Rutgers
For sexual and reproductive health and rights

Bold, transformative approaches tackle traditional norms and harmful practices

Gender equality as a catalyst for lasting impact

Power to You(th) Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, cultural norms, power imbalances at all levels and poorly implemented gender policies sustain harmful practices. This prevents girls and women from having the power to make decisions on matters that dramatically impact their lives.

The Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey in 2016 showed the prevalence rate of female genital mutilation to be 47%, child marriage at 40%, and both teenage pregnancy and sexual and gender-based violence at 13%.

A rite of passage with no health benefits

Female genital mutilation – a practice where the clitoris is removed – is seen as a rite of passage for young girls to 'become a woman' in around 30 countries, primarily in Africa and the Middle East, according to World Health Organization and UNICEF.

Female genital mutilation has no health benefits and harms girls and women in many ways. Immediate complications can include severe pain, excessive bleeding, urinary problems, shock and even death. Long-term effects can include vaginal, menstrual and sexual problems, greater risk of childbirth complications and newborn deaths, and psychological issues, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Despite these risks, in some communities, unless girls go through this rite of passage, they cannot marry or become mothers.

From harming to helping: changing the narrative on female genital mutilation

Caramba is a rural *kebele* (administrative ward) of Ensaro district in Ethiopia's Amhara region wherefemale genital mutilation and child marriage are widespread. Ensaro tops the list of 24 districts where female genital mutilation is still carried out.

Power to You(th) has been a key partner in supporting groups like the Caramba Reproductive Health Club to grow and engage effectively with the community. The club's 45 young members – 23 women and 22 men – promote reproductive health issues and raise community awareness to combat what have seemed to be insurmountable challenges around harmful practices. In this region, female genital mutilation practitioners (or 'cutters') are paid, and they are valued and respected by the community.

The club worked with local cutters, raising their awareness of the harms of female genital mutilation, holding them accountable, and gradually turning them into allies.

> "We believed we could play a key part in the transformation of a cutter into a change agent. Changing the mindset of circumcisers would significantly contribute to the reduction of female genital mutilation in Caramba."
>
> Clubleader Kenimos

The club approached the local social accountability committee (SAC) – established by Power to You(th) – the anti-harmful traditional practices committee, kebele authorities and community representatives, quickly building cross-party consensus and launching an outreach programme through which 12 local cutters were identified.

Power to You(th) supports adolescent girls and young women, especially those from remote or marginalised communities, to speak up on the issues affecting them, make informed choices and take control of their futures. The programme promotes gender equality by helping young people to understand their rights and challenge harmful traditions and barriers that limit their opportunities.

Issues like child marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual and gender-based violence, and unintended pregnancy continue to affect millions of young people around the world. Power to You(th) works to prevent these practices by addressing the gender expectations behind them and enabling girls and young women to be meaningfully included in making the decisions that shape their lives.

POWER TO YOUTH
CHANGE STARTS WITH YOU(TH)

“It was a wonderful experience to have adults trust us to sit with us to deal with a serious social issue. Power to You(th) has really empowered us to have our voice heard,” Kenimos, clubleader of the Caramba Reproductive Health Club, reflects.

A meeting was called for the cutters to meet healthcare workers, who spoke about the causes and consequences of the practice, and law enforcement representatives, who outlined local laws on female genital mutilation and child marriage.

“For their motivation purposes, we linked them up with Power to You(th) community workshops and platforms”, Kenimos explains. “Through continuous discussion, awareness was raised on the consequences of female genital mutilation on the lives of the young girls. In addition, the cutters were informed about the law, female genital mutilation being a criminal act in Ethiopia.”

The impact of this work is significant, with all 12 cutters choosing to stop performing this harmful practice.

Kenimos adds: “They are now working closely with Power to You(th) as changemakers and gatekeepers. What had seemed impossible became manageable.”

Mesfin Ayeta, of Amref Africa Ethiopia and the Power to You(th) national coordinator, says: “We use those who have been involved in female genital mutilation as role-models. Bringing them to the front is very important. It’s obvious they can influence the community.

Through continuous discussion and training, we raised awareness and understanding on the consequences of female genital mutilation on the child’s life and what the law says. It is a criminal act in Ethiopia. This has been noted on the criminal and family law.

Through these trainings, cutters were enabled to have the correct understanding of the health impacts of female genital mutilation so they will start hesitating, so they become advocates promoting youth sexual and reproductive health and rights in their community.”

Mesfin believes Ethiopia is progressing each year on the issue. But tough challenges remain in pastoralist areas and regions where religion and culture combine to strongly uphold female genital mutilation as a practice.

A local influencer against harmful traditional practices

Estibel Walelign is a farmer in Yemekat kebele, Bahirdar Zuria district, known for his passionate engagement in issues that matter in his community.

Estibel grew up hearing stories about teenage girls dying while giving birth to premature babies. Those who survived would be forced to drop out of school after developing fistula* and other chronic diseases.

*A fistula is an abnormal hole that can form between the vagina and other body parts, like the bladder, often during prolonged or difficult labour, causing issues like urine leakage. Women who have undergone female genital mutilation are at increased risk of fistula.

As a trusted leader whose opinion carries weight with his neighbours, Estibel was a natural choice for training on combating early marriage, unintended pregnancy and female genital mutilation in his community.

> "The training I received was an eye-opener. I came to deeply understand the challenges faced by our youth. The training was done well, so we could easily comprehend complex issues brought about by harmful traditional practices."
>
> Estibel Walelign, a farmer in Yemekat kebele, Bahirdar Zuria district

Estibel recalls. "It mainly focused on how we can educate, sensitise and change our society, especially young people, who in turn will be advocates against sexual- and gender-based violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation."

Estibel has gone on to mobilise local authorities, religious institutions, health centres, police and government offices to join a newly formed committee to raise awareness about these issues. He also focuses on young people, advocating in schools and other youth hubs.

"How can I sit back without contributing after receiving such useful training?" he adds.

About Rutgers' gender-transformative approach

Gender-transformative approaches aim to address root causes of gender inequality and power imbalances by challenging harmful, rigid and unequal social norms. They work to replace these with more inclusive and respectful ones, leading to better SRHR outcomes and helping to prevent violence and discrimination.

Rutgers' GTA key strategies include promoting and protecting human rights, encouraging people to critically reflect on traditional gender roles and expectations, highlighting the negative impacts of harmful norms on SRHR and the benefits of change, supporting the empowerment of women and girls, including those often excluded or disadvantaged, and involving boys and men in efforts to improve SRHR and promote equality for all members of society.

Mesfin Ayeta says: "We provide different training packages. They have an education programme so they can integrate gender-transformative approaches. So far, we have been successful in enabling them to discuss SRHR issues.

Young people should have space to discuss, to be heard, to decide. In terms of Southern leadership, this work has to be led by those CSOs: they know the community and they are legitimate."

Child marriages cancelled after committee steps in

Like most parts of Ethiopia, South Mecha has deeply ingrained community norms and challenges, making it difficult to combat harmful traditions, particularly child marriage.

Recognising this, Power to You(th) established social accountability committees (SACs) to monitor and track youth interventions.

South Mecha SAC has 15 members, representing government, churches and the community. After receiving training in 2022, the committee agreed on a key objective: to monitor child marriage. Information boxes were placed in every school in the district for students to provide confidential information.

Religious leaders take part in TV debate

Power to You(th) helped to organise a live television debate for religious leaders to discuss female genital mutilation and child marriage. Talking so openly about harmful norms and practices represents a real breakthrough in a socially conservative country like Ethiopia.

In cooperation with a local media house, the first television debate was organised in 2022. In 2023 a second debate followed, and another took place in 2024.

> "Talking about those sensitive issues publicly is a big step. State actors, or the community at least, had an opportunity to watch how religious leaders are discussing the issue of female genital mutilation and child marriage from a religious perspective."
>
> Mesfin Ayeta, Amref Africa Ethiopia, Power to You(th) national coordinator

Within two months, the SAC had identified 27 plans for child marriages and skillfully and sensitively stepped in. The SAC reported that 22 of them were cancelled before taking place.

> "I am so delighted to confirm that the marriage was officially cancelled."
>
> A 14-year-old girl in South Mecha district who was about to be forced into marriage.

Following the media debate, efforts were made to clarify certain issues to the public. This includes misunderstanding and misinterpretation of religious thought regarding female genital mutilation and child marriage. Among the panellists, clerics of the Muslim and Christian traditions joined civil society, young people and government representatives for a balanced panel conversation.

"Talking about SRHR topics is not that easy. Religious and community leaders are still resistant to publicly discussing abortion and teenage pregnancy. Even though they (female genital mutilation and child marriage) are criminalised in Ethiopia, these laws are rarely enforced due to religious and cultural norms", Mesfins says.

"So they talked about child marriage, female genital mutilation sexual and gender-based violence, just to give the right information to the public, to raise awareness, to shape a discussion. People are not yet aware that female genital mutilation and child marriage are criminalised – even those working in the justice system don't know that detail."

Mesfin believes the key to empowering young people and securing the rights of girls and young women is education and a strategic focus on decision-makers and policymakers.

"That is the really big investment needed to achieve our agenda here", he adds.

In 2023, the committee worked with police and the judiciary to make attempted rape punishable by a lengthy prison sentence – the first by-law of its kind in the district's history. Through its activities, the committee holds the local government accountable for the implementation of these laws.

Challenging harmful norms and attitudes

The Power to You(th)consortium in Ethiopia has used bold gender-transformative approaches, including supporting former cutters to lead campaigns against female genital mutilation, engaging men and boys as allies in communities to turn the tide on child marriage, and working closely with religious leaders and the media.

Bold, transformative approaches tackle traditional norms and harmful practices

Power to You(th) is a five-year programme (2021–25) funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The programme is implemented in partnership with Rutgers, Sonke Gender Justice and Amref Health Africa, together with with technical partners KIT Royal Tropical Institute and Choice for Youth & Sexuality and country management teams in Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Ethiopia, Senegal, Ghana and Indonesia.

POWER TO YOUTH
CHANGE STARTS WITH YOU(TH)

amref flying doctors
SONKE GENDER JUSTICE
Rutgers
KIT Royal Tropical Institute
CHOICE
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands