



# Trade and Development Seminar

## School of Thought: Education and Female Genital Cutting in Burkina Faso

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10:30am – 12:00pm

**119 Ruttan Hall**

Female genital cutting (FGC) is prevalent across many parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. This practice can have profound negative effects on women's well-being, both physical and psychological. Even with these negative effects, FGC is often perpetuated for generations because the cost of deviating from the social norm can be high. The prevailing theory in the study of FGC is that it is a social coordination norm—that is, households will abandon FGC if and only if a sufficient proportion of households within the community agree to abandon the practice. Recent empirical evidence rejects the implications of that theory. I draw on Schelling's 1978 model of critical mass to contribute to this important debate and generate a new data-supported theory that has important implications for the types of policies that should be introduced. Using a dataset of more than 36,000 women born between 1949 and 1995 in Burkina Faso, I show that households within a community have heterogeneous preferences for FGC such that each household contained therein may require a different proportion of community members to abandon FGC before they decide to also reject the practice. Additionally, I show that women who have received any formal education are willing to abandon FGC earlier than uneducated women (i.e. when a smaller proportion of community members have abandoned it). Finally, using geographic fixed effects to remove a substantial amount of what would otherwise be unobserved heterogeneity, I find that women who have received at least formal primary education are 18 percent less likely to have a daughter undergo FGC, and 30 percent more likely to oppose FGC. My findings suggest that individuals are in fact able to deviate from an entrenched, gender-biased social norm, and that increased access to education for girls may reduce the prevalence of FGC in subsequent generations.