

‘One hand can’t clap by itself’: Engagement of boys and men in KMG’s intervention to eliminate FGM-C in Kembatta zone, Ethiopia

Key messages

- Kembatti Mentti Gezzimma works with men and women in Ethiopia to encourage communities to abandon the practice of Female Genital Mutilation-Cutting (FGM-C).
- A ‘gender synchronous’ approach is used where men’s and women’s groups undergo a participatory process of problem identification and strategising to challenge the social norms that support FGM-C.
- Men and women are educated on the legal frameworks outlawing FGM-C and its harmful health and relational impacts.
- KMG’s work has led to an astonishing reduction in the prevalence of FGM-C and the social norms that condone it, and prompted reflection and change in other customary harmful practices such as bride abduction, widow inheritance, and intimate partner violence.



A KMG leader sits in front of his house, which he talked about as a space for his own change towards greater equality with his wife.

Image by Franz Stapelberg

Introduction

Kembatti Mentti Gezzimma (KMG) is an Ethiopian organisation working to encourage communities to abandon the practice of FGM-C. Despite high economic growth in recent years, Ethiopia continues to be one of the poorest countries in Africa. It is a highly

patriarchal society, and cultural practices harmful to women and girls are widespread.

FGM-C involves the partial or total removal of the external genitals of girls and women. It can lead to severe immediate and long-term health consequences including frequent bladder and urinary tract infections, kidney infections, cysts, infertility, elevated risk of childbirth complications and new born deaths, and sexual dysfunction. Throughout Ethiopia, public support for FGM-C has reduced in recent years. This is particularly pronounced in younger mothers who are

A ‘gender synchronous’ approach means that both women and men’s needs are prioritised and opportunities are created for exchange and collaboration between men and women (Green and Levack 2010)

five times less likely to have their daughters cut than older mothers (UNICEF 2010). There is also evidence that younger men are increasingly willing to marry uncut women (Feldman-Jacobs 2013). A supportive policy environment means that the harmful effects of FGM-C are acknowledged in the constitution and sanctions against FGM-C are covered by the 2005 Criminal Code.

Both women and men make decisions regarding the FGM-C of their daughters. Men's roles in the practice's continuation are as fathers, husbands and community leaders, influencing the prevailing social norms around the practice. KMG mobilises women, men, boys and girls to challenge social acceptance of the practice of FGM-C and increase awareness of its harmful effects on women and girl's health and wellbeing.

There has been a phenomenal reduction in FGM-C prevalence levels in Kembatta Zone where KMG has worked for the last two decades. Between 1999 and 2008, the number of people practising FGM-C in Kembatta zone reduced by approximately 92% (OHCHR 2008). KMG has expanded its work to other zones, including most recently the Sidama zone, and nearly the entire southern region of Ethiopia has been reached by its FGM-C prevention efforts.

Feedback received by KMG indicates that its intervention has not only reduced the practice of FGM-C, but has also reduced other harmful practices against women including bride abduction, widow inheritance, and intimate partner violence. It has generated shifts in men's and women's support for women's access to property inheritance, political participation, positive sexuality, household decision making and reducing women's domestic burden. Women's involvement in a variety of public spaces, including at religious, political and sporting events, has improved as a result of the KMG intervention.

How were men and boys engaged in the intervention to successfully promote gender equality aims?

KMG's approach is underpinned by the belief that men need to cooperate with the process of abandoning FGM-C because they have power and influence at the household level, in the community, and in legal and religious bodies. KMG provides opportunities for men to openly discuss and recognise that FGM-C is not only a female concern and domain. This involves

“Women do not get cut for themselves. They do it to please men. So of course we need to involve the men who make us do this. Women harm themselves, they bleed because man wanted to control women's sexuality and created this practice.”

DIRECTOR OF KMG

“The men do not want to waste money on medical complications of delivery if they marry a cut girl, so he prefers to marry an uncut girl. Now we marry more for love. So if he loves me, why would he need to lose me because of FGM? On sexual intercourse, it creates fun for both of us if I am uncut. It is also a sign of modernisation not being circumcised.”

KMG PROGRAMME PARTICIPANT

tapping into men's vested interests in ending the practice by educating them about its negative consequences, especially to the women and girls in their lives. KMG also informs communities about how FGM-C is driven by underlying gender inequalities and norms.

KMG engages men as critical agents in the process of abandoning FGM-C. Male participants overcome resistance from their peers and are encouraged to reach out to other men and boys through activism and in institutions such as youth clubs. Along with women in their communities, men have developed and implemented sanctions for those who continue to perform the practice.

Men have also helped to change women's attitudes towards FGM-C, especially around its links to women's marriageability.

What processes and strategies were used?

The Community Capacity Enhancement-Community Conversation approach

The Community Capacity Enhancement-Community Conversation (CCE-CC) methodology is a participatory learning process focused on strengthening community action related to harmful practices. In each area that KMG works in, the community selects 50 participants (25 women and 25 men) who represent various segments of the population including elders, women and youth, sub-district and religious leaders, and *idir* (traditional social self-help group) members.

The groups, which include separate men and women's spaces, meet twice a month over one and a half years. Participants are educated about the harmful health, economic and relational effects of FGM-C and the benefits of abandoning the practice. They are informed about government policy condemning FGM-C, and misconceptions and

social norms related to the practice are highlighted and challenged.

Women's rights education

KMG educates men and women about women's economic rights (for example to inherit property), rights to be free from other forms of violence including intimate partner violence, and rights to participate in political and public activities.

Awareness raising to change social norms

KMG publicly celebrates and supports men marrying uncut women. In 2002, KMG televised the wedding of an uncut woman to her husband. The bride and bridegroom both wore placards expressing their happiness to be married where the bride was an uncut woman. In early 2002, KMG made a video of a cutting, which was shown in various communities. Few community members had visually observed the practice and the video had a powerful impact. KMG has built schools to educate boys and girls, incorporating awareness of FGM, alongside their regular education. It holds annual celebrations of 'whole body, healthy life' events as a means to replace former celebrations of FGM-C of girls. Through this they have reached hundreds of thousands of community members.

Involvement of religious leaders and decision makers

The communities where KMG works tend to be highly religious, and are primarily Orthodox Christian. Religious leaders are trained to provide prevention information and to implement sanctions against those who continue the practice of FGM-C. In many areas the Ethiopian government has begun to support KMG's initiative, although some feel that these relations could be strengthened. Nonetheless, this has helped to create a conducive environment for the CCE-CCs and other aspects of KMG's work.

Monitoring FGM-C and the use of sanctions

Through the CCE-CCs, community members are encouraged to report instances of FGM-C. KMG has also trained community watchdogs and created a system to register whether or not a girl has been cut. The CCE-CCs identify sanctions to hold to account those community members who continue to practice FGM-C and other harmful practices. Potential punishments include periods of expulsion from religious or *idir* groups or fines.



A beneficiary of KMG, chairperson of the uncut girls club, and mother, holds her baby proudly. She had a safe delivery, which she attributed to not being circumcised. Image by Franz Stapelberg

Income generating activities and development

KMG provides awareness raising, training and alternative income generating opportunities for women who performed FGM-C on girls and have now chosen to give up the practice. It has also set up health and education services, saving and credit services, and skills training in agricultural, artisan and business activities with male and female community members. Integrating economic and environmental development with the FGM-C intervention has raised KMG's credibility in the communities and is integral for harnessing support.

Lessons learnt

- **Participatory community based interventions can prompt reflection and change:** KMG's intervention is grounded in local values and context and makes use of local knowledge. This is particularly critical for interventions on issues like FGM-C, which is a cultural and traditional practice deeply rooted in local context.
- **Use a gender synchronous approach:** By prioritising both men and women's needs and providing opportunities for exchange and collaboration among them, the CCE-CCs allow for consciousness raising discussions with men and women, awareness campaigns and collectively provided skills training.
- **Men are more likely to engage in work on FGM-C if they understand how it benefits them and their families:** KMG appreciates the ways that FGM-C affects men in relation to women – as fathers, brothers and husbands. It uses this as a motivating factor, which encourages men's involvement in the intervention.
- **Patriarchal norms can be challenged:** Both women and men make decisions about FGM-C, and men have much influence, especially at leadership level. Through the intervention, male and female community members are able to reflect on the harm that FGM-C does and work to alter the gender norms preventing its abandonment.

- **Personal transformation can lead to changes in the private sphere:** When men's understandings of, and attitudes toward harmful gender norms are transformed, they can become more involved in domestic work, and attitudes can change around financial affairs, including inheritance of property with their wives.
- **Involve powerful stakeholders:** Religious and *idir* leaders have particular influence and have been actively involved in KMG's intervention. Through their involvement, leaders gained a new perspective on the harms that women and girls faced, and supported the abandonment of the practice.
- **Address the wider environment:** Income generating activities and structural development secured community buy-in and enabled men and women to enact and sustain changes in gendered behaviours and attitudes. These changes were beneficial not only in reducing FGM-C, but in tackling other gender inequalities.

Further reading

Edström, J.; Hassink, A.; Shahrokh, T. and Stern, E. (eds) (2015) *Engendering Men: A Collaborative Review of Evidence on Men and Boys in Social Change and Gender Equality*, EMERGE Evidence Review, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton: IDS

Feldman-Jacobs, C. (2013) *Ending female genital mutilation/cutting: Lessons from a decade of progress*, Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau

Greene, M and Levack, A. (2010) *Synchronising gender strategies: A cooperative model for improving reproductive health and transforming gender relations*, United States: Interagency Gender Working Group

OHCHR (2008) *Eliminating female genital mutilation: an interagency statement* by UNAIDS, UNECA, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCHR, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, WHO

Stern, E. with Anderson, A. (2015) "One hand can't clap by itself": Engagement of boys and men in KMG's intervention to eliminate FGM-C in Kembatta zone, Ethiopia', *EMERGE Case Study 3*, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Brighton: IDS

UNICEF (2010) *The dynamics of social change towards the abandonment of female genital mutilation/cutting in five African countries*, Innocenti Insights, Florence

Methodology

This Story of Change is based on the EMERGE case study:

Stern, E. with Anderson, A. (2015) "One hand can't clap by itself": Engagement of boys and men in KMG's intervention to eliminate FGM-C in Kembatta zone, Ethiopia', *EMERGE Case Study 3*.

21 semi-structured interviews were conducted with KMG staff, male and female beneficiaries, and stakeholders including women's group association members, *gezimma* (KMG unit) leaders, youth group members, *idir* (mutual assistance groups or agricultural assistance groups) leaders, and religious and sub-district leaders. These interviews took place in four villages, in two districts (Angacha and Kachabira) in Kembatta Zone. One interview was conducted with a KMG programme coordinator in Hawassa, Sidama Zone and two interviews were conducted with KMG management in Addis Ababa. Data was analysed using thematic analysis to produce a grounded account of the changes (both positive and negative) that have occurred as a result of KMG's intervention to abandon FGM-C.

This story of change is part of a series of eight, developed collaboratively by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Promundo-US and Sonke Gender Justice as part of the Engendering Men: Evidence on Routes to Gender Equality (EMERGE) project. The project is made possible through support from DFID under the Leadership for Change programme. Learn more about EMERGE – our work, our findings and free resources, here: <http://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/>

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