Turning the impossible into achievable

Rutgers

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%.

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 where female 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."**
>
> Kenimos, club leader of the Caramba Reproductive Health Club

The club approached the local social accountability committee– 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.

> **"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."**
>
> Club leader Kenimos

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.

Kenimos, clubleader of the Caramba Reproductive Health Club explains: "For their motivation purposes, we linked them up with Power to You(th) community workshops and platforms. 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, Club leader of the Caramba Reproductive Health Club 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 Youth national coordinator, explains: "We use those who have been involved in female genital mutilationas 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 mutilationon the child's life and what the law says."**
>
> Mesfin Ayeta, Amref Africa Ethiopia

It is a criminal act in Ethiopia. This has been noted on the criminal and family law.

These trainings enabled cutters to gain 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 mutilationas a practice.

POWER TO YOUTH
CHANGE STARTS WITH YOU(TH)
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