



Engage Women: “All Human Life Has Dignity”

These interactive workshops provide an opportunity for women to learn about Female Genital Cutting, understand how they might use it, and discuss the specific issues that confront women. These workshops can be implemented in any women’s only setting – whether you have a longstanding women’s group within your faith community or if this is the first time that a group of women are coming together. The workshops can be facilitated by any capable person you trust who has a good grounding in these materials. They might be a faith leader, lay leader, women’s group leader, or other caring member of the community. Keep in mind that depending on the region you work, it might be best to choose a woman to act as facilitator, or if that is not possible, as a co-facilitator. The module is structured around several workshops, whose topics are as follows:

- Before you begin: create a **Safe Space** for the participants
- **Workshop 1:** FGC: The Facts.
 - The purpose of this workshop is to acclimate participants to discussing FGC, and to introduce the key medical facts about FGC. This workshop can be used as a stand-alone workshop, or as a “warm-up” immediately preceding Workshop 2.
- **Workshop 2:** Stop female genital cutting: it reduces the dignity of human life. We are perfect creations of God/Allah, the perfect creator.
 - The purpose of this workshop is to emphasize how FGC hurts not only women, but entire communities, and is a violation of God/Allah’s perfect creation. The end goal of this workshop should be to encourage these women to speak to their families and fellow community members on the topic, because happy, healthy, and productive communities work together to eliminate harmful practices like FGC.

These modules can be introduced either as part of a workshop series, or as stand-alone workshops themselves. Each contains a sample workshop plan and a series of conversations or activities that you can use.

However, you don’t just need to stick to the sample workshop plans: change or adapt these in order to best suit your needs. Use the activities that work best for you and feel free to add your own elements as well. It’s important to try and include the ‘Key Facts’ and ‘Big Ideas’ in your workshops, but there’s no reason not to get creative.

Introduction

This women's group module is designed to engage a group of women in a conversation about female genital cutting (FGC). The session should be facilitated by a faith leader, an elder, or any other member of the community who would normally be responsible for leading the regular women's group sessions.

FGC is a practice that can have devastating effects on the lives of women and girls. FGC can seriously impair a girl's health, and these effects will only worsen as she grows to be a woman. Health problems caused by FGC include: shock, bleeding, infection from unsterile blades (including HIV), painful scarring, fistula (incontinence of urine/feces) and continued pain/trauma which can affect marital relations, and will definitely obstruct childbirth, endangering both mother and child.

Many of the women in your women's group may have been affected by FGC. Therefore, you must be sensitive to their experience when engaging them in conversations about this topic. Many have been led to believe that this was the best thing that could have been done for them, and continue to perpetuate these practices with their own daughters for the same reasons. In order for this women's group activity to work, you or the facilitator must make sure the women feel like they have a safe space where they can talk about their own experiences honestly.

Instructions

This Women's Group Module contains different lessons/group activities to engage women in a conversation about FGC. They should ideally be used in a group of 12 women or less, and be facilitated by a faith leader, or a trusted, educated lay leader, male or female.

Read through each lesson/group activity carefully, and make sure you do not have any questions about the content before you proceed. If you do, please take this as an opportunity to seek more information from a trusted source, such as a local health clinic.

Please use the instructions provided in each lesson/group activity, and always allow women the opportunity to speak up or ask questions if they wish to do so.

NOTE: If you can, try to get to know a bit about each of the women in your group, so you may ask the appropriate discussion questions. Please refer to the discussion questions in the lesson/group activity for the questions to ask married women, married women with sons, married women with daughters, and unmarried women.

Start your first women's group session with a very brief introduction.

"I've invited you here to participate in this women's workshop so that we can feel more comfortable discussing female genital cutting (FGC), and other harmful traditional practices that hurt women. Let's start with an interactive exercise that helps us create a space in which we feel safe to have conversations about these difficult topics. "

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Activity

Creating a Safe Space – Before You Begin

Suggested Time: 15 minutes

Before you begin your first workshop with a group, it is important to Establish what is called “**safe space**.” Safe space doesn’t just happen – it’s up to you to take a proactive role in creating an atmosphere that will best support the growth and learning of each participant. Here’s a quick activity that will help establish safe space:

- 1) Explain to participants that the workshop(s) they’ll be taking part in are not just about you giving them information, but rather about people supporting each other to discuss difficult issues and learn from one another. Say that in order to do this effectively, we need to have a space in which each person feels comfortable and safe.
- 2) Ask the group, ‘How can we support each other to create a safe space?’ or ‘What do you need in order to feel fully comfortable in this group?’ Write the various answers that you hear on a large piece of paper or on a chalkboard so that everyone can see them.
- 3) Once you have received answers from as many women as would like to contribute, read everything that is written on the paper aloud, and ask the group if they think anything should be added. If not, ask the group if they are willing to commit to upholding what is written as group standards for the workshop.
- 4) Have participants signify their commitments by writing their names, initials, or drawing a marking or symbol on the sheet of paper with the safe space agreement.

It doesn’t have to end there! You can always come back to your safe space agreement. If your group ever meets again, you can remind people of their commitments at subsequent sessions. Additionally, if there is ever a difficult conversation or tension in the group, you can remind people of their safe space agreement and hold people to the intentions and norms that they set.

KEY TERM:

SAFE SPACE refers to a cooperative learning environment in which all participants feel comfortable and safe to fully participate. A safe space is one in which every person respects the ideas and thoughts of each other and people are supportive of each other’s growth and learning.

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Introduction to Female Genital Cutting (FGC)

Materials needed: Female anatomy flipchart, chalkboard or flipchart, pens and papers.

Speaking Guide

“We are here to understand your views and to learn from you your thoughts and feelings pertaining to some specific topics that may have touched your lives or the lives of women around you.

Today’s session will focus on something you may call female circumcision, which is also known as Female Genital Cutting, **or FGC.**”

“Please feel free to speak up and/or ask questions, but also to participate in the activities that we suggest.”

Workshop 1

FGC/NO FGC illustration

Show the group the faith-appropriate illustration. Ask the group to describe the illustrations. What is happening on each side? Start with the 1st illustration (on the left), and then move on to the 2nd one (on the right). Then, state that the illustration on the right is how all births should be, but ask: are they? Ask the group to volunteer any stories about their childbirth experiences, or women they know who have had difficult births. Then introduce the second illustration and say there are many things that can complicate a natural birth process, and FGC is a major contributor.

Female Genital Cutting

A Faith Leader Toolkit
to Address Harmful
Traditional Practices
in Your Community

ENGAGE WOMEN
MODULE 4



Once you have discussed the illustrations with the group, show them the version with the words “FGC” and “NO FGC”.



Ask the group again, “what do you think may have happened in each picture now?”
Take answers, discuss, and then review the Key Facts about FGC

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Workshop 2

Topic: The dignity of all human life: God's perfect creation.

Initial icebreaker: "Things in Common."

- 1) Have all participants stand in the center of the room/outdoor area. Begin the game by calling out things that may be true about many of the women in your group, e.g., "I enjoy [particular kind of local food]" "I am married!" "I have brown eyes!" "I have brothers and sisters!" and standing in a corner of the room (or designated "corner" in an outdoor space). Anyone who agrees or thinks that statement applies to them must stand in the same corner. Anyone who disagrees or thinks that the statement does not apply to them must go stand in the opposite corner.
- 2) Once it has been established who has been in what corner, call out a new statement. You can get more and more specific, e.g., "I know how to do [regional dance]" "I am afraid of snakes!" "I have lived in the same house all my life!" If the participants are comfortable enough to do so, have them call out the statements/things in common and walk over to the designated corners. Do this for 5 minutes or so, or until everyone is sufficiently warmed up/comfortable talking/standing/moving around with each other.
- 3) Finally, call out "I have been circumcised/undergone FGC." (This only works if the facilitator is a woman). Then, sit down with everyone and discuss what they thought about the game, what they learned about each other. There should be common threads. Ask what they thought of being asked if they had undergone FGC, and what they thought about it. If all in the room have, ask them to think about what the experience meant to them throughout the group study.

For all women: What did it mean for them to undergo FGC? How do they feel about their circumcised/uncircumcised status?

For married women with sons: Ask them how their sons view girls in their community. What have you done to teach them about kindness to all and the things we all have in common as humans beings under God?

For married women with daughters: Ask them how their daughters view themselves in their relation to boys. Do they see themselves as unclean or inferior? Have they had FGC performed on their daughters? If so, why? If not, what are the challenges they face, and how do they resist the social pressure to do so?

For married women with no children: Ask them if they hope to have daughters or sons more. If they have daughters, will they circumcise them? Why or why not?

For unmarried women: Ask them if they believe that FGC affects whether or not they will be able to marry. Why or why not?

ACTIVITY: Read the following story¹, then pause where indicated to ask questions of the group.

Once upon a time, there was a faraway land, where there lived a proud people of great cultural heritage, enriched by deep-rooted and much-treasured traditions. It was tradition, for instance, that the women in several of the villages in this land were one-legged. But one-legged as they might be, a more elegant and self-possessed group of women can hardly be imagined.

They had charming ways, and an extraordinary gift for beautiful poetry. At the same time, they were not without ambitions; and they possessed just the right measure of astuteness necessary to achieve them. And when the occasion demanded it, they could be very aggressive.

One day, a wise old woman from another area who was traveling through this land decided to stop and visit one of these villages – she had heard many great things about their people and their culture, and wanted to see them for herself. However, when she arrived, she saw that the people in this village were hungry and suffering – there had been a very bad drought throughout the land. The old woman was deeply saddened to see so much suffering in what was considered a great and vibrant community. The old woman was further shocked when she spoke to the women in this village. They considered it not only normal, but fashionable to walk on one leg! The wise old woman set about trying to discover the reasons for the strange phenomenon of the one-legged women, because she felt like cutting one leg of every woman could only increase the suffering of the village in such hard times.

This, however, was no easy task. The people she asked gave somewhat confusing answers as to why the women were unable to keep their two legs. Some people told her that if one of the legs of a little girl was not cut off, it would grow and grow, and before you knew where you were, it would become as big as a tree! Others told her that a woman with both legs was unable to bear a child. Yet others explained that a woman needed protection from herself, and somehow having one leg cut off helped to

¹ Excerpted and adapted from “Tradition! Tradition! A Story of Mother Earth” by Efua Dorkenoo, published by FORWARD Ltd., London, 1992. http://www.who.int/gender/other_health/teachersguide.pdf, accessed 5 October, 2012

ensure this. The old woman asked, “in what way?” But she did not receive a satisfactory answer. However, when she persisted with her question, she was told that with two legs a woman would run away and become a prostitute, but with one she would have difficulty!

Some people turned to the religious texts for an answer to the wise old woman’s question, and they convinced themselves that it was God who had decreed that women would behave better with just one leg. But there was one very old woman in the village who could remember how this habit of cutting one leg off every little girl had started. And she told the visiting wise old woman the following story:

“A long time ago,” said the old village woman, “in fact three thousand years ago, this land was enjoying a period of plenty and there were great festivities. Each year, colorful, exotic dance festivals were held to select the person who would be Ruler of the Land. In those days men and women competed equally and the best dancer would be crowned the Ruler of the Land. For five successive years, one man had won all the competitions hands down. But in the sixth year, it seemed that the throne was going to be snatched away from him. A beautiful woman had appeared on the scene, and it was clear that she could dance far better than this man.”

“He got very worried,” the old woman continued, “and decided something had to be done! In desperation, he passed a decree that all women should have one leg cut off. This seemed to solve his problem, for dancing on one leg unsuccessfully put women out of the competition. That is how this man continued his reign for another 20 years.”

This, then, was the old village woman’s recollection of how the phenomenon of the one-legged women began. But to generations of people in this village, it was simply tradition, handed down by their ancestors. What is more, it had become the responsibility of women themselves to see to it that all girl children adhered to this tradition!

The visiting wise old woman was fascinated by this story. But she wanted to know whether the old village woman thought it was a good practice. The old village woman stood pondering for a while, and then she replied: “I have known of many traditions, some good, some bad – as for this one, I am not sure.”

Then the visiting wise old woman remarked: “But just from looking at you, I thought you felt comfortable.”

“Oh no,” said the old village woman. “We have so many difficulties carrying out our daily chores with one leg! But it when it was decreed by the ruler three thousand years ago, everybody was frightened, and dared not discuss the issue. They all put on a brave face and professed it to be a wonderful tradition! Some said you could only be beautiful with one leg! Some said you could only be clean with one leg! Many claimed a woman could only be pure with one leg! And after a while, some women would say: ‘Why should we let the young women off the hook? We have suffered so much being one-legged. Now it is time for young girls to play their part in keeping the tradition going.’”

By this time, the visiting wise old woman was curious to know what the men had to say about all this. Was it possible that fathers would be blindly following such a tradition? Surely not! But the truth, she discovered, was that men could not afford to disapprove of tradition – even bad tradition. They believed that it would destroy family honor and dignity, and affect their status in the community. “After all,” they argued, “who would pay a good bride price for a daughter with two legs?”

Then the wise old woman asked, “But what about the children?” She could imagine them screaming with fear and pain. Yes, she was told, children would always be children. There were those who screamed and shouted and had to be forced to have the operation for their own good. Most of them, though, wanted to be like their friends and part of the crowd.

Then, the wise old woman thought that perhaps the rulers and lawmakers in this land might take a lead in stopping this bad tradition. But alas even they were not prepared to do so! They were afraid of challenging such a deep-rooted tradition.

Meanwhile, the food situation in this drought-stricken land was getting worse and worse. Walking on crutches, the women found it difficult to work the land and to travel far and wide to find richer pastures and foliage for the animals. But as the situation became worse, the wise old woman noticed that the people in this village were beginning to question cutting off a woman’s leg. A few men and women were coming together to discuss what they could do to stop this harmful tradition. They had realized the time had come to challenge it, if future generations were to survive these hard times.

As they talked among themselves, they discovered a multitude of myths surrounding the tradition. And as time went on, they gathered strength to challenge the myths and began to plan.

FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE: You may be thinking to yourselves, “this is an odd place to end the story, what happens?” Well, we are going to come up with our own ending to this story. Let’s ask ourselves, what are some of the possible ways this could turn out for the suffering village? Will getting rid of the one-leg tradition help this village get back on its feet? How might the people of this village challenge the tradition, and keep young girls from having their legs cut off in the future?
(Allow 10-15 minutes for discussion).

FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE: Thank you for all of your great ideas. The reason I read you this story is that this is our story. If any of us have undergone FGC, we are the one-legged women. However, there is hope, and there is hope for our daughters.

Ask the following discussion questions (FOR WOMEN’S GROUPS):

For all women: Ask what they thought of the story. Do they see the connection between the story and FGC? How they think it reflects their own experience?

For married women with sons: Ask them how they feel about tradition. Do they talk to their sons about the teachings of the Church and the traditions in their community? Do they explain that there is a difference?

For married women with daughters: Ask them how they feel about tradition. Do they talk to their daughters about the teachings of the Church and the traditions in their community? Do they explain that there is a difference?

For married women without children: Ask them if they felt that FGC was a requirement for their marriage. If they were to have children, would they tell them this story?

For unmarried women: Ask them if this story means anything to them. If they were to have children, would they tell them this story?

MUSLIM - Supporting verse: “Verily we created man of the best stature” (Quran: 96:4).

CHRISTIAN - Supporting verse: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 10:15)

Wrap-up & Thank you!

If scriptural questions emerge, you will find Christian and Muslim FAQs and religious references in Module 2: “Teach Yourself”.