



COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS: ELIMINATING FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Ethiopia Red Cross Society

CASE STUDY



AUSTRIAN RED CROSS



Finnish Red Cross



Pictured: Asit Mussa and Besmad
Borid, Community Conversation
Facilitators

Context

The Benishangul Gumuz Region in Ethiopia faces high prevalence rates of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) and early marriage. According to the Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey (2016), the prevalence of FGM/C among women aged 15-49 in the region is 62.9% and the 50 percent of women aged 20-24 are married before the age of 18. These harmful practices are deeply rooted in social and cultural norms, perpetuating gender inequalities and adverse health outcomes for girls and women.

Field observations revealed that FGM/C typically occurs between the ages of 2 months to 10 years, with many girls undergoing the procedure before the age of 2. Early marriage is also a significant issue, often resulting in girls being pulled out of school.

The Community Conversation Facilitation approach was selected by Ethiopia Red Cross Society as a key strategy to address these issues due to its proven effectiveness in promoting community-led change and shifting social norms. The project is being implemented in partnership with local government structures, including Woreda (district) and Kebele level administrations, as well as engaging religious leaders, health extension workers, and other community influencers.

Project Overview

The Ethiopia Red Cross Society's Assosa Zonal Branch, with support from the Austrian Red Cross and Finnish Red Cross, is implementing the second phase of the "Empowerment of Women and Health Equity II 2022-2024" project in Benishangul Gumuz Region. This case study focuses on the project's use of the Community Conversation Facilitation (CCF) approach, developed by KMG Ethiopia, to address harmful traditional practices (HTPs), particularly female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and early marriage.

The project aims to increase community acceptance and social action to reduce harmful traditional practices using the CCF approach. This approach has been implemented in several kebeles (the smallest administrative unit in Ethiopia) within the Assosa Zone, with the goal of achieving FGM/C and early marriage-free communities.

Methodology

The Community Conversation Facilitation (CCF) approach involves the following steps:

Kebele Selection: The Ethiopia Red Cross Society coordinates with Woreda government to select communities based on criteria such as population size (around 25,000), presence of a high school and health facility, and road access.

CCF Selection: Six Community Conversation Facilitators (CCFs) are selected from each kebele, including the Kebele Leader, Kebele Manager, Religious leader, Elder, Health Extension Worker (HEW), and Women's Representative.

CCF Training: Selected CCFs underwent a 5-day residential training in Assosa, covering topics such as HTPs, menstrual hygiene, personal and environmental hygiene, and facilitation skills.

Participant Selection: 60 community members (30 men and 30 women) are chosen to participate in the conversations, representing various villages within the kebele with efforts to include diverse age groups and persons with disabilities, though implementation varied between communities.

Community Conversation Sessions: Bi-weekly sessions lasting 1-2 hours feature circular seating arrangements alternating men and women, listing and prioritizing HTPs in the first session, and then focusing on one priority HTP per meeting with facilitated dialogues on FGM/C, early marriage, and related social norms using participatory methods like experience sharing and small group discussions.

By-law Development: Over approximately one year, CCFs are trained on developing community by-laws, which are drafted with community input and validated at the Woreda level.

Certification Process: Communities that uphold the by-laws and demonstrate elimination of FGM/C and early marriage for two years undergo certification involving Woreda, Zonal, and Regional taskforces.

Public Declaration: Certified communities hold a public declaration ceremony celebrating their FGM/C and early marriage-free status.

Additional project components include mobile cinema and drama for awareness-raising, radio programs for broader message dissemination, Village Savings and Loan Associations for former circumcisers, and school-based interventions including information sessions and drama performances for the community. This comprehensive approach addresses harmful practices from multiple angles, engaging various community stakeholders in the process of social norm change.

Successes

The Community Conversation Facilitation (CCF) approach has shown significant impact in changing attitudes, social norms, and practices related to FGM/C and early marriage in the target communities.

Shift in Attitudes Towards FGM/C

- Community members, including religious leaders, now understand FGM/C is not supported by religious texts.
- The belief that FGM/C is associated with cleanliness has been challenged and largely dispelled.
- Men have recognized its negative impact on marital intimacy
- Some women expressed regret for having undergone the procedure.

Changes in Social Norms

- The link between FGM/C and marriageability has weakened, with community members now discussing strategies to discourage the practice.
- The social status of circumcisers has changed from being seen as "queens" to being discouraged.
- The alternating male/female seating arrangement in CCF sessions has challenged traditional gender dynamics and promoted equal participation.

Reported Reduction in Harmful Practices

- Community members and local officials report a significant decrease in FGM/C and early marriage cases, with some communities making public declarations of elimination.
- Health Extension Workers now include FGM/C prevention in regular household visits from the birth of a girl child.

Increased Community Engagement and Reporting

- Children and youth act as informers to prevent FGM/C from happening
- Community members express willingness to report cases of FGM/C or early marriage to authorities.

Broader Impact on Gender Equality and Health

- Enhanced menstrual hygiene management practices in school.
- Reduction in social separation of women during menstruation.
- Decreased domestic violence with improved household management practices have been reported.

Legal and Administrative Changes

- Communities have developed and implemented by-laws against FGM/C and early marriage.
- Integration of FGM/C and early marriage prevention into local law enforcement and healthcare systems.

Empowerment of Women and Girls

- Women now participate more in community discussions and decision-making
- Girls' school enrollment has improved and retention of girls in school has been reported.
- Women report feeling more comfortable discussing health and social issues with men.

Intergenerational Impact

- Young people, particularly in schools, are becoming agents of change, challenging traditional views on FGM/C and early marriage.

Economic Impact

- Community members report saving money previously intended for FGM/C ceremonies for other purposes.
- Former circumcisers engaged in alternative income-generating activities through Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA).

These results suggest that the CCF approach, combined with other project components such as mobile cinema, drama, and radio programs, has been effective in initiating significant social norm change around FGM/C and early marriage in the target communities. The approach has not only addressed these specific harmful practices but has also contributed to broader improvements in gender equality, health, and community engagement.

Challenges

The implementation of the approach faced several practical challenges:

- **Logistical and Operational Issues:** Time management proved challenging with participants struggling with punctuality and attendance. Meeting locations presented difficulties when held outdoors, where weather conditions, vehicle noise, and limited space affected session quality. Resource constraints were evident in the lack of refreshments and materials needed for effective facilitation.
- **Cultural and Social Barriers:** The project faced initial resistance from community members who required time to accept or understand the importance of addressing harmful traditional practices. Religious concerns emerged early in implementation, with misconceptions about the project's alignment with religious beliefs requiring careful attention and clarification.
- **Gender Imbalance:** The selection criteria for Community Conversation Facilitators often resulted in more male than female facilitators, creating an uneven representation that potentially affected the program's ability to fully address women's perspectives and concerns.
- **Sustainability Concerns:** CCF turnover, particularly the movement of key personnel such as Kebele Managers, posed significant challenges to program continuity and knowledge retention. The project's limited coverage, operating in only a select number of kebeles, potentially constrains its overall impact on the broader regional practices.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** The current assessment of impact relies heavily on qualitative, self-reported information, which may limit objective verification of the program's effectiveness and potentially introduce reporting biases.

Despite these challenges, the Community Conversation Facilitation approach has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability in addressing harmful traditional practices. With strategic adjustments to address logistical constraints, cultural barriers, gender imbalance, and sustainability concerns, the program shows significant potential for expanded impact and long-term change.

Lessons Learned

The Community Conversation Facilitation approach yielded valuable insights that can inform future social norm change initiatives.

- **Importance of Religious and Cultural Sensitivity:** Engaging religious leaders and scholars proved crucial in addressing misconceptions about the religious basis for FGM/C and early marriage, while the project team's willingness to discuss and verify religious aspects with scholars helped build trust and acceptance.
- **Effectiveness of Multi-faceted Approach:** The combination of CCF with other interventions like mobile cinema, drama, and radio programs proved more effective than any single approach, with visual aids, particularly videos showing FGM/C, reported as highly impactful in changing attitudes.
- **Value of Inclusive Participation:** The alternating seating arrangement of men and women in CCF sessions promoted equal participation and challenged traditional gender dynamics, while including diverse community members enriched discussions and promoted community-wide change.
- **Importance of Government Collaboration:** Close coordination with Woreda and Kebele level government structures enhanced the legitimacy and effectiveness of the project, while integration with existing health and law enforcement systems supported the sustainability of changes.
- **Economic Considerations:** Addressing the economic impact on former circumcisers through Village Savings and Loan Associations was important for sustainable change, and communities recognized potential economic benefits from abandoning FGM/C practices.
- **Youth Engagement:** Involving schools and youth in the process created intergenerational impact and helped in monitoring and reporting harmful practices.
- **Continuous Capacity Building:** Regular refresher trainings and experience sharing between kebeles were identified as important for maintaining momentum and addressing emerging challenges.

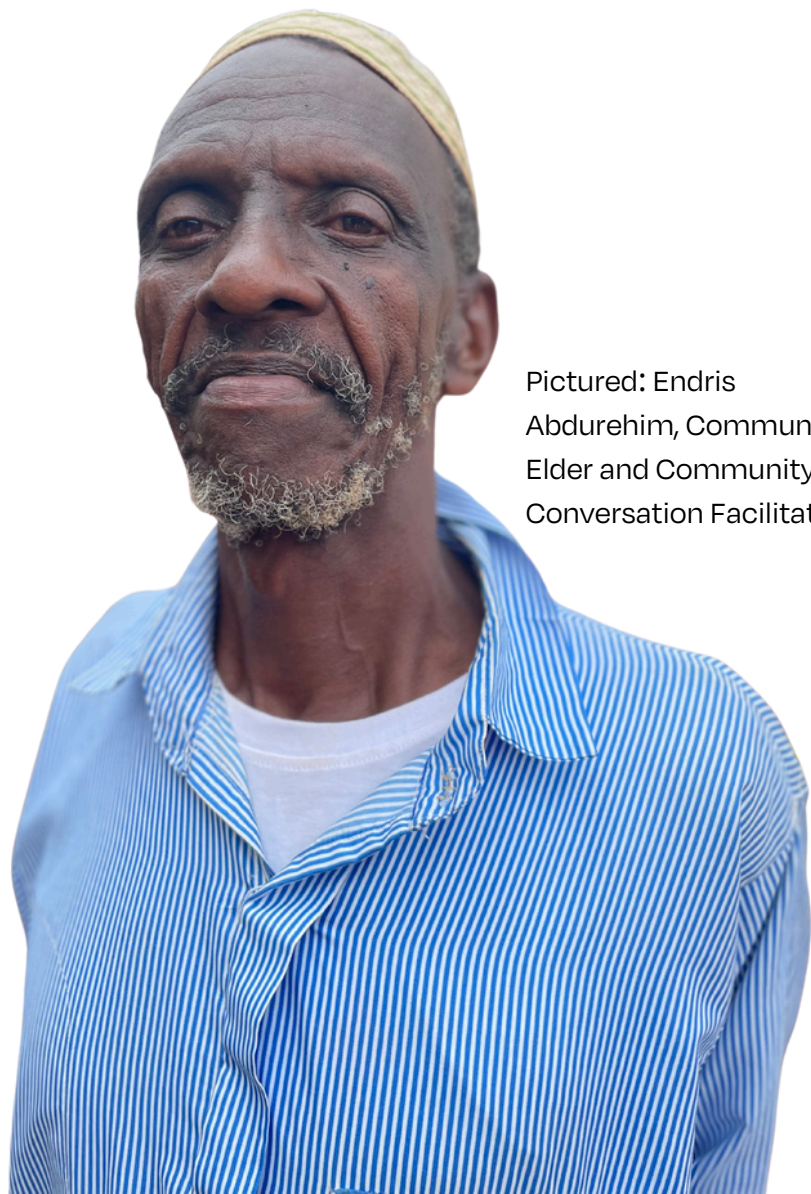
These lessons provide valuable insights for improving the CCF approach and enhancing its effectiveness in addressing harmful traditional practices.

Scalability and Replicability

The CCF approach has demonstrated strong potential for scaling up and replication in other contexts addressing harmful traditional practices. Its success stems from several key factors: inclusive community participation that engages diverse stakeholders; skilled facilitation supported by comprehensive training and ongoing supervision; and integration with local government structures that enhances legitimacy and sustainability.

The approach's effectiveness is enhanced by its multi-faceted nature, combining community conversations with complementary interventions like visual media, school-based programs, and economic support for former practitioners. Its cultural and religious sensitivity, particularly through engaging local religious leaders, builds essential trust and acceptance. The structured monitoring and certification process for FGM/C and early marriage-free communities provides clear goals that motivate continued engagement.

For successful adaptation elsewhere, implementers should ensure adequate resources for training and supervision, develop strategies to address facilitator turnover, strengthen monitoring systems, and foster strong government engagement at all levels. While the approach has proven effective, careful consideration of local contexts will be essential when applying these principles of community engagement and participatory problem-solving to new areas.



Pictured: Endris
Abdurehim, Community
Elder and Community
Conversation Facilitator



Pictured: Halima Atom, Community Conversation Facilitator and Bizuye Wodaj, Project Officer, Ethiopia Red Cross

Conclusion

The Community Conversation Facilitation approach in Ethiopia's Benishangul Gumuz Region has effectively addressed FGM/C and early marriage. Its success stems from fostering community ownership through open dialogue and critical reflection, enabling communities to question long-held beliefs and develop their own by-laws against harmful practices.

The approach's multi-faceted nature combines community conversations with visual media, drama, and radio programs to create a comprehensive strategy reaching diverse community segments. This has catalyzed change beyond the targeted issues, improving gender equity through increased women's participation in community discussions and challenging traditional gender dynamics.

Areas for strengthening include developing more robust monitoring systems, addressing facilitator turnover, and ensuring gender balance among facilitators. While integration with government structures and adaptability to local contexts indicate potential for scalability, successful expansion requires careful attention to resource allocation, cultural sensitivity, and ongoing support mechanisms.

This case study provides evidence that community-led, participatory approaches can promote sustainable social norm change around complex issues. The CCF approach, with its emphasis on community engagement and collaborative problem-solving, offers a promising model for addressing harmful traditional practices in diverse contexts.

