

Positive Deviants for **Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C)** in Sierra Leone

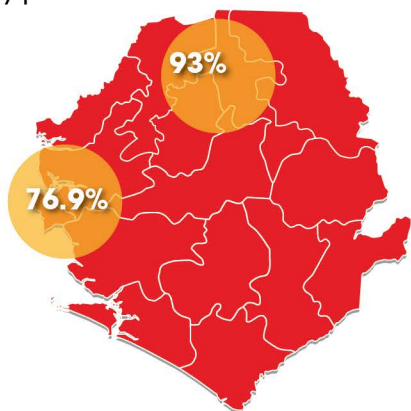


Save the Children

Introduction

Overview

In Sierra Leone, 86.1% of women and girls aged 15-49 years have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). FGM/C is part of the initiation ceremony into women's secret societies, known as Bondo; powerful, all women led and run groups organized by ethnicity. The initiation ceremony where FGM/C is performed is a "rites of passage" ceremony which publicly recognises that a girl has become a woman in her community. FGM/C is the first act performed as part of this ceremony. Today in Sierra Leone, Bondo remains an institution with strong cultural and political value, with FGM/C is social norm and tradition policed by community pressure.



● FGM/C Prevalence
Highest in the Northern region (93%),
and lowest in the Western region (76.9%).

National Trends

- In Sierra Leone, the practice of FGM/C is more prevalent in rural areas (92%) than in urban areas (80.2%); highest in the Northern region (93%), and lowest in the Western region (76.9%).
- More educated women and women in the highest wealth quintile are less likely to have undergone FGM/C compared to women with no education and in the lowest wealth quintile.
- The data shows that age of FGM/C was highest for the 10 – 14 age group, at 35.6% (2008 DHS) and 40.2% (2013 DHS) respectively. This is in keeping with the fact that girls become Bondo members around puberty.
- There are indications that girls are undergoing FGM/C at a much earlier age than puberty: over a third of girls (36.2%) had undergone FGM/C before their 10th birthday in 2008 and 29.4% in 2013. These proportions may be higher if it is assumed that respondents who said they do not know when FGM was performed were too young to remember.



10 -14 age group

35% (2008)
42% (2013)



36.2% undergone FGM
before their 10th birthday (2008)
29.4% undergone FGM
before their 10th birthday (2013)

Positive Deviants for FGM/C

A national FGM/C prevalence of 86.1% in Sierra Leone indicates that some families are choosing not to excise their daughters. In late 2019, Save the Children and Dr Owolabi Bjalkander partnered to determine the existence and identify families and girls in Sierra Leone who are choosing not to perform FGM/C (“positive deviants”) and their reasons, measures taken and the responses from the community.

Who is deciding against joining Bondo?

The findings show that predominantly female parents, over 50 years, alongside a smaller percentage of girls themselves, were deciding against joining Bondo and resisting FGM/C.

Why?

The potential harm to the health of women and girls through FGM/C was the main cited reason for the decision. Other key reasons included the high costs of membership - for the initiation and coming out ceremony, and the belief that FGM/C was against their religion (Christianity).

Impacts

The study showed that once a decision to resist FGM/C was made, it was communicated to the uncircumcised girl, and the information generally remained in the family.

The girls themselves reported that they are persecuted in their communities for taking a decision against FGM/C. In particular, the uncircumcised girls reported that they were isolated, shunned, excluded, abused, and in extreme cases, beaten, or threatened with forcible excision.

Parents/caregivers advised their daughters not to mingle with Bondo girls, particularly during times of initiation and would often send their daughters to bigger towns or cities until after the initiation period was complete.

Key Recommendations for Preventing FGM/C in Sierra Leone

1. Key stakeholder should identify role models who use uncommon, successful strategies and different behaviours to prevent FGM. The behaviours and strategies, once unearthed, can be explored, supported, and offered as solutions which can be accessible to others in the same community. The approach can also serve as a generic approach to offer relevant, affordable, and sustainable solutions for other problem areas in a community.
2. Emulate behaviours and strategies of positive deviants for FGM/C abandonment. The behaviours, strategies, and positions of positive deviants should be shared, and opportunities created in communities for others to consider their reasoning, emulate their actions and practise new behaviours to avoid FGM/C. Positive deviant solutions should be expanded so that other community members can access and practise these new behaviours.
3. Protection for uncircumcised girls. Care must be taken to safeguard positive deviants, once identified, from harassment by other community members. Mechanisms need to be in place to protect uncircumcised girls – chief, local, and traditional leaders should ensure that girls and their families are not discriminated against because of their decision against joining Bondo. In rural settings in particular, uncircumcised girls need to be protected from physical and other forms of abuse because of their FGM/C status.

Case Study on how new information translated into action

A workshop was held in Port Loko in November for all the data collectors where research results on FGM in Sierra Leone and the principles of the positive deviance approach were shared. Data collectors had the opportunity to pilot conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions before they returned to their Districts to conduct the study using these data collection methods. After the workshop of the data collectors, I travelled to all the Districts and served as an observer of the focus group discussions.

Before this particular FGD in a Southern District started, as I talked with the data collectors about the training workshop, one of them reported that all he had learnt at the workshop had caused him problems when he returned back home.

Puzzled, I asked him what had happened. He explained that he had shared and discussed with his wife all that he had learnt at the training workshop on FGM, showing her all the materials he had received.

In response, his wife, an ardent Bondo member, collected all the materials and documents from the training workshop and hid them. Apparently, plans were afoot before the data collector attended the training workshop for their two daughters to join Bondo.

The data collector's response to his wife's hiding the materials on FGM was to “divide their marital bed into two”. He told her, “You sleep on one side, and I will sleep on the other side until you decide what to do”.

Owolabi Bjalkander, Principal Investigator



Save the Children