



News Release

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Changing Cultural Attitudes on Female Genital Cutting through Entertainment.

Female Genital Cutting (FGC) constitutes a serious health risk for millions of girls and women but remains prevalent in many areas of the world. In a recent paper published in «Nature», researchers from the University of Zurich have found a promising approach to change attitudes within cutting communities. In their study they produced fictional movies including a subplot about a family in the process of discussing whether to have their daughters cut. The results show that the movies had a positive influence on attitudes towards uncut girls and therefore repeated exposure to similar movies could be a discreet but effective intervention to reduce female genital cutting.

Though female genital cutting can lead to serious health problems throughout life, an estimated 125 million girls and women are cut, and every year an additional two million girls are at risk of being cut. Therefore, governments and international agencies have promoted the abandonment of cutting for decades. In the past, many programs promoting abandonment of the practice assumed that attitudes favoring cutting are locally pervasive and deeply entrenched. However, recent empirical research has shown that these attitudes vary greatly. Conflicting attitudes coexist within communities and even within families. The arguments for and against cutting generally fall into one of the following two categories: personal values concerning health, purity and perceived religious obligations or questions regarding the future marriage prospects of cut or uncut daughters.

Taking heterogeneity of attitudes into account

Sonja Vogt, Charles Efferson and Ernst Fehr from the University of Zurich, together with two Sudanese researchers, put the discussion of these conflicting attitudes at the center of their empirical approach. «Instead of pressing values onto the communities and ignoring their cultural heritage, we took the conflicting attitudes on FGC within communities as a starting point», explains Sonja Vogt, one of the lead authors. The researchers created four versions of a full-length movie, the main plot being a heady mix of love, intrigue and deception involving a family living in Sudan. Three of these movies included a 27 minute subplot about girls in the family who were approaching cutting age. In the subplots, the protagonists of the extended family discuss the arguments for and against cutting.

One of the versions focuses on personal values, one on marriageability, and the third on a combination of both. The discussions within these subplots evenly cover both arguments for and against cutting and eventually led to the decision to abandon cutting. Charles Efferson explains: «By presenting conflicting sides of the issue, the movies dramatize how difficult it is for parents to make a decision about cutting, and they allow viewers to make their own judgements».



Challenging and changing attitudes through entertainment

«We saw that all three movies about cutting immediately improved attitudes, but that only the movie addressing *both* personal values and future marriage prospects had a relatively persistent effect by improving attitudes for at least a week», says Sonja Vogt. Charles Efferson, the other lead author, points out that they could measure a causal relation (instead of mere correlation) between a person seeing one of the movies and a change in attitude towards uncut girls. «This shows that using entertainment to dramatize the arguments can be an effective approach to changing attitudes about female genital cutting», he says.

Sonja Vogt believes that there is further potential in this approach. «Done in an ethical and balanced way, entertainment-embedded public information could increase the possibility of non-governmental organizations and for-profit ventures to cooperate», she says: «including such messaging in entertainment formats could initiate discussion and sustainable change». Efferson sees this as a key advantage of using entertainment: «Entertainment can often reach a much wider audience than educational documentaries. Documentaries run the risk of preaching to the converted».

How the study was conducted

To produce the movies, the researchers worked closely with a team of writers and actors in Sudan over the course of nearly two years. The movies were filmed in a family compound in a rural area outside of Khartoum. Participants watched the movies in public viewings as part of two randomized and controlled experiments. To measure how participants feel about cut versus uncut girls, the researchers developed an implicit association test to measure attitudes about cutting that adults might not want to reveal explicitly. The researchers used mobile computer labs to implement this test in a way that completely preserved the anonymity of participants. The researchers used the movies as treatments in two experiments with nearly 8000 participants in 127 communities in Sudan. The research was funded by the Swiss National Committee of Unicef and supported by Unicef, Sudan

Literature:

Sonja Vogt, Nadia Ahmed Mohammed Zaid, Hilal El Fadil Ahmed, Ernst Fehr, and Charles Efferson. Changing cultural attitudes towards female genital cutting. *Nature*. 12 October 2016. doi: 10.1038/nature20100

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