

## RESEARCH INSIGHT

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### Female Genital Cutting and the Slave Trade

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We test the hypothesis that the slave trade was one of the contributing factors for the spread of female genital cutting (FGC). In the Red-Sea route female slaves were sold as concubines and infibulation was used to ensure chastity. We show that differential exposure of ethnic groups to the Red-Sea route explains differential adoption of the practice today, highlighting the importance of identity in its persistence.

Female genital cutting (FGC) comprises all the procedures involving removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs. More than 200 million women are cut worldwide. The custom is present in 30 African and Middle Eastern countries and, in some areas, it is almost universal: cut women are 98% in Somalia, 96% in Guinea, 93% in Djibouti and 91% in Egypt and Sierra Leone. FGC is a harmful practice under several dimensions. First, it may have serious health effects, both at the moment of cutting (e.g. haemorrhage, infection and septic shock, mortality) and in the long run (e.g. birth-related complications). Second, it affects girls' educational achievement through a loss in the days of schooling and its potential association with early marriage. Finally, given that FGC is generally performed on young girls without their consent, FGC is considered a human rights violation and its elimination is now part of the Sustainable Development Goal 2015-2020. We aim at addressing the following research questions: i) How did FGC originate? ii) Can current differences in FGC prevalence be traced back to the origins of the slave trade?

#### Our approach

We combine individual level data from all Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) from Africa eliciting information on FGC and respondent's ethnic group with historical data on slave shipments by country, ethnic group and trade routes from 1400 to 1900. We exploit variation in the number of slaves across ethnic groups and the four main slave routes recorded in Africa (Trans-Atlantic, Trans-Saharan, Red Sea and Indian Route) and test if women whose ancestors were heavily raided during the slave trade in the Red Sea are more likely to be circumcised today.

#### Our findings

Our evidence suggests that women belonging to ethnic groups whose ancestors were traded in the Red Sea route are more likely to be cut today. This holds when we consider infibulation alone or all types of cutting, and is robust to controlling for a number of ancestral characteristics of ethnic groups taken from Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas. The results are also robust to restricting the analysis to East Africa only (the region most affected by the Red Sea route) and exploiting variation in exposure to slave exports within that region.

#### Research implications and impacts

Our findings can help designing policies aimed at reducing female genital cutting in two main directions: First, our results highlight the importance of "cultural identity" in the perpetuation of female genital cutting. Previous work has indicated among the key reasons for the perpetuation of FGC signalling on the marriage market (e.g. men value cut women more because it is a signal of sexual fidelity) and coordination failures (e.g., communities may be stuck in situations where the majority of members cut and no one wants to deviate from this norm for fear of social sanctions). Beside these important channels, our findings suggest that female genital cutting has ancient roots and has become part of certain groups' cultural identity. Keeping an "identity" component while designing policies to reduce the practice may then be a way to change people's demand for it. For example, in an ongoing project in Sierra Leone we are sensitizing communities to adopt an alternative initiation ritual for girls, which preserves identity but removes the harmful element (cutting). Second, we know that narratives are important to understand people's decisions: "Standard economics omits the role of narratives (the stories that people tell themselves and others) when they make all kinds of decisions. Narratives play a role in understanding the environment; focusing attention; predicting events; motivating action; assigning social

roles and identities; defining power relations; and establishing and conveying social norms” (Akerlof and Snower, 2015). If we change the narrative around FGC, for example by informing communities that FGC was introduced as a means to enslave members of a group, cutting may no longer be an appealing trait.

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