

Changing Harmful Norms through Information and Coordination: Experimental Evidence from Somalia

Abstract

We study the role of biased beliefs and coordination failures in perpetuating the norm of female genital cutting (FGC) in Somalia, where 98% of women are cut. We experimentally evaluate three interventions to decrease the prevalence of infibulation, the most harmful type of FGC: (i) correcting misperceptions about support for the practice; (ii) public declarations of one's willingness to abandon it; and (iii) a combination of the two. We find that on average community members overestimate others' support for infibulation. Correcting this misperception reduces the probability of infibulation by 39% two years after the intervention. This leads to an increase in the intermediate type of FGC (Sunna) over the same time period, but not in the long run, as it increases the likelihood that parents plan not to cut their younger, uncut daughters in the future. The public declaration treatment does not reduce infibulation, except in communities where participants had high priors about community support for abandoning the practice. The combined treatment yields similar or smaller effects as correcting misperceptions. Our findings point to the importance of correcting biased beliefs when designing coordination interventions to eradicate harmful norms.

This paper is joint work with Pedro Ferreira, Eliana La Ferrara, David Smerdon and Munshi Sulaiman.

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