

Faith: Religious tools that can help Eliminate Female Genital Cutting

SUMMARY REPORT

JULY 2014

FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING AMONG THE GUSII AND MAASAI OF KENYA

1. Female Genital Cutting in Kenya

1.1 Introduction

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is a traditional cultural practice involving the 'partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons'. The World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies FGM/C into four types, depending on the extent of the cutting.

WHO definitions for types of FGM/C

Type I: partial or total removal of the clitoris and, in very rare cases, only the prepuce (clitoridectomy).

Type II: Partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (excision).

Type III: narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner, or outer, labia, with or without removal of the clitoris

Type IV: All other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, for example: pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterisation.

FGM/C is associated with a number of significant short-term health effects including pain, bleeding and risk of infection as a consequence of the procedure itself. FGM/C is also associated with many long-term consequences which include chronic pain, infections, decreased sexual enjoyment, psychological problems and a significantly increased risk of complications during childbirth (WHO, 2008).

1.2 Kenya country context

Kenya's "Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Act," prohibits all forms of female genital mutilation or cutting and was signed into law in October 2011. In both the Gusii and Maasai communities, members were not aware of the law and that practising FGC was illegal, leading to convictions.



Photo © Mpanzi

Maasai girl in Nyamagwa village.

2. Research overview

2.1 Location

This is a preliminary report on a baseline study that examined the trends of, barriers and opportunities to eliminating Female Genital Cutting among the Gusii and Maasai of South-western Kenya. The study's focus was on villages surrounding Nyamagwa, Igare, Kilgoris and Poroko areas. It was conducted by Mpanzi, in collaboration with the University of Nairobi and Tearfund, a UK based Christian international NGO. Data were collected from women, men and girls using interview guides, questionnaires, focus group discussions and storytelling.

2.2 Objectives

The goal of the study was to establish baseline data to identify practical actions to engage survivors, men and children, as well as identify and deploy religious resources in efforts to eliminate the practice

The aims of the research were to:

- To establish the perception on the benefits and significance of FGC in South western Kenya
- To describe the changes in trends of FGC in the study area
- To determine the understanding of the legal status of FGC in Kenya
- To examine obstacles to eliminating FGC in the study area
- To map out religious resources that can help eliminate the practice

Furthermore, the study explored the role of faith in advancing or eliminating the practise

2.3. Partners

Mpanzi, a Kenya non-profit organisation conducted this research in partnership with University of Nairobi and Tearfund, a Christian UK based international NGO. Re of South-western Kenya.

University of Nairobi contributed their extensive knowledge for research methods

Tearfund has been working extensively with faith groups and communities to end sexual violence across sub Saharan Africa.

3. Summary of findings

Data analysis indicates that social and cultural dynamics still highly regard and favour FGC among the Maasai and Gusii ethnic communities residing in rural villages of south-western Kenya. Respondents suggested that religion is a way of life, and hence the social and cultural practice of FGC is weaved into social faith, where religious practices such as prayer and worship are embedded into everyday FGC activities. There is almost no knowledge and implementation of Kenya's "Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation

Key points

- FGC in both Gusii and Maasai communities is perceived as a rite of passage, with some girls voluntarily undergoing FGC
- There has been some changes in the practise of FGC over time however social beliefs about the benefit of the practice still sustains it
- A legal framework opposing FGC exists, however communities are not aware of it
- Faith plays an important role in Gusii communities and often part of FGC everyday activities
- Potential of faith as a tool to prevent and eliminate FGC

3.1 Key perceptions about FGC

Respondents (73%) suggested that FGC was a significant practice for both the Gusii and Maasai of South-western Kenya. Of those, 94% of the female respondents reported that they had voluntarily undergone FGC between the ages of 10-19 as a rite of passage. Key perceptions include:

- **Respect for girls and rite of passage**

Both male and female respondents suggested that traditionally, FGC resulted in respect for girls who would then be considered mature, responsible and ready for marriage.

Most respondents suggested that it was a significant transitional rite of passage from childhood to adulthood which enabled young women to receive training during the seclusion period to comfortably take on the required duties of married women. Maasai did not consider FGC as "harmful" but indigenous practise of blessing and honouring young girls as they transition to adulthood.

Often girls who underwent the practice attended school and were too young to be married off, but it was consid-

"When we circumcise Maasai girls, we train them to be good women. And when we circumcise Maasai boys, we train them to be good moran warriors who are blessed by the Laibon [A spiritual Prophet]"

(Respondent during an in-depth interview)



Gusii young girls dancing in church

Photo: ©Mpanzi

- **Prevention of promiscuity**

Controlling sexual desire to prevent promiscuity and maintain self control for married women

“Uncut” women were segregated and stigmatised as a result

- **Cultural identity**

FGC is significant cultural identity marker for both Kisii and Maasai girls and women. The Kisii neighbour the Luo ethnic community that does not practice FGC, therefore practice considered an essential identity marker for Gusii girls

Most respondents were concerned about derogatory terms used for “uncut” girls such as likening them to the Luo (Omogere bosa), which was considered an insult to the notion of girlhood and womanhood, and a major threat to being and belonging in the family and community



“I don’t want my daughter to grow up like Omogere bosa and insulted all the time”

(Respondent during focus group discussions)

3.2 Objectives

Respondents suggested that the practice of FGC had changed over time.

- There was considerable reduction of girls undergoing the practice due to knowledge of its health risks. Over 98% of all female adults interviewed had undergone the practice, while only 60% of the girls had undergone it
- In recent years, most girls underwent the practice much earlier (ages 7-12) often during school breaks
- Women and girls who had undergone the practice said it made them fit in and they felt respected
- Most girls underwent to practice as a family (with siblings, cousins, or extended family members), rather than community groups.
- Increasingly, the cutting was done by a medical practitioner within a homestead or in a health clinic
- Public festivities such as beer parties, sharing food and public signing processions were no longer common. But village parties were held with close family members and friends especially after the healing period
- Following FGC, girls continued with education, although some would drop off before or soon after completing grade 8 for marriage

Some activities had continued with the practice. Of those interviewed, 89% said religious practices such as prayer, thanksgiving and worship continued to be a central part of the FGC activities. Spiritual and religious leaders offered blessings to the initiates when requested by family or community members. However, FGC was never discussed or debated. Often FGC was practiced alongside male circumcision for children of the same age-set.

4. Understanding FGC Kenya law

Over 85% of the respondents were unaware of the Kenya’s “Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) Act,” which prohibits all forms of female genital mutilation or cutting and was signed into law in October 2011. About 14% of the respondents said that they knew that there was a law that criminalized FGC but were unaware of its details. They had learned about the law through public meetings called *barazas* that were organised by local chiefs, but they thought it was informational about the national government’s stand and would not have serious implications on local people’s culture.

Most participants did not understand that according to Kenyan law, the practice of FGC was illegal, and they were not aware of any convictions. Respondents were unaware that it was criminal to solicit services for purposes of FGC, or to use derogatory remarks against a woman or girl who had not undergone the practice.

5. Challenges to eliminate FGC in Rural Villages

Major obstacles to eliminating FGC emerged from this study. They are as follows:

- FGC is still significant to the social and spiritual practises of rural villages
- FGC is perceived as essential to granting personhood to a woman or girl. FGC is not considered harmful
- Although the practise has changed over time, emotional attachments, deep attitudes and undying beliefs about its benefits sustains it.
- Individuals and community leaders are unaware of the existing national laws that prohibit FGC. The law has not been enforced or adapted to local contexts
- FGC is normalised and embedded into religious life and activities. As a result, religion, like culture and institutions such as family, is a socialising and enabling agent.
- Religious leaders and congregations rarely discuss matters relating to FGC in churches or religious gatherings

6. Faith can help prevent and eliminate FGC – Recommendations for action

Eliminating FGC in rural villages among the Kisii and Maasai of Southwestern Kenya is a challenging task for a government or religious institution to achieve alone. Faith has the potential to prevent and end FGC by using its resources effectively and appropriately. The study highlights the following resources that could be used towards this

• Spiritual texts and values

Over 58% respondents noted FGC not part of religious text and therefore has no religious mandate to continue the practise.

It was suggested that religions such as Christianity and Islam considered FGC a prohibited practice. One respondent recited a biblical text asserting that in the book of Romans 2:29, it states that: *“Real circumcision is in the heart, a thing not of the letter, but of the spirit”*.

• Religious arguments and explanations

Respondents suggested that religious leaders such as pastors and priests could make religious arguments that link to Kenya’s law through the use of homilies, fatwas, preaching and prayer

• Religious groups

Respondents identified that religious groups like, Youth groups, Catholic Women Associations (Mama Mkatoliki), Dorcas (Seventh Day Adventist Women’s groups of deaconesses), Quakers, Anglican Mothers Union, could help provide structure and networking for campaigning messaging to eliminate FGC. These groups meet weekly and have links with national and international networks and would provide avenues for discussion

• Religious health centres

Respondents suggested that the religious health centres in the villages were trusted even by the government and could be utilised to provide education, training and knowledge particularly on the health implications of FGC. The health centres had skilled employees and facilities that would provide support and training for prevention as well as response in the event of an emergency such as bleeding

• Large numbers in congregation

The respondents suggested that because faith was such an integral part of village life, efforts to eliminate FGC that utilised the large numbers of congregations would effectively reach many people. The right messaging needed to be developed to resonate with the spiritual and cultural values of the people for organised change

7. Next steps

Mpanzi, Tearfund and University of Nairobi will share this research findings with a wide range of stakeholders, including faith leaders, government and other organisations committed to ending FG/C. This will be the first step in building collaboration and commitment working to develop a response that prevents FGC in these communities in Kenya.

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