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# School of Thought: The Role of Formal Education in Shifting Opinions of Female Genital Cutting in Burkina Faso

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# School of Thought: The Role of Formal Education in Shifting Opinions of Female Genital Cutting in Burkina Faso

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## ***Abstract***

Gender-biased harmful practices are prevalent across many parts of the world. Once these practices have become part of the cultural landscape, they are very difficult to alter without external stimuli. Whether those stimuli can be targeted toward individuals or they must be targeted toward the community as a whole is heavily debated. I study the effect of an individual-level intervention on the perceptions of an entrenched, gender-biased, cultural practice. Specifically, I study the effect of education on the perpetuation of female genital cutting (FGC) in Burkina Faso. Using a pseudo panel of 36,000 women born between 1949 and 1995, I find that educated women are 30 percent more likely to oppose the practice than uneducated women. Additionally, women who support the practice are more than twice as likely to have a daughter who has undergone FGC, and I find suggestive evidence that education raises a woman's bargaining power in the household. Together, my findings suggest that an individual-level intervention could reduce the prevalence of an entrenched cultural practice in the subsequent generations.

Keywords: Female Genital Cutting, Female Genital Mutilation, Sexual and Reproductive Health, West Africa, Education

*JEL* Classification Codes: D19, I15, O10

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# 1 Introduction

Gender-biased harmful practices have become an important topic of public and political discourse. Many gender-biased harmful practices are a result of entrenched social norms that, once in equilibrium, are very difficult to alter without external stimuli. Whether those external stimuli must be targeted toward the community as a whole or individuals may be targeted is an important topic for debate. Modernization theory suggests that as individuals become wealthier and more highly educated, traditional practices, including many gender-biased harmful practices, will be abandoned. Convention theory counters that only the community can abandon traditional practices, rendering individual-level interventions ineffective.

In this paper, I investigate whether an individual-level policy can affect a woman's opinion of female genital cutting (FGC). Specifically, I investigate the role of formal education in changing the opinion of a woman who has undergone FGC as to whether the practice of FGC should continue in society. Further, I determine the relative magnitudes of the effect of the woman attending formal schooling and the rate of education in the woman's community.

Female genital cutting—a practice wherein a woman's genitalia are partially or totally removed for nonmedical reasons—is practiced in many parts of the world. FGC has no documented health benefits (Efferson, et. al. 2015), and this procedure can have profound negative health effects on the women subjected to the practice. Women who have undergone FGC are more than twice as likely to experience birthing complications (Jones et al., 1999) and 25 percent more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases (Wagner 2014). They are also more likely to experience anxiety,

depression, and marital conflict (Dorkenoo, 1999). These physiological and psychological health complications can have negative effects on a woman's educational attainment and labor market outcomes, which can negatively affect economic growth in the countries in which the practice is widespread.

Yet the practice persists because of beliefs that FGC will encourage purity and fidelity among women subjected to FGC (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund, 2001), as well as beliefs that women who have undergone FGC attain higher standards of beauty, cleanliness, and femininity (Toubia and Sharief, 2003). As a result of these cultural beliefs and social expectations, more than three million girls worldwide undergo the procedure each year (WHO, 2012).

Development agencies and governments are working to reduce the prevalence of the practice. There is some evidence, inline with convention theory, stating that the social norms surrounding FGC act as Nash Equilibria—although the practice is collectively irrational, participation in the practice is individually rational. If acting alone, individuals who disregard the norm may incur social sanctions such as an inability to marry (Wagner, 2014) or being viewed as “unclean” and thus unable to participate in community life (Molloy, 2013). Recent findings have questioned this assertion, stating that FGC is not a social coordination problem in Sudan (Efferson, et. al., 2015) and that individual-level and household-level factors contribute to a larger share of the practice's persistence than community-level factors in West Africa (Bellemare, et. al., 2015).

Some development agencies have worked with communities to create community-wide pledges to abandon the practice, and many governments have adopted official

bans of the practice. There have not been any individual-level policies with the explicit aim of reducing the prevalence of FGC.

In this study, I find that, among women who have undergone FGC, attending formal school has a strongly negative effect on a woman's opinion of FGC, while the rate of education of women in the community has a statistically and economically insignificant effect on the woman's perceptions of FGC.

With this paper, I make three contributions to the literature. First, I show that in the context of Burkina Faso, a woman's opinion of FGC is a strong predictor of whether her daughter will undergo the procedure. Specifically, a woman who supports the practice is twice as likely to have a daughter who is cut than a woman who opposes the practice. This is important for targeting policies aimed at reducing the prevalence of FGC in Burkina Faso. Namely, women are important decision makers for this practice.

Second, I contribute to the debate between modernization theory and convention theory. My findings suggest that modernization theory is more applicable in this setting, i.e., that individuals are able to abstain from the practice without waiting for a critical mass of community members to abandon FGC. This widens the set of possible policy tools that can be used to address FGC, as introducing individual-level policies could change the norms surrounding FGC.

Finally, and most importantly, I find that formal education plays a critical role in encouraging the discontinuation of FGC. This gives policymakers a clear method for shifting opinions of an entrenched, gender-biased, cultural practice. Increasing girls' access to formal education could reduce the prevalence of FGC in subsequent generations. This is particularly important if policymakers are concerned about being

paternalistic, as my findings suggest that policymakers do not need to discourage women from participating in this practice nor educate them on the harmful nature of the practice. Instead, general formal education of girls leads to their opposition to the practice.

The strength of my approach comes from the pseudo panel nature of the data. I create a pseudo panel using three cross-section datasets from 1998, 2003, and 2010 from Burkina Faso. The use of the pseudo panel provides two key benefits in this analysis. First, I am able to analyze a 60 year timeframe, a much longer timeframe than any one dataset provides, which is important when considering trends in FGC and education. Second, I am able to include province-area fixed effects, which controls for all time-invariant observed and *unobserved* factors at the province-area level, ridding my estimates of a substantial amount of bias.

In Section 2 of this paper, I provide background information on FGC and a conceptual framework for this analysis. Section 3 introduces the data and descriptive statistics, and Section 4 discusses the empirical framework and estimation strategy. I present the results of the analysis in Section 5 as well explore potential causal mechanisms. I discuss the results and conclude in Section 6.