

**EDITORIAL****FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION AS AN ISSUE OF GENDER DISPARITY  
IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: LEVERAGING OPPORTUNITIES TO  
REVERSE CURRENT TRENDS**Workenesh Ayele, PhD<sup>1</sup>, Sileshi Lulseged, MD, MMed<sup>2</sup>

Half of the world's 7 billion people are women. However, despite the fact that the frontiers of science, including medical science, have advanced in an unprecedented manner, a sizable proportion of the world's population, women in particular, have not reaped the benefits of the progress. Our world is still home to millions of individuals who live in very different realities and whose basic human rights are still unmet. Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) constitutes a stark example of the violation of the human rights of women and girls as recognized in numerous international and regional human rights instruments (1). Because FGM/C can result in severe physical and mental harm and because it constitutes an invasive procedure on otherwise healthy tissue without any medical necessity, it is a violation of the right to women's and girls' health.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 100-140 million girls and women have had some form of FGM/C at some point in their lives (2). FGM/C described as partial or total removal of the external female genitalia is a non-therapeutic surgical intervention whose value has everything to do with accepted social norms and none whatsoever medically. The magnitude of the practice is higher in certain areas of the globe, including continental Africa. It is estimated that approximately 3 million girls on the continent undergo FGM/C annually and approximately 91.5 million women and girls above 9 years of age are currently living with the consequences of FGM (2). The prevalence of FGM/C varies across the continent and the practice is almost universal in countries in the Horn of Africa (3). Data from Ethiopia also show highly varying levels of FGM with the eastern part of the country being the most affected (4,5).

The complications that may occur following FGM/C depend on the type and extent of the procedure that is carried out (MPH Thesis, Gebremichael T, 2002, Addis Ababa University, Female genital mutilation and birth complications). The complications associated with FGM/C are generally classified as immediate, intermediate and long-term complications (2). Although certainly the adverse consequences of FGM/C on maternal and neonatal health, ranging from death to physical, sexual and psychosocial consequences, are well documented (6-9), the practice is not solely a medical issue. FGM/C is also intrinsically a social issue.

Ethiopia has successfully achieved six of the eight MDGs, including improvements in maternal health and reducing child mortality (10), even though one must still caution against complacency. It is highly unlikely that achievement of these milestones can serve as a stand-alone measure to effectively safeguard women's health. In the context of FGM/C, the health sector needs to pose properly framed and relevant questions viz: What impact could FGM/C have in addressing shortfalls in women's sexual and reproductive healthcare needs, if it were to become a reportable condition in the country's surveillance system? What appears certain is that there is still much acquiescence towards the practice, and tacit acceptance breeds more of the same. Elevating FGM to a reportable condition might help to galvanize attention and bring the issue out of the shadows directly to the forefront.

As stipulated in the FGM/C article in this issue of the Ethiopian Medical Journal (11), it is critical to understand the reasons for the persistence of FGM/C in Ethiopia, but it is also equally important to identify the opportunities at hand to design and implement strategies effectively. Ethiopian law specifically prohibits FGM/C. The practice should be recognized for what it is: gender-based violence and a denial of basic human rights. This calls for a clear

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recognition of the actions necessary to safeguard the welfare and inherent dignity of each girl and woman. Secondly there is global solidarity to combat FGM/C and Ethiopia is not expected to confront the problem single-handedly. Prominent world bodies have added their powerful voices for the elimination of the practice. In addition, the adoption of the global transformation agenda by 2030 in the form of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offers unique opportunities (12). By capitalizing on the SDGs, in particular SDG3 and SDG5 which advocate for increased wellbeing/good health for all and achievement of gender parity, respectively, it is possible to create a greater momentum for the elimination of FGM/C as a socially tolerated practice.

In the final analysis there should be recognition that no one single approach is likely to bring about an end to the practice of FGM/C. A multi-pronged approach is needed to empower communities to actively promote the health of every single member of the community. This will take concerted effort and time and use of lessons from the ground to inform plans and to improve understanding of related issues in the wider context of gender equality and social change. A combination of legal instruments and strong political will, as well as untiring efforts to educate the community can help to translate agreements on paper into reality. Transformation of our world by 2030 will mean taking bold steps, among other things, to address gender inequalities of which FGM, unfortunately, is still a major manifestation of that disparity.

The lessons of the past show that in order to have effective results and create a change in the practice of FGM/C, there is a need for evidence based, sustainable interventions that target and involve different players at all levels. Indeed, lessons and experience to date give us reason to hope that elimination of FGM/C is within reach. Global concerted action has produced the elimination of human scourges, killer diseases such as smallpox which are now eradicated. Numerous advances in medicine, as well as in other spheres testify to the power of the human mind to change the trajectory of human history. Surely nothing could be more worthwhile than taking timely and concerted actions to bring about a world in which the most vulnerable citizens of the globe get to enjoy the same basic rights as all others, and women and girls at risk for FGM/C are a case in point.

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