

Gender equality takes center stage — but will resources reach the grassroots?

By [Anna Patton](#) 29 July 2014



UK Prime Minister David Cameron speaks during the Girl Summit 2014 in London. Photo by: [Paul Shaw / Number 10 Gov / CC BY-NC-ND](#)

A month ago, London drew the world’s attention to [sexual violence in conflict](#), with former United Kingdom Foreign Secretary William Hague and Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie leading a huge public campaign to end impunity.

Another high-profile event — the [Girl Summit](#) — held in the city last Tuesday, pushed for an end to female genital mutilation and child marriage within a generation. This unprecedented attention to women’s and girls’ rights — with ministers, ambassadors and first ladies attending last week — was widely welcomed by NGOs.

Sarah Cornish, a gender adviser for [Save the Children](#) who has been working on women’s rights and gender-based violence for the past 15 years, told Devex advocates in this area were “lone voices” until relatively recently, and described the summit as “groundbreaking stuff.”

Driven in part by Secretary for State for International Development Justine Greening, the U.K. has had a bumper year for women and girls.

In spring, lawmakers [approved legislation](#) requiring all development actions to be gender sensitive. Alongside other commitments made at the End Sexual Violence in Conflict Summit in

June, London is also funding a 35 million pound (\$59.43 million) [campaign to end FGM](#) in Africa, while the [Department for International Development](#) announced last week additional funds of 25 million pounds over five years to help end child, early and forced marriage in 12 countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Funding fears

But with new data revealing the extent of both longstanding practices, representatives from organizations based in the “global south” questioned whether promised resources would actually trickle down to those working directly with communities at risk.

Estimates from [UNICEF](#) indicate that 700 million women alive today were married as children, while over 130 million girls and women in the 29 most at-risk countries have undergone some form of FGM. Some countries have made remarkable progress in reducing FGM prevalence; in others, though, it remains widespread. In Somalia, for example, some 98 percent of women are affected.

“If they want to [end] this within a generation, a lot of resources will be needed — not only financial but also human resources,” Peter Ndonwie, co-founder of the Pan-African Organization for Research and Protection of Violence on Women and Children in Ghana, told Devex. “The NGOs have human resources; they are ready to do it — but if they don’t have the finances to go out and do the advocacy, to meet with communities, or support the families, how do you expect they will achieve it?”

Funding concerns are particularly acute for those working in remote areas. Resources are scarcer the further one gets from cities and main roads, said Moses Ntenga from the Ugandan NGO Joy for Children, even though child marriage is more common in rural areas.

In India meanwhile, declining external funding is also placing a strain on organizations. And yet, Arvind Ojha, CEO of the Rajasthan-based NGO Urmul Trust, told Devex: “The quantum of the problem is huge. We have to scale up the small initiatives ... We can’t wait for 20 or 30 years.”

Everyone’s job

DfID’s latest idea to support initiatives to end child marriage promises to establish local community-based programs and, according to an official spokesperson, the department is currently “consulting with different groups to find the best way of making sure funding reaches civil society and grassroots organizations.”

Indeed, supporting communities is among the commitments listed in an [international charter](#) to which over 235 organizations including 30 national governments have now signed up. Recognizing that “legislation alone is not enough,” the charter also commits signatories to investing in services and gathering better data.

But will it go far enough?

“[Gender equality] is not just my job, it should be everyone’s job,” said Cornish. “We need every health provider on the frontline to be screening for FGM and CEFM. We need the people providing regular services — health, education, all the big pillars — addressing this like it’s their ethical mandate ... We need it to be completely embedded throughout everything we do — otherwise we reach a fraction of the girls that need us because we’re not working through the big institutions and the big programs.”

And for Colin Walker, campaigns manager at [Plan](#) UK, FGM and child marriage cannot be addressed as isolated issues; rather, they are just two of the many manifestations of discrimination against girls.

“When boys reach adolescence, the world opens up, opportunities open up. For girls, the opposite happens,” he told Devex. “When a girl reaches puberty, she starts being seen primarily through her reproductive and sexual [roles] ... [She may be] pulled out of school, forced to marry early, forced into household chores. The environment becomes restraining.”

Growing numbers

The sense of urgency on FGM and early marriage comes from increasing awareness of the scale of both practices.

Prevalence of FGM — or “cutting” — has decreased: a girl today is about a third less likely to be cut today than 30 years ago, according to UNICEF. But that progress is outweighed by the increasing numbers in absolute terms due to population growth, with about seven million more women affected today than two years ago.

And in sub-Saharan Africa, population growth is set to outstrip progress on child marriage, meaning that by 2050 — even if the current rate of progress is maintained — twice as many women will have married as children compared to today’s levels.

UNICEF’s statistics and monitoring specialist Claudia Cappa highlighted that FGM, while most concentrated in 29 countries, is also practiced in other countries — some with large populations of women at risk.

“We need to push governments to gather information on other countries as well,” she said. “There is evidence that the practice exists in Indonesia, Malaysia, Oman ... but if we don’t have good data will be very difficult to make the case for intervention.”

Social pressure

Governments, [U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron said at the Girl Summit](#), need to “ensure that we don’t just change the law, we change the culture.” And the message at the summit seemed to be that changing age-old practices is indeed possible.

“Tradition is dynamic, it’s not static. It’s a dynamic process and it can be changed,” Justine Kwachu, co-founder of the NGO Women in Alternative Action in Cameroon, told Devex — echoing 17-year-old education activist Malala Yousafzai, who told summit attendees that traditions are “not sent from heaven.”

UNICEF research reinforces this assertion. In the 29 countries most affected, according to Cappa, two-thirds of men and women want FGM to stop.

“[People] are against the practice even in countries where it is very common,” she said. However, they say it should continue “because of social obligation to conform and comply with what is perceived as being a norm in the community.”

Even traditional leaders — the “custodians of culture”, as Kwachu put it — “cannot bear to see their daughters mutilated [and] cannot bear to see their daughters go into early marriage.”

The first step, say experts, is getting people to talk about it.

In Guinea, said Cappa, where more than 90 percent of girls have undergone some form of FGM or cutting, UNICEF questioned couples separately and found half of them had discordant opinions on whether or not it should continue.

“They don’t know each other’s opinion because this is not something that people talk about ... very few have the courage to bring this up,” she said. A key step is therefore to “create opportunities for women and men, of different ages, with different functions and positions in communities, to discuss and debate the practice of FGM.”

Tactics for change

So how are community organizations at the frontline starting up those conversations?

Joy for Children tries to help parents make the link between early marriage and the social and economic consequences for their family.

“Many people know child marriage is bad, but are not in position to relate its impact to social issues, for example someone struggling with grandchildren brought to her from the [daughter] whose marriage has failed,” Ntenga said.

In India — home to a staggering one-third of the 700 million early marriages reported by UNICEF — Urmul Trust runs a six-month education program for illiterate girls, who are more susceptible to early marriage. More than 50,000 12-18 year-olds have graduated to date, we learned from Ojha.

The organization also works with local government leaders, trying to convince them to declare their village free of child marriage, the root cause of numerous health and social problems. The organization particularly targets the “young and freshly elected leaders,” he said — those who do come forward have attracted media attention that has prompted other villages to follow suit.

There are also more creative approaches.

In Rwanda, the DfID/Nike Foundation-funded Girl Effect program produces teen-friendly magazines and other media designed and written by teenage girls. And in Cameroon, Kwachu's organization works to end FGM by targeting the wives of traditional leaders — the so-called “queens” — whose status makes them respected voices in the community.

He added that in many cases, these women already know that FGM is damaging and are “burdened” by that knowledge. What they don't know is “how they can speak out against [it]. They just need us to build their capacities more and give them the tools to go down to the grassroots, to be able to talk to the girls.”

Interested in women's empowerment and gender equality? Learn about [U.N. Women's Empowering Women — Empowering Humanity: Picture It!](#) campaign in the lead-up to Beijing+20. Devex is a proud media partner.

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