

GLOBAL HEALTH

Rejection of Pre-Marriage Tradition Grows, Protecting Women's Health and Lives



A couple that chose for the bride not to undergo female genital cutting (FGC) sits next to another bride who made the same choice. The couples—both of whom wed in the past year—now travel around southern Ethiopia, speaking at community gatherings about their choice and the dangers associated with FGC.

AWASSA, Ethiopia—Ketto Buli has cut many women's genitalia during her 50 years, beginning with her teenage daughter. The procedure is a pre-marriage tradition with long roots here. But as the years ticked away, Ketto saw too many unwilling girls in pain, suffering from heavy blood loss and infection.

Last year a community health volunteer knocked on Ketto's door and told her about the dangers associated with female genital cutting (FGC). Now she too is a health volunteer, speaking against FGC.

"This was a taboo subject five years ago. But now there is an aggressive awareness campaign. At least we can talk about it," said Samuel Tuffa of the African Development Aid Association (ADAA), implementing partner of Pathfinder International, through which USAID is fighting genital cutting here.

Some 135 million of the world's women have undergone genital cutting, mainly in Africa and some Middle East countries. In Ethiopia, about 80 percent of all married women are circumcised, meaning that they have had their clitorises and/or all surrounding tissue cut off. The age when genital cutting is performed varies between ethnic groups: it can be done to infants less than eight days old or as late as a month before marriage.

Knives and scalpels used for the procedure are often unclean, causing infection. Heavy bleeding occurs. Women are left with lifelong health problems and often have difficulties during childbirth.

In the south of Ethiopia, where women are cut shortly before marriage, Pathfinder has trained some 7,000 volunteers as community reproductive health agents who tell

villagers of the health risks associated with FGC. They also advise about family planning and maternal and child health. The project will train another 3,000 volunteers in the next year.

ADAA had held workshops for religious leaders in the region, describing the dangers of FGC and disavowing any connection to religious theology. Many of those religious leaders have gone on to tell their communities that FGC is not safe or required, and that it can lead to psychological trauma.

Workshops specifically target men, who are seen as the first step in changing the attitude toward FGC, said Samuel. Men have long thought that girls who have undergone the procedure are "pure" and will make faithful wives.

When classmates Abdella Gebi and Medina Berisso decided to marry, Abdella, who had heard ADAA's messages, suggested that his bride not undergo FGC. Medina thought this unusual, but says she was very happy because she had seen a friend nearly bleed to death after being cut.

They were going to marry quietly. But then another couple in their area announced that they would wed without the girl being cut, so Abdella and Medina stepped out with them.

"In our culture, when you announce something on your wedding day or at a funeral, it's accepted by the public," said Samuel.

In one southern district, awareness campaigns have worked so well that now nearly all couples getting married are doing so without the woman being cut, Samuel said.

FGC is condemned by Ethiopia's penal code, after heavy lobbying by the National Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices of Ethiopia and NGOs like Pathfinder. ★

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE

Chocolate Companies Help West African Farmers Improve Harvest

ACCRA, Ghana—Chocolate corporations are helping West African farmers continue to harvest the seeds that are building blocks of instant cocoa, decadent truffles, and most every chocolate confection.

The Sustainable Tree Crop Program (STCP) is a public-private alliance working to improve the economic and social wellbeing of cocoa farmers and the environmental sustainability of tree crops in West Africa. Following the Global Development Alliance approach, the partnership fosters linkages between industry buyers and rural producers.

The region produces about 70 percent of the global supply of cocoa and other chocolate-related products. However, the livelihood of producers and their supply of cocoa to the chocolate industry are increasingly threatened by the diminishing number of fertile forests and the dangers of disease and insect pests.

"We are committed to fostering sustainable cocoa farms in West Africa, as it not only secures the supply chain for the long term but also protects the livelihood of more than 1.5 million cocoa farmers in the region," says John Lunde, director of international programs at Mars Inc. The candy maker is a supporter of STCP.

Inaction in the past has proved devastating for farmers and the chocolate industry.

A plague in the 1980s turned Brazil—at the time the second largest cocoa-producing country in the world—into a net importer. The impact on Brazil's rural producers was far more devastating than was the price spike for industry buyers, who nonetheless resolved to work together to prevent the recurrence of preventable diseases that had proved so destructive.

By 2000, the chocolate industry had formed the World Cocoa Foundation (WCF) to build partnerships with other stakeholders. WCF members such as Mars, Hershey's, Nestlé, and Kraft support regional initiatives to maintain cocoa cultivation and production with cash and technical expertise.

Industry contributions combined with USAID funding currently amount to about \$10 million—consisting of equal parts of cash from the Bureau for Africa's Office of Sustainable Development and cash and in-

kind technical assistance from the chocolate industry.

STCP covers Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Guinea, and is implemented by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture. The core activity of STCP and the other regional initiatives is to provide farmers with organizational support, marketing information, policy reform, research, and technical training.

Through farmer field schools set up to deliver these services, farmers learn how to boost their incomes through increased yields and quality and how to protect the natural resource base of the cocoa commodity. As with coffee, cocoa is often cultivated with other plant and animal life, requiring more care in cultivating the crop to avoid disrupting the ecosystem in which it is produced.

Farmer field schools also teach farmers about shade management, tree husbandry, and postharvest handling, and will soon include crop diversification, natural fertilization, and other best practices. The result has been dramatic: incomes have increased between 20 and 50 percent. And, in some cases producers doubled their income.

To date, over 10,000 farmers have graduated from STCP schools. Each trainer works with about 20 facilitators, who then conduct workshops and training on cocoa farms. In many cases, new facilitators are recruited from among the most avid field school participants.

"An important achievement of STCP is its success in building an industry coalition committed to improving the circumstances of cocoa producers," said Jeff Hill, senior agricultural advisor for the Bureau for Africa's Office of Sustainable Development. "Clearly, a consensus exists that the future of the chocolate business depends on the future of rural families growing the cocoa."

A byproduct of STCP has been the ability to deliver secondary messages to farmers on social issues such as HIV/AIDS, child labor, and education. This is also part of an industry-wide commitment to develop voluntary certification standards combating the worst forms of child and forced labor on cocoa farms in West Africa. ★



Graduates of a farmer field school in Ekabita, south Cameroon, show their certificates.