

Impact of Covid-19 on the Sexual, Reproductive Health and Rights of Women and girls

Ubuntu Symposium Event

19th November 2020- 3PM CAT

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) affected individuals and communities in variation. The Director General of the World Health Organization announced the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19), a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO 2020) and within a couple of months, the virus had infected millions of people across the world in high, middle and low-income countries. Determined to control the spread of the virus, governments around the world and in Africa instituted lockdown measures that restricted movement, requiring citizens to stay at home and observe social distancing. The pandemic and the related lockdown measures exacerbated vulnerabilities on women and girls, especially in contexts with weak health systems, frail rule of law, existing high levels of violence against women and girls (VAWG), and gender inequality.

The lockdown measures had adverse effects on the sexual reproductive health and rights of women and girls, who were already facing significant barriers in accessing essential sexual and reproductive health information and services before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exerted pressure on even the most advanced healthcare systems, thereby pushing further from reach SRH rights for women and girls. Lockdown, movement restrictions and schools closure, exposed young girls to increased risk of undergoing FGM, early marriage, teenage pregnancies which could lead to rudimentary unsafe abortions. Moreover, girls and young women could not access justice services or report crimes during the lockdown periods and with this emerged a shadow pandemic of gender-based violence and a set back to the gains made on gender equality.

FGM is internationally recognised as a violation of women's human rights and also an SRHR issue. 25 years ago, the Beijing conference acknowledged and affirmed that every individual has a right to pursue a satisfying sexual life, however, the practice of FGM violates this right as the practice has an impact on not only women and girls' ability to pursue a healthy sexual life and sexual pleasure, but also has adverse effects on maternal health leading to complications like still births, fistula and maternal mortality. FGM must be addressed across all SRH health programs and services for women and girls in order to provide the comprehensive care they need and ensure their right to the most satisfying and safe sexual and healthy lives possible (CHANGE.org).

Significant attention has been drawn to the negative impact of FGM on the lives of women and girls, with numerous international processes putting FGM on top of their agenda including; the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (Target 5.3, Goal 5), the United Nations General Assembly resolution on Female Genital Mutilation, the UN Secretary-General report on Female Genital Mutilation, and the Human Rights Council resolution on Female Genital Mutilation. The Beijing Platform for Action also calls for an end to all harmful practices against women and girls including FGM and recommends engaging men and boys as one of the strategies to advance gender equality.

Although women appear to endorse the perpetuation of FGM, men play a significant role in its continuation - as fathers, husbands, community and religious leaders. However, most of the existing

FGM intervention programmes involve men in limited ways, despite the increasing recognition of the critical role that men and boys play in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), as well as the prevention of HIV and GBV (UNAIDS, 2016). At a local and global level, men and boys can and should be involved by correcting misconceptions about FGM, and by providing information about the negative health and legal consequences of FGM. Men and boys can play a critical role in reversing the social pressures that facilitate the continuation of FGM and can be involved in educating other men and boys about the need to eradicate FGM particularly given the influence they have with their various communities.

In recent years, either due to increased awareness or due to punitive laws, FGM practice has evolved into newer trends which include medicalization possibly due to overemphasis on the health risks of FGM leading practising communities to opt for medicalisation, with the assumption that if done by a medical practitioner, FGM is safe. Other emerging trends include cross border practice, cutting children as opposed to teenagers to avoid detection as well as older women voluntarily choosing FGM due to social marginalisation.

Sonke, MenEngage Africa and UNFPA ESARO will host an event at the Ubuntu symposium to examine the impact of Covid-19 on women's rights, with a focus on FGM as an SRHR issue.

Specific Goals

- Review and discuss the impact of Covid-19 on women's rights and the impact on the ability to exercise their SRH rights access to SRHR services during the pandemic.
- Reflect on ICPD commitments versus actions, accountability to promises, and what unique opportunities were presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Cross-examine the role that men and boys can play in contribution to the AU Saleema campaign to end FGM

Topics

- Emerging trends and promising practices on FGM across the world
 - Medicalisation
 - Cross border FGM practice
 - FGM practice in the diaspora
 -
- Action and Accountability in relation to ICPD commitments, barrier and opportunities to women and Girls ability to exercise their sexual reproductive health and rights
- The role of religious leaders in ending FGM
- Engaging men and boys in ending FGM as contribution to the AU Saleema campaign.

Moderator: TBD

Panellists:

UNFPA: ICPD commitments and impact of C-19 on SRHR

MenEngage Africa Alliance: Role of religious leaders in ending FGM

Robert Kasenene: AU -Saleema campaign to end FGM

Dr Tammary Esho: Amref Health Africa- Medicalisation

Fatima Awil: End FGM European Network- FGM in the diaspora

Nicholas Songok- Cross border FGM and the impact of C-19 on FGM trends

Date: 19th November 2020

Venue: Online

Time: 15:00 CAT

Organising partners

Sonke Gender Justice

UNFPA

MenEngage Africa