Public Declarations on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting Abandonment

Author: Karin Weber
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Description & Context
In 2010 Uganda adopted a national law against Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting (FGM/C). Acceleration of the implementation for this law is much needed, since several communities in Eastern Uganda still practice FGM/C. Within the polygamous Tepeth, Sebei and Pokot ethnic groups in Eastern Uganda girls between the ages of 11-14 are being cut. The cutting takes place just after the harvest. Community leaders approve the cutting ceremony before it takes place and will only give permission when the harvest has been good and there is enough food available for the ceremonies. After being mutilated in groups the girls stay in a recovery shelter up to three months. During this healing time the mutilator is the only one allowed to see the girls and parents are requested to bring food. Additional ceremonies are being done during this period to prepare the girls for marriage and to have children. The end of the healing period is marked by another ceremony after which the girls are reunited with their families. At this time the girls are officially available for marriage offers, including so-called bride prices often in the form of a large number of cows for the family of the girl. Mutilators have a high status within the community and benefit directly from large payments by the parents during the cutting season as well as tokens of appreciations by the community throughout the year.

Objectives
The overall objective of the public declarations on FGM/C abandonment, as stated by implementing partner POZIDEP, supported by the UNFPA/UNICEF Joint Programme on FGM/C, is to accelerate the abandonment of FGM/C. More specifically 1) to change attitudes among leaders and community members towards the promotion of women’s and children’s rights, 2) to raise awareness on FGM/C abandonment, and 3) to show others that even the important persons who have always supported the practice of FGM/C have now abandoned the harmful practise.

Strategies and Implementation
As part of the joint programme for FGM/C abandonment local faith based organisation POZIDEP based in Amudat district decided on a strategy whereby role models in the Pokot communities would publicly declare their commitment to FGM/C abandonment during the celebration of so-called ‘Cultural Days’ in order to show other community members that they openly denounced the practice. The initial target group were the community elders who are perceived as the custodians of the Pokot culture in which FGM/C is one of the treasured practices. As a first step the group of elders was invited for an exchange visit to Kapchorwa district in 2009. Kapchorwa district already successfully implemented public declarations on FGM/C abandonment and the group of Pokot
elders learned from the experience by the Sebei council of elders. According to POZIDEP it was from this point onwards that the Pokot elders started to change their attitude towards the practice of FGM/C and POZIDEP included the elders during community dialogue meetings on FGM/C.

Next to the elders other target groups included mutilators, political and cultural leaders and youth. During the Cultural Day of 2011 eight elders publicly declared and signed the FGM/C abandonment declaration. In addition three former mutilators and 50 girls publicly declared FGM/C abandonment. Lastly, public declarations were made by five communities (villages) as a whole in Amudat District. During the February 2012 ‘Zero Tolerance for FGM/C Day’ an additional four former mutilators made the public declaration and abandoned their knives. During the culture days emphasis was placed on positive cultural expressions and celebrations including community dance and poem recitals.

**Key challenges**

One of the main challenges that community members faced after publicly declaring FGM/C abandonment was discrimination by other community members. Both the elders and girls stated that they experience discrimination within their communities and some people don’t want to talk to them anymore since the public declarations. One elder described: “They [other community members supporting FGM/C] take us as strangers, they call us names and say we are involved in witchcraft, because they take it as a culture of our forefathers”. However both groups of elders and girls expressed that they are determined to spread the message on the harmful effects of FGM/C within their communities. Another challenge, as expressed by the elders, is the fact that the communities are very large and the information doesn’t reach all people, especially those in the remote and hard to reach areas. Finally POZIDEP was faced with the challenge of elders, former mutilators and girls expecting support in the form of alternative livelihoods and education after publicly declaring FGM/C abandonment. According to one of the elders families can ‘earn’ up to 25 cows as a bride price when their daughter undergoes FGM/C and is married off afterwards. In addition mutilators benefit greatly from FGM/C and their livelihood depends on the practice. Some former mutilators have been trained as traditional birth attenders. However, challenges are also faced in this regards. Because of the benefits from within the community these traditional birth attenders, in some cases, have delayed to send women to the health centers when they were faced with complications during delivery, hereby putting the life of the mother at risk.
Progress and Results

Elders, girls and former mutilators stated that through the programme activities they have increased their knowledge on the negative consequences of FGM/C. One elder explains: “This practice has been going on for a long time, but now we realize the difficulties. For example, if you compare the challenges that cut girls have to undergo during delivery compared to uncut girls there are big differences: uncut girls give birth easily whereas cut girls have many complications”. Elders and girls who publicly abandoned FGM/C educate their peers on the risks of FGMC, including extreme bleeding after FGM/C that may result in death and the high risk of HIV infection, since mutilators use one knife for all girls during the cutting ceremony. When asked about the observed changes since the public declarations elders state that school dropout rates among girls have decreased and many communities have been discouraged to practice FGM/C. Communities also increased their awareness on the anti FGM/law passed by the Ugandan national government in 2010. The elders and girls who have done the public declarations were also trained to disseminate the law within their communities. Young boys and men are also targeted by this intervention as explained by one of the elders: “When my son is coming to the marrying age I will say no to him as a father when he wants to marry a cut girl”. Overall, since the start of this project the communities who said no to FGM/C also talked to other communities who were impressed by the positive changes in the communities who have already abandoned FGM/C.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

As stated by POZIDEP, public declarations on FGM/C abandonment by elders, former mutilators and girls during public events have contributed to the acceleration of abandonment of the harmful practice. Public declarations are seen as an important tool in changing the attitude of people towards the practice of FGM/C. Public declarations are used to educate and influence community members by their own leaders and peers. In addition audiences increase their knowledge on the harmful effects of FGM/C both during the public declarations as well as afterwards during peer sensitisation sessions. According to POZIDEP: “When the attitudes of some of the members of the society have been changed, then the complacency has been disturbed for almost everyone in that society. Attitudes of people can be changed through credibility in communication, hereby referring to a person’s personality, trustworthiness, status, expertise through experience, age and social background”. One of the lessons learned is that public declaration should start from the community itself, hereby strengthening commitment and ownership. In addition, FGM/C abandonment needs a collective effort; all actors need to come together and deliver the message on FGM/C abandonment deep inside the communities. Showing people the harmful effects of FGM/C, especially the difference in childbearing by uncut women versus cut women has been an effective advocacy message to discourage FGM/C by communities.
Recommendations and Next Steps
Community members, leaders and district authorities all stress the importance of education in the fight against FGM/C. Following successful implementation in Kenya local authorities and organisations in Uganda are advocating for the creation of a girl boarding school and a safety centre for girls that escape early marriage and FGM/C and who cannot return to their communities. Furthermore, to ensure sustainability of the programme communities should be encouraged to pass by-laws prohibiting FGM/C in their respective areas. Finally, all stakeholders involved in the programme have expressed the wish for exchange visits between practising districts and countries to facilitate knowledge sharing and learning from each other’s experiences.

Sources and Contact Persons
Primary sources
- Documented good practice by POZIDEP
- Interview with Nangole A. Isaac POZIDEP Amudat on May 31st 2012.
- Focus Group Discussion with 8 male elders in POZIDEP Amudat on May 31st 2012
- Focus Group Discussion with 18 girls in Amudat on May 31st 2012
- Interview with one former mutilator in Amudat on May 31st 2012

Contact persons
POZIDEP Amudat: Peter Lokor Yerer, pozidep2008@yahoo.com
UNFPA Uganda: Miranda Tabifor, tabifor@unfpa.org and Esther Cherop, cherop@unfpa.org
UNICEF Uganda: Agnes Karani, akarani@unicef.org and Yoko Kobayashi, ykobayashi@unicef.org
Author: Karin Weber, karin@karinweber.info and www.karinweber.info