

Migration and female genital mutilation

Can migrants help change the social norm?

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ELEVATOR PITCH

More than 100 million women and girls in the world have had their genitals cut for cultural, religious, or other non-medical reasons. Even though international organizations condemn female genital mutilation (FGM), or cutting, as a violation of human rights, and most nations have banned it, it remains prevalent in many African countries, and is slow to decline. This persistence raises questions about the effectiveness of international and national laws prohibiting the practice as well as the potential role of returning migrants in changing embedded cultural norms. Does migration change migrants' opinions and attitudes to this custom? If so, do they transfer the new norms to their origin countries?

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- ⊕ Migration can generate different attitudes toward social norms and different political opinions and persuasions.
- ⊕ Migrants who return to their home country can be an especially powerful vehicle for engendering new social norms.
- ⊕ Return migrants could help eliminate FGM as they can reduce the degree of importance attached to the “social identity” role of FGM.
- ⊕ Return migrants can be more effective than top-down interventions and information campaigns conducted by people from outside the targeted community.

Cons

- ⊖ Not all migration experiences give migrants the opportunity to learn and adopt new social and political values and norms.
- ⊖ The influence of return migrants is strongest when they are present in large numbers in their community of origin or when they rank highly in the social hierarchy.
- ⊖ Empirical evidence is scarce in relation to the process of social change in developing countries.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

FGM is perceived in many societies, particularly in Africa, as being an important social identity marker. Returning migrants, as a vehicle for new social norms, could help address the problem. However, the process of “social transfer” is complex. First, the migration experience has to provide a real opportunity for migrants to learn and want to adopt new values and social norms. This could be achieved through integration policies that favor social interaction, literacy, and language skills. Second, social transfer is effective only if the return migrants appear convincing to non-migrants. This could depend on both the number of “transmitters” of new norms in the population of origin and their social and economic standing. Policymakers should therefore consider ways of encouraging and assisting return migrants to resettle and find new employment.

