

# Female genital cutting is based on private values rather than social norms

September 24 2015

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Worldwide an estimated 125 million girls and women are cut despite the fact that female genital cutting leads to serious health problems throughout life. Development agencies spend millions of dollars every year on interventions promoting the abandonment of cutting. Researchers at the University of Zurich and their collaborators in Sudan have collected new data that challenge the assumptions on which many of these interventions are based. The study shows that families within communities vary tremendously in terms of their cutting practices. This result indicates that the decision to cut depends largely on private values rather than social norms.

Programs promoting abandonment are often designed around the assumption that cutting is a social norm based on coordination. If this assumption is true, families coordinate by cutting their daughters and expecting cut wives for their sons. If most families cut, all families have incentives to cut their daughters to ensure their daughters can marry when they get older. At the same time, if most families do not cut and do not expect cut wives for their sons, all families have incentives to not cut. In short, when families coordinate, everyone has an incentive to follow the local norm, whether this norm is cutting or not cutting. If this assumption is correct, cutting should be nearly universal in a local area or almost entirely absent. In particular, once a cutting norm is in place, cutting persists because no single [family](#) can risk the stigma of being different from the other families around them.

## **Novel methods**

Sonja Vogt, one of the study's lead authors, explains how they measured cutting practices: "In the Sudanese communities in our study, henna is applied to a young girl's feet when she is cut. For this reason, henna is an observable sign that a girl has been recently cut. We used this fact to develop a new and culturally appropriate method for estimating cutting rates." The researchers also developed a novel test to measure attitudes about cutting. Charles Efferson, the study's other lead author, adds, "We used the test to measure attitudes that adults might not want to reveal explicitly, and we used mobile computer labs to implement the test in a way that completely preserved the anonymity of participants."

## **Tremendous heterogeneity**

Attitudes and cutting practices varied tremendously both between and, importantly, within communities. Charles Efferson summarizes their key finding, "We found that cutting and non-cutting families essentially live door-to-door. The tremendous heterogeneity we observed suggests that coordination is not that important. Even if it plays some role, families apparently also respond to other private concerns and values that vary a lot across families and individuals."

## **Private motives and public declarations**

Their findings have important implications for the use of public declarations to promote the abandonment of cutting. Many development agencies sponsor public declarations in which several families in a community publicly declare that they are abandoning female genital cutting. Provided enough families participate, the need to coordinate should lead the other families in the community to realize that abandonment is now the best way to ensure their daughters will grow up

to marry. These families should then be prepared to abandon cutting because a new norm is taking hold in the community.

Vogt, however, explains why the study questions the effectiveness of public declarations: "Because there's so much individual heterogeneity, public declarations run the risk of simply collecting the families already inclined to abandon cutting. A declaration could then have little or no effect on the remaining families in a community because these families value cutting for reasons unrelated to coordination."

**More information:** Female genital cutting is not a social coordination norm, [www.sciencemag.org/lookup/doi/ ... 1126/science.aaa7978](http://www.sciencemag.org/lookup/doi/10.1126/science.aaa7978)

Provided by University of Zurich

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