



Preventing female genital mutilation through the empowerment of migrant communities living in Europe

The AFTER project experience in Italy, Spain and Ireland



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Activity 2.3, Output 6 “Public report on empowerment paths & informative meetings”
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Introduction

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is a global phenomenon affecting at least 200 million women and girls globally and constitutes a severe violation of their fundamental rights. FGM/C affects also girls and women living in Europe. They are most at risk when they return to their countries of origin to visit the ones they left behind, mostly during holiday periods.

AFTER (Against FGM/C Through Empowerment and Rejection) is a two-year project co-financed by the European Union aimed at preventing female genital mutilations through empowerment and awareness-raising activities targeting women and men from practising countries.

The project has been implemented in 5 EU countries: Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Spain and Sweden. In particular, AFTER realized **empowerment paths addressed to girls and women** to raise their awareness about the consequences of FGM/C on their health, rights and sexuality in order to prevent their daughters from undergoing the practice in the future. Simultaneously, wider awareness raising activities directed to communities and **specific paths addressed to men were organized**.

The empowerment paths envisaged the setup of women's/girls' clubs and men's forums in 3 countries (Italy, Ireland and Spain), where the discussion about women's rights and the impact of FGM on their lives was carried out.

Participatory methodologies were used to facilitate the discussion and to allow women, girls and men of any education level to participate and contribute to the debate. Participatory methodologies were used in group discussions to allow women, girls and men of any education level to participate and contribute to the debate. In particular REFLECT-ACTION (R-A) was the main methodology used in the framework of the AFTER empowerment paths. This method has been used successfully by ActionAid for many years to train communities in developing countries.

Women and men facilitators were selected to lead the clubs and forum and were involved in training on how to talk about FGM and about Reflection-Action tools useful for the analysing and reflection of the problem.

BOX: Reflection-Action (R-A) methodology, examples of participatory tools

Body map: The body map is a very useful tool to broach discussion on body parts and body functions. It is very useful when working with conservative communities and people who are not used to discussing the body and its various functions. The tool is also useful in discussing the topic of SRHR and control. Emphasis on reproductive body makes it very easy to discuss the practice of FGM and why it is a human rights violation. Sometimes the graphic nature of the body map can be disadvantageous especially to a group which is not ready or well prepared to discuss intimate body parts. The facilitator needs to be very well schooled on how to use this tool. There is also the danger of discussions getting out of hand as participants discuss various body parts and how they make them feel.

Activity mapping: This tool is useful for identifying rights issue in the way gendered division of labour is structured. Very good for creating awareness about the rights of women and reproductive work which ultimately affects their reproductive health. This gendered division of labour is also used in communities where FGM is the norm to reinforce the practice. It is



important to be very careful when using the tool with male participants. This session should be delivered towards the end of the EPs and not early on as it can put male participants off.

River: this tool was used to map participants’ journey through life, reflecting on some of the common issues, joys, disappointments they went through. The process of constructing the river is supposed to elicit a discussion which can spiral into the participants’ relationship with others. This tool is useful in bringing about positive change in individuals and groups. The session should be as reflective as possible. It is important to encourage participants to go on reflecting way after the session is over. This makes the learning more continuous. There is need on the part of the facilitator to be careful not to elicit feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability from the participants.

Local partners and intervention strategies

In order to realize empowerment paths, a preliminary mapping of potential local partners - associations, cooperatives, current projects and services - was carried out in all the 3 countries.

Partners working closely with migrant communities were selected, as they are able to positively contribute to facilitate and organize the circles, respecting cultural differences, participants’ sensitiveness and needs, always keeping the main aim of the AFTER project, which to advance women’s and girls’ rights.

Circles of girls and women were led by women while the men’s ones by men. Facilitators or cultural mediators coming from countries where the FGM/C is practiced or belonging to migrant communities were selected to lead the circles. These choices were made to facilitate the exchange between the participants in a safe space, free from cultural prejudices and gender dynamics which could prevent the expression and the participation inside the groups, as well as the emergence of problems and solutions.

Table 1. Local partners and places where empowerment paths were carried out

COUNTRY	CITY	Local partners	Place and composition of circles of WOMEN and GIRLS	Place and composition of circles of MEN
Italy	Milano	Crinali ONLUS social cooperative	<p>Path 1. House of women in Milan - <i>Girls and women from Nigeria hosted in Casa Suraya, a reception Centre managed by social cooperative Farsi Prossimo Onlus</i></p> <p>Path 2. House of women in Milan - <i>Girls and women from Somalia hosted in Casa Suraya, a reception Centre managed by social cooperative Farsi Prossimo Onlus</i></p>	



		Aisha Project (CAIM)	<p>Path 3. Muslim women's house in Cologno Monzese - <i>Girls and women, mainly from Egypt, living in Milan or in the hinterland</i></p> <p>Path 4. House on the move in Cologno Monzese - <i>Girls and women, mainly from Egypt, living in Milan or in the hinterland</i></p>	<p>Path 1. Melegnano Mosque - Boys and men, mainly from Egypt, living in Milan or in the hinterland</p>
	Rome	Lucha y Siesta Association and House of women	<p>Path 1. SPRAR Aida - <i>Young girls originating mainly from practicing countries</i></p> <p>Path 2. Occupazione Santa Croce in Jerusalem - <i>Women and girls originating mainly coming from practicing countries</i></p> <p>Path 3. Shelters of the anti-trafficking project "Roxane" - <i>Nigerian women victims of trafficking</i></p>	<p>Path 1. Nerola CAS - <i>Young men originating mainly from practicing countries</i></p>
Ireland	Cork	Kinsale direct provision centre	<p>Path 1. Kinsale Road direct provision centre - <i>women asylum seekers originating mainly from practicing countries</i></p> <p>Path 2. Kinsale Road direct provision centre - <i>girls asylum seekers originating mainly from practicing countries</i></p> <p>Path 3. Kinsale Road direct provision centre - <i>women asylum seekers originating mainly from practicing countries</i></p>	<p>Path 1. Kinsale Road direct provision centre - <i>men asylum seekers originating mainly from practicing countries</i></p> <p>Path 2. Kinsale Road direct provision centre - <i>men asylum seekers originating mainly from practicing countries</i></p>
		Glounthaune direct provision centre	<p>Path 4. Glounthaune direct provision centre - <i>women asylum seekers originating mainly from practicing countries</i></p>	
		Glenvera direct provision centre		<p>Path 3. Glenvera direct provision centre - <i>men asylum seekers originating mainly from practicing countries</i></p>



Spain	Madrid	Karibu Association	<p>Path 1. Karibu Association - Young women from <i>Sub-Saharan Africa without residence permit</i></p> <p>Path 2. Karibu Association - Young women from <i>Sub-Saharan Africa without residence permit</i></p> <p>Path 3. Karibu Association - Young women from <i>Sub-Saharan Africa without residence permit</i></p> <p>Path 4. Karibu Association- Young women from <i>Sub-Saharan Africa without residence permit</i></p>	
	Recas	Malian Association		Path 1. Malian Association - <i>Boys and men working in the agricultural sector mainly from Mali</i>
	Albacete	Colectivo de Apoyo al Inmigrante de Albacete		Path 1. Colectivo de Apoyo al Inmigrante de Albacete - <i>Boys without residence permit from Senegal, Mali, Guinea and Ivory Coast</i>

Challenges and lessons learnt

Discussing about FGM/C during the empowerment paths with migrant communities raised difficulties and resistances due to many factors.

In the first place, participants' perceived **FGM/C topic as secondary** problem compared to their material needs, especially for asylum seekers - home, job, documents, residence permit, recognition of refugee status). This made them

Secondly, at first talking about FGM/C caused mistrust and closure, both because any sexuality-related issue is usually considered as a taboo and not to be discussed in public, and because for many women and men it was the first time a practice belonging to their country "tradition" was put into question.

Moreover, the negative consequences of the FGM/C were often ignored, while beliefs in the advantages - **social, hygienic and aesthetic** - were strong. For men another difficulty was that they considered FGM/C as a practice which shouldn't involve them as it was perceived as a "women's issue" and which only women should discuss about.



In addition to this, a general ignorance about the risks and the consequences of FGM/C on women's health and sexuality was registered, as well as the belief that FGM/C are religious obligation.

“FGM/C bring advantages because young women necessarily preserve their purity and virginity, they are less attracted to men because they feel less sexual desire and so they reduce social problems. Women with FGM/C can walk around the city without being necessarily accompanied by their husbands or brothers. FGM/C is still practised because of aesthetic and social advantages. We must overcome those beliefs, habits and traditions”

Woman involved in the empowerment paths

For those reasons empowerment paths envisaged various strategies aimed on one hand at creating trust among participants and between the group and the facilitators, and on the other hand at answering to participants' practical needs. In this sense it was decided to include FGM/C into a wider strategy aimed at raising awareness around gender inequalities and the causes of violence against women and at giving information on fundamental rights (health, work, citizenship) and relevant services and institutions to turn to in case of need. At this purpose various professional figures were involved in some meetings (such as gynaecologists, sexologists, lawyers) in order to deepen certain issues that were of particular interest for the participants.

“It is necessary to know the right friction method to use after sexual intercourses in order to avoid pregnancy. The problem is that my husband may notice that I am using this contraceptive method and will get angry because I don't want to have other children from him”

Woman involved in the empowerment paths answering to the gynaecologist who asked the group which type of contraceptive methods they knew

Participatory tools used during the empowerment paths proved to be powerful and useful to build trust in the group and to gradually introduce topics related to the body, sexuality and cultural traditions in the circles. They were also effective to facilitate the sharing of life experiences. In general, as the tools were easy to use and based on drawings they facilitated the expression of opinions and concepts by every member of the group, despite the difficulties related to the language in multicultural groups and among people recently arrived in Europe. Only some well-educated participants showed resistances in using those participatory tools.

“Why men should be involved in women's issues? How could this help us?”

Man involved in the empowerment paths

Outcomes and conclusions

The choice of the places where the empowerment paths were carried out led to the involvement in most of the circles also of participants not originating from practicing countries. This gave the possibility to explore the FGM/C topic within the broader issue of violence against women and harmful traditional practices and their social and cultural causes. This helped not to stigmatize communities in which FGM/C are practised. FGM/C were therefore referred to as one of the several



forms of gender based violence and as on the results of power imbalance between men and women. This gave the possibility to discuss also violence against women in Europe and to underline how its root causes are similar in all countries in the world.

“Why didn’t my mother protect me when the healer told her to circumcise me?”

Girl involved in the empowerment paths

In general the empowerment paths were successful in bringing change in the perception of FGM/C by the participants. They were an occasion to put into question traditional practices never doubted before and to understand the consequences of FGM/C and their social and cultural origin. Among the obstacles that still persist, the strongest one is the participants’ fear of being excluded by their families and communities for rejecting FGM/C and the difficulties to resist social pressures, especially in their country of origin.

The complementarity between interventions in Italy and in practising countries to prevent and fight FGM/C is therefore key to gradually deconstruct social norms that legitimises FGM/C.

“We can overcome FGM/C. I don’t care if a woman is circumcised or not. She can do it if it is her own choice. There should not be any constraint in a sexual intercourse”

Man involved in the paths

FGM/C prevention strategies should be included in wider strategies of eliminate violence against women, as no country is exempt from the problem. This approach facilitates the reflection on gender-based violence and avoid the stigmatization of affected communities.

At the same time, interventions aimed at informing men and women on their sexual and reproductive rights, as well as sex education, are key to let them better understand the consequences of FGM/C on women’s and men’s sexuality.

“Every woman should have sexual intercourse to feel pleasure in the first place”

Woman involved into the empowerment paths

Table 2. Total number of empowerment paths and of participants

	Number of empowerment paths	Number of participants
Women and girls’ clubs	15	218
Men’s forum	7	105