Changing attitudes to the practice of Female Genital Mutilation in the Somali National Regional State of Ethiopia.

Pastoral Concern Association Ethiopia and Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa

Introduction

This case study describes the changes in the attitude of local people and the resultant change in the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the town and district of Filtu in the Liben zone of the Somali Region of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia. The process of change took place over a period of four years beginning in 1999 to 2003. This process was part of a wide ranging health education programme which was implemented by the Pastoral Concern Association Ethiopia with funds provided by the Big Lottery Fund through the Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa (PENHA). Filtu is populated by ethnic Somalis who are virtually all Moslems. It is extremely isolated geographically with rudimentary health, social services and educational facilities and it lacks communications such as telephone or postal services. There is a road (built for military purposes in the 1930s) through the district. The practice of FGM has been deeply embedded in the local culture, with very significant effects on the health of local women. The PCAE (with PENHA support) was committed to confronting this issue, but by working with the community and not by top down fiat.

What changes took place?

Studies (undertaken 1997) prior to the Pastoral Health Project in Filtu revealed that FGM was considered to be “obligatory and necessary by both men and women”. Further research commissioned by the PCAE in 2000 showed that in the town of Filtu, 95% of women had been thus mutilated. Over two thirds of these women had suffered from the aggressive pharonic form of FGM. The PCAE followed this up by organising a number of focus group discussions between men and women in several locations in the Filtu District, along with some in an adjoining district in the same region. After this, two major conferences were held with both men and women attending, including a significant number of the community elders and leaders of women’s groups. The members of these conferences concluded that FGM was dangerous to women’s health and un-Islamic and should not be followed.

At the end of 2003, a formal conference of community leaders, both men and women, including religious leaders and a number of the local sharia court decided that it should be outlawed in Filtu.

Reflection

Filtu is virtually self governing because it is so isolated. FGM is not outlawed at the national level in Ethiopia, though it is not encouraged. PCAE in all of its activities has worked closely with the local elders in seeking to make changes – for example in confronting the problems of AIDS and in promoting the position of women in pastoralist society, as well as trying to provide basic social and physical services. It is very well respected locally (and nationally) as a Somali-led Ethiopian organisation committed to the development of the local community. This has meant that it has been
able to involve and carry the local community with it. The reason that it has been able to persuade the local people to change their attitude and practice has been because the men and women of the local community spoke to each other of the damage that FGM did to women. The really important aspect of this project is that PCAE was able to provide a place where men and women, possibly for the first time, were able to talk to each other openly about this subject. Men then became the leaders in deciding a change of policy – and they included many of the local policy makers themselves. PENHA’s role was to support this process and to get the funding for the project so that, as part of the whole, FGM could be confronted. Without this support, nothing could have happened.

**Conclusion**

FGM cannot effectively be banned by a law from above. This has been tried already in other countries – it does not work. The local organisation (PCAE) with the support of PENHA, an international organisation, had the confidence of the local people and the professional skill to involve them in coming to their own decision.

**Key background documents**

Ossman, Abdul-Hamid, 2001, "Assessment of Knowledge, Attitude and Practice of Women on FGM and Its Type in Filtu Town, South-Eastern Ethiopia", *Senior Paper submitted to the Community Health Programme, Jimma University in partial fulfilment of the degree of BSc in Public Health*, Jimma University, Ethiopia


**Funding**

The Big Lottery