

### **Key factors, drivers and gatekeepers of Female Genital Mutilation in Ethiopia: a meta synthesis of national and regional studies**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a harmful practice that consists of all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. This meta-synthesis aimed to identify and describe the key factors, drivers and gate keepers of FGM practices in Ethiopia was conducted using systematic searches in electronic databases (PubMed, PsycINFO and Google Scholar) and grey literature from 2012 to 2021. The main factors and drivers of FGM practices were cultural and traditional practice including marriageability and religious obligations. Other drivers are poor enforcement of laws against the practice, and medicalisation of FGM practice. The key gatekeepers are Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) who are also mostly the female circumcisers; mothers, grandmothers and older women reported as major promoters, circumcisers, and key decision makers on the practice. Religious leaders and health workers also play pivotal role in the prevention of FGM as trusted source of information dissemination. The study identified key factors, drivers and gatekeepers of FGM practice in Ethiopia especially in the regions with high prevalence. Programme and policy solutions must be tailored to the local context, not only addressing these drivers but involving the gatekeepers in developing the solutions.

*Keywords:* Female Genital Mutilation, Actors, Drivers, Gatekeepers, Meta synthesis

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a harmful practice that consists of all procedures involving partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. All forms of FGM can cause immediate and long-term health risks including physical, psychological, emotional, and social health problems; the risk, of both immediate and long-term, increases with the extent of the cutting [1,2]. FGM is recognized as a pervasive violation of human rights, and other international conventions[3].

FGM is a global challenge with estimated over two hundred million girls and women worldwide having undergone the procedure and another three million girls are at risk of being cut yearly ([1]. It is estimated that the prevalence may increase to sixty-eight million by the year 2030 with a projection of nearly five million girls undergoing the procedure yearly if more actions are not taken towards eradicating the practice [4] .The practice of FGM is concentrated mostly in Africa, Asia and the Middle East and it is characterised by the partial or total excision of the female external genitalia and associated with entrenched cultural practices in most communities in Sub-Saharan African countries[1,2,5].

In Ethiopia, 65 percent of women and girls aged 15-49 years are circumcised at national level though with notable disparities across regions and settings. Three regions in the country have the highest prevalence, Somali 99 percent, Afar 91 percent and Harar 82 percent[6,7]. The aforementioned three regions are predominately Muslim with Somali and Afar also being pastoralist. Nearly half of cut women underwent FGM when they were younger than 5 years old, whereas nearly 3 in 10 were cut after age 10; age at cutting varies substantially by region and religion[7].

Given the unacceptably high prevalence of FGM in the country, Ethiopia has been striving to address the issue through implementation of several strategic and programme measures. This includes an appropriate legal framework and policy provisions that promote the rights of women and girls and criminalizes FGM as a violation of human rights. FGM has been prohibited in Ethiopia's criminal code since 2004 and the Ministry of Health banned medicalization of FGM in all public and private medical facilities in the country in 2017 [8].

In addition, the government of Ethiopia developed the National Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation- 2020-2024 that aims to bring about the complete abandonment of child marriage and FGM in Ethiopia by 2025[9].

The purpose of the meta-synthesis was for scoping review of evidence on the key factors, drivers and gatekeepers of FGM practices in Ethiopia to help improve programmes aimed to end FGM in regions with high prevalence with particular focus on pastoralist communities.

## **2. Methodology**

2.1 A systematic search of published articles was conducted from main electronic databases (PubMed, PsycINFO and direct search from Google Scholar) with no language restrictions. In addition, searches of the grey literature were also conducted including theses, policy briefs, programme evaluation reports of organizations. In addition to the above, specific key words, such as “pastoralist communities”, “factors” “drivers”, “gatekeepers” of FGM in Ethiopia”, were used to retrieve studies for the meta-synthesis.

### **2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria.**

Studies were included if focused on factor, drivers and gatekeepers of FGM; conducted in Ethiopia and used all study designs with clear methodologies for enabling an assessment of quality ,studies not exceeding the past 10 years (2012-2021) published as research studies, evaluation reports , policy briefs, and theses.

Studies conducted before 2012 and outside the scope of the research were excluded.

### **2.3 Data Quality control**

After the first selection of studies was completed, methodological quality control measures using designed critical appraisal checklist to minimize inclusion of irrelevant documents into the synthesis were undertaken by two reviewers. Studies by authors without some institutional affiliation, questionable reputability of the journal/publisher, inadequacy of the methodology of the study, inappropriateness of the sampling method used, lack of objectivity in the analysis, and questionable ethicality were used as quality assurance techniques to eliminate the irrelevant studies.

### **2.4 Data abstraction, coding and synthesis**

A qualitative analysis software (ATLAS.ti) was used to extract the key codes, themes and findings from the selected studies. Meta-syntheses were done through combining or summarizing the interpretation of the text particularly from the findings of included studies into one or more related thematic areas. Then grouping of codes into one or more descriptive themes and sub-themes followed. Finally, the coded qualitative data were synthesized according to the flow of themes and sub-themes.

### **3. Results and discussion**

#### **3.1. Factors and Drivers of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Ethiopia**

The main factors and drivers of FGM as reported in the studies are:

**3.1.1 Cultural and social expectation:** FGM has been considered a traditional practice to fulfil social expectations and reinforce gender norms, including marriageability. The practice is considered as a means for preservation of cultural values and norms in traditional societies of Ethiopia [10-15]. Women from Somali tribe do infibulation (Type III FGM) on their daughters considering it as part of existing culture of their tribal group [10]. The practice is considered as intervention to narrow the women's genital organ, control women's and girls' sexual desire; secure cleanness of women's genital organs; increase the sexual pleasure of men; and to ensure abstinence from premarital sex [11-17].

The ability of a girl to get married is influenced by being circumcised which makes her 'clean and pure' and maintain her virginity before marriage because of harmful gender norms, including the belief of boys/men that only circumcised girls are good for marriage and able to maintain family/relationship [13,14,18].

**3.1.2 Religious obligations:** Type 1 FGM also known as 'Sunnah cut' (consisting of the partial or total removal of clitoris), is believed to be a religious obligation for Muslim population [10-15,17]. However, religious requirements of FGM are debatable and remain controversial [10]. A study conducted in Harar and Somali regions of Ethiopia indicated that religion is the major reason for the perpetuation of the practice [10]. This evidence is collaborated by the Ethiopian Demographic Health Survey of 2016 that indicated that 41 percent of Muslim women believed that FGM is a religious requirement [6].

**3.1.3 Community's attitude:** Parents are concerned about discrimination faced by uncircumcised girls in the communities and the inability to get married and rejection by the community [10]. A study in Fafan and Arsi,

predominantly Muslim communities reported that abandoning the practice involved a high social risk, such as sanctions against uncut girls and social exclusion[13]. Uncircumcised girls are considered unclean and face stigma and discrimination [14]. Likewise, a study conducted in Jigjiga (Somali Region) revealed that an uncircumcised woman was considered as hypersexual, infidel/unfaithful, non-Muslim, and impure [19]. A study found that traditional community norms and value was the main predictor of whether the practice FGM is right or wrong thing to do[20].

**3.1.4 Level of education of women:** The educational status of women was found to have a well-recognized impact on interventions to combat FGM. The practice was reported higher among mothers with less education and suggested to be due to their poor exposure to information about FGM and its consequences[3, 21,22]. A study by Andarge reported poor awareness about existing laws and regulations as one of the major challenges in fighting against FGM in Ethiopia[11]. Studies reported higher rate of circumcision in girls who have older parents than girls from young parents, this was attributed to poor knowledge/awareness among older parents about the anti-FGM declaration, associated complications and issues related to gender equality [16,23]. Similarly, in three studies reviewed, women's education was identified as an independent predictor/risk factor for FGM in Somali Jigjiga, Amhara and Afar regions of Ethiopia[18,20,23]. Women in rural community who are mostly uneducated were found to have quite higher acceptance and continuation of practice of FGM[23].

**3.1.5 Poor law enforcement against the Practice of FGM:** Ethiopia has a full-fledged policy on FGM and act of the parliament which criminalizes FGM as a violation of human rights and prohibited in Ethiopia's criminal code since 2004[8]. However, studies on enforcement/implementation of legal framework to combat FGM practice are very limited. Weak government engagement and enforcement of legislation was identified as one of the major reasons for the perpetuation of the practice[19]. The fear of violating community's cultural norms and values was said to be possible reason for weak enforcement by the government agencies[19] while another study reported that laws enforcement implemented as a single intervention can be counterproductive" since these tend to "alienate beneficiaries of health services, reduction in the age of cutting and secrecy in performing FGM [24].

**3.1.6 Medicalization of FGM:** This practice even though illegal in the country is being practiced by health workers. Previous study by UNICEF reported that nearly all FGM in Ethiopia was performed by traditional

practitioners (89 per cent), while medical personnel rarely performed the practice (2 per cent)[7]. The study reported that Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR) region was the only region in which there was some involvement of medical personnel with 1 in 10 women who underwent FGM there were cut by a doctor, nurse, midwife or other health professional. However recent studies done in Afar and Somali region indicate that some health workers even though they believe it's against human right, support and practice medicalization of 'Sunnah cut' type 1 of circumcision because of their religious belief as well think that it makes FGM safer compared to the traditional method by reducing the risk of infibulation and medical complications[25,26]. The studies reported that 20 per cent (Afar) and 55.5 per cent (Somali) health care providers from hospitals; 30 per cent (Afar), and 36 per cent (Somali) of health care providers from health centres, admitted to having practiced FGM[25,26]. These findings indicate that medicalizing the practice of 'sunah' type is becoming increasingly common and a way of encouraging the practice of FGM to continue in most part of Ethiopia like Afar and Somali regions of Ethiopia

### **3.2. Gatekeepers of FGM:**

The review identified the following key gatekeepers:

**3.2.1 Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs).** Most of the traditional female circumcisers are traditional birth attendants (TBAs) in Ethiopia. A study conducted in Harari and Somali Regions shows that most FGM is performed by traditional female circumcisers who consider the practice as their job or source of income which sustains the FGM practice[15]. Providing other means of livelihood for them has been identified as a strategy to reduce practice of FGM in the country [10]. A study shows that TBAs who have no training in prevention and care of FGM tend to circumcise without any hesitation while the trained TBAs are hesitant to do the same[11].

**3.2.2 Mothers and grandmother or older women:** Available evidence have shown found that mothers, grandmothers and older women are major FGM promoters, circumcisers, and key decision makers on the practice in the communities[10,13,15,27]. The poor literacy rate of grandmothers and old women was found to contribute to the perpetuation of the practice of FGM. Most of them have no awareness about the criminalization and medical complications associated with the FGM practice nor do the human rights issue[23]. These women are reported to perceive the advocacy for an ending of the practice of FGM as an attack on their tradition and dignity[15]. Mothers and women thus hold the key to curbing FGM in Ethiopia, but they must be

empowered through education and behavioural change interventions to dampen any fears about their violating traditions.

**3.2.3 Fathers/men:** Fathers, followed by mothers and religious leaders, usually hold a central place in promoting and arranging the practice of circumcision of their female children[10,17]. Seventy percent of decisions are reported to be made by both parents while only one-in-five FGM practice is decided by mothers only[10]. In addition, there are also male circumcisers reported in some communities[27].

**3.2.4. Health Care Providers:** Health care workers are regarded as one of the most reliable sources of information to improve positive health seeking behaviour by the community members. They have been engaged in providing appropriate information and community awareness about the impacts of FGM which brought about tangible change in the community. However, some of them still have attitudes and practices that positively promote and could encourage Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) practices, including medicalization of FGM despite their knowledge of the health consequences and their acceptance as a violation of the rights of women and girls[14,25,26]. This has resulted a wrong message to the communities that FGM practice is acceptable if done by a health professional and in the hospital facility. This has high tendencies of depriving the community members of access to accurate information that will enable them to make informed decisions about FGM and efforts to eradicate the practice[25,26].

**3.2.5 Religious leaders:** Religious leaders play a pivotal role in the prevention of FGM as communities and women trust information disseminated in mosques and churches by them[10,13,16]. This is done by minimizing the misinterpretation of FGM as one component of religious obligation. However, from the various studies their role in stopping the practice has been mixed. In Afar and Somali Region, some religious leaders still promoted 'Sunnah cutting' as religious obligation and secretly advised the believers not to abandon the practice entirely and rather only reduce the severity of the practice, since it is the true meaning of Islam [27,28];. However there are also some religious leaders who object to the practice[27,28]. Among the Christian communities, FGM practice was reported denounced as a religious obligation and the declaration made against it by the religious leaders from Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE), the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), and the Ethiopian Catholic Church Mehari[13,14].

**Conclusion:** The study identified key drivers and gatekeepers for FGM practice in Ethiopia especially in the region with high prevalence. Program and policy solutions must be tailored to the local context, not only addressing these drivers but involving the gatekeepers in developing the solutions.

## **COMPETING INTERESTS**

The findings of this study and recommendations arising from this study are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not represent the position of the organizations they work for. Authors have declared that no competing interests exist

## **Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors

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