

**Our Selves, Our Daughters: Community Mobilization to  
Support Community-Led Change for and with  
Newcomer Women**

**Winnipeg  
December 2013**



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## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank those community members who collaborated and participated in this project, and shared great insights into their community, women’s health issues, and community change, in particular the youth. Many thanks to the project team. Without your hard work, this project would not have been made possible. Lastly, we would like to thank our funders, the Assiniboine Credit Union, and Manitoba Healthy Living, Seniors and Consumers Affairs and the for their support.



## **Introduction**

The Sexuality Education Resource Centre (SERC) has been involved with a number of communities in the area of Female Genital Cutting (FGC). This project has been undertaken at the invitation of newcomer communities. We work in close partnership with these communities.<sup>1</sup>

Our main focus has been to work with women from communities affected by FGC. However, we understand that this is a community practice. As such we have expanded our work to include men, and youth. This model is meant to improve newcomer women's social supports in community. By enhancing community capacity across gender and generations, we hope to mobilize the whole community to begin to re-examine women's role in society, and support community-driven change around FGC.

The main objective of the "whole community" mobilization work was to train a team of community-based co-facilitators (CCFs) to mobilize for change around newcomer women's wellbeing and prevention of harmful practices, part of a broader community-capacity building project.

## **Project Activities**

We hired and trained a team of 3 Community Co-Facilitators (CCFs) from a newcomer community. Members of this team were already familiar with the OSOD project. One of the members of the team was part of the research project and a previous set of education sessions in the community.<sup>2</sup> A second member of the team, a young woman, participated in the research and education sessions. The third member of the team, a young man, attended an education session

This team of CCFs participated in skills and knowledge capacity-building on issues such as gender roles and identity as they relate to women in their culture, health and wellness information, techniques for community mobilizing and education, and addressing change around traditional practices such as female circumcision. In turn, the team organized a series of workshops and forums with youth; and a forum in their community with adult men and women (including elders), as well as the younger generation. This model was developed to begin to break the silence around issues impacting on women and their role and identity in their society, including the sensitive issue of female genital cutting as well as other gender-related issues that pose barriers to women.

The original plan was to conduct gender-segregated workshops with adult men and women. However, due to limited resources we decided to invest the resources available to working with youth. This decision was made in part due to limited resources, the fact that over the years, we

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller understanding of our work since 2009, please visit our website at

<http://www.serc.mb.ca/projects/female-genital-cutting>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.serc.mb.ca/sites/default/files/resources/Our\\_Selves\\_Our\\_Daughters\\_2011-12\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.serc.mb.ca/sites/default/files/resources/Our_Selves_Our_Daughters_2011-12_Final_Report.pdf)

have worked with adult women, and the more intense dialogue with youth would allow them to feel more comfortable in coming together to the whole community at the forum. By supporting this dialogue that promotes change at a whole community level (rather than just working with women), the CCFs aimed at building on the strengths of newcomer communities bolstering social cohesion and gender equity, which inevitably build women's social status and self-efficacy in society.

Through October to December 2014 we conducted:

- Three capacity-building sessions with the Community-Based Co-facilitators (CCFs)
- One session with each group of female youth and male youth;
- Two sessions with both, female and male youth (i.e., Youth Forum)
- One session with youth (both female and male) and adults

### ***The Capacity-Building Sessions with Community Facilitators***

We conducted three training sessions with the community-based co-facilitators. These sessions were designed to increase the co-facilitators' capacity in engaging on discussions about FGC with their fellow community members, youth and adults. These training sessions focused on:

- Female anatomy and physiology
- Types of FGC
- Possible short and long term health consequences of different types of FGC
- Cultural dynamics concerning women's sexuality
- Physical and emotional dimension's of women's and men's sexual response
- Reasons behind FGC
- Community change / Community mobilization
- Model of Change

The selection of topics for these sessions was meant to ensure that the facilitators were able to comfortably address these topics in the education sessions, and answer questions from participants. In addition to in-depth discussions of these topics, the team discussed the plan, outreach and recruitment strategies, and logistics.

### ***Workshops with Youth***

The youth co-facilitators recruited youth for the sessions. They recruited seven female youth, and nine male youth. The young women were age 17 to 25; and the young men were age 18 to 28.

Both gender-specific groups followed the same content. The group was asked to discuss their views on FGC, reasons for the practice within their own community, cultural worldviews surrounding the practice, health consequences, and changes surrounding the practice back home and in Canada.

The sessions were to run for 2.5 hours; however, the discussion led to longer sessions for both youth sessions. Youth had many questions, and shared many of their personal experiences.

At the meetings, we distributed the “community-friendly” research report.<sup>3</sup> This was meant for the participants to read and come back to the youth forum ready for discussion on the research findings.

### **Youth Forums**

The youth were invited then to participate of gender-mixed sessions. Ten participants attended the first forum (6 young women, and 4 young men). The plan for this workshop was to outline the findings from the research project in two stages. In gender-segregated groups, the groups discussed the findings from the research, and then worked around a “case study” to discuss consequences of FGC, cultural implications, cultural change, and youth's role on change. Among the main issues for discussion were the impact of FGC on relationships, the role of virginity, role of FGC in marriageability of girls, and cultural change. Then, in a large group, the youth presented back a summary of the main items discussed in their groups.

Similarly, to the gender-segregated sessions, the youth forums ran longer. It became apparent that many of the youth knew each other, making the conversation easier. According to the Project Facilitator, youth seemed quite comfortable, and 'didn't take long to start a discussion.' Further, she felt that (referring to her work with adult women in the community) the conversations with youth on FGC was much easier to start and carry out than with adult women.

Upon completion of the "Whole Community" Forum, we invited the youth back for another forum to address a number of issues that became apparent throughout the discussions. Eight youth (four male and four female) attended this session. About half were new to the project. The focus of the session was on ‘relationships’. This topic was decided upon request from the youth attending the previous session. Here, youth discussed the following topics: meanings of *dating*, *virginity* (this discussion included changes to the expectation on remaining virgin due to migration, i.e., exposure to new sexual norms, but also to forced sex in the context of migration or engaging in other institutions such as the military). Other topics were: *age differences in relationships*, *religion and sexuality*, *expectations for young men vs. young women around sexuality issues*, *use of sexual enhancement products*, *decision-making around contraception*, *FGC*, and *role of youth on FGC related decision making*.

Usually, we become aware of a number of questions and issues when engaged in dialogue with participants; however, we are not always able to respond immediately to these. Because of availability of resources (i.e., limited funds), we were able to conduct this second youth forum.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.serc.mb.ca/resource-library/talking-together-about-change-community-friendly-report>

### **“Whole Community” Forum**

The Team invited the youth and a number of adults to a community forum. Seventeen participants attended the forum. This was conducted to begin to break the silence around issues impacting on women and their role and identity in their society, including the sensitive issue of female circumcision as well as other gender-related issues that pose barriers to women. By supporting this dialogue that promotes change at a whole community level (rather than just working with women), the CCFs built on the strengths of newcomer communities bolstering social cohesion and gender equity, which inevitably build women's social status and self-efficacy in society.



### **The Evaluation**

In collaboration, we decided on what we wanted to evaluate and learn about from these sessions and the model of community mobilization. We decided to look at what were the successes and challenges of carrying out this work with the community. We wanted to know this from the perspectives of the CCFs and the Project Facilitator, and other SERC staff (mainly a Community Education Facilitator who assisted in the CCFs capacity-building sessions). These views were gathered during a team debrief meeting, individual interviews with SERC staff, and other documentation.

Then, we sought to understand the views on addressing FGC from the perspectives of youth and adults attending the sessions. This information was collected orally at the end of each session. The question guides are appended at the end of the report.

## ***Community-Based Co-Facilitators' Perspectives***

### **Achievements**

As already established, we were able to rely on a team who was already familiar with the project. This allowed them to quickly re-connect with the project and achieve all the tasks.

The CCFs praised the level of organization. They appreciated that the capacity-building sessions were conducted a few days before any given session. That would give them the information they needed to use in the sessions and in turn feel more confident. One of the CCFs commented:

One of the things I liked about the sessions is that we meet on Thursday, a couple of days before the actual sessions. [The Facilitators] would present to us the topic we were supposed to discuss [in the sessions], then it was close enough not to forget the information.

Moreover, another added,

That way we felt confident, we knew what to present in the session.

The CCFs believed that the community-friendly report of the research project at the root of all these exchanges was key in the success of the sessions. All participants were “very positive about the booklet, most of them as I understand are positive about it, very impressed by the graphics, the look...” The youth received the booklet in the first session and came prepared with comments at the first youth forum. Here some of the youth presented dissenting voices of those showcased in the booklet. The comments in the booklet sparked conversations about the acceptability of circumcised girls and women in the community, expectations of remaining virgin until marriage, and gender related issues in general.

They also believed that the model of having separate sessions prior to bringing people together was a good decision. Although they observed the young women were uneasy at the beginning, the use of “case studies” to helped in the discussion. By the end of the sessions, youth “had a lots of questions about FGC, culture and FGC, anatomy, relationships.” And another CCF expanded this by saying,

Discussing relationships, especially about virginity, family planning. One of the comments that I remember was [about the use of the rhythm method] if a couple communicate together when to have sex when not to have sex, people would expect what is going to happen that night.

This comment on “a method that requires communication,” opened up a conversation between family planning, pleasure, and communication among the youth.

The wide range of issues explored only left youth asking for more information. The CCFs found that all the topics would converge around a main one: “relationships.” However, here the youth were not only talking about intimate relationships, they were also talking about relationships “with parents about cultural understandings of sexuality,” “with boyfriend-girlfriend about pressure to do things,” “decision-making,” “relationships outside the community (with people from other ethno-cultural groups).” Youth also asked about the role of the law and their rights, which could also be seen as a relationship with the state concerning sexuality.

Interestingly, the CCFs also attributed the success to the initial angle taken to dealing with FGC. They believed that “circumcision is easy to talk to than sexuality” within their community. They explained that circumcision, could be understood as “a health issue, so that's why it is important, but at the end of the day they want to talk about relationships.”

By the end of the sessions, youth did not only ask to attend more sessions, but a number of them wanted to volunteer for the project. This was well received by the CCFs as a sign of success in the model of the project.

Finally, in addition to the benefits of the work in the community, the CCFs also benefitted from the experience by receiving a small contract, adequate training, and mentorship. Although very small in scope, these are invaluable opportunities for building future employability, and potential career paths for newcomers to Canada.

### **Challenges**

The whole program was completed in a very short period. On the one hand, this is a sign of the capacity of the project and the team to pull together to achieve the objectives. On the other hand, the CCFs felt that the compression of activities left them with little time for reflection and improved planning. One of them explained, “If you are more organized, you feel more composed, people respond better” to convey his unsettlement during some of the sessions.

The short period to get the program started affected the extent of promotion and recruitment for the sessions. This was particularly the case about the whole community forum.

Further, as this was the first time that participants engaged in the topic, the CCFs realized that people became engaged with time. It was towards the end of the sessions that participants became more “activated,” and ready to exchange ideas. Some believed that part of the problem was that people would come in late and had missed some information.

People feel at home as the time goes by, but then, 'oh, time is over'! We had little time after the group discussions around the case studies, only a few minutes to present back and discuss...people wanted to discuss [the cases]



One of the workshops was affected by the tragic accident that involved refugees of the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa. This resulted in reduced number of participants during the first youth forum. The accident affected participants and other community members directly or indirectly. As a result, many chose to gather in their community to discuss possible actions to support family members who have lost loved ones. Others were discussing human rights actions to ameliorate the hardships refugees face in trying to access a safe life.

Further, two other social events involving large number of community members also affected the "whole community" forum. Again, many were not able to attend, in particular women. Many of the women were in charge of cooking for these events.

Another more significant challenge faced at the whole community forum was the fact that the adult participants had not been exposed to FGC related conversation in the Canadian context, at least not in an open community forum. This was the first time that they were to come together to discuss the topic. The CCFs perceived some sort of uneasiness and lack of readiness for this type of conversation, among the adults.

While in this project we were able to provide a small honorarium (\$10), the CCFs assessed that child minding would have been more appropriate to make the event more accessible to parents.

### ***Participants' Perspectives***

The CCFs conducted a short oral evaluation at the end of each of the sessions. They asked if participants were able to understand the topics, about the way the information was presented and facilitated, how they would use or share the information with others in their community, any suggestions for improvement. They also sought specific comments about the "community-friendly" report distributed during the sessions. The following is a summary of the participants' responses.

#### *Understanding of the topic as result of the sessions*

Youth utilized a number of adjectives to explain their understanding of the topics presented. They indicated that the information was 'interesting', 'informative', 'thorough', 'helpful' and 'clear.' In some cases youth found new information (e.g., 'I learned many things I didn't know' - young man).

Some found new awareness about the potential harms of the practice, as illustrated by this young man's comment:

In our culture, we learned that female circumcision is good, and it doesn't cause trauma. I used to think that way too. But today's information helped me to know it can [cause trauma], so it is not good, because it can hurt her. (male-only group)

In addition, another young man added that the information 'will help me to speak about the topic with confidence.'

The adults also found the information 'helpful.' They appreciated the discussion.

#### Implications of the Information in People's Lives

Youth believed that they could 'use' the information. They explained this by stating that they would share information or issues raised during the sessions with 'our friends at work', or friends in general, mostly those from the community. Some also identified potential discussions with family, and neighbours.

During the whole community forum one of the participants felt that the information needed to target women, in particular grandmothers, implying that they have a key role in the perpetuation of FGC within their community. However, this person also felt that opening up the conversation with women was something that they needed to do.

Some also found that the report would help in sharing the information with others. They did not only find the content relevant, but they also liked the look as it spoke to their cultural background (e.g., references to the tree, and the jug).

#### Approaches to education and community-mobilization

Initial gender-segregated sessions with youth were not only welcome, but help to build a much needed comfort level for gender mixed, and intergenerational encounters. All youth agreed that gender-segregated sessions allowed, if not guaranteed that they were able to ask and discuss sensitive topics more openly. As per the discussion during the first session, youth felt that they would feel 'shy.'

On the other hand, they also believed that there were benefits of having young men and women coming together.

It is good that it is males only. We can ask and say anything openly, but it is good also to discuss with the girls, so the next session will be interesting.

The evaluation of the gender-mixed session with youth confirmed that the session was beneficial. In reflecting on this, participants said:

I learned from these girls, women. It is good that we are mixed gender [here, in this group].

Always, when the discussion is between males and females, it leads to clear understanding and consensus. It also makes easier to disseminate the ideas that we discussed to our community people.

However, youth not only saw the benefit in coming together as youth. One of the young men challenged the focus on youth when he said:

I think this information has to be given to all our community, not only us. To create awareness in our community you have to campaign more and you have to reach more people. You have to allocate more [resources], especially for the old people to change their perceptions. (male only group)

This view was not shared by all. A young woman felt that 'youth only' work was more desirable. She said, 'we have the same understanding, our judgment is not clouded by culture, and we feel shy with adults. It is not an open topic.' Perhaps because youth are more open among each other, another young woman felt that it was important to have a 'whole community' discussion 'because they have more experience' but also because 'they are also the ones that need the education.'

This comment also suggests that youth are more open to the disruption of the practice of FGC; while it is the older generations that have to engage in the conversation. A similar comment was gathered in the session with the adults and youth when a participant said, 'more people have to learn, more women have to learn, especially grandmothers.'

Youth welcome the model of having gender and age specific groups and mixed aged groups. One of the young man felt that:

we may have to be careful of our words (with older people). However, we will also learn from the older people's experiences and thoughts. So, it is good to have separate and mixed groups to discuss thoughts and experiences. (male only group)

Notable is that one of the young men had community-organizing experiences in FGC prevention. He had participate in anti-FGC campaigns back in his country of origin. In comparing his experiences to the model used in these sessions, he praised the team. He recalled large community meetings where information on the harms of FGC was provided, but there was no dialogue on what it would mean to change the practice for the community. He believed that our model would to large extent mobilize more meaningful knowledge.

### ***Improving the Model***

Participants felt that the project should benefit the community at large. As such, they wanted to see more people involved in the project.

This project has to work hard to reach everybody in the community. You have to work in a bigger number. I mean, try to reach every family in the community and every family member in the family. I was working in [country name] with an NGO (non-governmental organization) when I was a student. We did a lot, but always I knew that there was much that has to be done. Now, I also see the same here.

Participants also believed that more sessions would help them obtain answers to their many questions (e.g., "We need more sessions. Time was short and it is good to have more sessions like this one"). Some felt that 'relationships' required more discussion.

We need more information. I mean more sessions about relationship. These sessions are important in our community. Many are in conflict because they don't communicate specially about sexuality. You know, a shared problem is 10% solved.

In terms of the content or format of the sessions, participants asked for “icebreakers” or other activities, include a testimonial, and consider the use of “drama.”

It is good if you show drama because people can easily see the traditional perception, action and consequences on the girls in particular and the community in general. People will also talk easily about the drama, [even when] they are talking about female circumcision.

The use of testimonials or personal stories was debated. While some felt that this would help change people's perceptions and actions; others, in particular the young women, felt that they would be ridiculed.

Participants received an honorarium of \$10. This was meant to defray expenses, including transportation. A few advocated for a larger amount. During our last session, we asked youth if they were to attend similar sessions without receiving an honorarium. While most agreed that the sessions were to their benefit, some also indicated that having an honorarium was more than welcome. This suggests that the honorarium may have been a significant incentive.

Some suggested a more central location. SERC is in a central location; however, participants still believed that there were some other facilities in the inner city where to conduct these sessions. Because the group involved young adults, some believed that there are many young adults who have children. For these childminding should be considered.

A considerable number of participants (i.e., four), young men and women, indicated that they would like to volunteer in the project.



## Concluding Remarks

Throughout the many phases of the Our Selves Our Daughters' project, we learned that immigrant women are key actors in their communities. However, women and girls also face inequities. In this project, we aim at supporting women's greater participation in society by addressing their role in society, and cultural practices that are based in gender inequities. In this specific small part of the project, we aimed at engaging both men and women, young and old, for all to come together to discuss changes that would benefit not only women but also, the community as a whole.

Although small in scope, we were able to bring together youth and adults into the dialogue on FGC in this particular community. However, we focused our efforts in engaging with youth. Youth were very receptive of the project, and provided great insight on their points of views on FGC within the context of their lives and in the context of their communities. As they saw FGC related to identity, relationships, and sexuality, the youth were able to reflect on relevant issues in their lives in Canada.

The conversations with youth revealed a number of new learnings that would help us shape future work in the community. Among the most salient issues was that it was easier to approach the issue by focusing on FGC rather than discussing about sexuality related topic at the onset. This was even so when youth were interested in discussing "relationship" issues. When FGC is presented as a health concern, it appears that people would be more receptive to participating. With the creation of the right environment, the health consequences related to FGC would only become the entry point, leading to the most relevant topics for the participants.

Discussions on relationships led to a number of sexuality, reproductive and sexual health issues. For instance, in the context of reproductive and sexual health, contraception became also part of the conversation among the youth. This was discussed within the context of their lives, in terms of what is acceptable and accessible to them; however, even more interesting is that contraception was also linked to pleasurable sexual activity. Here, we refer to comments made by male youth about the "natural" or rhythm method, what appears to be a very common, relevant, and legitimate method of birth control in the community. Youth spoke about how this method requires timely communication about potential sexual activity, and as such creating anticipation to the sexual act. This illustrates the relevance of dialogue-based discussions that attend to community perspectives, as well as the comfort level obtained during the project.

### *For future consideration*

The gender-segregated sessions helped to build the dialogue across gender, and to encourage youth to discuss these issues with adults in their communities. However, we also found out that adults needed to come also to the conversation prepared or ready. The original model of conducting workshops prior to the "whole community" forum is a desirable model when addressing FGC and other sexuality related topics.

This initiative tends to reach out to smaller groups within the communities we work with. Participants believed that the rest of the community should benefit from participating in the workshops. They also felt that they needed more time was to properly address all the issues. This indicates that dialogue across gender and generations is feasible and recommended.

Further youth-centered work is also recommended. Youth are open to discussing sexuality related topics. Youth are also considered at the group that would promote and support change regarding the practice of FGC. However, they are just beginning to be part of the conversation.



## Appendices

### *Evaluation guides for use in different sessions*

#### Youth groups

1. How has today's discussion helped you to understand the topic?
2. Did the way we organized the session help you better understand the topic? (e.g., by gender, by age, having "whole" community together)
3. Do you have any comments or suggestions to help improve our work (do our education sessions better)?
4. Other comments?

#### Youth Forum

1. How has today's discussion helped you to understand the topic?
2. Did the way we organized the session help you better understand the topic? (i.e., with people from opposite sex/gender)
3. How do you see using this information in your life?
4. Does this information need to be shared with other youth in the community? how?
5. Do you have any comments or suggestions to help improve our work (do our education sessions better)?
6. Other comments?

#### Whole community

7. How has today's discussion helped you to understand the topic?
8. Did the way we organized the session help you better understand the topic? (i.e., having "whole" community together)
9. How do further share this information with the community at large/beyond this group?
10. Could you share some comments about the "community-friendly" report? (show the report, so people know what you are referring to) probes: is this a good way to share information with people in your community? how would you use it?, etc.
11. Do you have any comments or suggestions to help improve our work (do our education sessions better)?