

Summary of Report n° 11

The Role of Grandmother Leaders
in the Process of Abandoning
Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Kandia

Velingara Department, Kolda Region, Senegal

Study conducted by
Grandmother Project – *Change through Culture*

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"If female genital mutilation (FGM) has been abandoned, it is because the Grandmothers have put a stop to it. They are the ones who know about the ritual and all the secrets tied to the practice of FGM, just as it is the men who have mastered all there is to know about male circumcision. Therefore no man will oppose their decision when they choose to put a stop to it"

Kerewane Village Chief

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ensuring the development and well-being of girls poses a major challenge in southern Senegal. In this region of Senegal, particularly in the Department of Vélingara, girls are exposed to many difficulties such as minimal schooling, child marriage, teenage pregnancy and female genital mutilation (FGM).

The magnitude of these phenomena has led the government and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to implement programs to better address them. The Grandmother Project – Change through Culture conducted the Girls’ Holistic Development (GHD) Program from 2008 to 2014 in 60 villages within the rural district of Kandia, in the Vélingara Department.

The program's approach is based on actively involving the elderly, strengthening communication between generations, and strengthening the skills of three generations of leaders in order to drive change within the communities, using communication methods based on dialogue and critical thinking.

This study aims to examine the process of abandoning FGM in certain villages in the Kandia district where the Grandmother Project – Change through Culture (GMP) has implemented the Girls’ Holistic Development (GHD) program.

The methodology of this study is based on qualitative research techniques through the use of individual and group interviews with different categories of community stakeholders, namely Grandmother Leaders (GMLs), Women of Reproductive Age (WRA), and Village/Religious Leaders. In total, 47 individual interviews were conducted in 15 communities, with 32 Grandmother Leaders, 13 Village Leaders and 2 WRA. Similarly, 12 group interviews were conducted with WRA (see Appendix for a table outlining the interviews conducted in the 15 communities).

Key findings from this study are:

A) GMLs are heavily involved in family and community life.

All interviewees stated that GMLs play a central role in families and in communities. Previously, the GMLs appeared to be somewhat indifferent, but thanks to GMP activities, they have changed their attitude and behaviour. They are now very involved with the children’s education. Likewise, they serve as advisors to other members of the community and are very committed to the protection of young girls/women.

B) Three main factors motivated GMLs to promote the abandonment of FGM in their communities:

1. New knowledge changed the GMLs’ attitude towards the practice.

Through meetings organized by the GMP, GMLs have gained new knowledge about Islam’s position on FGM and the negative consequences of FGM.

Expanding the GMLs' knowledge was a decisive factor in changing their attitude and commitment to the collective abandonment of FGM.

2. *Discussion spaces were created.*

The meetings organized by the GMP, such as intergenerational forums, represent opportunities for discussion involving all community players from both sexes and three generations, and open communication on issues such as FGM. These meetings were an important step in the process of abandoning FGM in the communities.

3. *The GMLs' self-confidence has increased.*

Thanks to the leadership training they have received with the GMP program, GMLs have gained greater self-confidence. Today they fully assume their roles in their communities and demonstrate a strong commitment to promoting the well-being of young girls.

Actions undertaken by GMLs to promote the abandonment of FGM:

1- GMLs organized meetings with other community members.

According to the majority of interviewees, to promote the abandonment of FGM, GMLs have organized multiple discussion meetings with all categories of stakeholders, namely Village/Religious Leaders, fathers of families, WRA and girls. During these community meetings, GMLs based their arguments on the consequences of FGM and Islam's position on FGM to convince communities to abandon the practice.

2- GMLs had a real impact on the community's decision to abandon FGM.

All interviewees stated that FGM is the business of GMLs. According to them, as soon as GMLs made a commitment to abandon the practice, the rest of the community supported this decision. This shows just how influential GMLs are in their communities as they have succeeded in getting the idea of abandoning FGM accepted. According to the interviewees, in most villages FGM is forbidden by village chiefs. Likewise, almost all fathers refuse to have their daughters submit to FGM. As for WRA, the majority no longer want this practice in place.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions based on the study results:

- In the Kolda Region in southern Senegal, it is women, especially older ones, who are primarily responsible for perpetuating FGM/C. These findings call into question the idea that men always have the predominant influence on the perpetuation of the practice.
- Given the status and influence of GMs in communities, the central role that the GHD Program has given them in all activities has been a determining factor in the process of abandonment of the practice.
- Many single-issue programs only address FGM/C. In GMP's approach, FGM/C is addressed as part of a wider strategy to promote all facets of girls' rights and development. In light of communities' concerns for girls' overall development, the holistic approach motivated them to reflect on and take action related to all aspects of girls' development.

The following diagram summarizes the highlights of the study:

ROLE OF GRANDMOTHER LEADERS IN PROMOTING ABANDONMENT OF FGC IN COMMUNITIES INVOLVED IN GIRLS' HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Synthesis of interviews with Grandmother Leaders, Women-of-Reproductive Age and community Elders. Velingara Dept., Kolda Region, Senegal.

