

Education & FGM

Report of the online Talk: education & FGM

The online talk of 31 August 2022 organised by the COP addressed the issue of addressing FGM in education systems.

This online talk was an opportunity to deepen and continue the debates that have been taking place within the group on the topic of education & FGM. It was also a question of sharing best practices and analysing the challenges faced by the actors in order to provide adequate solutions.

Below you will find a summary of the views of different participants on education and FGM online talk.

Summary

Participants in the online talk noted the *"need for a strong evidence-based approach!"*

This need for solid evidence is embodied in the evaluations of school curricula that have proven their ability to change social norms and practices in communities. It was also mentioned that changes in knowledge and attitudes do not mean changes in social norms and practices.

The question to ask is: *"What is the logic of the theory of change that work in schools changes social norms?"*

There is an assumption that if you change the knowledge and attitudes of YOUTH, social norms and practices will change. Even if there are not yet strong correlations between education and the eradication of FGM, it seems to us that this avenue should be given more attention.

In addition, other avenues could also be investigated simultaneously, notably parents and elders who are often the people who exercise authority and make decisions. Why not also work simultaneously with the elderly? There are methods for this, for example the grandmother project. Indeed, the assumption is that programmes that work with schools would be more effective if they also work directly with parents and elders, and in dialogue. Programmes need to be holistic and based on lifelong learning, dialogue between younger and older generations. Children, teachers, parents and elders should be linked.

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1. Implementing good practices on addressing FGM in education systems

Participants in the online talk identified good practices from projects implemented in both Africa and Europe.

In Africa

a) *Developing creative programmes that are attractive to young people: the example of Burkina Faso*

- The project of Tackle Africa, an organisation working in Burkina Faso, has used sports such as football to initiate conversations about FGM and measure the change in knowledge and attitudes. Like many other organisations, it struggles to measure long-term change, as short-term interventions and funding are a problem. The strongest knowledge change is in schools, as a structured environment. They have started to teach more about other factors that contribute to FGM, such as gender discrimination factors.
- At the institutional level, the integration of FGM modules into the educational systems notably in three courses taught to students, namely: French, history and geography, and natural sciences. The aim of these courses is to raise awareness and provide information to pupils on FGM.

A toll-free number has also been made available to students in order to denounce the risks of FGM. Cultural activities such as slams, and poems are organised in some schools.

Since 2015, a family dialogue approach has also been tested. The objective is to organise awareness-raising sessions in the family cocoon on different themes, including FGM.

Since 2022, an intranet system is being installed in schools to continue awareness raising through a digital platform.

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b) A strong correlation established between education and FGM: the case of the project led by the organisation ASD in Guinea Conakry

The organisation ASD has already established the correlation between education and FGM since 2012 in the Kankan region of Guinea Conakry.

This project involves the school as an important actor in the protection of girls. Indeed, the approach involves the collaboration of different educational and institutional actors. These actors are trained in guidance and protection of girls against FGM.

Teachers have the right to be informed of the children's moves in order to protect them. In the classrooms, through a card for the identification of uncut girls, a system for the protection of these girls at risk is put in place. Through these cards, information can also be collected from classmates in case they are aware of a potential excision.

Cultural activities are also organised in the schools of the Kankan region, in particular the projection of videos in order to initiate debates on excision. At the end of this activity, it was noted that 80% to 90% of young people were convinced that they could trigger alerts to the service dedicated to the protection of girls.

As a result, to the work carried out by ASD in this region, a drop in the prevalence rate of between 3% and 4% has been noted in certain districts.

As part of the project, community meetings were also organised as an awareness-raising strategy. One of the strong stories that emerged from this sensitisation was that one of the children who had been informed that there was going to be a collective excision alerted the NGO, which was able to stop it. Similarly, an 11-year-old girl in Kenya, after learning about the negative effects of FGM, said NO and convinced her mother not to have it done, and started a movement in her community. This movement may have more impact in communities that practice FGM when the girls are slightly older. Of course, we cannot expect young people to be brave, self-reliant and to go against people who have so much power, but it is important to equip them with the knowledge they need.

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c) A values-based approach: the case of the Kisii region in Kenya

One participant said that when she was working in Kiisi, part of her research was to see how laws and education reduced FGM. She found that informal education in the communities, not only learning in schools, women's self-help groups and local organisations were organising special sessions for adults and also incorporating FGM. Community volunteers went into schools to talk to children. They did not view FGM in isolation, it was part of the general issues facing the communities, such as teenage pregnancy, hygiene, alcohol consumption and many others.

Classes on general health were conducted in Kisii (local language). After the discussions, it was up to the people to decide whether they still wanted to cut their daughters or not. This is called a values-based approach.

In Europe

d) Going beyond the classroom and working with parents too: The Gender ABC project, in Germany, Italy and Spain.

The Gender ABC project uses an approach that is not limited to the classroom. In addition to integrating gender modules into the school curriculum, activities such as meetings are also organised with parents where sexuality can be discussed. In some cases, they anticipate that during these meetings, the issue of sexuality is discussed, and some parents may react badly, as they are uncomfortable talking about sex with children, which is the case in Italy. The programme includes other strategies such as drama with the community and families.

So, the school is a gateway to talk with the whole family and community. This programme will soon be launched in several African countries.

e) A more institutional approach: the case of England

Since 2000, England has adopted a directive that makes it compulsory to integrate gender-based violence into the school curriculum. This is a much more comprehensive approach to sex education, human rights, protection and awareness of gender-based violence.

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2. Gaps and challenges in the implementation of educational programmes that take FGM into account

In general, participants in the online talk also identified a number of challenges, including:

- The lack of strategies to protect girls during school holidays
- The religious context that needs to be taken into account and which makes it difficult to integrate gender-based violence such as FGM into the school curriculum. Even though there is a slow evolution in the fact that FGM is gradually being addressed in some mosques and religious ceremonies.
- The lack of psychosocial support structures for girls at risk as well as the lack of structures for the care of the girls concerned.
- Lack of prevention kits in schools
- Fear of talking about it in the community for fear of reprisals
- The fear of some teachers to tackle the subject of FGM in the school curriculum, as in England - even if since then training courses and funds have been made available to community organisations for the training of teachers to tackle subjects such as FGM in schools. It is therefore necessary that this training be effective.

a) Resistance in Senegal

The point that came out strongly was the assumption that all children are in school or that school is celebrated everywhere. But in some places, there is enormous resistance to schooling. The school is often seen as a colonialist institution, the content and methods are seen as a colonial legacy, and the use of the mother tongue is often scorned. This was the case in southern Senegal when the Grandmother Project was set up - parents were very suspicious of schools and teachers. School enrolment was low and drop-out rates for girls were high. The Grandmother Project brought teachers and elders together to explain the rationale for abandoning harmful practices such as FGM to girls, which ultimately earned the project the African Union's Educational Innovation Award.

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b) Fear of stigmatising the communities concerned: the case of Italy

While school attendance is not necessarily a problem in developed countries, the transmission of FGM material can be. In Italy, for example, teachers may decide to speak to the media or teach about FGM out of the blue. These risks fuelling racist stereotypes and condescension towards children from the communities concerned.

The idea of this project is not to engage in schools if the conversation is solely about FGM. Rather, it is to provide holistic education to students that talks about gender-based violence, inequality and other common problems in society, and emphasises that FGM is another manifestation of gender-based violence.

Teachers should therefore only talk about FGM if they themselves have been trained to avoid the risk of causing further harm. They should be trained to avoid gender stereotyping and let the children come up with their own, much less biased, thoughts.

c) Administrative complexity that hinders the inclusion of FGM in educational programmes in Guinea Conakry

The current problem in Guinea Conakry is that it is difficult to have a strict integration of FGM into educational programmes. Indeed, schools that wish to integrate FGM into the school curriculum are confronted with the refusal to validate school protocols by administrative bodies that pass the quid on the competence to validate such a measure.

This administrative vagueness and the lack of consultation between the administrative authorities as to which service is competent to implement such a system make the implementation of the systematic integration of FGM into school curricula more complex. Faced with this difficulty, the actors in the field are content to find alternatives for integrating FGM into school activities.

d) The perpetual conflict between so-called traditional education and so-called Western education

For the participants in the online talk, there is a need to value what communities teach young people and to seek to create a dialogue that would merge the best of both sides rather than prioritise what seems to support the eradication of traditional community learning methods.

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e) A more holistic approach to education

Curriculum change alone may not be effective. Taking the example of Kisii above, the strategies seemed to work because there was a combination of several things going on at once, adult education groups, volunteers going into schools, a women's group performing arts (skit). There is a need to include discussions on several issues in society that are more often related to gender norms and the need to live in harmony with everyone.

f) The need for continuous learning

Parents and elders are as important as young people. There is a need to combine formal and non-formal education and we must be careful not to define "education" as synonymous with school, as education is broader and involves families and communities.

3. Solutions/recommendations

Participants in the online discussion proposed some solutions to the challenges faced on the ground. These include:

- Systematically integrate FGM, including GBV, into school curricula
- Mapping the necessary stakeholders in order to have a synergy of actions, institutions and consultation platforms between stakeholders
- Establish a framework for comprehensive care of girls affected and girls at risk
- Train teachers, school nurses and school social workers on gender-based violence, including FGM, so that they can in turn raise awareness among pupils
- Establish a national protocol for the integration of FGM into the school curriculum
- Establish collaborations with community-based organisations
- Long-term funding for grassroots organisations that will allow for qualitative evaluation of gender mainstreaming and other anti-FGM strategies in schools.

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4. Towards a more comprehensive approach to gender transformative education: the example of [the Freetown Manifesto for Gender Transformative Leadership in Education](#)

The Freetown Manifesto for Transformative Gender Leadership in Education was developed in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in May 2022, at a workshop on transformative gender leadership organised by the Ministry of Basic and Higher Secondary Education and the Gender Initiative at the Centre as part of a programme implemented by UNGEI and UNESCO IIEP and supported by UNICEF, GPE, UNESCO and the governments of Italy, France and the UK, Germany and the European Union.

The aim of the manifesto is to create momentum for gender equality in and through education.

In this Manifesto, the various actors (including 14 countries, ...) work towards the achievement of quality education for every child, and at the same time reaffirm their firm belief in the equality of all humanity and the catalytic role of girls' and women's empowerment in equitable and equal human development. In signing this Manifesto, countries resolve to collectively focus their leadership on empowering girls through education while seeking to achieve gender equality in and through education.

To this end, signatory countries commit to transforming their systems, pedagogies, institutions and even their own mindsets so that they can end harmful gender norms and stereotypes and help every child achieve the freedom they need to dream and grow without barriers.

In making these commitments, signatory countries are taking steps to work in partnership with line ministries, religious and cultural leaders, the private sector and civil society organisations that serve the most vulnerable children on the ground, as well as with young activists who advocate for their needs and those of their communities and schools.

To read more about the manifesto, click here: [Freetown Manifesto for Transformative Gender Leadership in Education | LEGEI \(ungei.org\)](#)