Female genital mutilation and social change

Changing social expectations is the key to ending the practice of female genital mutilation or cutting, according to a new report by UNICEF, *The dynamics of social change: towards the abandonment of female genital mutilation/cutting in five African countries*. Worldwide, up to 140 million girls and women are estimated to have undergone some form of genital mutilation—a recognised violation of human rights and a procedure complicated by severe haemorrhage, infection, and difficulties with delivery and sexual intercourse. Yet many parents, influenced by community expectations, believe that cutting secures social and economic security for their daughters. For them, the social harm of not cutting outweighs any physical, psychological, or even legal risk. It is “insufficient to simply provide individual families information of the harm of the practice” says author Francesca Monetti. While cutting is seen as the only possible social way to act, one of the first steps towards abandoning the practice is to promote the alternative, not cutting.

The report looked at how Kenya, Senegal, Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia have promoted the type of social change needed for communities to abandon the practice. Although the national prevalence of genital mutilation remains high in Egypt (91%) and Sudan (89%), as a result of community-driven change all five countries have reported a decrease in the percentage of women who think the practice should continue. Successful approaches include reinforcing the positive aspects of local culture rather than demonising traditional practices, using the media to elevate the status of being uncut, human-rights education linked to local values and aspirations, and the development of linkages with neighbouring countries and countries of migration.

Efforts to end female genital mutilation started decades ago. The report’s insights represent an important step towards ending this and other practices that are damaging to women’s health. Whilst respecting the subtle message that understanding and changing social expectations takes time, governments and donors must act quickly and decisively to support what is working to end female genital mutilation. Communities ready to adopt the social expectation not to cut can then do so. ■ *The Lancet*

---

McPolicy: bringing you the Big Mac society

If you were a UK Health Secretary faced with soaring rates of obesity, alcohol misuse, and diet-related diseases, what would you do? Were you to take an evidence-based approach, you might consider minimum pricing per unit of alcohol and restrictions on its availability. You might look at toughening the regulation of how the least healthy foods are marketed to children. You could even demand that manufacturers reformulate their least healthy products to meet minimum nutritional standards. Or you could, if your name was Andrew Lansley, dismiss all of the above and instead invite representatives of McDonald’s, PepsiCo, and the drinks giant Diageo among others, to submit their policy suggestions on how best to deal with the UK’s public-health crises for a forthcoming governmental white paper.

After the initial surprise, it can still take a while for the bizarre reality to sink in—that the companies who have profited the most from the epidemics of obesity and alcohol misuse should now be responsible for setting the agenda on public health simply beggars belief. Whatever sage wisdom the various captains of the food and drink industry have to impart, it will certainly be in the narrow interests of their shareholders, whose continued wealth is contingent on maintaining precisely the status quo that brought about the current public-health crises. Perhaps their feelings of corporate responsibility will extend to plugging the funding gap left by Education Secretary Michael Gove’s decision to remove £162 million of funding to English schools for the sports-for-all programme, which tackled low levels of physical activity in children.

The creeping influence of corporate power on public policy is not news to anyone in the UK, but the breathtaking speed and scale by which the UK coalition Government is embracing the agenda of business at the expense of the health of the electorate is an unwelcome novelty. By putting the interests of big business at the heart of public-health policy, Lansley is ensuring that the UK’s big society will not be shedding the pounds any time soon. ■ *The Lancet*