

Grandmas, Pensions and Clitorises

Rebecca Calder

"No one practices female genital cutting here now that the SAGE programme has come. It is a big change for us here in Karamoja."

District Community Development Officer, Nakapiripirit, Karamoja, Uganda

"We used to cut our daughters here, at age 12 or 13, right before they were married. But not anymore. My 14 year old granddaughter has not been cut, and we won't cut her."

69 year old grandmother, Moruita village, Nakapiripirit, Karamoja, Uganda

The comments above were repeated to me, time and again, by local officials and villagers in Nakapiripirit, a district in the Karamoja pastoralist region of North-east Uganda. In July and August 2012, Development Pathways was conducting fieldwork for the DFID/Irish Aid funded Expanding Social Protection Programme, in order to better understand the impacts of the "SAGE" old age pension pilot on recipients and other family members. We certainly did not expect to find that the pension was potentially having a significant impact on the practice of female genital cutting (FGC).

However both women and local officials told us that a reduction in female genital cutting was one of the biggest changes in the lives of the Karamojong since the pension started in September 2011. They explained that, despite a range of NGO and government interventions to "change social norms", as well as the criminalization of female genital cutting by the Ugandan government, the practice merely went underground. This is because, until recently, the old women who relied solely on the income they received as "cutters" continued to support the practice. In an interview with the daughter of a female pension recipient – whose mother was a former "cutter" – I was told that:

Everyone knew that the practice needed to be abandoned but, with the grandmothers still supporting it and with no other means of family support, the practice continued in secret. Now my mother uses the pension to support the household and is doing well in small businesses such as grinding and selling maize flour. The pension is not a lot of money, but it is enough for this.

While a number of local people clearly feel that the old age pension has been a significant driver of abandonment, no definitive claims can be made about its impact on female genital cutting based on this research. The sample was not large enough, the qualitative evidence is not robust enough, and too many questions remain. For example, the relative contributions of social dialogue, criminalization and old age pensions on abandonment are still not understood. But one thing is clear: we need to know more. A starting point is to understand current theories on how to change social norms related to harmful traditional practices.

Changing Social Norms Related to Harmful Traditional Practices

Building our understanding of the impact of family economics on female genital cutting would provide valuable insights in how to promote its abandonment. To date, interventions to support the abandonment of harmful traditional practices – such as dowry, child marriage and FGC – have focused primarily on social norms marketing campaigns, multi-faceted community interventions, and legal reforms to enforce change. Based on evidence from a range of countries, most relevant literature argues that an initial critical mass of people abandoning the practice is required for broader change.¹ This core group recruit others through organized diffusion until a large enough portion of the “practising community” – the tipping point – is ready to abandon. Actual, stable abandonment is realised by a public commitment. Overcoming self-enforcing beliefs requires credible new information, including discovering the feasibility and desirability of alternatives to the practice.² Mothers themselves also resist based on their own experiences of being cut (and not wanting to submit their daughters to a similar ordeal), or girls resist because of what has happened to others.³

Evidence also shows that parents want what is best for their children. It is this most basic value that motivates a parent’s decision to follow social convention and marry their children off early, perform female genital cutting, and participate in other harmful practices; failure to comply brings shame and social exclusion to girls and their families. The argument follows that, once an alternative to the social convention becomes possible within a community and people realise that the community might be better off without the practice, this most basic value of doing what is best for children motivates communities to abandon the harmful practice.⁴

Economics and Household Decision Making

But there is another side to the equation of course. People are driven not only by social considerations, but also by economic needs. So, while social change theory has dominated the discourse on abandonment of harmful traditional practices for over a decade, research is beginning to suggest that economic interventions have a role to play.

As a result, programmes in Ethiopia have piloted the use of economic incentives such as school materials and goats to tackle early child marriage.⁵ The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) is implementing a programme in Ethiopia that is piloting economic incentives to encourage delayed marriage for girls.⁶ It is based on evidence that while community conversations and outreach by teachers can support attitudinal change around the value of education for girls (and boys), poverty is a strong driver of early marriage. Unless it is addressed, households are unlikely to sustainably change their practices. As has been demonstrated by the Zomba experiment in Malawi, an unconditional cash transfer scheme can effectively delay early marriage among girls.⁷

The economic drivers of some harmful traditional practices, such as child marriage, are relatively easy to understand: early marriage forges alliances between households, building social capital to help them withstand economic shocks and stresses.⁸ The fact that FGC and early marriage are linked – the former often being thought of as a necessary pre-condition for the latter – might explain why an economic incentive impacts on female genital cutting.

A more straightforward explanation, however, is that both types of intervention – social and economic – may be required to transform deeply ingrained traditional practices. This seems to be happening in Karamoja. Cutters appear to have been willing to abandon their practice. However, they were unable to do so until the economic conditions were in place. The pension appears to

¹ Evidence is drawn mainly from research on the abandonment of female genital cutting, but also early marriage and foot binding in China.

² Makie (1996); Makie and LeJeune (2009); UNICEF (2007); Tostan (1999); Dagne (2008); WHO (1999); Ball Cooper and Fletcher (2012).

³ Boyden, Pankhurst and Tafere (2011).

⁴ See, for example, Tostan (1999) and Boyden, Pankhurst and Tafere (2011).

⁵ Muthengi and Erulkar (2011); Erulkar and Muthengi (2009).

⁶ Calder and Goodman (2012).

⁷ Baird et al. (2011); see also Kidd and Calder (2011).

⁸ See, for example, Boyden, Pankhurst and Tafere (2011).

be providing the necessary economic conditions for abandonment. Perhaps if we improve our understanding of what is happening in Karamoja, we might be able to understand drivers of similar practices elsewhere and propose more effective interventions to tackle harmful traditional practices, like female genital cutting.

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About The Author

Rebecca Calder is a Senior Social Development Specialist at Development Pathways. She is somewhat daunted by the challenge of coming up with a witty introduction to a paper about clitorises. So she will, both prudently and somewhat unusually, remain silent.

For more information please feel free to get in touch, our contact details are below:

DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

Development Pathways
483 Green Lanes, London,
N13 4BS United Kingdom

M +44 (0) 781 345 7624
E admin@developmentpathways.co.uk
W www.developmentpathways.co.uk