

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Role of ARP in FGM/C Abandonment:  
New evidence and potential policies**

**Online workshop 8 September 2022**

Hosted by the Alternative Rites of Passage Working Group in partnership with the University of Bristol and UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund

**#ENDFGM**

# SAVE THE DATE!



The Role of Alternative Rites of Passage in FGM/C Abandonment: New Evidence and Potential Policies

*Organised by the ARP Working Group and University of Bristol in partnership with UNFPA*



8 September 2022



11:00 AM East Africa Time | 4:00 AM Eastern Standard Time



[Zoom](#)



This event provided an interactive, online [forum](#) for practitioners, representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scholars and researchers and policy makers to engage in open dialogue on Alternative Rites of Passage (ARP) in their work to end FGM/C. The focus of this second event was on exploring new evidence of the impact of ARP and developing evidence-based policy briefing notes.

The interactive approach promoted open dialogue, actively creating safe spaces within which practitioners and researchers could recognise and discuss the challenges of obtaining robust evidence on ARP and managing expectations of donors, communities and research institutions.

**Key questions included:**

- What does ARP bring to the movement to end FGM/C?
- In which contexts is ARP most and least likely to be effective?
- How can the specific impact of ARP be evaluated?
- How can active engagement between researchers and practitioners contribute positively?

## Session 1: What constitutes ARP?

In this first session, the working group presented a draft description of the commonalities and differences between different ARP programmes and invited participants to discuss and make recommendations for amendments in breakout groups. The revised document is [available here](#).

There is no single model of ARP, and neither should there be as one size does not fit all. A model should take into account cultural and regional variations. To delve deeper into some of the components of ARP, participants were asked to reflect on their understanding and add any additional elements.

The responses included: inclusion of girls who have already undergone FGM/C; engaging with elders; focusing on self-sustainable and scalable initiatives; ensuring that ceremonies are part of a continuous process of awareness raising and education; encouraging wider social norms change; and the inclusion of public declarations to stop FGM/C. Additionally, follow-up after the ARP was identified as an important component, including monitoring girls and following up with communities after they make a declaration. Furthermore, engaging with men and boys, creating alternative sources of income for cutters, and creating an intersectional framework to include other harmful practices such as child marriage were other important steps we discussed. All the participants agreed that ARP should be a community-centric exercise.



## Session 2 : Lessons from communities

In this session, representatives of NGOs/CBOs from Uganda, Tanzania, Sierra Leone and Kenya presented and discussed their on-the-ground experience with developing and implementing ARP. ([Slides available here.](#))

All saw ARP not in isolation but as one part of a holistic programme of community engagement on FGM/C. They explained what they see as the positive outcomes of ARP, including: increases in awareness of the harmful effects of FGM/C; large number of girls who have gained confidence in themselves and their ability to influence their future; and whole communities engaging in dialogue around FGM/C. A recurring theme was that ARP is not just about ending the cut, but about 'giving girls a better future', i.e. changing social norms, resulting in keeping girls in school for as long as possible, ending child marriage, and delaying adulthood.

Participants wanted more information on the different curricula being used in ARP, including the role of ex-cutters. They also asked about the extent to which communities are abandoning FGM/C without using ARP, i.e. whether ARP is an essential component.

At times, ARP and rescue centres were closely linked. This led to questions about the effectiveness of rescue centres, rejection of 'rescued' girls by their families, reconciliation with families, and the short- term nature of rescue as a strategy.

## Session 3 : Research evidence of the impact of FGM/C

Despite ARP's popularity, there is little evidence of its effectiveness in ending FGM/C. In this session, researchers presented two studies on the impact of ARP programmes to initiate a discussion on appropriate quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the impact of ARP.

The first presentation focused on the limitations of using Demographic and Health Survey Data to measure the impact of ARP interventions, e.g. data aggregated at county level and counties is not easily comparable due to multiple variables that influence FGM/C attitudes and behaviours. The second presentation explored how qualitative methods – including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions – can help us examine the relevance (does the ARP programme respond to community needs?); coherence (is it aligned with other interventions in the region?); effectiveness (does it change attitudes and behaviours?) and sustainability (what are the long-term effects?) of ARP programmes.

Two academic responders from the University of Bristol shared insights on methodological rigour and innovation and provided suggestions for data collection methods that can easily be implemented by NGOs and CBOs. The NGO responders commented on the practicalities of conducting research on ARP and emphasised the need for long-term follow-up and a deeper understanding of why some but not other families opt for ARP. ([Slides available here.](#))

## Session 4: Looking ahead

In this session, in mixed groups of practitioners, researchers and policy makers, participants discussed next steps regarding policy, empirical evidence, and monitoring and evaluation.

Key points included:

- where ARP is being used, it is deeply embedded in programmes that encourage abandonment, not as a standalone approach
- the importance of context in selecting and adapting approaches to ending FGM/C, which was highlighted through the case studies of the family-focused Loita Rite of Passage, Kenya, and the 'bondo without cutting' initiative in Sierra Leone
- the value of continuous awareness-raising and education for girls and communities, with a gender transformative approach
- the term ARP can be divisive, since it divides girls who have been cut from those who have not, and risks singling out girls on the basis of their FGM/C status
- the need for communities to identify what works for them as they move towards abandoning FGM/C, rather than being dictated to
- the value of collaboration between practitioners, communities and researchers and the need for coordinated data collection and sharing
- the need for engagement with donors, building trust and sharing the need for locally devised approaches to ending FGM/C (rather than seeing ARP, or any other approach, as 'the' solution)
- the need for donors to be encouraged to allocate sufficient funds for effective evaluation and impact assessment over time
- the need for more effective, long-term evaluation and impact assessment which would benefit considerably from collaboration between researchers and implementers of ARP, and the use of a wider range of indicators of change linked to both attitudinal and behavioural change

Participants identified personal intended actions which included collaborating on evaluation plans with researchers/practitioners, linking with practitioners from other countries practising ARP, and actively engaging a wider range of community members in activities to end FGM/C. These actions will be followed up in 2023.

## Concluding Remarks

Formal and informal feedback from the two online open dialogue sessions has been overwhelmingly positive, recognising the value of bringing together practitioners, researchers and policy makers in safe spaces where the voice of each sector is heard and valued. There have been calls for similar face-to-face events, although participants have valued the opportunities to connect, and engage, with people from other contexts who they would not normally meet in person.

The working group purposefully selected the presenters for each event to ensure a wide range of approaches were presented from a geographical spread, including CBO practitioners as well as established researchers. The contributions of researchers and practitioners were given equal weight, with the working group supporting all presenters in focusing their presentations on the key questions. Financial support was provided to community-based participants to ensure no one was limited in their participation by the internet connection.

Presenters were actively encouraged to share their challenges and uncertainties, rather than just give a sanitised summary of their work. Participants were encouraged to be actively engaged, even during the presentations, with all chat contributions captured in a [shared learning document](#) and fed into the breakout groups and revised documents. The inclusion of practitioners and researchers as responders encouraged ongoing critique throughout the day. The allocation of participants into diverse breakout groups actively encouraged interaction across practitioner/research/policy divides as well as geographical divides.

A [questionnaire](#) has been devised to explore possible future actions.

The working group would welcome opportunities to collaborate with other stakeholders in using the same interactive online approach to promote open dialogue around other aspects of FGM/C, e.g. medicalisation or cross-border cutting.

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