



Inter African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Girls

Positive Local Knowledge and Traditional Practices

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Health remains to be a cross-cutting issue and a primary social and individual concern among all communities worldwide throughout human history.

Its preservation has generated beliefs and practices that are firmly woven into taboos and norms. Society as a whole but certain stakeholders in particular have strong influence in shaping attitudes and practices related to health.

My organization The Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices deals with practices that affect the health of women and girls both negatively and positively promoting the beneficial and discouraging those that are harmful. In this process IAC strongly believes in engaging community dialogues in a manner that respects local wisdom as a community asset to be used for introducing a lasting positive change.

Since 1984 IAC has been working against such practices as female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, nutritional taboos, widowhood rites as well as breast feeding, caring for the elderly, community self-help etc.

Before planning programmes of intervention an assessment of the community structure as well as the different stakeholders is carried out for setting priorities and for building programmes on existing positive knowledge.

Such preliminary survey usually gives valid information on the social interaction and on the potentials of major stakeholders to impact and nurture positive change of attitudes and practices for the promotion of a healthy living for women and girls.

IAC works with excisers considering the mystical as well as the practical role and influence they have within their communities. In countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone these groups enjoy power over the community for practicing FGM and for perpetuating the beliefs behind the practices. They are the guardians of FGM.

According to traditional beliefs which they inherited unexcised girls will not enjoy a long life nor will they be fit for marriage. IAC has a special programme of reconversion to use their position for introducing change of attitudes towards the prevention of FGM.

Through training and information campaigns it has been possible to change the beliefs and practices of these groups and to use them as change agents. As a result of their interventions taboos have been broken among several communities and FGM is facing challenges.

Religious and community leaders are targeted through appropriate programmes in order for them to change their attitudes and beliefs regarding harmful traditional practices (HTPs). Once convinced and capacitated in communication skills they reach their communities with sustained messages for the protection of girls against harmful traditional practices (HTPs). Mosques, churches and community gatherings are used to transmit and inform the population using local languages and wisdom for impacting sustained social change of behavior.

Youth are trained and mobilized to use different methods to carry out campaigns. In some countries they use youth caravans, sport events, local music festivals, radio programmes, poetry and drama to influence the community as well as their peers.

Dialogue is held with traditional media experts for the promotion of a healthy life style for men and girls. Special information campaigns are organized to reach their communities with positive messages using their poetic and musical skills.

Traditional birth attendants (TBAs) are important target groups. Their skill in child delivery and their proximity to the mothers give them the advantage to be able to talk openly about the importance of the integrity of the female body both for the mother and child. IAC carries out special sessions for TBAs using anatomical model to explain the different functions of the female organ and the consequences of FGM. Once convinced and equipped TBAs have proven to be effective change agents since they possess the wisdom in communication and have the confidence of women.

IAC also reaches other health workers men and women in the communities as well as policy makers and legislators.

Its work extends from the local to the regional and to the international to impact positive and lasting change in promoting health through the fight against harmful traditional practices (HTPs) while promoting and encouraging positive practices.

The IAC national committees have been able to mobilize communities basically through dialogue and understanding and appreciation of local wisdom and existing positive human skills.

Understanding the mental map of the community, identifying positive local knowledge, working with the community using gate opens are vital elements for the introduction of positive and lasting social change in order to close the health promotion gap.