

Focus:

Leveraging Mali's return migrants to roll back Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting.



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Studying the link between migration and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) entails observing behaviour in the sending country and not just in the receiving country. Whereas some studies find that immigrants, both men and women, tend to take issue with FGM/C, others observe that they remain very attached to this community identity marker.

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) intentionally alters or causes injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. The practice ranges from the partial or total removal of the clitoris and labia minora to the narrowing of the vaginal opening and all other harmful procedures to female genitalia.

The practice is widespread mainly on the Sahelian strip in Africa, from Egypt to the Atlantic coast. Under international law, it constitutes a violation of human rights condemned in most countries. Yet it continues to varying extents, despite government opposition and NGO information campaigns on the practice's harmful repercussions on women's health.

Mali has one of the world's highest rates of FGM/C

There has recently been an increase in the number of studies on social remittances, i.e. the transfer to a sending country of cultural, social and political norms acquired in the receiving country. Yet few studies have looked into this phenomenon in relation to FGM/C practices. Mali has one of the world's highest rates of FGM/C for 15-to-49 year old women: estimated at 93% by a 2013 survey. A study conducted in 2009 even found that 84% of young Malian girls had already been circumcised by the age of 15.¹

We combined this survey of Malian girls with local census data to find out if there was a link between the extent of return migration and the decline

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¹ *Enquête Nationale sur l'Excision au Mali (National Survey on FGM/C in Mali)*, ENEM-2009.

in this practice. Malians migrate massively to neighbouring West African countries, particularly Côte d'Ivoire where the rate of FGM/C is just 38%.

The risk of FGM/C is lower in Malian villages with resident return migrants from Côte d'Ivoire

The study confirms that return migration rolls back FGM/C practices. Girls under 15 living in a village inhabited by former migrants have less of a risk of FGM/C, other things being equal (same ethnic group, equivalent level of education for the parents, etc.). This is especially the case when the migrants have returned from Côte d'Ivoire – and not, as might be expected, from Europe or America. Our interviews with these villages' inhabitants turned up that the information on the harmful effects of FGM/C on girls' health has clearly been taken on board. Return migrants who relate their experiences in Côte d'Ivoire effectively convince their compatriots that abstaining from FGM/C does not disrupt community life. Some inhabitants even say they are in favour of a legal ban on the practice.

The findings of this research offer new avenues for countering FGM/C practices at a time when the NGOs' ability to do so is often questioned. Rather than imposing a European model, action could be more effective if it were to leverage migrants who had lived in African countries where the custom of FGM/C is already in decline.

Further reading:

S. Mesplé-Somps, I. Diabaté, « [Female genital mutilation and migration in Mali, do migrants transfer social norms?](#) », Journal of Population Economics, 2019. DOI : 10.1007/s00148-019-00733-w

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P.S. Yoder & S. Wang, "Female Genital Cutting: The Interpretation of Recent DHS Data", DHS Comparative Reports, n° 33, September 2013.

P. Levitt, "Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion" International Migration Review, 1998.

P. Levitt, The transnational villagers, Berkeley University of California Press

D. Kapur, Diaspora, Development and Democracy, the Domestic Impact of International Migration from India, Princeton University Press, 2010.

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The authors:

This research is the result of a meeting between Sandrine Mesplé-Somps, Researcher at French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD) and Fellow at the Institut Convergences Migrations, who was working on social remittances to Mali associated with migratory movements, and Idrissa Diabaté, Statistician at the Malian National Statistics Institute (INSTAT) and member of the team working on the National Survey on FGM/C in Mali in 2009. Their joint study was made possible by a research/training partnership between the DIAL Joint Research Unit (UMR DIAL) and INSTAT.

