Lessons Learned from Comparison of Programs to Abandon Harmful Practices in Five Countries

Gerry Mackie
for Innocenti Research Centre, UNICEF
March 2009

1. Introduction. The social-convention theory of the practice of female genital cutting/mutilation (FGM/C), and its recommendations about the process and content of abandonment activities, are largely supported by program experiences in five major practicing countries. The more that program activity is consistent with the several elements of the theory, the more it tends to lead to the general abandonment of FGM/C. At the same time, people in different places creatively invent different ways of addressing those elements, often in response to the particularities of their local and national circumstances. The basic recipe works with either millet, rice, wheat, or teff.

Here are the features of more effective programs:

- FGM/C is understood as a self-enforcing marriageability convention requiring coordinated abandonment.

- The process of abandonment starts with a smaller critical mass of initiators who, through organized diffusion, brings around the greater part of the community, sufficient to stably end the practice, termed the tipping point.

- Effective abandonment requires genuine community discussion, community decision, and community commitment.
• FGM/C is typically almost universal within an intramarrying community and thus weaves a web of self-enforcing beliefs difficult to overcome. Therefore, the content of abandonment activity must be credible to community members.

• More effective programs are credible because they provide support to the community on a wide variety of concerns, are nondirective in attitude, and are positive about the community and its traditions.

• FGM/C is also usually held in place by social approval and disapproval, and the abandonment process also reverses the social norm of FGM/C.

• More variably, the practice can also be held in place by belief that it is a religious obligation, or that it promotes chastity and fidelity.

• Community deliberations about local cultural and religious values, and about international human rights, bring to the forefront the fundamental moral norm -- do not harm your child -- which originally justified the derived social norm of FGM/C.

2. The Process of Abandonment Activity.

2.1 Coordinated Abandonment of the Marriageability Convention of FGM/C. Insiders refer to the practice as a tradition, one which links FGM/C to the marriageability of the girl and to her family’s standing in the community. Thus, we are likely to find that FGM/C is general within the local intramarrying group, of ancient origin, and quite persistent, even among individuals who have come to oppose it in principle. FGM/C is not an individual practice, but a community practice, which can only be resolved at the community level, by organizing the greater part of the
intramarrying group to coordinate on abandonment. That FGM/C is a conventional
prerequisite of marriage is often mentioned in the country reports.

- In the Egyptian town of Deir al Barsha, families which had foregone
  FGM/C were reluctant to say so for fear of harming their daughters’
  prospects for marriage, but became emboldened to do so after a
  written and public declaration of village leaders against the practice
  (CEOSS). The very same was reported later in Benban, part of the
  FGM Free Village Project (FGM-FVP), as a result of a mass public
  commitment to abandon.

- An Egyptian woman asked about the decision to practice FGM/C
  explained, “I’m like my neighbors. People say no, I’m like them,
  people say yes, I’m like them.” In a group discussion an Ethiopian
  villager also remarked, “I stop when others stop.”

2.2. Critical Mass, Organized Diffusion, and Tipping Point. The social
convention theory also describes the social dynamics of the organization of abandonment.
A smaller core group of first movers, called the critical mass, can conditionally resolve to
abandon FGM/C, and then has an incentive to recruit remaining members of the
community to conditionally join the effort, until a large enough portion, called the tipping
point, is willing to coordinate on stable abandonment. The process of persuasion and
attitude change about the advantages and disadvantages of abandonment is an organized
diffusion from core groups through existing and created social networks within
intramarrying communities. Once a large enough portion of the community is ready to
abandon, then a public commitment signals a shift from conditional commitment to
actual commitment, in order to make clear that most people know that most other people do abandon the practice.

- In Senegal, the NGO Tostan typically selects about five villages (average village size about 800) in a larger 30-village area, and conducts two classes in each of those five villages, one for about 20-25 adults and one for about the same number of adolescents, each open to both women and men. These are the critical mass. Through the strategy of organized diffusion, 250 people eventually bring around 24,000. At time of writing, 3,500 villages have organized abandonment in 35 public declarations.

- In Egypt, the FGM-FVP is implementing a program among 600,000 people in 124 villages. As of the end of 2006, FGM-FVP had facilitated public declarations of commitment to abandon in seven large villages. The collective commitments followed two years of preparatory activity carried out by official, popular, and religious leaderships, women activists, and youth, including seminars in leadership homes, mosques, churches, youth clubs, and home visits to families with daughters of FGM/C age. Dialogue took place in men’s, women’s, and youth groups. The declaration is a pledge by official, popular, and religious leaderships, women, and youth to end the practice, and is usually announced in official public ceremonies attended by regional and national dignitaries. There are banners of welcome throughout the village, and the event is festive, including drama by young women
on the hazards of FGM/C, and music. At the end of the ceremony the commitment is signed by community leaderships, a document arousing pride. The declaration of commitment influences others not directly involved in the program.

- In the Kembata and Tembaro Zone of Ethiopia, where the age of cutting is between 12 and 18, the KMG NGO establishes five core groups in parallel, one of them on harmful traditional practices (HTPs), another of uncut girls. The HTP core group diffuses through traditional women’s insurance, income-generating, and social organizations; in churches; and most importantly through the local community edir, an insurance and self-defense organization for all whose decisions are binding on members. The uncut-girls core-group diffuses to family, friends, and schools. Every edir in the Zone, about 800,000 in population, has publicly committed to abandon the practice. The edir commitments are replicated upward in meetings held at the Subdistrict level, and upward again at the District level. At the same time, public weddings of uncut girls are celebrated, and annual zonal whole body celebrations draw tens of thousands in attendance. Multiple diffusions and public commitments saturate the population with the self-fulfilling expectation that all have given up the practice.
2.3. **Community Discussion, Decision, and Commitment.** Effective abandonment of FGM/C requires genuine community discussion, community decision, and community commitment.

- The Amhara Regional government in Ethiopia involved in regular nondirective dialogue about human rights and HTPs 70 individuals from all community sectors in each of 17 Subdistricts. After 18 months of training these individuals in turn conveyed the Subdistrict abandonment decision to local communities, but not as an item for discussion, decision, and commitment. The Wolayta Zonal government in the Southern Region trained for two days on health and HTPs six community dialogue facilitators in each of several Subdistricts. The facilitators in turn organized one- or two-day dialogues for one or several villages at a time. Public commitment was communicated *downward* from Subdistrict to village, and discussion was brief. In both Amhara and Wolayta new legal obligations were also conveyed. In consequence, FGC is no longer openly practiced, but one-third of respondents say that it continues clandestinely, and uncut girls remain subject to ridicule and stigmatization. In later interviews, Wolayta participants recommended for the sake of better results that community dialogue be held at the village rather than the Subdistrict level, and be carried out for more than a day or two. The Amhara and Wolayta programs were constrained by a limited budget, but a strategy of organized diffusion within and between villages could be more effective at the same cost.
In Kenya, alternative-rite-of-passage (ARP) programs are popular among donors and NGOs. These programs vary, but tend to target girls at risk, sometimes those already inclined to change; sometimes do not involve parents, and often do not involve the broader intramarrying community. Alternative seclusion and training for the girls lasts several days to two weeks. Girls who complete the ARP and forego FGM/C may be stigmatized, and as a result some ARP girls later choose to be cut. In contrast, the NGO Fulda-Mosocho in Kenya recruited 210 school officials as the critical mass, and organized a three-year training program in reproductive health and human rights for them. These initiators diffused to colleagues and students, neighbours, chiefs, community meetings convened by chiefs, clan elders, and women’s organizations. Here, the alternative rite is not the central activity, but the culmination of a prior process of community discussion and decision. The first annual alternative rite in 2004 involved 2,000 girls in week-long seclusion, culminating in a ceremony attended by 10,000, including many notables. Each girl was given a certificate and a candle as a symbol that their parents, families, and clan elders said no to cutting, and as a symbol of their acceptance as full members of the Kisii community.

The public commitment of the community was decisive to wide and stable change, according to interviews with participants reported in a recent UNICEF evaluation of Tostan’s first three organized mass abandonments in the late 1990s. The fact that the issue has been widely discussed, and a
public pledge made, is binding on all. It is a matter of sacred honor for individuals and communities to keep their word. Since for a community to remain uncut is also a self-enforcing social convention, theory also predicts that most individuals would not be tempted to revert.

3. The Content of Abandonment Activity.

3.1. Overcoming Self-Enforcing Beliefs. The marriageability convention of FGM/C is typically almost universal within an intramarrying community, because noncomplying families fail to reproduce and thus are extinguished. Hence, community members lack information to compare the cut and uncut alternatives. FGM/C is held in place by self-enforcing beliefs, reasonable in their context, about the nonexistence of an alternative, the healthiness of cutting, the nonviolation of rights, the indecency of uncut women, the unmarriageability of uncut women, and infeasibility of abandonment.

- According to the Ethiopia country report, any immediate health harms of FGM/C are attributed to bad spirits, and Mackie (2003) had previously identified exactly the same belief in Senegal 6000 kilometers away. This belief is formed because all girls are cut, but only some experience immediate complications.

- In the Kenya study the belief that uncut girls would become promiscuous and disobedient is frequently reported. Other self-enforcing beliefs in Kenya are that uncut girls would not be able to bear children, would become both unmarried and pregnant, would end up prostitutes, or would have a bad odor.
• In Senegal, the Bambara people involved in the first two public declarations believed that to mention the practice would bring death. This powerfully self-enforcing belief not only blocked discussion, but prevented local women from comparing harms arising from the practice, which each thought to be idiosyncratic.

3.2. Credibility: Holistic, Nondirective, Positive Content. Self-enforcing beliefs are strongly supported and any contrary message initially seems preposterous to their holders. A variety of messages, international, national, regional, local, the more credible the better, are valuable in softening such beliefs, opening the way for their more systematic revision. Community programs which deal with only FGM/C, or even only with reproductive health, are viewed with warranted suspicion. Holistic programs, providing assistance on a wide variety of topics, are more credible. Their actions not only symbolize the good will and competence that indicate credibility, but prove them again and again by bringing about a sequence of valued changes on a variety of community needs. Nondirective and positive content, by encouraging honest community dialogue about advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives, and showing sincere respect towards people and their traditions, also promote credibility.

• Pioneering community commitments to abandon FGM/C emerged independently in the later 1990s in response to the activities of CEOSS in Egypt and Tostan in Senegal, each a holistic development program.

• FGM-FVP in Egypt, and the Entishar and ROCSS programs in Sudan, are deliberately designed with attention to credibility issues. They are all holistic programs where participants identify community problems, and
nondirective programs which rely on community dialogue. In Egypt, there
is sometimes resistance to FGM/C programs, linking them to a Western
attack on Egyptian tradition and values. This resistance is most vocal,
says the Egypt report, when FGM/C is considered in isolation from other
services valued by the community, or when the NGO is not closely
integrated with the community or is from outside it.

• In Sudan, the National Council for Child Welfare carries out a
comprehensive media campaign for child protection, FGM/C being one of
five issues. Formerly, the content of such advocacy was negative
messages about risk to health, but recently they include messages about
human rights, and sometimes feature children, youth, and married couples
speaking for themselves. FGM-FVP in Egypt is a multilevel program, and
worked at the national level in 2003 on a national media campaign called,
“The Egyptian Girl,” advocating education for girls, an end to early
marriage, and an end to FGM/C. Three television spots addressed
medical, religious, and ethical aspects of FGM/C, and commonly mistaken
beliefs about the practice.

• KMG in Ethiopia, starting in 1997, introduced a wide range of practical
projects to improve the health and livelihood of the population, winning
the trust and confidence of traditionalists, according to the Ethiopia report:
health education, malaria prevention, environmental sanitation, income-
generating projects, bridges, wells, springs, nursery and afforestation,
biogas, and so on. The NGO organized environmental restoration of the
Kembata people’s sacred mountain Hamericho, which raised the prestige of KMG and of its leader Bogalech’s appeal for change.

We observe in practice that effective abandonments are positive and forward-looking, not negative and backward-looking, not harsh in terminology or punitive in attitude.

3.3 Reversal of Social Norm. The original social convention theory noted that the core group also has an incentive to revalue the alternatives of cutting and not cutting, and showed how such revaluation hastens the process. But it did not detail the mechanisms of revaluation. The refinement (Mackie and LeJeune 2009) explains how FGM/C is maintained not only as a social convention, based on marriageability interest, but often also as a social norm, further kept in place by informal social sanctions of approval and disapproval applied by members of the intramarrying community. The country reports frequently mention positive social sanctions for being cut, and negative social sanctions for being uncut.

- The Kenya study reports in district after district that the stigmatization of uncut girls at times causes ARP graduates later to choose cutting. Girls are shamed, ridiculed, mocked, and cast out by their peers, at worst not allowed to fetch water, collect firewood, or even to interact with the cut. In some instances girls are trained to answer back, in one a godmother is assigned to each for counsel, in one a cut older girls is assigned to to each uncut girl as her guardian, and in one backsliding results in excommunication from the church. ARP provides an immediate positive social sanction to the participant, but that positive sanction might be outweighed by hostility from parents and the rest of the local community.
Efforts which proceed at the individual level, rather than at the community level, expose their followers not only to the risk of unmarriageability, but to the more certain prospect of painful rebuke and taunting.

- Social norms, old or new, are upheld by positive sanctions at least as much as by negative ones. UNICEF Sudan is rolling out a national-level child protection media campaign, its first topic FGM/C. In traditional communities in the Sudan, going uncut was linked to misbehavior, and to accuse a male or female of being uncut was a common curse. The most common word, ghalfa, is negative, and connotes slavery and prostitution. In the first phase of the campaign, the slogan “Every girl is born Saleema” will be popularized, by materials with a warm, happy, light-hearted emotional tone.

The process for shifting the social norm to not cutting, and to negative sanctions for choosing to cut and positive sanctions for choosing not to cut, can be identical to the process for shifting the marriageability convention to one of not cutting. The processes can be conceptually distinguished although behaviourally identical, but more importantly, evidence shows that the processes can be behaviourally distinct. Programs which have had time to obtain results share in common, not perfectly universal abandonment within the community, but an effective reversal of social norm within the community and an initially significant and then increasing reversal of the marriageability convention.

- The processes are most distinct in the case of the Coptic town of Deir al Barsha in Egypt. Town leaders in 1991 publicly announced that those who cut from today on will be questioned before God. These notables
announced that they would no longer have their daughters cut, persuaded some other families to announce that they would refrain from the practice, and cutters agreed to discontinue their service. The document was signed in a public ceremony attended by members of the women’s committee, other town committees, and the religious leaders. This event was a shift in the social norm of FGM/C, reducing negative social sanction and increasing positive social sanction for going uncut. At annual family health visits, families were invited to sign on, publicly or privately, to the list of families not cutting. Surveys estimated increasing shift in the marriageability convention over the years, and as of 2005 there is no new cutting.

- In the Amhara and Wolayta programs in Ethiopia we see both substantial discontinuation and continuation of FGM/C. There is imposition of a criminal prohibition, but no reversal of the social norm. Thus, families and their daughters who go uncut are likely to encounter harsh stigmatization, of unknown consequence for the stability of choice among those who have abandoned.

3.4. Additional Overdetermining Factors. FGM/C generally is maintained by the marriageability convention and usually by social norm as well. More variably, it can also be held in place by belief that it is a religious obligation, that it is required for adolescent rite of passage, or in order to satisfy the female honour and modesty code.

- The country reports frequently mention the belief that FGM/C is a matter of piety. For many people, there is not a crisp differentiation among
religion, tradition, and culture: “It has always existed. They don’t realize that it is not in the Bible or the Koran,” says Bogalech Gebre, the leader of KMG. The Egypt study reports that religious leaders often played the biggest role in convincing people to oppose the practice, and that opposition to abandonment by religious leaders was sometimes a major problem. Where FGM/C is mistakenly considered a religious obligation, changing that belief is necessary but not sufficient for change.

- Evidence continues to mount that adolescent rite of passage does not on its own maintain FGM/C, and that alternative rite of passage is ineffective in isolation. In Kenya, in response to national media campaigns and criminal prohibition of the practice, families cut at earlier ages, such that in many places it is no longer directly associated with adolescent passage. The Senegal country study as well reports that among groups where FGM/C was once associated with rite of passage, girls are cut at a younger age without reference to initiation.

- The country studies frequently report the belief that FGM/C reduces female sexual desire and thereby promotes chastity and fidelity. Uncut girls, it is said, are wild, will become pregnant outside of marriage, even become prostitutes. The beliefs may be self-enforcing, due to lack of local variation in the practice, and also may arise out of folk explanations for the origins of the practice.

3.5. Transformative Human Rights Deliberations. The refined theory also addresses wide reports that the continuation or discontinuation of FGM/C is discussed in
terms of moral right and wrong. The moral norm “do not harm your child” motivated the origination and maintenance of the marriageability convention of FGM/C, and the very same moral norm motivates abandonment once it is realized to be feasible.

- Bogalech Gebre of KMG in Ethiopia, says of community abandonment of the practice, that, “People in villages may be illiterate, but they are not stupid. They want what’s good for themselves and their children.”

Enunciation of more fundamental moral norms allows for culturally sensitive revision of more derived social norms.

- CEOSS in Egypt and Tostan in Senegal are adamant that community deliberations about human rights, international, but especially as already implicit in the local vernacular, were essential to their pioneering community abandonments. The deliberations probably play a causal role.

- Based on accumulated international experience, national programs in Egypt and Sudan deliberately incorporate human rights education in their activities. Program content shifted, from negative health messages to the facilitation of positive community dialogue about the practice, appealing to international human rights and local community traditions and values.

- Also, in several efforts, there is an explicit transition, motivated by program experience, from working on women’s empowerment alone, to working on both women’s empowerment and community empowerment. For example, the stated mission of KMG is, “to empower Kembata women and their communities in support of their right to be free of harmful customary practices and other forms of abuse.” This is probably
due to a growing realization that FGM/C is a community practice which can only be resolved by the whole community.

- Human rights deliberations are necessary but not sufficient. KMG in Ethiopia started in 1997 with community development projects, women’s empowerment, and human rights. KMG says on its webpage that, “We used to talk about helping girls one girl at a time. Now, our people have taught us that it is possible to seek not just change, but accelerating change.” In 2002 it became a “community capacity enhancement program,” trained core groups, engaged in organized diffusion, and started “community conversations” deeply involving all sectors of the community, which prompted a wide sequence of organized abandonments.

4. Conclusion. Finally, programs respond creatively to local circumstances.

- Age of cutting varies by group, but in many groups takes place before adolescence. In the Kembata and Tembaro Zone of Ethiopia, however, it takes place between ages 12 and 18. KMG trained not only multisectoral core groups to diffuse on HTPs, but also core groups of uncut girls powerfully motivated to organize against the practice. Additionally, in the circumstances, it was able to hold dramatic public weddings of uncut girls, to show that they could obtain good husbands.

- In Senegal, the marriage horizons of rural communities overlap, such that the mobilization of one village stimulates positive and negative interest in overlapping villages. Organized diffusion within a few and between many related villages is highly efficient. In Egypt, the girls of Deir al Barsha
married only within the geographically and ethnically isolated town. The circumscribed marriage market made the pioneering abandonment easier to accomplish, but prevented its diffusion to other communities. Wohi Reddu in Ethiopia has obtained momentarily stable abandonment in six nomadic groups, but observes that more surrounding groups must be added to obtain irreversible change. Astute members of the community are aware of those to whom they owe reciprocal obligations, and their knowledge should guide program design.

Abandonment activity includes local community deliberations about fundamental values, among them the moral norm not to harm one’s child. Such discussions inspire reversal of the more derived social norm of FGM/C. Where applicable, beliefs that FGM/C is a mandatory religious obligation, or that it promotes chastity and fidelity, need to be publicly deliberated. Effective abandonment activities are holistic, nondirective, and positive, and thereby establish credibility, helping to overcome powerfully self-enforcing beliefs. Genuine community discussion, decision, and commitment start with a critical mass of initiators who through organized diffusion brings around the greater part of the community to coordinated and stable abandonment of the practice.

END