



LEARNING BRIEF

POWER
TO YOUTH

CROSS-BORDER

DIALOGUE

TO END FEMALE GENITAL
MUTILATION (FGM)



Reproductive
Health Uganda



Introduction

The Power to You(th) (PtY) programme is a five-year (2021–2025), Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs–funded strategic partnership that empowers adolescent girls and young women to claim their rights, challenge harmful gender norms, and advocate for inclusive decision-making on issues such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), child marriage, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), and unintended pregnancies. In Uganda, PtY operates in six districts: Singiro, Kalangala, Bukwo, Mbale, Busia, and Kampala (coordination and advocacy) in collaboration with Reproductive Health Uganda (RHU), the Uganda Youth and Adolescent Health Forum (UYAHF), and the Eastern African Sub-Regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women (EASSI).



Female Genital Mutilation Context and Cross-Border Dialogues

Despite the 2010 Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act, FGM remains deeply entrenched in Uganda’s Sebei and Karamoja regions, including Bukwo district. An estimated 26.7% of women aged 15–49 in Kween, Bukwo, Kapchorwa, Moroto, Nakapiripirit, and Amudat have undergone FGM, with Moroto (51.5%), Nakapiripirit (49.2%), and Amudat (43%) reporting the highest prevalence. The practice persists covertly underpinned by cultural beliefs linking FGM to womanhood, fidelity, and higher dowry values.

To address this, PtY facilitates cross-border dialogues between Uganda and Kenya, convening elders, youth, cultural and religious leaders, CSOs (e.g., IREP, AMREF), technical experts, and former cutters. In Bukwo District, the PtY Focal Person works with district and sub-county officials to mobilize participants, while the area chief leads mobilization on the Kenyan side. These intergenerational, community-driven discussions cover FGM’s impacts, legal frameworks, and prevention strategies — ensuring broad stakeholder engagement and coordinated action.

Operational Study and Learning Brief

In December 2023, PtY Uganda launched an operational study to evaluate the effectiveness of its cross-border dialogue interventions in shifting community attitudes and behaviors around FGM.

The study aims to identify critical success factors and persistent challenges and to develop evidence-based

recommendations for strengthening and scaling up these strategies.

This learning brief synthesizes the key findings, challenges, and recommendations from the March 2024 “PtY Operational Research Report on Cross-Border Dialogues,” offering actionable insights for partners, policymakers, and practitioners committed to ending FGM through coordinated, community-led approaches.

Research Methodology



The Operational Research used a cross-sectional qualitative design, gathering and analyzing data from implementers, beneficiaries, and key stakeholders involved in cross-border dialogues in Bukwo district on the border of Uganda and Kenya. It aimed at understanding how cross-border dialogue interventions have influenced attitudes and behaviours related to FGM in target communities, the critical success factors, and challenges associated with cross-border dialogue interventions in preventing FGM.

Findings

- **Increased School Enrolment:** Participants noted significant progress in girls' education, attributing it to Power to Youth (PtY) interventions. A District Community Development Officer (DCDO) highlighted, "Increased enrolment of girls in schools... which is positive." Implications: Continued support for education initiatives can empower girls and disrupt traditional practices like FGM, emphasizing the importance of sustained efforts in promoting education.
- **Shift in Attitudes Toward FGM.** Participants across different sub-counties and roles highlighted a change in attitudes towards female genital mutilation (FGM) within their communities. Youth Advocates from Bukwo District mentioned that sensitization efforts have led to a shift in perceptions, with individuals questioning the need for such practices. This shift is also reflected in the changing preferences of men, as mentioned by the Local Government Official from Riwo SubCounty, who noted that men are now more accepting of uncircumcised women and are choosing them as partners over circumcised women.
- **PtY's cross-border interventions** have not only contributed to a reduction in FGM but also contributed to declines in teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence. While some practices continue underground and community pressures persist, stakeholders praise these grassroots efforts and call for their expansion to sustain the positive change.
- **Cross-border interventions among the Pokot and Sabin communities** have contributed to reduced forced marriages by disrupting smuggling routes and increasing transparency. Stakeholders report that these meetings not only create a fairer environment but also raise awareness of the harms of forced unions, prompting community-led rescue efforts for vulnerable young women. The study underscores the critical role of cross-border cooperation in tackling harmful cultural practices and calls for ongoing sensitization to empower communities to resist forced marriage.
- **Improved cross-border communication and collaboration** through information sharing and coordinated efforts — has strengthened FGM prevention. Cultural leaders in Suam and youth advocates in Bukwo report greater unity between Ugandan and Kenyan officials, highlighting a collective front against FGM.
- **Cross-border cooperation** has cultivated unity and solidarity that transcends borders. The Kaptererwo Sub-County Chief notes that communities on both sides now bond freely, voicing concerns without fear of legal repercussions. This thematic analysis underscores the vital role of joint efforts in combating FGM, fostering communal cohesion, and driving positive socio-economic outcomes for border communities.

Negative outcomes of the cross-border interventions

The adverse effects of FGM, as highlighted in the study, can be analysed thematically:

Economic Impact: The ending of FGM practices has left former surgeons without a source of income, resulting in unemployment and financial insecurity for individuals who relied on performing FGM for livelihood.

Early Sexual Activity: Some respondents reported that there is a correlation between the decline in FGM and an increase in early sexual activity among girls. The view is that uncircumcised girls engage in sexual activity at a younger age, leading to teenage pregnancies and early marriages.

Infidelity: FGM was traditionally believed to reduce sexual urge among women. However, with the decline in FGM, women who have not undergone the practice may engage in extramarital affairs.

Success Factors

Enabling Laws: Uganda's Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act (2010) and Kenya's 2011 Prohibition Act deter FGM through arrests and reduced practice, and cross-border legal cooperation further bolsters enforcement.

Grassroots Approach: PtY's grassroots approach engages communities directly, promoting dialogue and insights into local needs to help reduce FGM.

Meaningful Youth Participation: Empowering youth to engage in decision-making strengthens their advocacy and authority, boosting efforts to end FGM.

Contribution of like-minded CSOs: Collaboration among like-minded CSOs strengthens cross-border interventions, ensuring most-at-risk individuals receive coordinated support to prevent harmful practices like FGM.

Utilizing grassroots leadership structures: Engaging grassroots leaders and government departments builds shared ownership and boosts community-driven anti-FGM efforts.

Political will and support: Local government engagement signals strong political commitment to end FGM by raising awareness and mobilizing community action.

Challenges

- Local leaders reported that the 2010 anti-FGM law was poorly distributed and understood in Kapterewo sub-county. Without printed copies or clear explanations, communities couldn't grasp the law's provisions or penalties. To address this gap, the Sub-County Chief recommended producing and distributing printed materials for future sensitization campaigns.
- Language barriers hinder communication and collaboration across borders, compounded by cultural rigidities and FGM inducement charms. Insecurity and porous borders worsen the issue, enabling secret practices of FGM and mobilization challenges in Kenya
- Poor infrastructure impedes timely engagement. Addressing these challenges demands culturally sensitive strategies, community empowerment, and enhanced cross-border cooperation.

Recommendations

1. Integration into Cross-border Dialogues

Including local mentors, known as "Mabiryondet," in cross-border dialogues can offer valuable insights into combating FGM, given their role in supporting girls undergoing FGM practice. Income-Generating Activities:



2. Providing income-generating opportunities for mentors can reduce their dependency on FGM, thus contributing to sustained efforts against the harmful practice.



3. Target sensitisation efforts towards parents

Encouraging parents, especially fathers, to actively engage in discussions about FGM with their children can foster understanding and awareness within families, ultimately discouraging harmful practices.



4. Policy Makers: Educational Initiatives

Prioritizing educational initiatives and vocational training opportunities for vulnerable girls can offer viable alternatives to FGM, promoting empowerment and skill-building.



5. Surveillance Strengthening

Strengthening surveillance efforts against FGM through collaboration with relevant authorities and integrating surveillance with educational and religious platforms is crucial for effectively monitoring and reporting cases.



6. Cultural Leaders: Rites of Passage Alternatives

Implementing empowerment programs for girls and former surgeons can provide alternatives to traditional rites of passage, contributing to the abandonment of harmful practices like FGM.



7. Power to Youth (PtY) Sustained Engagement

Maintaining frequent meetings, cross-border dialogues, and sensitization efforts against harmful practices like FGM is essential for sustained progress and community involvement.



8. Youth Empowerment

Prioritizing youth empowerment through initiatives like youth camps and sports activities can equip young people with the knowledge and skills to advocate against harmful practices within their communities.



9. Provide transitional support to former surgeons

Facilitating the transition of former surgeons into alternative livelihood activities, coupled with community sensitization programs, can break the cycle of dependency on FGM and contribute to its elimination.



Conclusion

A multi-faceted approach is needed to combat FGM, as highlighted by stakeholders. Integrating local mentors and sensitizing parents and institutions involved in educational initiatives is vital. Policymakers need to prioritize the making and implementation of ordinances. Cultural leaders must promote alternative rites of passage. Another avoidable action that must be considered is the support of former surgeons, so they transition to alternative livelihoods. Without this, FGM shall be carried out in secrecy. Other actions that are imperative to combat FGM include sustained sensitization of the community about its inhumane nature and illegality.