

## Elongation of labia minora in Uganda: including *Baganda* men in a risk reduction education programme

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*Okukyalira ensiko* or 'visiting the bush' is how, in Uganda, the Baganda people name the practice of elongating the labia minora, which young girls start performing before menarche. As a mandatory rite of passage that identifies membership of the tribe, one of its main purposes is to enhance sexual pleasure for both male and female partners. The conditions in which it is practiced involve certain physical health risks. In this qualitative study carried out in Wakiso district, a semi-structured interview was conducted among 31 Baganda men, in order to understand their perceptions, attitudes and knowledge toward the way in which their daughters practise labia minora elongation. According to our results, men highly value this practice for its capacity to enhance sexual stimulation even though they are aware of its risks. Since genital stretching is likely to endure, the authors discuss the possibility of addressing Baganda men by health workers in an education programme aimed at minimising the risks attached to the procedure and, hence, improving the sexual and reproductive health of Baganda girls.

**Keywords:** genital stretching; elongation labia minora; female genital modification; Baganda; okukyalira ensiko

### Introduction

Many African women, members of diverse cultures, modify their bodies in order to fit certain cultural norms. One of such practices is female genital mutilation (FGM), defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as encompassing 'all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons' (WHO 2008, 4). Elongation of the labia minora is seemingly a different practice than the reductive versions of FGM (expansive versus reductive; pleasure seeking versus pleasure denying), but it is included in the four types of FGM classification of the WHO due to the social pressure on young girls to perform it and the permanent changes that it creates. While the three first types involve reductive forms, type IV includes a broad range of manipulating procedures, such as pricking, piercing, cauterisation, scraping or cutting, introduction of corrosive substances and stretching. Other authors prefer to classify stretching under the term 'female genital modification' (FGMo) or 'female genital practices' (Christoffersen-Deb 2005; Grassivaro Gallo and Villa 2006b; Koster and Price 2008; Mwenda 2006; Tamale 2005).

In Uganda, although the reductive forms of FGM are banned by law (Namutebi and Kafuuma 2009),<sup>1</sup> they are still practised by the Bagisu, Bugiri, Busia, Famu, Kalengins,

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Pokot and Ssebei tribes (Grassivaro Gallo and Busatta 2009). In contrast, the *Baganda* people perform the ritual of *okukyalira ensiko*<sup>2</sup> (OE) ('visiting the bush'),<sup>3</sup> which consists of genital stretching of the labia minora. The *Baganda* women in Wakiso District, where the present study was carried out, are expected to accomplish this before menarche. As a cultural rite of passage, *okukyalira ensiko* determines the transition between childhood and womanhood. Once achieved, girls are considered ready for marriage with a *Muganda* man. Elongation of the labia minora is also to be found in Uganda among the Bagisu, Bakiga, Banyankole, Banyoro and the Batolo (Grassivaro Gallo and Busatta 2009). It is to be noted that it is also practised in other countries, such as Benin, Burundi, Congo, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Zambia (Grassivaro Gallo, Tsiala Mbuyi, and Mulopo Katende 2007; Grassivaro Gallo, Moro, and Manganoni 2009; Grassivaro and Busatta 2009; Koster and Price 2008).

Since *Baganda* men are believed to be responsible overall for the tradition of labial elongation being practised (Tamale 2005), in this qualitative study 31 *Baganda* men were studied in order to elucidate their attitudes, perceptions and knowledge towards it. Our ultimate goal is for the findings to be used in the planning for future sexual health education programs in order to minimise the health risks associated with the practice. The study objectives were to: determine male knowledge on how the procedure is performed; describe the perceived risks involved in the procedure; determine the likelihood of this practice continuing in the future; determine the importance of this practice for *Baganda* men as it relates to choosing a wife; understand its role in influencing men's sexual attitude and behaviour; and establish sexual health recommendations in order to minimize the social and physical risks attached to the practice.

## Methodology

The first part of the study included gathering of background information to learn about conceptual, cultural and health issues concerning the *Baganda* and to describe accurately the procedure of *okukyalira ensiko* and its cultural meaning. This information was later used to arrive at a clearer understanding of the perceptions, attitudes and knowledge of the *Baganda* men interviewed.

As part of information gathering, a literature review was conducted using TRIP DATABASE, PUBMED, sCIELO and CUIDEN using the following search words: genital stretching; elongation labia minora; female genital modification; African sexuality; cultural practices; *baganda*; and *okukyalira ensiko*. Participant observation (Gruenbaum 2005) was carried out during the Sexual and Reproductive Health Workshops organised in November–December 2009 by the Ugandan NGO Concern For Children and Women Empowerment (COFCAWE). The workshops took place in the villages of Kasangati, Kibiibi, Kigoogwa, Kiwenda and Matugga in Wakiso district, north of Kampala. The main goal of COFCAWE is to educate young people and their parents in sexual and reproductive health. Using a psychosocial approach, COFCAWE facilitators discuss a wide range of issues, such as prevention of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), risky sexual cultural practices and family planning. One of the issues discussed is *okukyalira ensiko*, stressing its risks. The participants, both male and female adolescents and their parents, display and comment openly on their knowledge, feelings and beliefs toward this procedure.

The final part of information gathering consisted of interviews with *ssengas* or 'aunties' who are responsible for preparing girls in sexual and reproductive issues among the *Baganda*, who we met in the villages where the COFCAWE workshops took place.

A total of five *ssengas* were interviewed and asked to describe the proper way of *okukyalira ensiko*.

The second part of the study involved interviews with *Baganda* men. A semi-structured questionnaire, with six open questions, was designed (Table 1).<sup>4</sup> A total of 31 interviews were collected and recorded. The interviewees were randomly sampled from among the male population of the already mentioned villages according to the following criteria:

- men born in Wakiso district and belonging to the *Baganda* tribe or men who have been raised within the *kiganda* culture;
- heterosexually experienced men, irrespective of their marital status;
- men who had at least one daughter under 18 years old.

Men who did not conform to all three inclusion criteria were excluded. These men were the target of this research, since the authors of this paper aimed to learn whether these *Baganda* men could be addressed or not in future risk-reduction educational programmes to be designed by health workers.

## Results

### *Understanding okukyalira ensiko*

In Uganda, most people identify their membership of a tribe. This membership determines their social status and the rituals and roles to be followed. The *Baganda* is the largest tribe, encompassing a widely dispersed net of 52 families through the country. The *Baganda* have a strong patriarchal and patrilineal social structure in which polygamy is common and tolerated (Tamale 2005). The Kingdom of *Buganda*, with the king or *Kabaka* as its cultural head, historically dates back to the XVIth century. Though abolished in the Idi Amin era, it was welcomed back in 1993 during the Yoweri Museveni government. The *Kabaka* do not have political power. The *Kabaka* Parliament (or *Bulange*) in Kampala, is the most important institution responsible for the promotion of the *kiganda*.

### *Okukyalira ensiko: technique and meaning*

*Okukyalira ensiko* or genital stretching begins between the ages of 9 and 16 among girls in Wakiso District. Girls are expected to succeed in elongating their labia minora up to a minimum of one and a half inches long before they start menstruating or before getting married.<sup>5</sup> They refer to this practice also as *okusika* ('pulling out'). The *Baganda* would rather use these expressions than *okusika nfuli* ('pulling out the labia minora'). They consider that it is vulgar to name the female genitalia and instead use a wide range of metaphors (Grassivaro Gallo and Villa 2006a).

Table 1. Questions addressed to interviewees.

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Can you describe how <i>Baganda</i> girls perform the practice <i>okukyalira ensiko</i> ?
Can you name and explain the risks attached to the procedure of <i>okusika</i> ?
Do you expect your daughters to 'visit the bush'? Have you already requested them?
If your wife had not <i>okukyalira ensiko</i> , would you have rejected her as your wife?
If you compare having sex with one woman who did <i>okusika</i> and with one who did not, could you perceive any difference? How so?
In general, how is your perception towards the practice <i>okukyalira ensiko</i> ?

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According to Tamale (2005) the traditional way for girls to acquire the skill of labial elongation is to send her to the home of her *ssenga*. The *ssenga*, or paternal aunt, is a traditional mentor whose role is to inculcate in the young girls a wide body of values, behaviours, duties and sexual issues. As soon as a girl reaches pre-menarche, the *ssenga* starts preparing her for marriage. How to prepare food, sit properly, conduct herself and how to practice *okukyalira ensiko* are some of the issues taught. Erotic instruction is an important component of those teachings. The *ssengas* foster elongation of labia minora because they consider that it is a cultural rite that every *Baganda* girl should undergo. The practice is considered as a sign of membership of the *Baganda*. *Ssengas* convince the young girls that elongated labia will enhance their physical pleasure if touched during sexual foreplay. The girls are also warned that *Baganda* men could reject them if they do not conform. Thus, these girls engage in *okukyalira ensiko* over a period of several weeks in order to make themselves more marriageable and enhance their sexual lives and to avoid being stigmatised by the society (Grassivaro, Villa, and Pagani 2006; Tamale 2005).<sup>6</sup>

Despite the role the *ssenga* plays, according to Sengendo and Sekatawa (1999), Tamale (2005) and Grassivaro Gallo and Busatta (2009), the *ssenga* is no longer the only one responsible. Long distances and lack of monetary resources when girls are sent to boarding schools often preclude the necessary meetings between the *ssengas* and their nieces. Today the mother or girls' peers in their neighbourhood or schools or even commercial *ssengas* (Tamale 2005) can replace paternal aunts as a source of information about sexuality, reproduction and marriage.

According to the *ssengas* consulted, men are never involved in this teaching. *Okukyalira ensiko* is practised out of view from men. It often takes place in a clearing in the bush during school recess. The girls lie down on a blanket or directly on the ground. The *ssengas* teach them how to initiate stretching and which herbs to use. The young girls then return in pairs or in groups to the bush, so that they can assist each other. This can also take place in enclosed areas (at home, in the bathroom, in bed, on a chair).<sup>7</sup>

To soften the labia minora, the *Baganda* employ herbs that they can find around the villages, such as *ntengotengo* or *solanum incanum*, *ssere* or *bidens pilosa*,<sup>8</sup> *ekiyondo*, *mukasa*, *namirembe* and *nfulibiri*.<sup>9</sup> Besides traditional herbs, some Ugandan commercial firms manufacture moisturising crèmes advertised as useful aids for *okukyalira ensiko*.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the girls use dust, soil or ashes to prevent their fingers from sliding off the swollen and frail labia minora. If the labia start swelling and bleeding, which can happen, especially when using *ntengotengo*, the girls dry their fingers in the thick hyperkeratosis layer of the heels or use banana leaves to hold the labia.

There are a number of risks associated with *okukyalira ensiko*, given that the practice takes place in the bush, where girls assist each other in groups and employ corrosive caustic herbs and other contaminated elements such as dust or soil from the bush or ashes from the fireplace. These risks include:

- Pain: according to Koster and Price (2008) labial elongation is not synonymous with pain. The influence of discomfort is influenced by factors such as how the pulling is done, the type of herbs used and the time span used to reach the desired length of the labia. For example, *ntengotengo* fluid, which is obtained after heating the ripe fruits on hot ashes until they burst, has been repeatedly described as very stinging.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, according to Grassivaro Gallo and Villa (2006b) and Grassivaro and Busatta (2009), the girls always experience pain when they attempt stretching their labia minora for the first time. The pain is more severe if they wait until they are older, when tissue structures are less elastic.

- Swelling: as a result of the herbs used and the constant stretching.
- Bleeding: cuts and sores may happen in the mucosa of the labia minora. The swelling, the herbs used and the constant traction facilitate this.
- Neurosensitivity: in women with hypertrophic labia, due to the high concentration of sensory nerves, stretching can increase skin sensitivity in the area, resulting in hyperesthesia and dysesthesia (Grassivaro Gallo and Villa 2006b; Grassivaro et al. 2006).
- Infections: there exists an indeterminate risk of vaginal, bladder, urinary tract or systemic infections directly from the environment or through exchange of bodily fluids with other girls. Etyang and Natukunda (2005) claim that the risk of HIV transmission is increased by the *ssenga* teachings that encourage early sexual activity.
- Anxiety: intimidation is at times used to force girls into labial elongation. For example, if they try to resist, they may be threatened with being left naked on the road with corn poured over their genitalia, with hens to feast on them.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Okukyalira ensiko: is it likely to persist?*

According to Tamale (2005), *okukyalira ensiko*:

is alive and thriving in the urban and peri-urban areas around Kampala, and it has also spread to many non-Baganda women (including some of European descent), who can even seek the services of commercial *ssengas* to elongate their labia. Nevertheless, a great many younger urban women have chosen to opt out of this cultural practice. (26)

#### **Men's perceptions of *okukyalira ensiko***

Of the 31 men interviewed, 30 were *Baganda* and 1 was *Banyankole* but born and raised in Wakiso as a *Muganda*. Their ages ranged from 20 to 66 years of age and all of them were engaged in heterosexual relationships. At the time of the interview, 30 men were married, one was divorced and some of them had more than one wife, but data on polygamy was not collected. All of them had at least one daughter under 18 years old. The total number of daughters ranged from 14 to only 1. Of the interviewees, 9 had completed university studies, the rest had attended primary school, they were not asked whether they had finished their primary school studies or not. Interviews were conducted in *Luganda* (14) and in English (17). The demographics concerning ages, studies and professions of the interviewees are displayed in Table 2.

#### *Describing the practice*

The interviewees identified the *ssenga*, the mother and the girls' female peers as the persons in charge of guiding through the practice (25, 16 and 3 men, respectively).<sup>13</sup> Two of the 25 who identified the *ssenga* added that if a girl failed to get married because of lack of labial elongation, her *ssenga* was to blame. Six persons identified the role of boarding schools as promoters of this practice. One man, Kenneth, a 29-year-old primary school teacher, clarified that only *Baganda* female teachers are involved. Two men claimed that the *Nabagereka* Foundation promotes it in its summer camps.<sup>14</sup> One man, Ssekabaka, a farmer of 66 years old, expressed his worries about orphan girls. These girls, he stated, do not have any *ssenga* or close relative able to guide them. Thus, they may fail to get married to a *Muganda*.

Table 2. Relation between studies, professions and ages of interviewees.

		AGE	21–30	31–40	41–50	50–60	61–70	Total
		PROFESSION						
University studies	Bar owner (BS. marketing)	–	1	–	–	–	–	1
	Engineer	–	–	1	–	–	–	1
	Social worker	–	1	–	–	–	–	1
	Teacher	2	1	2	1	–	–	6
Primary school studies	Bar owner	–	1	–	–	–	–	1
	Builder	–	–	1	–	–	–	1
	Driver	1	1	–	–	–	–	2
	Farmer	2	1	5	–	1	–	9
	Gardener	1	–	–	1	–	–	2
	Mechanic	1	2	1	–	–	–	4
	Soldier	–	1	1	–	–	–	2
	Taylor	1	–	–	–	–	–	1
Total		8	9	11	2	1	31	

There is variability in the perceived age of *okukyalira ensiko*. Most agreed that girls practise it between 8 and 18 years of age, 15 of them indicating the age of 12. Two persons clarified that they should start before menstruation. Five men added that they have to stretch again after giving birth because at the moment of delivery the labia minora may shrink. One man, a 39-year-old graduate in Marketing, said that prostitutes have to stretch throughout their life because having long labia ‘gives them marketing’.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding the aids employed in labial stretching, most men (24 interviewees) were aware of the use of local herbs: *ntengotengo* (17), *nfulibiri* (3), *kireka ngwangalabi* (1), *nafringi* (1) and potato leaves (1). One man cited the use of *ghee*.<sup>16</sup> One man described the use of tweezers in women who had to stretch once married.<sup>17</sup> Three men named dust or soil and two identified ashes as elements to be smeared on the fingers in order to prevent sliding.

Six interviewees described the expected length of the labia. Five agreed that 1.5 to 2 inches is the desired length. One explained that it used to be 3 inches; however, nowadays due to the tight underwear women wear, it is no longer practical. Another man clarified that it is the *ssenga* who decides the appropriate length of the labia. Two stated that in other tribes in West Uganda women pull out their labia up to 4 inches, which is not what *Baganda* men expect.

Regarding the reasons for *okukyalira ensiko*, fitting into society and avoiding stigmatisation was cited 11 times. The enhancement of both male and female sexual pleasure was stressed by 12 men; 10 alleged that girls must stretch their labia in order to get married. Lastly, Kenneth, the 29-year-old teacher, added that stretched labia are associated with less suffering during childbirth.

### Identifying dangers

Eight men denied any dangers associated with *okukyalira ensiko*. Two of them indicated that not only there is no danger but that girls enjoy the process. One man, Ssempe, a 42-year-old engineer, explained that even though he did not know of any risks, he assumed there must be some given the lack of promotion of the practice by health organisations. Seven of these eight men had primary school studies; the eighth was a primary school teacher.

Pain was the most common risk identified by the men (17 interviewees). It was linked both with the practice of stretching itself (9) and the use of herbs (7). Specifically, two men

described *ntengotengo* to give stinging pain. Kenneth, the 29-year-old teacher, linked pain with the use of tweezers. Another, Ssekabaka, the 66-year-old farmer, explained that it is more painful if the girl starts the process 'late'. Swelling was a risk identified by three persons, linked with the use of *ntengotengo* (2 men) and mechanical stretching (1).

Wounds and the risk of labial tearing was supported by five men, one of them, Michael, a 35 years old teacher believing that labia minora can 're-germinate'<sup>18</sup> after being totally pulled out. Another man said that the use of ashes creates sores in the mucosa of the labia minora. Infection was a risk quoted by eight persons. Five men believed that HIV transmission is likely to happen by stretching. Kenneth, the 29-year-old teacher, cited syphilis and pelvic inflammatory disease as a possible complication. Four men thought group assistance to be the cause of transmissible infection. Two men identified the presence of wounds in the labia minora as the entrance of pathogens. Two blamed the use of contaminated soil, dust and ashes and one said that infections might occur when they stretch with dirty hands and long nails.

Two interviewees stated that, because the procedure takes place in the bush, girls are exposed to snake bites. One man believed that girls are at risk of cancer secondary to the herbs, soil and dust. Finally, given that this practice is believed to enhance sexual pleasure, four men believed that girls would engage into early sex encouraged by the sexual teachings they have received. Three of these four men identified the *ssenga* as the person in charge of guiding young women.

With regard to the interviewees' ages (Table 3), we can observe that men older than 40 were more aware of the risks (12 of 14 identifying risks) than men younger than 40 (only 11 of 17). With regard to their education (Table 4), 8 of the 9 men who had completed university studies recognised some of the risks described by the *ssengas* or by the references consulted. Meanwhile, only 15 of the 22 men with primary school studies were able to identify some of the risks.

#### *Attitudes towards daughters' involvement in the practice*

Most of the interviewees (26 men) claimed that they are satisfied with their daughters practicing *okukyalira ensiko*. Nevertheless, two of these men admitted that they knew some of its risks and that they had a somewhat negative perception of the practice; furthermore, they said they no longer thought the practice as culturally relevant. Most of them (24) specified that fathers are not involved in the teaching process. Twelve of them added that they would ask their wives and sisters if they are guiding their daughters in *okukyalira ensiko*.<sup>19</sup> One of them, aware of the risks, said that he would talk to his sister about the risk of HIV transmission and

Table 3. Overview of general perceptions toward *okukyalira ensiko* (OE) by interviewees' age.

Attitudes towards OE		Men who recognize OE dangers	Men who believe OE enhances sex	Men who encourage their daughters to OE	Men who would reject their wives if they did not OE	Men who have a positive general perception of OE
Age	Total					
20–30	8	5	5	6	1	6
31–40	9	6	9	9	6	8
41–50	11	9	9	8	3	7
51–60	2	2	2	2	1	2
61–70	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total	31	23	26	26	11	24

Table 4. Perceptions of *okukyalira ensiko* (OE) by interviewees' level of education.

Education received	Men who recognize OE dangers	Men who believe OE enhances sex	Men who encourage their daughters to OE	Men who would reject their wives if they did not OE	Men who have a positive general perception of OE
University	9	8	7	6	2
Primary school	22	15	19	20	9
Total	31	23	26	26	11

make sure that his daughter is stretching in the safest conditions. One man claimed that he would recommend that his daughters talk with their *ssengas* about safety, but he would not teach them directly. One said that he would inform his daughter himself if he were the only one available to do it.

Only four men said that they would not like their daughters to undergo the rite. Three of them identified the risks as the reason for their attitude. Two explained that the practice is becoming obsolete due to migrations and intercultural awareness – they understood that women in other Ugandan tribes or abroad Uganda do not practice *okukyalira ensiko*.

There were no significant differences between the age groups concerning this issue (Table 3). In relation to length of education (Table 4), 20 of the 22 men with primary school studies said that they wanted their daughters to undergo the rite of *okusika*, while 6 of the 9 with university studies claimed the same.

#### What about sex?

The interviewees were asked whether they enjoyed more having sex with a woman with elongated labia minora rather than with one with natural labia. Four men admitted that they could not answer because they never had sex with a woman who had not undergone *okusika*. Another four men claimed not to perceive any difference. Only one man, Isiko, a 42-year-old teacher, answered that he would prefer a woman who had not stretched her labia; his reason was that, since these girls are 'more technical in that work ... if the man is not strong enough in sex concern, that woman can run into another men because you cannot satisfy her sexual desires that are very high!'.<sup>20</sup>

Being more expert at sex, due to the *ssenga* teachings was a highly esteemed aspect of *okukyalira ensiko* and 22 men said that they enjoy sex more with a woman who had a stretched labia. Among these men, the expressions they used to define the genitalia of the women with normal labia minora are derogatory, describing their vaginas as being larger, colder,<sup>21</sup> and open – a 'big cold hole', 'empty space', 'house without curtains', as if 'the cupboard is open' or as a 'pumpkin without seeds'. The men complained that such vaginas 'brush' and 'do not spit water'.<sup>22</sup> Having sex with these women was described as 'like bathing in a basin', 'like sleeping with a man' or 'like playing with my penis in a plastic cup'.

In contrast, narrower, tighter<sup>23</sup> and warmer were the most used adjectives to denote the vaginas of women who practiced *okukyalira ensiko*. Elongated labia minora were described as 'car brakes', as an 'electric switch' and, most often, as 'doors'; 'you first go and knock at that door', 'men do not like enter directly'.<sup>24</sup> Some men claimed that elongated labia minora provide 'support' for the penis, guide it to enter the vagina, and 'tickle' it. Finally, the most esteemed aspect of *okusika* was the ability of touching the prominent labia minora with the

fingers before the intercourse, as a way of ‘thanking her for doing this’, ‘putting her in the mood’ and ‘stimulating her’.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the men felt, the *Baganda* women feel more sexual pleasure, reach orgasm and enhance the sexual experience for both parties involved.

Most men over 30 years of age (21 out of 23) agreed that the practice of *okusika* enhances sex for both partners, only 5 of 8 younger than 30 agreed. Length of education did not appear to affect male perception of *okukyalira ensiko* enhancing sexual pleasure: 7 out of 9 university educated men and 19 out of 22 primary education men agreed (Table 4).

#### *Not for every man: a must for marrying*

Of interviewees, 11 said that they could reject their wives or potential wives if they had not had *okusika*. This attitude was linked to cultural reasons by 3 men and to diminished sexual pleasure by 2. The others (7) did not specify their reasons. Another group of 11 men answered that they would not reject such women. Of those, 2 men, a 35-year-old teacher and a 39-year-old, divorced bar owner, quoted love and mutual understanding as more relevant aspects in marriage and 5 had a negative perception toward the practice in general. The rest of this group (5 men) did not justify their answers.

Of interviewees, 5 answered that they would marry women with natural labia and then send them to the *ssengas* for labial stretching; 3 claimed that they would not reject such women but they would not enjoy sex with them; 2 suggested assisting their wives with labial stretching themselves; and 1 answered that he would not reject marrying a woman who had not had *okusika* but that he would keep her genital status a secret.

With regard to their ages (Table 3), the responses given by the interviewees were not as homogenous as in other issues discussed with them: 6 of the 9 men with ages between 31 and 40 years old and 2 of the 3 men older than 51 answered that they would not marry a woman who did not *okukyalira ensiko*. In contrast, only 1 of the 8 men younger than 30 and only 3 of the 11 men between 41 and 50 answered the same. With regard to their education (Table 4), 2 of the 9 men with university studies and 11 of the 22 with primary school studies answered that they would reject a woman who did not *okusika* as their wife.

#### *General perceptions*

When asked how they would define their general perceptions of *okukyalira ensiko*, many of the men (24) answered that these were positive. Some (17 out of 24 men) indicated that the practice should be promoted due to its sexually enhancing qualities for both men and women. The importance of cultural tradition was stressed by 16 of them; 4 men stated that this practice brings happiness to the family, acting as a binding factor; 2 men, a 45-year-old teacher and a 39-year-old bar owner, in their defence of *okusika*, clarified that this practice is not the same as the reductive female genital circumcision performed by some tribes in East Uganda. A negative perception of *okukyalira ensiko* was held by 7 men. The associated risks were the reason given by 2 men. Likewise, 2 men believed that it is meaningless and another 2 that it promotes eroticism and pushes girls into early sex; 1 man stated that it is losing its importance due to the rise of inter-tribal marriages.

#### **Conclusion**

This study aimed at understanding the perceptions, knowledge and attitudes toward *okukyalira ensiko* in order to explore the potential of addressing *Baganda* fathers in future sexual health education programmes. Despite the relatively small sample size, the authors feel that the 31 men interviewed is a sample large enough to provide insights into what

Baganda fathers with daughters from Wakiso district think and expect of *okukyalira ensiko*. However, in order to picture a more representative picture of what Ugandan men think of this practice, further research should be carried out to include men from other districts.

Among *Baganda* men in Wakiso district, there exists a general consensus regardless of age (Table 3) or profession (Table 4), that *okukyalira ensiko* is a desirable and welcomed practice (24 men). Though most of them (23 men) are aware of some of its health risks, the majority of interviewees (26) would encourage their daughters to undergo the rite. Given the patriarchal nature of *Bagandan* society and the positive responses towards the practice, it is likely that *okukyalira ensiko* will continue. Support for labial stretching among the *Baganda* men is multifaceted. Mainly *okukyalira ensiko* is perceived as an important part of the cultural heritage and a marriage requirement. The majority of men (26) value elongated labia especially because they believe that it enhances the sexual experience for both parties. Nevertheless, when asked whether they would reject a woman as a wife if she had not had her labia stretched, not all of the interviewees agreed (11). Therefore, *okukyalira ensiko* as a prerequisite for marriage does not seem as crucial as young girls believe and could be a decreasing trend.

Interviewees were generally ignorant of how labial stretching is practiced. Because talking about sexual issues with their daughters is a cultural taboo<sup>26</sup> and *okukyalira ensiko* is perceived as belonging to the private sphere of females, most of the interviewees claimed that they were not interested in such details or in being involved in teaching their daughters about its risks. But, given that most men are aware of the risks associated and that most of them want their daughters to undergo the rite and that some of them recognised that they would ask their wives whether their daughters are being taught genital stretching, Baganda fathers could potentially be persuaded to become involved. It may be very challenging to recruit men to help in future educational programmes. Nevertheless, Baganda fathers are already attending the workshops where the authors of this research were collecting data. In these workshops Baganda men are invited to discuss their feelings and knowledge towards *okusika*. The practice itself is never discouraged. The purpose is not to eradicate it, but to teach Baganda girls how to stretch in the safest way. Thus, healthcare workers need to design a risk reduction training programme where *Baganda* men could be addressed and encouraged to talk openly about *okukyalira ensiko* with their wives and daughters and the community health workers; the latter group could be a great source of information regarding risks and safety. Beyond this, efforts should be made to ensure high safety standards among the women who guide young girls in genital stretching. The following risk-reduction measures may be helpful in this respect: performing the practice alone rather than in groups (if assisted by colleagues or by the *ssenga*, the use of gloves should be encouraged); performing the practice at home rather than in the bush; washing the hands and genitalia before and after the practice; avoid using dust, soil or ashes; avoiding using the fruit of *ntengotengo* as well as other caustic herbs; urinating after stretching (to minimize risk of urinary tract infection); and being able to identify signs and symptoms of *okusika* complications that need medical attention. By including men in risk-reduction initiatives designed by health workers, the prevention measures aimed to reduce the health risks attached to *okusika* can be spread more effectively and, hence, the risks minimized. This has to be done always with the most sincere respect toward the *Baganda* culture and tradition.

Finally, we have some suggestions for future qualitative research on the subject. Throughout the interviews we noticed that some of the English words and expressions used by the *Baganda* speakers lacked the strong cultural connotations attached to their

*Luganda* equivalents. Therefore, we recommend that future interviews be conducted strictly in *Luganda*. Baganda wives were observed talking openly on sexual issues altogether with their husbands in the COFCawe workshops. Nevertheless, they were not interviewed. In future research projects, Baganda wives should be asked up to what point they would accept their husbands to become involved with female practices such as *okusika* or to know what the *ssenga* teachings are. Women should be asked as well if they talk to their daughters about the risks related with *okukyalira ensiko* and if they teach them how to avoid them.

Other subjects that need further exploration include the psychological and physical health risks and the consequences occasioned by genital stretching, including the topical and systemic effects of all the herbs. Some risks have been just identified and described, but, given that the precise incidence of transmissible diseases and other infections associated with *okukyalira ensiko* has not been researched yet, we recommend that further thorough quantitative research be conducted on this issue. We advocate a prospective cohort study as the best research design for that purpose (c.f. Makhoul Obermeyer 2005, 445). Qualitative research to learn more about the sexual experiences and the degree of sexual enhancement perceived by women who did *okusika* is also recommended.

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### Notes

1. On December 9, 2009, a Bill prohibiting Female Genital Mutilation was unanimously passed by the Parliament of Uganda (Namutebi and Kafuuma 2009).
2. The following *Luganda* words can be found in the paper: *Buganda*: kingdom of *Baganda* tribe in Uganda; *Baganda*: name of the largest tribe in Uganda; also means 'men' or 'women'; *Bulange*: Parliament of *Buganda* located in Mengo (Kampala); *Kabaka*: the King of *Buganda*; *Kiganda*: traditional culture of the *Baganda*; *Luganda*: language spoken by the *Baganda*; *Muganda*: 'a man' or 'a woman' (member of *Baganda* tribe); *Nabagereka*: Queen mother, or wife of the *Kabaka* of *Buganda*; *Okukyalira ensiko*: 'visiting the bush' (the practice of stretching labia minora); *Okusika*: 'stretching', 'pulling out' (the practice of stretching labia minora); *Ssenga*: paternal aunt.
3. Throughout this paper, we will refer to genital stretching as practised by the Baganda as *okukyalira ensiko* because of all the cultural connotations attached to the *Luganda* expression.
4. Gruenbaum (2005) on FGM researching methods says that 'When time does not allow for extensive participant observation, individual in-depth interviews are highly desirable' (432).
5. Ages and lengths as indicated by the *ssengas* and by the adolescents consulted.
6. These reasons described by Tamale (2005) and Grassivaro, Villa and Pagani (2006) were confirmed by the *ssengas* and the adolescent girls consulted during this research.
7. According to Grassivaro Gallo and Villa (2006b). Nevertheless, the girls in the workshops attended by the authors just named the bush.
8. Also named 'black jack', a herb used as well for genital stretching in Rwanda (Koster and Price 2008).
9. No botanical names were found for the last four. All these were herbs cited by the *ssengas* and adolescent girls consulted. Neubinger (1994, 846) quotes *ntengotengo*. Tamale (2005) quotes *mukasa*, *ntengotengo* and *oluwoko*. Grassivaro Gallo and Villa (2006a) quote *namirembe*, *ntengotengo*, *kabbo ka kabyala* and *mukasa*.
10. Grassivaro Gallo and Villa (2006b) state that herbs may be substituted by crèmes, e.g. Tropical Belt manufactures 'Sangoma Twin Towers', a moisturising crème that can be purchased in

- <http://tropicalbelt.com/products.html>. 'Twin Towers' refers to the concept of elongated labia minora as 'twins', as described by Grassivaro Gallo and Villa (2006a).
11. Described as stinging by both the *ssengas* and the adolescent girls consulted.
  12. As related by the girls participating in the COFCAWE Workshops.
  13. The word *ssenga* was only used by men in the interviews conducted in Uganda. When answering in English, the interviewees used the word 'auntie'.
  14. This fact was denied by the staff at the Nabagereka Foundation, with its headquarters in Bulange, the Kabaka Parliament (Mengo, Kampala).
  15. Quoted from the interviewed. Interview conducted in English.
  16. Unsalted cow butter. Its use for this purpose was denied by all the *ssengas* consulted.
  17. Neither the *ssengas* nor the bibliography consulted confirms the use of tweezers for stretching.
  18. Quoted from the interviewed. Interview conducted in English.
  19. Tamale (2005) claims that it is a cultural taboo for a *Muganda* father to discuss sexual issues with his daughters.
  20. Quoted from the interviewed. Interview conducted in English.
  21. Christoffersen-Deb (2005), who researched the perceptions of AbaGusii towards Female Genital Modifications in Kisii (Kenya), observed that men preferred circumcised women: 'circumcised women were preferred on account of their 'sexual coolness', which seemed to offer the promise of faithfulness that husbands seek' (411).
  22. The Baganda prefer wet rather than dry sex (Tamale 2005). Furthermore, Koster and Price (2008) write about Rwandese's perceptions towards elongating labia minora; 'All of our informants were of the opinion that elongated labia minora aid in the production of vaginal secretions' (198).
  23. This is explained by Koster and Price (2008): 'Since the labia minora swell during sexual excitement, there is a larger surface area for penile friction during coitus. Since the swelling partly takes place inwards, the entrance to the vagina may also become tighter, thus creating more pleasurable friction for the man' (196). Gruenbaum (2005), on female genital cutting, states that 'narrowing of the vaginal opening with infibulation is believed to make intercourse more pleasurable for men' (431).
  24. Further explanation on labia minora described as 'doors' can be found in Grassivaro Gallo and Villa (2006a).
  25. According to Tamale (2005): 'When touched and manipulated in the correct manner during foreplay or mutual masturbation, they may be the source of immense pleasure to the couple' (27).
  26. See footnote 19.

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## Résumé

*Okukyalira ensiko* ou «visiter le buisson»: c'est ainsi que les Baganda, en Ouganda, appellent l'élongation des petites lèvres que les jeunes filles pratiquent avant leur ménarche. En tant que rite initiatique obligatoire qui confirme l'appartenance à une tribu, un des principaux objectifs de cette pratique est d'augmenter le plaisir sexuel des partenaires sexuels, qu'ils soient masculins ou féminins. Les conditions dans lesquelles l'élongation des petites lèvres est pratiquée exposent à des risques physiques. Dans cette étude qualitative conduite dans le district de Wakiso, des entretiens semi structurés ont été menés avec 31 hommes issus de l'ethnie baganda, afin de comprendre leurs perceptions, leurs attitudes et leurs connaissances, relativement à la manière selon laquelle leurs filles pratiquent l'élongation des petites lèvres. Selon nos résultats, ces hommes accordent beaucoup de valeur à cette pratique, pour sa faculté à renforcer la stimulation sexuelle, même s'ils sont conscients des risques potentiels. Dans la mesure où l'étreinte sexuelle est susceptible de perdurer, les auteurs discutent de la possibilité que des professionnels de santé abordent ce sujet avec les hommes issus de l'ethnie baganda, dans le cadre d'un programme d'éducation visant à minimiser les risques liés à la pratique et, par conséquent, à améliorer la santé sexuelle et reproductive des filles issues de la même ethnie.

## Resumen

*Okukyalira ensiko* o 'visitar el arbusto' es el modo en que, en Uganda, el pueblo Baganda nombra a la práctica de elongación del labio menor que realizan las chicas jóvenes antes de la primera menstruación. Como rito obligatorio del paso a la madurez que identifica la afiliación a la tribu, una de las principales finalidades de esta práctica es aumentar el placer sexual tanto para los compañeros masculinos como femeninos. Las condiciones en que se practica implica ciertos riesgos para la salud física. En este estudio cualitativo realizado en el distrito de Wakiso, se llevó a cabo una entrevista semiestructurada con 31 hombres Baganda con el objetivo de conocer sus percepciones, actitudes y conocimientos sobre el modo en que se sus hijas practican la elongación del labio menor. Según los resultados, los hombres valoraban mucho esta práctica para su capacidad de mejorar la estimulación sexual aunque estaban al corriente de sus riesgos. Dado que es probable que continúe la práctica de la elongación genital, los autores proponen la posibilidad de que trabajadores sanitarios eduquen a los hombres Baganda a través de un programa educativo destinado a minimizar los riesgos que implica este procedimiento y, por tanto, mejorar la salud sexual y reproductora de las chicas Baganda.

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