

COLLABORATIVE WORK WITH SOMALILAND STAKEHOLDERS TO INCREASE EVIDENCE BASED DECISION MAKING IN FGM/C

“Translating research into practice is challenging however we have made some gains in Somaliland, if you look back in 1998 speaking publicly about FGM/C was unheard of ... now we are here in this knowledge sharing workshop openly discussing issues in FGM/C, we need to escalate this and have strong leaders who will also push for abandonment of FGM/C.” Opening remarks from Dr Deq Jama, Obstetrician, Reproductive Health Policy specialist in Somaliland.

The need for rigorous research evidence for FGM/C continues to grow and in Somalia, where key stakeholders such as the national government, donors, NGOs and the UN have been implementing programmes to abandon the practice, the prevalence remains high at 98 percent (UNICEF 2016¹) and the lack of an enabling policy environment is still a challenge.

Last December, Population Council collaborated with partners Orchid Project and Somaliland Family Health Association (SOFHA) to pilot a new approach to disseminating research findings in order to increase the impact of evidence-based decision making in programme, policy, and investments in FGM/C. The three day knowledge sharing workshop was held in Hargeisa Somaliland and facilitated by Dr Katy Newell-Jones from Orchid Project with over 40 policy makers and programme implementers who are part of the National FGM/C Task Force. The workshop utilized an open space approach to encourage review of recent key evidence on FGM/C in Somaliland; explore UNICEF’s six elements of abandonment and their relevance to the Somaliland context; link research with decision making; and develop action plans.

Within the past year and a half, the Population Council has led two seminal research projects in Somaliland. The [Evidence to End FGM/C](#) programme, which is supported by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), released a report entitled “Female genital mutilation/cutting in Somaliland: A qualitative study exploring potential shifts in the practice and their societal drivers”. The second project, “Female genital cutting in Somaliland: Baseline Assessment”, was funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation



(Norad) and sought to support and build capacity of SOFHA to undertake a rigorous baseline assessment for their FGM/C programme. The above research projects, along with the UNICEF six elements of abandonment, served as the evidence base for the workshop.

The open space approach allowed for participants to delve deeper into the research and the six elements of abandonment and use it stimulate conversation, identifying six key themes for further reflection: behavioural/social change, medicalisation, policy, child rights, further research, and the role of NGOs and CBOs. After the discussions on the last day of the workshop, participants developed draft action plans to link the research to their current work on policy and programming for FGM/C.

“We have to work collectively and come up with action plans using robust evidence to design and implement FGM/C interventions in the community, the research is showing that trends are changing hence the need to remodel advocacy programs to better respond to the needs of the people.” Remarks on the way forward from Mustafe Ahmed, Nagaad Network

The action plans from representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (which is the lead government agency for FGM/C) will focus on the establishment of a legal framework on FGM/C. The Ministry of Health and Education will move forward and work on developing materials and guidelines for health workers and teachers while the Ministry of Religious Affairs will focus on clarifying their stance on “sunna” and other types of FGM/C before producing a fatwa. Meanwhile, for NGOs and CBOs present, their action plans included a variety of activities such as strengthening capacity of schools, health workers, and engaging communities especially in hard to reach rural areas in non-judgemental dialogue and supporting them in identifying ways of abandoning FGM/C.

So as to hold partners accountable and not lose momentum, the Population Council, SOFHA, and Orchid Project will be following up with participants to see the progress made towards their action plans and to assess the usefulness of knowledge sharing workshops as a means of disseminating research. The knowledge sharing workshops served to engage key stakeholders on research findings in a different way rather than the conventional meeting presentations that are often



used. Ultimately, they were intended to generate meaningful discussions around evidence-based decision making for FGM/C policy, programmes, and investments in Somaliland.

This workshop was made possible through the Norad funded “FGM/C Research Capacity Building project” which aims to improve the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of policies, programs, and investments for the elimination of FGM/C by strengthening the use of indicators and measurement processes and intensifying the use of research-based evidence in decision-making.

REFERENCES

1. UNICEF. Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A global concern. New York: UNICEF, 2016