

Knowledge of female genital schistosomiasis lacking in Ghana, study finds

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Community member on the bank of Lake Volta, Ghana Credit: Emmanuel Arthur, 2019 (CC BY 4.0)

Urogenital schistosomiasis (US), a chronic parasitic disease, is endemic in Ghana and policymakers have undertaken efforts to control it, largely through mass drug administration of praziquantel given to school-aged children. Now, researchers reporting in *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases* have found that awareness of Female Genital Schistosomiasis (FGS), a specific gender manifestation of US, is lacking, which affects the ability to control this disease in girls and women.

FGS is thought to affect some 56 million [women](#) and girls in Africa, and is a serious, chronic gynecological condition that can cause stigmatizing vaginal discharge, bleeding, pain and, if left untreated, problems with infertility and miscarriage. However, urogenital schistosomiasis—caused by the blood fluke *Schistosoma haematobium*—is typically thought of as a male affliction and as a result FGS is often misdiagnosed. Few studies have aimed to understand knowledge and practice related to FGS amongst [community members](#) and [health providers](#).

In the new work, Vida Ami Kukula, of the Ghana Health Service, and colleagues studied awareness and understanding of FGS in 16 communities along the Lake Volta, a region of Ghana with elevated schistosomiasis infection levels. The researchers used qualitative methods including 12 focus groups and 34 in-depth discussions conducted in 2017. The age, gender and occupations of participants was purposefully diverse.

While there was wide recognition that US was present in the communities, and [general knowledge](#) about the transmission pathways of the disease, there was a strong sense by many groups that the illness predominantly affects men rather than women. Knowledge of FGS was lacking in women, girls, and front-line health workers and there was a misconception that FGS is the result of sexual promiscuity. Stigma about the [disease](#) was a major barrier for girls and women seeking care at formal health clinics.

"There is a clear imperative for the national control program to better engage on FGS and implement interventions to meet girls and women's needs," the researchers say.

More information: Kukula VA, MacPherson EE, Tsey IH, Stothard JR, Theobald S, et al. (2019) A major hurdle in the elimination of urogenital schistosomiasis revealed: Identifying key gaps in knowledge and understanding of female genital schistosomiasis within communities and local health workers. *PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases* 13(3): e0007207. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0007207

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