

# Transformation in action: Tales from Phase II



Reflections on Phase II of the UNFPA-UNICEF  
Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation



## Credits

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## UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation

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Five-year-old Muteyan lives in Kenya's Narok county, where advocacy against FGM is bearing fruit and helping to protect girls like her.

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Cover:

Anissa, 15 years old, Syria.

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# Build on positive cultural values

**A new social norm will meet with less resistance and be more sustainable when it builds on positive intrinsic cultural values. That idea forms the basis of interventions across the 17 UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation countries.**

←

Young girl and women in Kayes region of Mali.

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A wide-eyed, pony-tailed toddler looks straight towards the camera as she earnestly sings a simple and catchy tune on YouTube:

Papa, I trust you  
Mama, I trust you.  
You will never mutilate,  
You will always educate.  
You will never cut me,  
you will never hurt me.  
E-eh, Papa I love you,  
e-eh I love you.  
Mama I love you,  
e-eh I love you.

When the young parents and 10-year-old sister chime in on the chorus, *E-eh, I love you, I will always love you, Oh my baby oh*, it's hard to imagine anyone being unmoved. (It's also hard to get the tune out of mind.)

### **The song triggers the fierce love and protectiveness parents in all cultures feel for their children.**

The widely seen track (more than 11,000 YouTube views) triggers perhaps the most primal of human emotions: the fierce love and protectiveness parents across all cultures feel for their children. It also suggests the utter

betrayal that a young girl must feel upon being subjected to agonizing pain by those she so deeply trusts. The video is one of many produced by a Nigerian youth-led social media platform, **#endcuttinggirls**.

A number of Joint Programme-supported interventions tackle FGM by building on strong or unique positive cultural values shared by a community. This is the case in another video produced by **#endcuttinggirls**.

"Mothers, I beg you in the name of God, stop cutting your girls as I have stopped cutting mine," exhorts Madam Obelawo, an anti-FGM activist. She points to Nigeria's distinctive sculptures, drumming, dancing, and colourful paintings and fabrics as traditions to promote. "FGM is not a good tradition. Let us abandon it, and all will be well with us," she said.

### **Preserving a ritual, while leaving girls intact**

Around the world, rites of passage are important rituals that cement affiliation with one's community. Among the Maasai and some other communities in Kenya, graduation into adulthood has been traditionally marked by a period of seclusion, an initiation into adult ways (including information about sexual relations), and a ceremonial reincorporation into the larger society. In some cases, cutting of hair serves as a symbolic break from the past. But in others, it is the genitals that are cut, often down to the pubic bone.



Cultural Day at a secondary technical school for girls in Umuaka, Imo State.  
© UNICEF, Nigeria

Among the Maasai, these cultural rites are deep expressions of culture, and their erosion deeply unsettling, as suggested by this Maasai adage: “It takes one day to destroy a house; to build a new house will take months and perhaps years. If we abandon our way of life to construct a new one, it will take thousands of years.”

Rather than asking these groups to abandon an important cultural tradition, the Joint Programme aims to preserve positive values associated with the ritual, without subjecting girls to FGM. Alternative rites of passage replicate the traditional ritual in many ways – offering a liminal space away from family, inculcation into Maasai culture and values, lessons on sexuality and a closing ceremony witnessed by other members of the community. But they also include an emphasis on education, delaying marriage and human rights.

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## Using sports as a catalyst for mobilization

Uganda has been a leader in tapping the enthusiasm of young people for sports to mobilize against FGM. Popular football and netball competitions, for instance, have taken place under banners such as Kick FGM out of Sebei. Events conducted at the matches have led to action plans and commitments by participants and community members to accelerate abandonment.

The globally acclaimed prowess of the East African runner is a particular source of pride, one leveraged by the Run to End FGM marathons, organized under the auspices of the Church of Uganda. Since 2015, the races have drawn increasing numbers of runners and participants, while sensitizing communities on FGM abandonment and linking abandonment with the positive cultural forces of church and sport.

**The prowess of East African runners is a source of pride that is leveraged by the Run to End FGM marathons.**

Led by the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, Stanley Nitagali, the race has attracted over 15,000 spectators and 1,200 runners, including famous national and regional athletes from Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. Growing awareness has encouraged other religious leaders, such as Sheik Mubaje, the Mufti of Uganda and current chairperson of the Inter Religious Council of Uganda, to commit to working towards total abandonment of FGM, including by spreading the message that it is not condoned by religion.

The race also has an important cross-border impact as the Sabiny who live in Uganda have a close relationship with their counterparts or relatives in Kenya.



A Run to End FGM marathon.  
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