

The Safe Motherhood Project

Country: Ethiopia



Millennium Development Goals:

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Duration: October 2005 to September 2009

Beneficiaries: More than 50,072 women and young girls in the Oromia communities of Jeju and Hidhabu Abote

Partners: Government health institutions, community organizations, schools

Total project funding: US\$411,500

Funding source: Private donations

Project goal: To improve maternal health in the project area by reducing harmful traditional practices, improving access to maternal health care and promoting safe motherhood practices.

What we are trying to accomplish:

- Raise awareness among women and young girls about the risks associated with harmful traditional practices and encourage them to postpone marriage, stay in school and choose safe motherhood practices
- Improve delivery of maternal and child health services through local health facilities
- Reduce incidence and transmission of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV

Project Overview

Ijigayehu is a traditional birth attendant living in a small village in Jeju, in the Oromia region of Ethiopia. Health clinics in the region are chronically understaffed and undersupplied, and Ijigayehu offers the only assistance that most women have during childbirth. Even so, many women in her community give birth without any trained attendants.

Traditional birth attendants like Ijigayehu also help prepare young girls for marriage. Following an ancient practice, believed to make girls pure for marriage, they routinely “circumcise” village girls two weeks before their wedding day. However, the painful ceremony is often performed in unsanitary conditions that expose girls to the immediate risk of infection and hemorrhaging, which can lead to shock or even death.

The practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) can result in lifelong reproductive health problems, especially since girls who have undergone this

procedure are usually given in marriage before age 18. Early marriage takes teenage girls out of school and quickly leads to pregnancy and motherhood. Early and frequent child-bearing dramatically increases a young woman’s risk of anemia and obstructed labour. Other harmful traditional practices such as wife inheritance, abduction and forced marriage make women vulnerable to trauma, depression and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.

Statistics show about 74 per cent of women in Ethiopia between ages 15 and 49 have experienced FGM. Widespread acceptance of FGM and other harmful traditional practices, combined with poor access to maternal health care, puts the health of thousands of women at risk.

As a result, Ethiopian women face a one in 14 chance of dying during childbirth or from other pregnancy-related causes, compared with one in 4,000 in industrialized countries.

Reducing the threat and improving care for women

In the Oromia communities of Jeju and Hidhabu Abote, World Vision is working with traditional birth attendants like Ijigayehu to change community attitudes about traditional practices.

“The training conducted by World Vision gave me important information on bad practices that are found in our community,” says Ijigayehu. “My eldest daughter was circumcised and married, and I remember she passed through difficulty on delivery.”

Trained birth attendants and community health workers are helping to raise awareness about the risks associated with traditional practices.

“I have decided not to circumcise the rest of my daughters,” says Ijigayehu. “I and my colleagues will continue to educate our neighbours and hopefully all our villages [so they] will be careful about women and young girls in the future.”



Early marriage takes teenage girls out of school and quickly leads to pregnancy and motherhood.

In addition to training and education for health workers and traditional birth attendants in the areas of family planning, antenatal care, delivery, maternal and child nutrition, immunization, prevention and treatment of STDs and HIV, World Vision is also providing medical supplies such as delivery sets, episiotomy sets and medicines to the local health facilities.

Community attitudes are changing

With the help of women like Ijjigayehu, positive change is beginning to occur in Jeju and Hidhabu Abote ADPs. Female genital mutilation—a subject that was once taboo to even discuss—is now being discouraged by some community leaders.

Providing information and support to teenage girls has been one of World Vision’s most important strategies. Through the project, we are working to keep girls in school, which is one of the most effective measures against early marriage and the health risks of premature pregnancy. We support a network of 21 after-school clubs where girls, aged 10 to 18, receive information about safe motherhood, gender equality and violence against women. They also have access to counselling, present skits at community events and openly debate the issues in class.

Tadelu Wodajo, a teen living in Hidhabu Abote ADP, participates in some of these drama skits and is now promoting awareness to her peers. Although she was circumcised at age 10, Wodajo is learning another way.

“I know what happened to me and I also know these are false beliefs,” says Wodajo. “So I decided I have to teach others.”

Although many of her peers have already married young, Wodajo has hope for the next generation of girls. “I want to get married and have children,” she says, but “only after I finish school and reach where I want to be.”

Continued efforts needed for lasting change

A significant sign of changed attitudes in Hidhabu Abote ADP is the establishment of community task forces aimed at controlling harmful traditional practices. Each task force has five to seven members who work in close collaboration with the

local government, including women’s affairs, the police and the judiciary. Their purpose is to have an organized body of community leaders who can advocate for women’s and girls’ rights, work to enforce the local bylaws against harmful traditional practices and take a leading role in raising their communities’ awareness on their negative impacts.

World Vision believes that lasting change is possible through continued education at all levels of society, including local officials, religious leaders and parents. Since 2005, World Vision has helped a host of women like Ijjigayehu and Wodajo become leaders of change in their communities. We continue to support their efforts with education and the medical supplies they need to make Jeju and Hidhabu Abote communities safer for mothers and their children.

It will take time to change the deeply-rooted harmful traditions that put women’s health at risk in Ethiopia. Ultimately, our efforts must focus on helping the next generation of girls postpone marriage, stay in school and choose safe motherhood practices.

About 74 per cent of women in Ethiopia between ages 15 and 49 have experienced FGM.



Girls' clubs provide a forum for young women to share their experiences and learn about the dangers of FGM and other harmful practices.



Results to date:

- A network of 21 after-school clubs are in place where 5,775 girls, aged 10 to 18, receive information about safe motherhood, have access to counselling and mobilize community support.
- Teams of trained birth attendants and community health workers encourage women and young girls to use antenatal, delivery and postnatal services available at government health institutions. They counsel mothers on family planning to encourage child spacing, prevent unplanned pregnancies and support prenatal care.
- Community health workers report an increase in the number of mothers using the health services provided through the project. Women are now more likely to seek help during childbirth, with 24 per cent of women delivering in health institutions. This is up from 11 per cent in 2005. More women are also ensuring that their children are immunized.
- Community leaders have formed task forces aimed at controlling harmful traditional practices.

Policy influence:

Helped to enforce the Ethiopian Government policy (2004) making Female Genital Mutilation illegal, joining 16 other African countries.

What we learned from this project:

- For projects that address culturally ingrained practices, it is essential to create advocates within government bodies and other institutions that can enforce bylaws and influence behaviours. In particular, associations with the Office of Women's Affairs, police, the judiciary and the religious community are important.
- By providing training, we can build on existing structures such as girls' clubs, women's affairs and other government organizations to disseminate information to the community.