

Improving Women and Girls' Health, Combating Harmful Traditional Practices

Malga Woreda, Sidama, Ethiopia



Voices from Malga, 2019-2022

A project implemented by Berhan Lehetsanat in partnership with Disability and Development Partners, and supported by Jersey Overseas Aid



Over three years and a six-month extension period, from March 2019 to August 2022, the project *Improving Women and Girls' Health, Combating Harmful Traditional Practices* took a whole-community approach – involving local government, schools, health centres, religious and community leaders, ex-FGM practitioners, and thousands of local people, public events and information – to tackling the problem of HTP throughout the traditional rural woreda of Malga.

The whole district has been engaged through Community Conversations, resulting in anti-HTP bylaws in villages of every kebele. Women who once performed FGM and other harmful practices now have more productive livelihoods, and play a part in maintaining a hostile environment for their former trade; visiting practitioners have every chance of being prosecuted; and religious and community leaders are actively campaigning alongside local government, school communities and grassroots health workers.



[Berhan Lehetsanat](#) is an Ethiopian NGO based in Addis Ababa, working primarily with disabled children and focusing on education, health and livelihoods through a community-based development approach. BL celebrates its 25th anniversary in November 2022.



[DDP](#) has been working on disability and development for almost 30 years. Our vision is one of inclusion, where disabled children and adults can access all the opportunities their societies have to offer. In our partnerships with disabled people's organizations, inclusion is at the heart of everything we do.



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Community Conversation



We dropped in on a gathering of people in the small town of Wotera in April 2022, convened by their local Community Volunteer.

Representatives of the Women and Children Office and *Berhan Lehetsanat* addressed the group.

While we were there, one woman reported that parents in the area had stopped forcing their daughters to marry. Another spoke up to say that she herself had been an FGM practitioner, but through her involvement with this project she had repented and converted to anti-HTP activism.

This group will gather each week for 6 weeks to discuss the implications of such practices, and finally agree their own bylaw governing the issue – and the action they will commit to taking in case of any future infringements. This is just one of hundreds of such conversations over the course of the project, reaching all parts of Malga Woreda and over 30,000 of its citizens in all – even with the temporary ban on gatherings, then adaptations made during the COVID state of emergency.

In the UK we often hear references to a nebulous ‘national debate’ but we could learn from the effective, beneficial traditional practice of community conversations. They have helped to bring attitudinal change through the open sharing of information and experiences and consensual decision-making.

Global Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM

Global Zero Tolerance Day was celebrated with a fanfare in 2022. A one-day workshop on the theme *Female genital mutilation is a crime and a violation of women’s and human rights* was held for 200 girls from Malga high schools, focused on empowering women to resist all harmful traditional practices.



The day began with a meeting of stakeholders at the Woreda Administration office with experts from the WCO, Health Office, school principals, school Girls’ Clubs, religious leaders, community representatives, male and female elders, former HTP practitioners, kebele representatives and others.

BL gave an overview of FGM prevalence, covering the global situation, the effects on women’s psychosocial health in later life, gender discrimination, women’s rights, and the need to eradicate violence against women at all ages. Selected girls gave presentations on their own experiences: how they perceived their cases as rights violations, how they dealt with the experience, and the challenges they face in their communities. At the end of the meeting, a candlelit vigil was held to commemorate the victims of FGM.

The message was also taken out to the community by a vehicle-mounted PA system travelling from village to village to say: “FGM is a crime and a violation of women’s and human rights. We must stop it!”, “FGM is a form of child abuse and violence against women!”, and “FGM has severe physical and psychological consequences!” All less snappy in translation. Posters on FGM were displayed, and there was a procession through the town centre with a banner and chanting.

The Global Day was a chance to amplify the project’s message, raise community awareness, and make local government give prominence to the issue.

Worknesh, ex-practitioner, Manicho



We sat down with Worknesh in her café, by a cauldron of simmering potatoes. She used to be an FGM practitioner and traditional birth attendant, but was helped to set up this business instead: preparing food to sell on the market and serve to customers.

Through her involvement in the project over the last three years, Worknesh has come to recognize the harms caused by HTP including FGM, tonsillectomy and traditional home births. She knows many other ex-practitioners who have also repented and stopped, and all of them are happy – and financially better-off – with their new occupations.

Now she is an anti-HTP activist in her community and church, for instance advising girls in the choir to reject FGM. The religious leaders who took part in the same training are preaching the same message in their sermons.

For Worknesh's generation, FGM affected almost 100% of girls, and these issues were never mentioned in school. One reason given for circumcision was the safety of crockery, as uncut girls were said to be clumsy. Now the percentage affected is small and declining all the time. Her own daughter, standing a little way off, has graduated from school without undergoing FGM.

Tamrat and Mussie, Manicho Health Centre



Health officials Tamrat and Mussie were pleased this project came to Malga, where HTP rates have been particularly high, and with its focus on girls and women, who are most vulnerable. One priority is to reduce the number of traditional home births, often accompanied by unsafe umbilical practices.

They are trying to encourage women to attend health centres, give birth with the support of trained professionals, and benefit from ante- and postnatal services.

If something goes wrong at home, it is very hard to get an ambulance in time, so they are glad that our project was able to equip a waiting room at each health centre, enabling women to stay overnight. We looked into theirs to find an expectant mother, and women relatives of another woman who was in the delivery room. 84% of deliveries used to take place at home, but it has come down to 30%, and the number of stillbirths has been reduced from 5-6 a year to just one in the last 9 months. Maternal mortality is down, too, and their healthcare work goes hand in hand with prevention and awareness-raising through health extension workers (HEWs), youth services and work with schools.

Before the project, HTP didn't get sufficient attention, but the training for staff, HEWs and others has increased capacity and a sense of local ownership; issues like FGM are firmly on the agenda. The age for marriage and pregnancy is going up: now most are 19+, partly thanks to the religious leaders confronting early marriage and polygamy. Tamrat and Mussie think eliminating HTP is a very realistic prospect. People used to do FGM as a job, but now they have reformed and been assisted into alternative livelihoods. Traditional birth attendants have also been trained and now encourage women to opt for health centre deliveries. "The future looks promising."

A Muslim Leader



I am Sheiki Soduka Yeden, a leader of Malga’s Muslim community. In the past, FGM, abduction and even rape have occurred.

I had been encouraging families to get their daughters circumcised, believing it was a religious duty. At the time, I thought that all females should be circumcised to fulfil the commandment of Allah, although I realize I had no written evidence.

It was in fact a habit that endured from generation to generation without a religious foundation. It was the organization *Berhan Lehetsanat* together with the woreda’s Women and Children Office that enlightened me, through the training they gave us, about the absence of any connection between FGM and religious duty.

I represented my Muslim religion at training sessions on harmful traditional practices against women for leaders of different faiths. It made me understand the effects of HTP on female health. Since then, I have been teaching my followers about the harms of FGM, abduction, rape and polygamy. I believe I am executing my responsibility as a religious leader to educate my fellow adherents. In addition, I participate in community discussions organized by peers in the kebeles, and give education about HTP to the community.

I am living with regret for allowing FGM to be practised in the past. I would not have done that, had I known what I have now learned. Now, I have a good deal of knowledge about the harms of traditional practices against women, and these harmful traditional practices have no basis in the Holy Qu’ran.

A Protestant Leader



My name is Abera Abate. I am 45 and live in Malga, where I serve my community as both a religious and a community leader. The majority of the population are Protestant Christians. Previously, I had no knowledge about harmful traditional practices (HTP), so I didn’t see any harm in practising FGM on the village children – including my own – and I just accepted it as a normal part of our culture.

However, following training from *Berhan Lehetsanat*, I have become much more aware, and have started to work for change towards FGM and other HTP. I have been educating many Christians in the woreda about HTP, in 30-minute sessions after each of our regular preaching services. And, although harmful practices have not yet been totally eliminated, I am glad to say that we are witnessing a huge reduction across the woreda.

Signboards



There are large, prominent signboards at the main road junctions in Malga displaying the project’s main messages in Amharic and Sidamic languages. One refers to the Community Conversation

programme; one calls for the engagement of boys and men in abolishing HTP; another highlights the role of religious leaders

Asaget Sheka, Malga Justice Office



Asaget trains school directors and teachers, prosecutors, etc. He considers that the key Offices working on HTP issues are Police, Justice and WCO. He takes a holistic approach, working with religious leaders, government officials, Kebele leaders, schools, elders, and in cultural settings, with reference to legislation on children's rights, women's rights, child trafficking, and to the Ethiopian Constitution.

Asaget feels there is still work to be done, especially in remote areas, but he has seen significant improvements. He brandishes Malga's new plan for 2015 (starting this week in the Ethiopian calendar), which incorporates ongoing tasks from the HTP project.

His role is largely preventative, but also involves prosecuting those who break the law, working with courts, WCO and police. He points out that the community bylaws are in harmony both with Federal Law and the Constitution. In a case of HTP, local Anti-HTP Committee members will pass the message up the chain. It used to go under the radar, dealt with informally... but now the formal legal process takes precedence. His message is uncompromising: even a go-between found to have abetted HTP risks jail, and perpetrators found guilty lose many rights. This is a common commitment across Woreda authorities, a whole-community decision, he says, and there have not been cases for some time now.

Malga is surrounded by six other Woredas which all have the same systems and structures, and good coordination. One of the areas of the 2015 plan covers the reporting of cases to the perpetrator's home area. Malga's experience can be a model for other areas. Asaget himself spreads the anti-HTP message in his work with other agencies, NGOs and in other parts of the country. HTP are hard to eradicate entirely, but Asaget is confident of their continued decline, and that a new generation of leaders with skills, knowledge and technology will only get stronger in the fight against HTP.

Daniel – Malga Education Office



We meet during the 2022 school registration process: young people and parents are coming into the schools to book their places for the year. But inflation and the cost-of-living crisis may be limiting registration: only around 16k of an estimated 40k children in Malga, so far, with 3 weeks to go.

An exercise book has gone from 50 to 80 birr. Daniel says that many girls are involved in small business in the holidays to pay for educational expenses. At primary level more girls are enrolled than boys, but 2-3% fewer at secondary school. Local government will do what it can to try and bridge the gap.

For the schools, the project has been about abolishing HTP – but also raising girls' educational attendance and achievement, and not missing schools during menstruation. Now they are budgeting for sanitary products, and if there is not enough, they will use the proceeds of agricultural activities like the Wotera High School wheat field above. We discussed the environmental impact of commercial sanitary pads, and the possibility of reusable ones. In fact, there is a room at this very school equipped with sewing machines for the purpose.

Daniel sees the BL/DDP HTP project as an example of “prioritizing sustainability over implementation.” The Education Office will continue to work with students, school clubs, teachers and management on sustaining its outcomes, which have been embedded in their gender mainstreaming policy and can no longer be ignored. The Education Office will monitor the incidence of HTP, and both teachers and students will continue to transfer their experience to their new colleagues and classmates, particularly since all secondary schools are required to cater for grades 11-12 from 2021 (although not all students pass entry requirements, and there is a risk that girls will leave to take up home and livelihood responsibilities).

A case of abduction



3 Grade 10 girls (aged 17) were abducted in 2018-19 on their way home from Guguma High School. The father of one of the girls started an investigation, and the school was called as a witness. She was eventually found, thanks to text messages she sent him, and brought home.

Her father sold his land for 40k Birr, and spent 30k on the investigation. The school is planning to collect money from its community to support him. It has also arranged for the schoolgirl to sit the exams she missed.

There are 3 forms of abduction: one that is accepted by the family; one that is arranged between the individuals involved; and 'true' abduction, exclusively in the interests of the male and associated with violence and rape. It thrives amid a lack of awareness, and the legal system has insufficient reach.

The girl who was abducted has become a role-model for other students, and a symbol of change in her community. We met her father at the school: pending the abductor's trial, he comes each day to make sure his daughter is safe there and on the way home. Though the dramatic part is past, it's not yet over; those responsible could still be nearby. But he feels there is a good chance of a satisfactory verdict soon. He is glad to talk to us.

Most parents reluctantly come to terms with such situations and end up settling matters through a go-between. But, having had no education himself, he wasn't going to give up his dream of his daughter's schooling and future success. He gave an impression of quiet unshakeability. It's time for change, and he wants to be an example of standing up against this practice – saying "That's enough." He feels he has the moral support of the community. A remarkable man.

Students at Wotera High School



We met four delightful grade 10-11 students – Nadioz, Burte, Zerihun and Gechegenu – in April 2020. When they hear the expression 'harmful traditional practices,' they think of early marriage, abduction, FGM and tonsillectomy (carried out by traditional practitioners using scissors...).

Nadioz reveals that she herself was abducted when she was in grade 8. Her parents were going to accept the marriage as a *fait accompli*, but Nadioz refused, and with the support of the WCO and the school, returned to her education, and now plays an important role in the campaign to abolish HTP.

Geche believes that future generations will be better informed: his younger siblings are already better informed than he was at their age. Nadioz says that if she had stayed with her abductor, the same could have happened to her younger sisters, but she has set them a different example. She also advises other students, some of whom have returned to school after getting married.

Burte says that just talking about HTP used to be a taboo, but we've only just met you, and here we are talking about it; we are taking the message into our families and our community. All the young people agreed that when it comes to HTP, their highest priority is education, as the basis for everything else.

Geche is proud of the positive aspects of Sidama culture, such as *afini* conflict resolution through elders; *Fiche Chambalala* – the New Year celebration; traditional *lua* music; *bursame* – a local speciality made of fermented, pulped 'false banana' (prepared with butter, not water); and the tradition of communal eating... "Without discrimination!" chimes in Zerihun, in English.

The young people's future plans reflect their principles. The boys want to be teachers, Burte a doctor, and Nadioz a policewoman. During her abduction, she came across officers who were prepared to take bribes to protect the perpetrator. She will stand up for justice.

Teegne, Director of Guguma High School (2020)



In a cluster of yellow buildings, built just 5 years ago, we met Teegne in his office. He had recently been promoted from Vice-Principal, and had been aware of the project – and looking forward to meeting representatives of BL for the first time.

HTP are a serious problem for girls' education. From Teegne's point of view, the most serious are abduction, rape and FGM. There is also a problem here of families 'protecting their girl children from school' – prioritizing sons, and not valuing girls' education. This is reflected in the school's roll: 90 boys and 50 girls in Grade 9, and 58 boys and 24 girls in Grade 10. It's a challenge, but Teegne is very keen to support girls to reach a higher level of education.

FGM is possibly the most dangerous HTP, taking place behind closed doors by hidden practitioners who can re-use blades up to 5 times, bringing the risk of HIV transmission and other infections.

There are also consequences for childbirth: all five of Teegne's sisters experienced serious complications. He becomes emotional as he relates that one sister has had her own daughter subjected to HTP. They knew he would try to prevent it, so waited till he was away. It was the parents' idea, and the girls were not happy. Teegne went to the police, but they said they could not intervene because it was already done. There is a prevailing attitude that uncircumcised girls are 'prostitutes' or lack respect.

Teegne is candid and committed. He is happy to cooperate, and has started adapting an outbuilding to house the Girls' Club. They have purchased materials to complete it, and will provide sanitary supplies; it will also serve for peer counselling.

Tekal, Director of Guguma High School (2022)



After Teegne there was one other Director in between, then Tekal. But continuity was ensured through key teachers, record-keeping, and the continued programme of awareness-raising and training. The Girls' Club building we saw in January 2020 is still in use.

We learned what happened in the story of the Guguma schoolgirl who was abducted and her father's fight for justice, with the support of the school, WCO and Education Office. The perpetrator received a 9-year jail sentence, which should have a strong deterrent effect. The girl continues to attend events and speak out about her experience. She has benefited from the counselling service.

Cases of HTP in Guguma and Tekal's school are increasingly rare, but early marriage and abduction are still risks, generally from young men without education who have been refused in marriage or know that the girl's wealthier family will not approve of the match. The difference is that families do not put up with them any more. They used to acquiesce or engage traditional mediators, but now they go straight to the Woreda authorities and the police. Thanks to the Community Conversations, there is a commitment to reporting.

Although he can't say that gender equality has been fully achieved, attitudes are changing. Girls' education is valued, and daughters are starting to inherit land. For the school, HTP remain a priority for girls' education. Tekal says that male students share similar values, and display no negative attitudes towards the girls. They all have Civics and Ethics lessons, and he puts great emphasis on direct discussion, and speaking one's mind. Students have grown in confidence and are able to discuss previously taboo issues such as menstruation.

The Malga schools will maintain their connection because they are part of the same cluster and have regular meetings. Experience-sharing – including about HTP – will carry on between directors and teachers, and they are ready to join forces again with collaborative NGO projects.

Besha, ex-practitioner

My name is Besha Ofoka and I am 64 years old. I live in Chamo yanigala kebele in Malga. In the past, my family and I used to live on the income we got from female circumcision/cutting. It was the main source of income for my household. At that time I was not aware of the dangers of FGM. I had been carrying on practising female genital mutilation in my community, including on my own daughters, without realizing the negative impacts of FGM on female health.



Things changed after a humanitarian organization called *Berhan Lehetsanat* got involved in efforts to eliminate harmful traditional practices including FGM in our woreda. I was one of the people selected by this organization for training on FGM, which helped me to understand how circumcision affects female health: circumcised women have troubled during labour, because circumcision causes labour to be prolonged. It can even result in the loss of the mother's life.

I would like to thank the organization for the knowledge I acquired on the harms of FGM through the training they gave me. The organization has also supported me to change my income source, previously based on FGM. I received a seed grant of 2,990 birr, and now I have totally abandoned my FGM practice in the community.

With the support I got from the organization I bought sheep from the local market and started herding. At the same time, I have also been gardening on the small plot of land available at my living compound and selling the produce on the local market. From the income I got from the market, I began saving for the betterment of my future life and used the rest of the money for looking after my family.

Worke, ex-practitioner

“Kere, kere!”
Worke speaks positively and eloquently about the HTP project. Her involvement began when she was invited to Manicho for training and discussions with BL and the WCO.



In her family, FGM practice had always been considered a task inherited from their ancestors, and a source of income, but through the IWGH project Worke gained new knowledge, and gave her word to other people and to God that she would not do it any more. Now her hands are clean. Worke has become an anti-HTP champion, supporting girls and convincing them not to have FGM.

Farming is her main focus now. She used to have a small plot of land and no savings, but sold a little produce. Seed funding from the project, however, has enabled her to expand and cultivate more land, growing potatoes, *enset* (‘false banana’ – the regional staple) and wheat. She bought fertilizer, employs a labourer, and uses the land to the full. Business is good, and pays much better than her previous occupation.

Worke says that her story reflects a wider change she is seeing across the whole woreda, partly down to improved communication. She is not concerned about the loss of traditions more generally, because “Lots of positive things remain.”

Zewditu and Elsabet



We met girls' leaders Zewditu (left) and Elsabet (centre) in the Girls' Club room at Manicho High School in January 2020. The room is also used for the school's anti-HTP committee, to store sanitary supplies, and for counselling. The girls seemed shy at first, but gradually opened up to our Sidamic interpreter Senait.

They joined the club to support other girls by providing sanitary pads, sharing awareness of menstrual health and about FGM. They don't find it difficult – they have had training as part of the project: in school, at the health centre, and together with students from other schools, developing their confidence and communication skills.

Some boys are aware of the issues, and support them. Things are changing as awareness grows. A main achievement is that absence during menstruation is going down, leading to improved attainment. Now they plan to take the anti-FGM message to other schools.

Asked whether there is any resistance, or girls who actually want FGM, Zewditu and Elsabet say no. There used to be pressure for FGM coming from families, but now people's knowledge about HTPs is gradually growing. They feel that their work with other girls is having an effect, and that the problem of girls travelling/being taken to neighbouring woredas for FGM is also declining.

Previously, there was a 'herd effect' whereby girls needed the presence of their friends, but now they come individually to seek help, advice and sanitary materials. Zewditu and Elsabet feel respect and admiration from the boys. "I don't remember there being girls like this when I was at school," says the Director, Dawit. "Now they are making *us* aware. We're so proud of them."

Bayush, Malga Women and Children Office

Bayush says that two years ago there were many problems in the more remote areas of Malga, but the project's focus on women and girls, religious and community leaders, has brought encouraging changes. Early marriage and polygamy have almost been eradicated. There used to be cases of 50-year-old men marrying girls of 20, but not now. Girls' education is valued just as much as boys'.



There were 2 cases of FGM in 2020, the dramatic reduction accompanied by an increase in reporting. It used to go on underground, but now even parents have a duty to report cases. It is prohibited not only by Ethiopian law, but also – thanks to the project – community bylaws all over Malga. It was under one of these bylaws that the practitioner was reported to the WCO in 2020. The parents gave evidence, and the practitioner was jailed for 6 months.

Malga's FGM practitioners have converted to alternative livelihoods, so when it still occurs it is usually at the hands of women from neighbouring areas. In response, the WCO is getting leaders together from neighbouring woredas to share experience and cooperate over reporting and investigation.

As with FGM, there are still cases of abduction for marriage, but in much smaller numbers. During the pandemic – a time of increased risk – there were 2-3. Now, even after being abducted, girls are refusing to accept it as their fate, and returning to their families and schools.

We are working with the grain of progress and generational change, but Bayush calls the project "the backbone of efforts to combat harmful practices in the woreda": providing an integrated approach, consolidating and accelerating change in an area particularly prone to HTP. There was a time when Bayush and her local government colleagues worried about the project coming to an end, but they have put mechanisms in place to sustain the momentum. The kebele anti-HTP committees are working together formally, and Bayush is confident: "We are seeing a permanent change."