



OUR SELVES OUR DAUGHTERS

Tools for Change: Resources for African Newcomer
Communities to Help Prevent Female Genital Cutting

ACTIVITIES AND EVALUATION REPORT

Project funded by

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Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba

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Introduction

This project is part of a larger initiative entitled *Our Selves Our Daughters*. The larger project aims at raising awareness at the community level and with service providers with regard to female genital cutting as integrated within socio-cultural and, sexuality and sexual and reproductive health issues. In “Tools for Change,” two resources (booklets from here on) sharing stories from the communities of interest, were developed to promote discussion and change at a community level around the issue of female genital cutting (FGC), a practice that many immigrant and refugee women of African heritage in Winnipeg have identified as needing to end. Community change was seen as essential to support change in women and girls’ lives.¹

We originally envisioned completing this report with data gathered with women and community members in leadership positions or well-respected go-to people (men and women) in 2011 and 2012. Upon securing funds to expand our research this year, we were able to engage men and youth in conversations on FGC. This allowed us to complete “Tools for Change” that incorporate views from adult men and women, and young men and young women in the two communities of interest.²

The Approach

In this project, we followed the following principles:

- Invitation by newcomer communities to work in collaboration to address the adverse impacts of FGC and support prevention
- Close collaboration with two communities of interest in project design, implementation and evaluation
- A focus on enhancing the social, emotional, and educational supports for African newcomer women affected by FGC.
- Direction for key project decision lies with women in the community
- A strengths-based approach (e.g., acknowledging the richness of culture, women’s role in family and community) and a capacity-building approach (e.g., mentoring and hiring women in the community)
- A belief in the necessity of a “whole community approach” for sustainable and meaningful change in women and daughters’ lives.

¹ Throughout the life of the project, we have withheld the names of the national communities in our public reports. This decision has been made by request of some members of the community who believed that by mentioning which community participated, and for that matter, is raising the issue of FGC, the national communities, and in particular women would be further stigmatized. We are currently working with three national communities affected by FGC.

² Full reports of the research with these two communities can be found at www.serc.mb.ca/projects/female-genital-cutting

The Activities

Booklet Development

The main activities were the development of two community-oriented booklets. We extracted and adapted the content from notes of the focus group discussions with community members, and final research reports. The booklets reflect community perspectives on female circumcision and change. These booklets are meant to become resources that can be used to facilitate community-based dialogue. They are concrete resources for a community-based education and mobilization process, the need for which emerged from our community-based research. The cover page of one of the booklets is appended.³

To keep some consistency and work within available resources (i.e., funds and time) we followed the booklet designed produced for another community in 2011. Still, we assessed and adapted the ‘look and feel’ of these booklets with guidance from a number of community members.⁴ We hired two community facilitators to conduct this process. The community facilitators provided feedback on the content as well as on the ‘look and feel.’ Because this version of the booklets was completed in English, we were not able to fully assess the content with some of these participants.

Community Meetings

Upon completion of the booklets, we held three community sessions to share or ‘launch’ the report. This brings our research full-circle and allows us to give back to the community by providing a concrete tool to aid in the process of community-led change. We had originally planned to conduct two community sessions, but expanded this to three to accommodate one of the communities. Upon discussions with one of the communities, we decided to conduct sex/gender segregated meetings, for males and for females. We hired two young men to assist with the organization and facilitation of the meetings.

The first part of the meeting was to reintroduce the main findings of the project and assess the interpretation of these findings. We divided the group by sex/gender to be able to listen and discuss issues and findings more freely. Then, the whole group came together for a community dialogue on what the findings and the booklets meant to them, and how to move forward with the project. The discussions were facilitated in first language.

Sixteen (16) participants, adult men and women, and young women and men, attended the first ‘launch.’ We anticipated 30 participants; however, quick weather change the day of the meeting may have prevented people from attending.

Twelve adult and young women attended the second ‘launch.’ Originally planned to meet for two hours, this group of women gathered for four hours. All the participants arrived a half-hour before the anticipated beginning of the meeting, signaling interest for the project.

Finally, 12 adult and young men attended our last meeting. Because of an unexpected community event, the team successfully rescheduled the meeting to accommodate most invitees.

All the community meetings were held on weekends, during the afternoon or late afternoon hours.

³Full community report available at www.serc.mb.ca/projects/female-genital-cutting

⁴see, SERC (2010) Talking Together About Change booklet

http://www.serc.mb.ca/sites/default/files/resources/Talking_Together_About_Change_Community_Report.pdf

The Evaluation

The objectives of the evaluation were to learn about the process of developing community-friendly booklets for disseminating findings of the research and as a tool to incite community conversations on FGC, and to assess acceptability and intent of further dissemination and use in communities via the participants.

The findings from this report originate mainly from the assessment of the draft of booklets with community members (individually and in groups), feedback from the community-facilitators and the overall project facilitator, and a short questionnaire deployed at the end of the booklet launch sessions. The questionnaires were translated into the main languages spoken in these communities.

Findings

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Although limited to a few one-on-one conversations with community members, and feedback from a group of women, those providing feedback of the booklets had much to say.

The community facilitators found that there was a good reception for the booklets in the community. The process of consultation did not only help us to obtain feedback on the booklets, but on the project in general. According to feedback from many in one of the communities, we came to realize that this is a "much needed project" in these communities.

In one of the communities, the community facilitator indicated that the elders were thanking SERC and the community facilitator for taking leadership and carrying on with this project. According to her, people said that unlike other experiences when they had been asked for their input and not hearing back, SERC has ensured that in this project the project staff has gone back to the community. Community consultants appreciated this continuous engagement and were willing to meet with our team.

Conversely, we learned that not all in the community openly accept this project. This community facilitator has faced comments opposing her work. Some women would not support her work in the area of sexual and reproductive health. Similarly, she had heard from men who would not support their wives to participate in this line of work. However, having listened to what women and young women have to say in this project, the community facilitator is more than convinced of the needs in her community. Resistance to activities or projects on sensitive topics does not come as a surprise.

According to the other community facilitator, community members appreciated that she, as a community member, facilitated the process. People indicated that they felt safer to openly talk and provide feedback when talking with others in the community on this sensitive topic.

Specific Feedback to the "Look and Feel" of the Booklets

Those who assessed the draft of the booklets were “happy” to see this resource. In all, they liked the colors, and appreciated some of the objects chosen to represent the community (e.g., star, camel) and suggested other items as well. One of the comments pointed to having more “active people” instead of representations of people sitting down. This was believed to show that people were more engaged in change and defy notions of laziness. Other comments were to add pictures of elders speaking to youth.

Unfortunately, due to limited time and resources, not all the items were incorporated. The changes were prioritized in collaboration between the booklet writer and the community facilitators.

We already pointed out a considerable shortcoming to making the booklets completely accessible to all in the community - the language of the booklets is English. To maximize accessibility to the content of the booklets, we decided on using "plain language" guidelines. The incorporation of quotes to "speak for themselves" on the different themes explored in the research were also believed to maximize understanding of the material. Translation would be key for new arrivals, and some members of the community that remain isolated or have not accessed English training. Unfortunately, that may be the case for many women.

BOOKLET LAUNCH

Booklet Launch with First Community – What we Learned

Female circumcision is still a taboo subject. Everybody knows it exists, but nobody talks about it unless they have sessions like this (man)

Here we summarize topics that introduced discussion and ideas not expressed in our research and consultations.

Reactions to Males' Perspectives

We observed that participants were receptive of the booklet, and engaged vividly in the discussions on the findings of the research. The men focused their discussion on the matter of “virginity.” Findings of the research pointed to (non)importance of marrying a sexually uninitiated woman (i.e., virgin) among men. At the meeting, the men agreed with a common belief that FGC would ensure young women to remain a virgin till marriage. However, they believed that society has changed and that virginity “should not be the criteria to get married.” They explained that nowadays some couples tend to get to know each other intimately or even live together for some time before marriage, “and decide if they are fit to spend the rest of their lives together.” Conversely, others argued that there is still an expectation that young women be virgins for the future husbands. This, was explained, would guarantee that she would be “respected” for the rest of her life. This group of men followed religious beliefs that forbid sex before marriage. Some also believed that marrying a non-virgin would bring about mistrust and conflict in the marriage. Besides from the issue of virginity, some men said that they would prefer to marry an uncircumcised woman to prevent sexual intimacy problems. As we heard during the research groups, some of these men felt that as it is women’s sexual desire is low, and that added female circumcision would further reduce women’s sexual interest.

Men were also not sure about how to determine if a woman is circumcised. This question may mean that although female circumcision is common in their communities, men do not know what the woman’s body looks like, or

that the bodies they know are similar, or that the type of circumcision affecting the women they may know corresponds to less conspicuous forms of genital modification (i.e., type I or type II).⁵

Women reacted to the men's perspectives from the research with interest. They spoke at large about men's responsibility concerning FGC. While men would say that the decision to carry female circumcision was in the hands of both parents, the women emphasized that FGC occurred to please men (e.g., for men to have a "quiet" wife, or have a "disciplined" girl). Throughout this discussion we realized that women belonged to different ethnic groups with different reasons for upholding the practice, and for whom the practice looked different. For instance, some indicated that the girl would also "decide" to become circumcised. This was attributed to the fact of wanting to be similar to other girls in the community. Later on the women explained that circumcision occurs when the girls are 12 years old or older. Other women indicated that women are circumcised when they are 18 or older, believing that if the genitalia is "cut" before age 18 the organs would grow back again. This was the first time that other women in the group had heard this explanation. This was also our first time.

One of the participants was puzzled by all the focus on the prevention of female circumcision in the last 10 years (referring to her experiences with campaigns back home). She asked: "almost all women before these [last] 10 years were circumcised, but they are living a normal life. Why is such a huge problem?" To this question, other women in the group responded by referring to harmful surgical practices that could put girls at risk for infections or other health problems, and to the need to protect girls from harm.

Everyone was supportive of the abandonment of female circumcision. They believed that younger generations would not support this practice, and the practice would come to an end soon. Everyone also supported community education involving the whole community.

Reactions to Females' Perspectives

Recorded comments from the women confirmed the findings from the research discussed at the meeting. Women attributed much change to the practice of FGC to educational campaigns. Many had also been exposed to prevention messages promulgated by religious leaders. The involvement of religious leaders was meant to disassociate FGC from being required by religion. Still, some women mentioned that there are still people who relate FGC to religion. Some of the women felt they were a testament to change by explaining that their parents decided not to circumcise them.

Sharing the personal story of how her daughter came to be circumcised one of the participants illustrated that power may be outside parents' purview. She explained that while she was successful in keeping her daughter from being circumcised, her mother (the child's grandmother) did not agree and organized her daughter's circumcision in her absence.

⁵ The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies female circumcision into four types. Type I, partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce; Type II, partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora; Type III, narrowing of the vaginal orifice with creation of a covering seal by cutting and appositioning the labia minora and/or the labia majora, with or without excision of the clitoris, and; Type IV, all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterization. See, WHO (2008) Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation: An Interagency Statement http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2008/9789241596442_eng.pdf?ua=1

Discussions on changes in legislation that prohibit FGC led us to find out that some women did not know that in Canada it is illegal for parents to take their daughters out of the country to be circumcised.

When discussing the findings from women's perspectives, the men focused on a number of items. However, much of their interest was on talking about women's sexuality. In this regard men believed that women did not demonstrate much sexual desire, but they also believed that this was not necessarily attributed to FGC (although this may be a factor sometimes). They felt that this was a result of their socialization as women within their community. This, the men believed, would get in the way of women showing their sexual desire and interest. On the other hand, they also said that men contribute to this by chastising women who are sexually forward. This attitude would oppress women, they said. Men supported changes in the way men and women communicate about sexuality. They wanted more open communication within the family "because it makes the family stronger and the couple's relationship more enjoyable." In support for open communication, one of the men said "if someone is hungry and doesn't have food, he will look outside [the home]. Same way works for sex."

They supported research findings that stated that FGC is changing. This is mostly supported by younger generations, but they also said that it would take time to see it completely gone. Although they believed that women make the decision to circumcise their daughters, men's financial contribution to the procedure (i.e., paying the circumciser) and celebrations makes them complicit and knowledgeable of the practice.

Men supported more open discussions about sexuality in the community, and commended this initiative for bringing the "whole" community together.

According to the responses to our end-of-meeting questionnaire, all the respondents believed that the topics addressed by the *Our Selves Our Daughters* initiative were relevant to their community. Similarly, everyone indicated that the meeting designed to share or 'launch' the booklets to the community was a "good way" of talking about FGC in the community.

As per the booklet, while all women thought that the report was a "good tool" to engage people in a dialogues about FGC in their community, a few men (33%) were not sure. The rest of the men agreed with the women. All but one of the participants indicated that they would share the booklet with others in their community. The participant who did not agree with this, a male, was not sure about sharing it with the community.



Recommendations

The following are some of the main recommendations proposed by the participants:

- Translating the booklet into two common languages in the communities
- Holding more sessions, including gender and age specific and "whole community" forums, that include more information on female circumcision, and audiovisual materials in first language
- Holding similar sessions to the "launch" in the summer time
- Considering the incorporation of volunteers within the project model. Like in previous work, some participants offered to volunteer for the project
- Considering the incorporation of people of different age ranges, and community and religious leaders in the dissemination of the booklet. This cadre of people would ensure the booklet reaches more people in the community. Men felt that these people would read the brochure to those with no sufficient English language proficiency. They would also help with other project activities.

Booklet Launch with Second Community - What We Learned

These two gender/sex segregated meetings were well attended. The participants were very impressed by the booklet, which set the stage for an open conversation. Participants in both groups engaged in a "heated" discussion punctuated with laughter. The participants also appreciated the "home- like" atmosphere created during the session. Here the community facilitators ensured that there was music and that the food was appropriate. These were important tools in facilitating dialogue. In what follows, we present key discussion items.

Reactions to Females' Perspectives

With respect to the findings from the research with adult women and young women, all the participants felt that all the ideas presented reflected what they saw to be the "reality." Here, the women engaged in further discussion on female circumcision, mostly reiterating what we have heard during the focus groups. Although the women supported the practice of FGC, they were clearly against infibulation, the most extensive form of female circumcision, and the most common within this community.

The women were quite surprised by some of the men's comments about wanting to know if their future wives were circumcised. Adult women, in particular, found this odd as they believed men would know that all women would be circumcised. This points to the need for further understanding of why men would be now asking this from women.

Towards the end of the session the women concluded with a discussion on issues that were well documented during the research. They spoke at great length of the challenges they face in navigating the health care and other social services system. They shared examples of health problems people face with no clear resolution or access to appropriate care. They were also concerned about providing written consent for diagnostic and other procedures in hospital. Women felt that often they have felt rushed in signing consent forms without understanding the

information. The women felt that discrimination on the basis of wearing the headscarf and stigmatization due to FGC should not occur in Canada.

For the most part the men agreed with what women had to say. That is they did not find their statements unusual.

Still the men disagreed with the idea that circumcision would beautify the genitalia, something that was said by adult women in the research. They believed that statements as this, translated directly and void of context do not provide a fuller picture of what is meant. However, because they disagree with the statement they did not provide a possible explanation on this.

The men agreed that women are the main decision-makers in the process of circumcising their daughters. They thought that men were "powerless" in this realm.

Equally men agreed with the health consequences of female circumcision (e.g., difficulties with urinating, during menstruation, with scarification, etc.). Still, men felt that because women are invested in this practice they do not openly talk about the health complications of FGC.

The male participants engaged in a heated discussion on the consequences to marriage of female circumcision. Some felt that being circumcised and/or marrying a virgin is highly valued, and as such being deceitful would bring about problems. Others explained that it would be shameful to have to consult with a physician to deal with the circumcision so the couple could have intercourse. Regardless of the issue, men seemed to point out the challenges to their sense of manhood. They also discussed how female circumcision may lead to divorce or marrying another wife because of problems with intimacy.

They agreed with the women's interpretation that religion is not related to female circumcision. They agreed that this is a "cultural practice that is rooted in the hearts of the people." However, they also said that if people were to follow their religion "it is consider Haram to make someone bleed." (Haram indicates a forbidden practice). This belief would help with the cessation of the practice. They disagreed with comments made during the research that imply that sunnah, a less invasive practice should be more acceptable than the Pharaonic practice (i.e., infibulation). The men discussed the terms used to describe the different practices. They say that Pharaonic implies that there is no relation to any Muslim tradition, thus proving that it is not an Islamic/religious tradition. However, they were also against using sunnah to speak of clitoridectomy, as they believed that that practice was not Muslim either.

Reactions to Males' Perspectives

Women found findings from the research with men "true" and "real." They were not surprised.

Women commented that men's understanding of the impact of FGC in relation to childbirth. They explained that nowadays, in particular in Canada, men would escort their wives to the hospital and even be present during labour and delivery. Back home women would be for the most part assisted and supported by women only. These changes would bring about new awareness among men, suggested the participants.

Another significant discussion revolved around the topic of virginity. The women described and discussed different traditions by which this institution is practiced and still maintains currency back home. They mostly

focused on practices that signify whether the bride is a virgin or not. Either way the whole community would know.

However, they emphasized how much the institution of marriage has changed. The women discussed the extent to which arranged marriages are becoming less popular. Parents are increasingly less involved in the marriage choices of their children. "They just give the blessing and the recognition."

The women reacted strongly to the issues raised with regards to the role of religion on FGC. All the participants felt that while uncircumcised women may not "follow the culture," that did not mean that they were against their religion.

The group of males clarified the notion of "purification" and "cleanliness" associated with FGC. They insisted that among some people, uncircumcised girls would not be seen as "dirty" in a literal sense, but as counter to their culture. Further, an elder said that "in some parts of (country), circumcision is not a big deal; uncircumcised girls are accepted just like circumcised girls so we should stop saying that all (nationality) sees girls that are not circumcised [are] dirty."

Still, they discussed the relationship between female circumcision and virginity. They explained that circumcision was a way of ensuring the virginity of girls and young women; however, they also believed that virginity was not about physical property, and something that could not easily be assessed. The most important issue was to marry a woman who had not had sex before marriage.

With all the talk about the effects of female circumcision on women and on their intimate relationships, some of the men wondered about the issues uncircumcised men may face. Although this is the first time we heard about this from the men's groups, male circumcision tends to be part of the discussions in the education sessions with women. This opens up discussions on the broader issue of circumcision for both men and women, both of which can be controversial.

All participants, men and women were open to participating in more education sessions and discussions on FGC. However, men also talked about the need for education on HIV, raising children in Canada, "dealing with culture shock", and gangs; and also expressed an interest in having a "space for men to share the challenges that they face when they come to Winnipeg."

The participants discussed the format of the session. This was prompted by a question about bringing the men and women, young and older generations together. Most of the women did not want gender mixed sessions. However, some could envision sitting together in a room with males. It was believed that this would help each other share knowledge across groups. However, they said that they supported this model if the content of the meeting was to be on general health issues, or other community issues. They were against sharing the room with men when visual representations of the reproductive systems, different types of FGC, or even reproductive systems terminology were to be used. Women felt that the work had to be done by respecting the community values, and avoiding discussions that would lead to conflicts.

The women felt that meeting with women from other communities affected by FGC was welcome. They were open to this idea as long there was interpretation available. They highlighted that the interpreters had to be women.

In spite of the positive reaction to the booklet the participants (men and women) had some critiques to some of the visual representations included. Women felt that the camel would "speak" to people. On the other hand, they could not recognize the woman carrying a pot as part of their cultural practice. They did not like the depiction of women sitting down, and would have liked to see women facing each other, as engaging in a conversation. As per the men, the main observation was that the women depicted in the booklet were not wearing traditional clothing (i.e., the clothing motifs did not reflect usual worn clothes). This type of feedback indicates that there is much that needs to be taken into account when developing resources for/with communities. Also, this process demonstrates that consultations yield increased involvement and investment in the project and topics, beyond the smaller consultations used to review the booklet.

In spite of the misrepresentation some found in the booklet, people were highly satisfied because,

"I do like the way that the report looks and feels, it is written in a way that is easy to read and I really like the images" (elder)

"What I like the report is not that someone just randomly wrote. No, I can see it that this is our own words, our discussion and is a good representation of view point and whoever wrote did not add their piece and you know very often that happens" (elder).

All participants insisted that the resource should be translated into first language.

All the participants to the meeting responded to our written questionnaire. According to the responses to our end-of-meeting questionnaire, all the respondents believed that the topics addressed by the *Our Selves Our Daughters* initiative were relevant to their community. Similarly, everyone indicated that the meeting designed to share or 'launch' the booklets to the community was a "good way" of talking about FGC in the community.

Except for one male, the rest of the participants, males and females, believed that the report is a good tool to get people talking about FGC in their community, and that they would share the report with others in their community.

Those who provided written comments described the event positively. They used words as "very good," "fun" or "entertaining," "educational" and "inclusive" to convey their experience. One female participant hoped for having this event continue, and a male participant told us "every time I come to the sessions I learn something new."

Concluding Remarks

The development of a resource based on research findings and the subsequent release to incite dialogue across genders and generations proved to include an appropriate process and much desirable outcome. Although limited in scope, we learned that consultations during the process of resource development not only provoke reactions on how to make resources that are attractive to the community, but to initiate conversations on FGC.

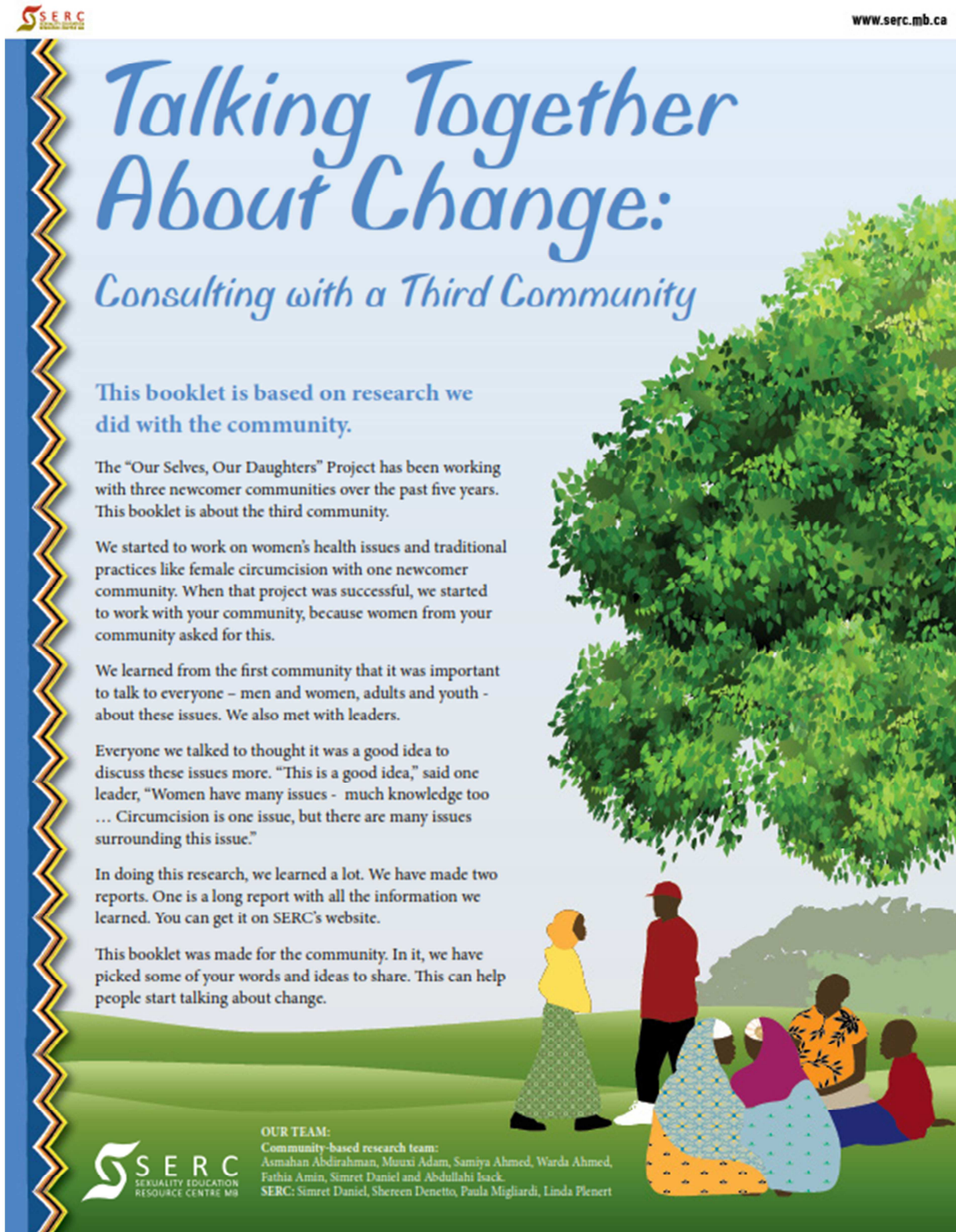
The sharing of the final booklet with members of the communities, some of which were new to the project, was well received. Because we expanded our project to include men and youth, we only were able to invite a handful of people from each of these sectors (i.e., adult women and men and young women and men). On the other hand, smaller groups allowed for more in-depth conversation in a safer environment.

Recommendations

- These booklets constitute some of the initial steps in developing accessible resources. Considering that most of the process of engagement involved the use of first language, it is recommended that funding be sought to translate the versions of these reports into two to three main languages the project operated in (which coincide with the main languages within these national communities). This will ensure increased access of resources within the communities.
- Conduct further dialogue-based "whole community" meetings as basis for education on FGC. This should mostly follow the format of these sessions while incorporating additional information based on some of the gaps discussed in the research and during these meetings.
- While during the research process with the second community we found out that some participants were open to dialogue across genders and generations, there continues not to be consensus on this. Sex/gender segregated sessions should continue to be the general rule when engaging this community. On the other hand, younger people may be more open to gender-mixed groups.
- Although some of the issues raised appear to concern specific groups (e.g., the role of religion and the inclusion of religious leaders in talking about female circumcision), other issues seem relevant to different groups with whom we have engaged. Exploring the use of these Tools with other communities affected by FGC is recommended to inform potential "multicultural" work (i.e., assess what, if any, makes sense across groups, still considering that much of the strength of the resources is that they reflect the voices of the participants/community members).

Appendices

Sample Report cover



Evaluation Form

**Our Selves Our Daughters
Community report release**

Female ☐ Male ☐

1. Are the topics discussed in this project relevant to the community? Yes No Not sure
2. Was today's meeting a good way of talking about FGC in our community? Yes No Not sure
3. Is the report a good tool to get people talking about FGC in our community? Yes No Not sure
4. Would you share the report with others in our community? Yes No Not sure
5. What three (3) words would you use to describe the event?

6. Any other comments?

Thank you!