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Multisectoral approach to address Female Genital Mutilation: a case study from Portugal

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Issue:

Female genital mutilation (FGM) comprises all procedures that injury female genital organs for non-medical reasons, with several health impacts. Due to global migration, FGM has been increasingly recognised as a healthcare issue in Europe, affecting nearly 1 million women. In Portugal it is estimated that 5483 migrant women have undergone FGM in the Lisbon region. Intervention is required to tackle this issue.

Description:

Portugal launched the “Healthy Practices: End of FGM”, a multiagency project targeting Lisbon and Tagus Valley region. Project implementation started in Nov 2018 at 5 local public health units (PHU) and was scaled-up to 5 more in Feb 2020. Project comprises 3 main axes: 1) inclusion in public policy instruments; 2) professionals’ education and awareness; and 3) community intervention. We describe inclusion of FGM in public policy, professionals training and changes in FGM recording before and after intervention.

Results:

Between 2018-2022, inclusion of FGM in municipalities’ migration policies doubled. Between 2019-2021, 110 training sessions (n = 1722 professionals) were promoted. During pandemic years, only 344 (2020) and 202 (2021) were trained. Raising awareness and empowerment to risk communities happened mainly through local/online open sessions, workshops, flyer distribution, video projections. These occurred in all 10 PHU, mostly through partnerships with Non-Governmental Organizations and municipalities. According to the Portuguese Health Records, until 2018 there were only 300 women registered with FGM. Between 2019-2021, 363 more were added.

Lessons:

The multisectoral approach allowed PHU professionals to collaborate directly with external organizations from different society sectors. COVID-19 pandemic posed a challenge to implementation, especially in the community intervention axis. Notification numbers increased after interventions, though causality could not be established and impact evaluation is yet to be performed.

Key messages:

- Multisectoral projects for FGM intervention have specific implementation challenges, including how to justify and evaluate them, that must be considered in each setting.
- Training health professionals might increase identification and notification of FGM, but the impact in preventing FGM in the Portuguese reality is still largely unknown.