

Resource 1

Reaching Communities

About this resource

Because of the privacy surrounding the practice of FGM/C and the health consequences experienced by women who have undergone the practice, it can be very difficult to begin a conversation about the topic without having established rapport with members of a community. Concerns about confidentiality, personal sensitivities around discussing sexual and reproductive issues, fear of stigma or judgement and emotional trauma can all serve as barriers to starting open dialogue about FGM/C. These concerns may be heightened in settings such as Australia where the practice is illegal and unfamiliar to the wider population and where the community is itself dispersed or isolated, such as can be the case in rural settings and among recently arrived migrant groups.

This resource aims to provide some practical suggestions related to reaching communities and recruiting bilingual peer educators. The suggestions are based on international literature and the successes and experiences of Australian FGM/C prevention programs. In line with the recommendations of the 'NETFA Best Practice Guide', this resource has been developed with the expectation that community members would necessarily play a leading role in the process of initiating a conversation about FGM/C among the community. This resource covers:



Where to start

Across Australia there is a diverse range of health resources and programs available to support and educate new and established migrants about FGM/C. However, for many reasons it can be difficult to reach individuals and develop networks within immigrant communities.

Providing ongoing professional training and development for peer educators has been shown to be one of the most effective ways to raise community awareness about FGM/C as a harmful practice and support lasting change among community members.

Finding and recruiting women and men who want to raise FGM/C awareness in their community may seem like a daunting task if you do not already have connections within that community.

Some things that you can do to start the process might be:

- **Get in touch with FGM/C programs operating in your state or territory**
If you are a service provider that thinks a group in your local area may benefit from information about FGM/C, your first step should be to get in touch with current FGM/C programs in your region. Many of these programs already provide free bilingual education on FGM/C, professional training and multilingual resources. They may also have data and suggestions about the audience you may want to target. You will find a list of current programs around Australia in Resource 3.
- **Check your demographics**
There is often data available on the size of migrant communities in your region. While these figures do not reflect the prevalence of FGM/C, they can indicate communities that may potentially benefit from education about the risks of FGM/C and information about where to access support. Knowing which countries and ethnic groups have previously practiced FGM/C will be instructive in choosing potential groups to target, but it is important not to make assumptions about prevalence of the practice in any community or cultural group. FGM/C can cross religious, geographic and cultural boundaries and can occur in communities where it has not been a traditional practice, just as it can be an abandoned practice in communities where it was once widely accepted.
- **Speak to community leaders, both female and male**
Be aware that not all community leaders may feel comfortable talking about FGM/C or necessarily support its prevention. Make sure you clarify your views and establish their position to ensure a good working relationship.
- **Speak to women's organisations**
State and regional women's organisations may have contact with women in emerging communities or be aware of activities or groups you could link with.
- **Speak to multicultural and ethno-specific organisations**
Ethno-specific and multicultural organisations are likely to be well connected and well informed about the issues affecting their local community and be aware of activities or groups you could link with.

- **Speak to migration and settlement services**
If you are finding it difficult to reach a new community, migrant and settlement services may provide a good point of contact or be aware of activities or groups you could link with.
- **Speak to schools and other educational settings**
TAFEs, language schools and universities might be able to link you to relevant student groups.
- **Speak to school nurses, social workers and other community health professionals who engage in outreach.**
Local and community health professionals may also be able to identify groups or individuals you could link with.

Holding a Cultural Day

Once you have made some initial contacts, you may still be unsure about how to generate interest in starting a discussion about FGM/C prevention within a particular community.

One successful strategy employed by the NSW Program in Australia has been to hold Cultural Days. Developed in consultation with bilingual peer educators, Cultural Days are designed to enable women in specific communities to come together to celebrate their communities and cultural identities and to raise awareness about human rights and Australian legislation against FGM/C. The Cultural Day is also an opportunity to promote an extended education program about women's health and FGM/C and to invite women to sign up.

A Cultural Day should be thoughtfully tailored to suit each specific community and should be designed in close consultation with community leaders, community organisations, bilingual peer educators and community members. Ideally, it would be beneficial to collaborate with organisations that have specific expertise in FGM/C.

Depending on the community, facilitators may begin by holding a Cultural Day for families, or choose a significant cultural event or international day to use as a focus for activities (e.g. International Day of the Child; International Women's Day). There may also be different communities that feel culturally connected and could participate in the same event (for example, NSW has held an Ethiopian and Eritrean day). However, in most cases it is more effective to hold events that are community and gender specific, particularly if the topic of FGM/C will be raised. Decisions such as these are best made by or in close consultation with the community.

Aims of the Cultural Day

- To reaffirm cultural or ethnic identities and positive cultural traditions and practices
- To celebrate the community in your local area in a fun and dynamic way
- To bring community members together to further develop links and support networks
- To raise awareness about the health risks associated with FGM/C and available support
- To raise awareness and support for the global campaign to end FGM/C
- To raise awareness about the human rights and Australian legal position on FGM/C
- To get feedback and ideas about effective ways to engage the community
- To identify potential champions of ending FGM/C among the local community
- To identify community members who are interested in becoming peer educators

Planning your Cultural Day

See the introduction to this Guide for detailed information on planning a session or event. The 'NETFA Best Practice Guide' can help you to plan your event based on the following Best Practice principles:

1. **Community engagement:** Consider the audience you would like to engage: would you like the day to be culturally specific in its focus? Would you like it to be gender specific or to include the whole community? Would you like to focus on youth? Tailor your activities appropriately, and as much as possible, enlist community members who belong to the demographic you are interested in inviting to the Cultural Day.
2. **Community leadership:** Consider your capacity to plan the event. Engage community members to assist in identifying local needs and to implement an appropriate program for the day.
3. **Holistic and integrated education:** Think about how you can best communicate your messages about FGM/C to your audience on the day. Introducing FGM/C under a broader theme of human rights, women's rights, gender equality and/or sexual and reproductive health may be less confronting for some participants.
4. **Peer education and training:** If you are not a peer educator from the community you would like to invite, consider linking with trained peer educators or with other organisations that can provide this service. When selecting people to speak or facilitate the event, consider their familiarity with the community they will be addressing and their understanding of the topic.
5. **Cultural dignity:** When developing your day, it is important to ensure that public forums have clear and understood rules for participation and facilitators maintain individuals' right to privacy and respectful treatment.
6. **Building the capacity of relevant professionals:** Relevant professionals from various sectors can benefit from understanding cultural and social attitudes related to FGM/C. If appropriate for the event, invite relevant professionals (e.g. general practitioners, school nurses, teachers, or local government workers) to take part in the day's activities and hear the voices of their local community.
7. **Women's empowerment:** Ensure that the day focuses on women's and girls' empowerment. The program should promote immigrant and refugee women's achievements and/or help to build the capacity of women's community organisations.
8. **Collaboration:** Maximise opportunities to work in collaboration with multiple stakeholders during the planning and/or delivery of the event. Involve relevant community groups and individuals, health services, refugee support and settlement services and other non-government services to be part of the organising committee.
9. **Research and evaluation:** Ensure evaluation is part of the event planning. Establish a process for collecting participants' feedback before, during or after the event.

Cultural Day Program Content

Cultural content

The Cultural Days are intended to attract as many community members as possible, so including fun social events that connect them as a community is key.

Some of the cultural activities developed in consultation with each community have included:

- Traditional dancing
- Traditional stories and jokes
- Fashion parade of traditional costumes
- Singing or music traditional to the culture
- Other cultural traditions (e.g. Coffee ceremony and hair plaiting for Ethiopians and Eritreans)

Educational content

The Cultural Days are an opportunity to introduce women to your program or organisation and to raise awareness about FGM/C prevention. Try to incorporate information throughout the program, without overwhelming participants. Information could be related to:

- Reflecting on what culture is
- Discussing challenges of migration
- Presenting information about gender inequality around the world and encouraging women to speak out
- Discussing FGM/C and the efforts to prevent the practice around the globe, including in their home region
- Introducing the work of your organisation and links to further education, information and support
- Inviting participants to attend a more detailed education program (See Resource 2)

NSW program Egyptian cultural day program

Saturday 1 November 2008

9:30	Registration
10:00	Welcome (with interpreter)
10:20	Housekeeping
10:30	Talk about Egyptian culture
11:00	Jokes
11:15	Global issues affecting women
11:30	Egyptian belly dancer
11:45	FGM/C and human rights
12:00	Lunch
1:00	Introduction to film
1:10	Film screening: "Season of planting girls"
1:50	Focus group discussion
2:15	Exercise session
2:30	About the NSW Program
2:45	Music and dancing for all
3:30	Raffle

The NSW Program held Cultural Days for 8 communities: Egyptian, Kurdish, Sierra Leonean and Liberian (together), Ethiopian and Eritrean (together), Sudanese and Somali. You can read more about the specific cultural activities chosen, event promotion and feedback from the Cultural Days in the NSW Report.