

# FGM IS ALIVE AND WELL IN KURIA

*As the world marks the International Day of Zero Tolerance against FGM tomorrow, this goal seems a long way off for girls in Kuria. Last December saw a spike in FGM cases in the region, with as many as 500 to 800 girls being cut every day*

BY CHRISTINE BUKANIA

**B**lood flowed freely last December in Kuria. Blood was shed, by young pre-teens as they danced down the dusty rural roads to signify their passage from childhood into womanhood. Blood was shed, by older women, mothers, who were thought not woman enough because they were as yet uncut. Blood flowed freely last December, from the bulls and all manner of domestic animals, slaughtered for the celebratory feasts that came after. No evidence remains. The evidence is long gone, swallowed up by the red dust in this hot and thirst-filled season. All that is left are the memories and tales.

Tales like that of Martha Boke, a widow and mother of five, who grew up at a time when campaigns against female genital mutilation (FGM) were unheard of. "To think how I suffered, if I had been born in this generation, I would not have gone through this rite," she says. Martha was circumcised twice. After the first cut, the wound was covered with cotton wool and when it healed, skin had grown over the cotton wool, necessitating another cut to remove that growth.

At the time, no one thought of saying no to the cut. Martha insists that these days, parents have the option to protect their children from FGM, but the practice is still common.

## A crime against children

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines FGM as procedures involving partial or total removal of female genitalia, or other injury to female genital organs.

According to the 2008 Kenya

Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS), the estimated prevalence of FGM in girls and women of 15 to 49 years in the country was 28.2 per cent, indicating a decline from a prevalence of 32.2 per cent in 2003. At 96 per cent, Kuria is one of the regions with the highest prevalence.

Although by 2001, Kenya had passed the Children's Act, which legislates against harmful practices such as FGM performed on children, it was not sufficiently comprehensive because it did not include female victims aged 18 and above. To close this gap, Kenya enacted The Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act, 2011, which criminalises FGM.

Still, FGM is deeply rooted in the Kuria culture and is widely practiced from Kuria East and Kuria West. To avoid the long hand of the law, some families send their children to their relatives in Tanzania for the cut.

Education and awareness campaigns about the negative effects of FGM seem to be having only moderate success.

*My mother said that I was going to get cut and after that I would be a grown woman. I recovered and went right back to playing in the mud with other children! – Merida*

Merida Omahe is the chairperson of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, Kuria West sub-county, and the chairperson of GOCESO CBO, which works in Gokeharaka, Bukira Central and Bukira South locations. The CBO is among many organisations and churches that are spearheading

the fight against FGM. Apart from awareness creation, they collaborate with the health officers, the children's office in Kehancha and the judiciary to prosecute those found culpable for perpetrating child rights abuses, among them FGM and forced early marriage. According to the anti-FGM activist, last December saw a spike in FGM cases in

Kuria, with as many as 500-800 girls being cut every day. "We tried to keep our own records, and the numbers were alarming. In Gokeharaka, we recorded 3,000 cases; in Bukira Central, around 1,500 cases and in Bukira South, around 2,000," she says. Merida adds that the increase in

numbers was because girls who had undergone alternative rites or gone to rescue centres in preceding years were purposely targeted.

Merida takes exception to the young age of initiates and wonders why, if this practice is so acceptable, the community does not let the girls decide at 18, when they understand what it means. The general trend is that the age of initiation is reducing, with girls as young as eight and nine years old now undergoing the cut. "How can you tell a 12-year-old that she is a complete woman?" Merida asks.

Martha laughs outright at this ridiculous thought. "My mother said that I was going to get cut and after that I would be a grown woman. I recovered and went right back to playing in the mud with other children!"

## Need for acceptance fuels FGM

Still, cultural belief seems to defy all logic, and for that matter, the law. The pressure to fit into society compels many girls to undergo FGM. In Kuria, an uncut woman is called *msagane*.



**NO LAUGHING MATTER:** Martha Boke outside her house. Below, Leah Boke in class.



It is a name that follows her like a bad smell until she dies. A *msagane* lives under a number of restrictions that always remind her of her lower status. She is not allowed to open or close the main gate of her family's compound. She cannot pick vegetables from the communal garden lest she makes them wilt and die. She is restricted from using the communal well, because she may cause it to dry up. If there is a wedding in the family, she is not allowed to eat with the 'grown-ups' and must wait for her food to be given to her by children. She is ridiculed by children and adults alike, and if she does something wrong, people will say she has no brain because she is uncut. Even her husband is not spared the ridicule. He cannot tie his animals outside another man's compound, and his wife is not allowed to cook and serve his peers. Confronted with such hurdles, Kuria girls willingly submit themselves, in the process, absolving the elders who as a rule, are not allowed to say no to willing initiates.

Kuria clans perform the initiation rite every two years, in December. Before the clan of elders declares the beginning of the season, they perform some rituals in their sacred places in the forest. These secretive practices lend them an aura of mystical power, which makes it difficult for community members to resist their directives. "It's like people forget themselves. During this strange time, even those who claim to be against FGM suddenly find it impossible to resist. When policemen are called in to stop ceremonies, they just lose their direction and turn back," says Merida.

For anti-FGM activists, there is a real physical danger involved



in trying to fight the course of tradition. Merida describes a close encounter she had last December. Having arrived at one ceremony, the circumciser pointed at her and accused her of having caused her arrest.

"People mobbed me, took my shoes and phone, and threatened to finish me." It was her quick thinking that saved her life. She told them she was only there to celebrate with them, as a member of their community. Nonetheless, she only got off after enduring a five-hour detention and paying Sh5,000.

Simon Wankuru, the programme officer for civic rights at Action Aid's Kuria office, says that politicians too have failed to play their part in reducing FGM. "I think politicians do not speak up against FGM because the elders are for it, and these older people are the ones who influence voting patterns." According to him, some of the local politicians are solely driven by their interest in securing their votes, children's rights be damned. Merida agrees and expresses her frustration at the increase in FGM cases last December. "I feel that if our politicians had spoken out strongly against FGM before the season began, it would not have been so bad."

#### Change lies with children

FGM hinders access of girls to education. After undergoing the cut and being declared 'women' their focus must shift to finding suitable husbands and delivering dowry to their families. Leah Boke is a



**HOPEFUL:** Daniel Mahanga in class.

14-year old student in class eight in Bwikarabo Primary School. She says that when she was in class six, five of her classmates dropped out and got married. This year, another one has left. Her classmate, Daniel Mahanga, thinks that FGM is useless, and only makes young girls think that they are grown up, when in effect, they are still children. "I personally know three neighbours who got the cut last year. They are class three children and now they act like grown women. Even my cousin, who dropped out in class five, already has three children," he says.

Early marriages and pregnancies bring with them a host of health problems, such as complicated child

birth, psychological trauma and physical abuse, which plague the girls right into adulthood, that is, if they survive that long.

Even as they grapple with ways to stop FGM now, anti-FGM campaigners realise that it is the children who will bring about lasting change. Girls who forego FGM and get educated have a higher status in Kuria society, than those who are uncut and uneducated.

This is what organisations like Action Aid are banking on. They have programmes which include girls' forums in public primary schools, where girls are educated about their rights. "So far, we have distributed the anti-FGM Act, the Education Act and the Constitution to them," says Simon. At the same time, church organisations provide rescue centres to girls during the circumcision season. There, they hold regular seminars, in which they learn how to protect themselves from forced FGM.

"Changing culture cannot happen overnight, but we are making substantial progress. Our focus now is education. If we use the role models and profile the success of those who refused the cut, one day, and this generation of role models will be the decision makers. Then we will see the real change happening," Simon says optimistically.

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## New approach needed in fight against female cut

BY MARTHA TURETI

THIS year's theme for the International Day of Zero Tolerance against FGM/C is 'Together to End Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting'. Despite campaigns and laws proscribing the practice, it is still rampant among some Kenyan communities. Children's Act CAP 141 defines harmful cultural practices such as FGM/C as child abuse. In Sexual Offences Act 2006 the practice is an abuse, and it is outlawed in the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act 2011. FGM/C denies girls and women their constitutional rights as specified in Section 44(3) of the Constitution of Kenya 2010. It states that no person shall compel another to undertake cultural practices or rites that are deemed harmful.

But as a pointer to the entrenched nature of FGM/C, last year hundreds of Maasai women staged a demonstration in Kajiado in support of the practice, after some of their leaders advocated against it. They argued that the practice is part of their culture, and insisted that banning it could adversely affect the marriage prospects for their daughters. In Samburu, some elders have endorsed the practice.

Last year, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon launched the Global UN and The Guardian Media campaign to end FGM/C in Kenya. This is an illustration of how the practice is given importance on Kenya. However, the permeation of FGM/C in the Kenyan society raises a number of questions; is it an issue of analogue and digital gap? Elders and older women in some communities apparently rigorously vouch for it as a critical rite for their survival. What are they afraid of? Is it a source of livelihood? Yes, it is for the circumcisers. For the family? It gives it honour. For the women? It gives her identity. For the men? Controlling their wives sexuality. For the girls? Cultural and ethnic identity and marriage suitability.

Can one receive all these 'goodies' without necessarily having to use the girl-child? The communities that do not cut their girl should elaborate how their girls receive cultural and ethnic identity. What about marriageability? Men, what is it you get from a girl who has undergone the cut?

The fight against FGM/C has faced many challenges; most of them entrenched in religious beliefs, ignorance and high level of illiteracy, current trends such as medicalisation of FGM/C, lack of information on the psychological consequences of the practice, inadequate studies carried out linking psychological complication to the practice and lack of research on the role of community courts. Additionally, inadequate funds have hampered campaigns. These means efforts by government agencies and non-government organisations many not have sustainable programmes.

These challenges can be lessened. Most importantly, there is an urgent need to give anti-FGM/C initiatives a multi-faceted approach. This through establishment and strengthening of partnerships among campaigners; in essence concerted efforts will be efficacious, instead of separate entities carrying out initiatives aimed at purging of the practice. In addition the approach requires utilisation of a culturally-sensitive innovative approaches to eradicate the practice; active involvement of the government particularly law enforcers like police, local authority and the judiciary.

Partners need to invest in empirical research and evaluation for programmes to measure their effectiveness so that urgent adjustments are made to the initiatives. There is need to engage male youth and men, so that they will endorse marriages to uncut girls. For example, some young men in Samburu who have agreed to marry uncut women can become ambassadors in the community. All these efforts should be undertaken while being sensitive to communities' cultures.

*Martha Tureti is the national gender and development coordinator World Vision Kenya*

Photo/FILE



**FUTURE:** Some Samburu morans have chosen to marry uncut girls.

## ONE GIRL'S BID TO ESCAPE FEMALE CIRCUMCISION IN KURIA

BY CHRISTINE BUKANIA

WHEN Miriam Ghata Chacha's father passed away, she was in class six. Together with her mother and siblings, she moved in with her grandmother, and her uncle took over the responsibility of educating her.

Although girls and boys in Kuria generally get circumcised around the age of 12, Miriam had been going for seminars during her later primary school years. There, she had learnt that female genital mutilation (FGM) could have negative effects on her health, and that it was her right to refuse. So it was that at 16, her family started exerting pressure on her. "I did not want to go through the rite, but my grandparents and uncles were forcing me to," she recalls.

To ease off some of this pressure, and to buy time for herself, Miriam promised her uncle, who was also her benefactor, that she would undergo FGM as soon as she finished her secondary education.

Time rushed by faster than she had expected, and upon sitting her Kenya Secondary Certificate of Education (KCSE), her family renewed the demands that she gets cut. The big date was December 18, 2014. Her uncle went to the market and bought a bull and foodstuff for the after party. He personally sent invitations to his family and friends.

Miriam was cornered. Out of excuses and false promises, she did the only thing left to do — she ran. "It was my mother that planned my big escape. I think she hates the fact that they forced my older sister to get cut, and she knows the pain of giving birth after FGM," she says. She ran to the Children's Officer of Kuria West, who took her to the Komotobo Rescue Centre, which is run by a church mission and provides refuge to hundreds of girls just like Miriam every year.

Here, girls get a hideaway for the entire circumcision period, they discuss their rights, motivate one another to resist the cut, and contribute their strategies for fighting FGM in their community. "I suggested that they arrest all circumcisers and imprison them for life, and that they should provide free education support for girls who shun the practice, so that other girls can choose education over FGM," Miriam recalls.

Back home, the Children's Officer and the Chief ensured that the circumciser was arrested. "I stayed at the centre until December 28, then I went back home." Miriam had done her calculations carefully. Kuria circumcision season is timed within a specific period in December, and with the



**DETERMINED:** Miriam Chacha volunteers at a school.

circumciser away in prison, her family would have had to send her to Tanzania to get the cut. She knew they would not afford it. For this season at least, she was safe.

In an area where women do not have much say, the defiance Miriam's mother showed by helping her daughter flee had repercussions. She was rebuked and almost thrown out of the family home. But things calmed down with Miriam's return. Unrepentant, the feisty girl declared to her family that she was too old to get the cut. Neither was she remorseful about the expenses her uncle incurred. "They used the foodstuff for Christmas celebrations."

Despite the obvious resistance, Miriam says her uncle is adamant that she goes through the initiation rite during the next season, in two years' time, but she has other plans. She intends to be far away at college, where she would like to take a course in accounting and mix with people from other cultures. Until then, she must hang around and face her family's anger and the ridicule from her age-mates. "I am isolated and called names by most of the girls in my neighborhood," she says.

Miriam perseveres and hopes, even though her future is uncertain. She wonders if her uncle will pay the school fees, now that she has continued to openly defy him. Nonetheless, young dreams are not easy to extinguish. She sees herself many years from now, back in her community, an uncut, educated woman who commands respect not because of the missing parts of her anatomy, but because of the work she will be doing to improve the lives of those around her.

Photo/CHRISTINE BUKANIA