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THE Indigenous

Indigenous Girls' Voices to End FGM/C



AFRICA-LED MOVEMENT | MY POWER
TO END FGM/C | MY VOICE

Samburu Women Trust (SWT) is an indigenous women-led network of indigenous women advancing women and girls rights in pastoralists, hunters and gatherer, women living with disabilities and fisher folks' communities in Kenya.

SWT has been on the forefront advocating inclusiveness and effective participation of the indigenous women in decision making processes at all levels. The organization has for the past 10 years successfully advanced community led advocacy and organizing on women's and girls' rights.

It is also the convener and secretariat of the Coalition of Indigenous Women (CIWO), an advocacy women movement at national level, a loose women movement with more than forty-member (40) drawn from pastoralists, hunter gatherers, women living with disabilities and fisherfolks organizations across the country.



Our VISION

We envision a society that recognizes, promotes and protects the fundamental rights and freedom of women and girls; and ensures full participation of indigenous women in their own development.

Our MISSION

We exist to empower indigenous women and girls claim their human rights, strengthen their capacity to influence local and national policies, add address harmful practices through integrating the role of women as decision-makers in the community.

Our GOAL

We seek to build and enhance indigenous women and girls' capacities using diverse strategies and approaches that are not in conflict with pastoralists cultural practices, address traditional harmful practices that subjugate women position in the society and their roles.

Our CORE VALUES

- Accountability and transparency
- Innovative and Action oriented
- Passion for human rights
- Respect for culture
- Gender equality
- Professionalism
- Integrity

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I use my story to motivate my community see importance of educating girl-child.

Jane Meriwas



Jane is the director of Samburu Women Trust (SWT). She has been at the centre of the war against violation of women rights be they girl child beading, FGM and child marriages. Personally, she is a survivor of FGM. She uses her own experience to campaign for girl-child/ women advancement. We talked to her about her struggles to see advancement of her community.

You are known to have been personally involved in the campaign for the rights of girls and women in general how did you find yourself in this particular field and not others?

Being a pastoralist girl, I went to school by a chance. I am a survivor of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), the environment itself coupled with vastness of the area with limited access to education and health facilities, not forgetting the patriarchy in the society that denies girls and women every opportunity to raise voice and access education and health facilities without further being subjected to approval from elders – this what propel me to campaign the rights of girls and women among indigenous communities – using my story as a motivation factor to enable the community see the importance of educating a girl child and give her the opportunity for leadership.

Samburu is among the last of Kenya's communities that cherish and still maintain a firm grip of its culture, why did the SWT decide to focus on elimination of FGM and what is the position now?

SWT believes in championing the rights of indigenous girls and women, to liberate them by equipping them with skills, knowledge to enable make informed decisions including elimination of #EndFGM in our midst. We use diverse strategies that are home grown solutions across all age-sets (groups), elders, girls, youth and women involvement to enable them develop solutions that address their needs to end gender -based violence in the community. We decided to encourage our communities who are patriarchy in this discussion on GBV as well as FGM to hold candid conversation because it's only us who understand these issues, being survivors of all these violations, we know best how to address them and developed home grown solutions. The position now is that the community is accepting and speaking about FGM openly.

SWT won the war against beading of the Samburu girl-child. What are the lessons learnt and the impact of that success?

Yes, SWT has received numerous commendation and recognition from the community and government for eradication of girl-child beading among the Samburu community including development of zero draft Anti-beading policy to address girl beading in other affected counties.

These positive acceptance and recommendation from the affected community has enabled us to draw lessons and success impact that propel this fight against #EndFGM with the Samburu community because elders believe in our strategies of community engagement hence that trust enable us fight this vice.

What is the relationship between education, FGM and marriage of minors?

The relationship between education in relation to FGM and marriage of minors is that education is key for girls, it give them liberty to have a voice to choose what's right and good for them. When a girl accesses education at an early age, it gets the skills to know where to secure refuge when FGM strikes. In addition, it enables her to evade early marriages that also contributes to the loss of her dignity.

Some opinions hold that CSOs like Samburu Women Trust have not fully incorporated men in the campaign against FGM/ forced child marriage, what's your take?

SWT has positive lessons learnt from the Girl-child beading campaign, where the strategies deployed were community-led solutions which enabled them to own the whole process, which translated to positive results that ended Girl-child beading in Ol Donyiro ward, Isiolo County.

What more is required to completely eradicate FGM and forced child marriages among Samburu community?

Continuous awareness raising through dialogue forums, engaging local radio stations, engaging different age-sets – elders, women, girls, youth and circumcisers, traditional birth attendant, law enforcers are all needed to eradicate FGM not only in Samburu community but in the entire nation of Kenya.

Where do you want to see the Samburu girl-child/ woman in the next ten years?

My aspiration is to see Samburu girls/women get the freedom of choice, dignity to define her body, and voice to standup against patriarchy.

Jane Meriwas

Executive Director
Samburu Women Trust

Kipsing Primary School: An island of hope for vulnerable girls

Kipsing centre lies on a bushy plateau at the foot of the picturesque Lekuruki and Kusokon mountains in Isiolo County. Other numerous tiny mountains that surround the settlement in the distant and the torrid temperatures, makes a visitor feel like he's inside a basin.



Homesteads in Kipsing are covered by shrubs which makes it difficult to tell the expanse of the settlement unless from a highly elevated angle. But the shrubs are a blessing to the residents as they become refuge in the scorching heat during the day.

One of the key features of this settlement is Kipsing primary school. From a casual look, it's your ordinary school in a rural setup-rusty iron sheet roof, dusty masonry walls and whitewashed stones lining the dusty paths.

But this is not just a school. For years it has acted as a refuge for vulnerable young girls running away from one oppressive cultural rite or another. It's the first port of call for girls escaping from perpetrators of female genital mutilation (FGM) or early marriage.

It is in this institution where hopes, confidence and self-esteem for emotionally and physically injured girls are reconstructed to become whole again after a traumatic experience.

It's here that the traumatized girls find a shoulder to cry on, get material support as well as encouragement. It's here that such girls renew their strength to soldier on in the midst of a hostile environment.

"Many of the girls in this community are living under pressure from their relatives to undergo the cut against their wish," soft-spoken Sr. Mary Flora Kanyengera, a guidance and counselling teacher, asserts. "Listening to the girls and their mothers you can see a different mindset- many are helpless in the presence of their fathers and husbands."

FGM is a cultural practice that is deeply rooted in the community because it is a qualifying factor from childhood to womanhood and community members do not want to ease the grip on it.

According to Sr. Flora, many a times girls who have been subjected to FGM against their will suffer psychological trauma before they open up on their experience.

"I had a case where one of the girls was suffering from acute stomach ulcers yet she had everything in her box. It is after prodding her that she disclosed that she had been secretly subjected to FGM and here the journey begins of start counselling her," she recalls.

The girl's father was living with HIV/AIDS and since he did not have a son he feared dying without blessing any of his offspring, so the girl had to undergo FGM against her will to receive the father's blessings.

Teachers of Kipsing primary school have an additional role of protecting the vulnerable girls from proponents of FGM and early marriages and counselling and renewing hopes to those whose rights have been violated in one way or another.

Some time back a male parent stormed the school and took away his 11-year-old daughter and married her off as a second wife to an elderly man. Reason?

"The father claimed he married her off to get money to educate his sons!" Sr Flora points out.

Months later, a day before our interview with Sr Flora, the girl managed to escape back to school. When the father was summoned, he was non-committal on her education. The incident was among the pending issues that Sr Flora was handling before we disrupted her for the interview.

Most girls do not like spending long holidays home where they are exposed to harmful cultural practices. Samburu community believes children born by women who have not undergone FGM are cursed and therefore are supposed to be killed. Sr Flora has encountered cases where girls who get pregnant are forced to get the cut before the child is born.

Back at the Kipsing Catholic Mission Centre, Sr Flora ropes in other members of her congregation in the gospel against FGM. Whenever they go out to the community for the weekly *Jumuia meetings* on Tuesday, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, they talk about FGM and its harm to the society.

"They encourage them (girls) to run and go to the administration when things are tough. Some skip chiefs and go straight to the GSU camp," she said.

Sixty-eight girls in the school have so far attended mentorship sessions through a programme by Samburu Women Trust. Sr Flora says the programme is transforming the girls at a phenomenal rate.

"These mentorships are making a lot of difference and whatever they are learning is sticking in their minds. They have started to open up more about their lives," she says.

Once in a while the school also encourages some female teachers from Samburu community to mentor the pupils and give the disadvantage of FGM from a medical perspective. Transformation of societies is normally driven by a very bad people. Sr Flora silently champions against FGM in her own small way.

Although the war against female genital mutilation is yet to be totally won, there have been critical milestones that have been covered.

There have been a lot of improvement compared to some past years as a result of awareness by civil society organizations, among other actors. As such more and more vulnerable girls are escaping or taking themselves to school, chief's office or police station whenever threatened with FGM.

"The level of awareness has been good- we're at about 30 percent because of the efforts of CSOs. But so long as illiteracy is high, eradication of FGM will be hard," notes Kipsing chief Samuel Loltianya. He believes the main change agent is education.

He once handled a case of a newly married couple where the groom's father rejected his son's bride because she was not circumcised.

"It's an emotive issue that can pose security threat to those opposing it. It can be eradicated just the way beading was. In some areas like Laikipia FGM is almost ending," he said.

The administrator proposes that CSOs target men in their anti-FGM sensitizations efforts since they are the main decision-makers within the traditional structure of the Samburu community.

Take for instance, a man like Lenomoira Paris, 45, whom we found at the chief's court at Kipsing. Although he knows there's law prohibiting FGM, Lenomoira wonders why that law is in conflict with Samburu culture. To him his Samburu culture is apparently supreme to the law.

"Our forefathers were practicing it. It's in our culture so we don't know of its ills. We have not seen any benefit of not circumcising girls," he states through an interpreter.

Ironically, Lenomoira has three daughters in Grade 3, Grade 2 and PP1 whom he plans to educate to the university level.

His decision as to whether to subject daughters to FGM or not depends on the position of the community- if the majority are not for it, that's the side he will be.

Lenomoira's ignorance underscores the need for CSOs focused on ending FGM to target the Samburu man as the next frontier for awareness on ending FGM. Such awareness should culminate with Nyiro - a declaration by men folk outlawing FGM.

The encouraging thing, however, is that in the depth of this vast area are heroes and heroines scattered all over. They are men, women, young men, girls and professional who, against the prevailing odds have stood up for the rights of girl-child and women in general. These are the people who are slowly but courageously transforming the community towards human advancement.

Those whose inspiring stories have been narrated here are just a fraction of the growing number of anti-FGM champions. There are many more in the depths of Kipsing and Oldonyiro that we could not have captured due to limitation of space and time.

There is light at the end of the tunnel.

I want to finish my studies and help my family live a better life

Most people remember year 2020 for the pain and panic that the Covid pandemic caused world over. But MNL, a 16-year-old class eight pupil at Kipsing Primary School remembers that year differently.



It was the period when she was subjected to female genital mutilation. The onset of the Corona pandemic had disrupted the school calendar and pupils had to spend long holidays home.

Young girls like MNL living in a community where female genital mutilation is still deeply entrenched were at a risk of being forced to undergo the cut.

"It happened that my elder brother was supposed to undergo circumcision. A boy in a family cannot be circumcised when her sister has not undergone through the FGM. It's a taboo in Samburu community. So I had to undergo the cut," MNL remembers.

Remembering the pain that she felt and the blood she lost, MNL regrets why she never escaped.

"It was not something easy. I wish I had the power to resist. I was too young.. ..I was not enlightened on the dangers of FGM," she says with a tinge of bitterness.

MNL parents had separated when she was eight years old. Her mother went one way and her drunkard father the other, leaving her under the care of her grandmother.

MNL was dropped off at chief's office at Kipsing. The chief summoned the parents and ordered them to enroll her to school immediately.

"The chief told them that if they neglect me again, I'll be taken away to a school where they shall never see me again," she says.

In school she campaigns against FGM among her peers using her terrible experience she underwent through two years ago.

"I want to become an FGM champion to help many other girls not to undergo the pain I that I went through," MNL says. She is lucky to have gone back to school after the rite as many girls are normally married off after the cut.

MNL is among anti-FGM champions under Samburu Women Trust girls' mentorship programme. Apart from learning about the dangers of FGM, the girls are taught on boosting self-esteem, confidence and girls' collective power at schools.

Despite the challenges facing her, MNL is studying hard with an aim of becoming a medical doctor to help her family to lead better lives. Her mother survives by distilling a local gin (chang'aa).

Two of her brothers have already dropped out of school due to poverty. One finished class eight in 2018 but he could not proceed despite passing the exams with 390 points. The other one finished school in 2019 but cannot collect his certificate due to fees balance.

For her she balances time to study and helping her mother in household chores. She doesn't have a good environment to do her studies at home. All in all, MNL is determined to finish her education and influence change in her Samburu community.

Months into their absence from home, an uncle came and went with her to his home in Ngare Ndare. Here she was to assist in herding his livestock- goats and sheep.

As young as she was, she was adorned in beaded necklaces and bangles – an indicator of a typical traditional Samburu girl.

One day as she herded her uncle's livestock, she lost some sheep and on returning home in the evening she was thoroughly beaten up. That's when she made up her mind to escape back to her home in Kipsing.

The following day she drove her uncle's sheep and goats to the pasture abandoned them and escaped. She hitched a lift to Kipsing from security patrol vehicle belonging to a local wildlife conservancy.



She escaped forced FGM by attending SWT mentorship programme

In April 2023, *Happiness L. escaped undergoing Female Genital Mutilation by a whisker. Her brothers were undergoing circumcision and her estranged father has been exerting a lot pressure on his wife to subject Happiness and her sister to the harmful cultural practice.

It is a taboo in Samburu culture for a boy to be circumcised before the family's eldest daughter has gone through FGM.

The father is also apparently worried that his daughters will not get Samburu men to marry if they do not go through this rite of passage. Another pressure point has been Happiness's grandmother and maternal uncles. They have been putting pressure on their mother to subject them to FGM and marry them off instead of educating them.

By sheer coincidence, Samburu Women Trust had organized a mentorship programme at Oldonyiro on the day her brothers were circumcised. *Happiness had been identified as a participant and was not there to undergo the rite of passage.

Her father exerted a lot of pressure on her mother to produce her daughter to undergo the cut but she was nowhere to be found.

By the end of the mentorship session, her resolve of becoming a champion of anti-FGM had been strengthened double-fold.

Luckily, *Happiness has the backing of her mother Purity. Despite being subjected to intense pressure by her estranged husband, brothers and her mother to have the daughters undergo the cut and marry them off, Purity has remained steadfast.

"I have completely rejected to subject my daughters to FGM despite all this pressure. I am a church elder who has been empowered. I cannot subject my daughters to that torture by removing what God gave them," says Purity, a mother of four boys and girls.



This is not a very popular stand among the Samburu community especially those living around Kipsing. Despite the Kenya government criminalizing female genital mutilation, the practice is still rampant in many Samburu families. For fear that their daughters would be stigmatized, many mothers subject their daughters to FGM - albeit secretly again for fear of law enforcers.

"It's possible to eliminate FGM. But we are not out of the woods yet. Civil society organizations should not fall into temptation of ending their anti-FGM and child marriages programmes, assuming that the war has been won," she says.

Unlike in the past, there are no elaborate circumcision ceremonies around Kipsing and Oldonyiro areas. Some families are still subjecting their daughters to the cut secretly to avoid reported by civil society activists and eventually get arrested by law enforcers.

Once in a while the husband passes by Purity's homestead demanding that the girls must undergo FGM. Purity reacts by threatening to call the police and human rights activists if he persists with that issue.

Purity believes her daughters and any other Samburu girl, have God-given rights that nobody-including parents should violate. She is happy with the efforts that Samburu Women Trust have done.

*Happiness, a standard Eight pupil, aspires to become a doctor to enable Kipsing community access quality healthcare. The mentorship programme by Samburu Women Trust has helped her boost her self-esteem and confidence.

****The name has been changed.***



Purity



High drop out of my classmates made me a defender of girl rights



In January 2010, Texan Learpanai joined Form One at Kipsing secondary school. It was a very vibrant class of 36 students. Out of this number, 17 were female. This was an encouraging number considering that Samburu community has a well-entrenched traditional patriarchal system that does not regard education of girl-child.

As years passed by girl students were dropping out one by one. By the time Learpanai wrote the Kenya certificate of secondary education (KCSE) in 2013, only six girls sat for the final exams with him. The rest had dropped out.

"I felt bad that all these girls had fallen along the way. Even the six who finished had been forced to undergo FGM but had determinedly struggled through to finish their secondary school education," recalls Learpanai with a sad not in his voice.

This particular incident served as a wakeup call to him. Now more empowered than the ordinary *moran* in his village, he desired change for his community. He knew that he was the one to bring that change in his own way.

By the time he was finishing secondary school education, Samburu Women Trust was in the thick of war against girl-child beading- another oppressive traditional cultural practice that has since been rooted out of Samburu community. Child beading is a harmful

cultural practice that enhances morality while keeping the culture alive. *"Child beading can briefly be described as a community-sanctioned, non-marital sexual relationship between Samburu men in the 'warrior' age group, and young Samburu girls who are not yet eligible to be married."*

"I resolved to join hands with SWT in the war. As a *moran* then, I started canvassing for the girl child rights and the harm of FGM among fellow *morans*. It seemed strange but they would listen to me because of my knowledge," says Learpanai.

As he pursued a career in teaching at Presbyterian Teachers College, Learpanai was also involved in the mentorship of girls during holidays.

Now, an experienced guidance and counselling teacher at Raap primary school, several kilometres outside Oldonyiro market, he is spearheading an initiative known as 'TEAM' (Together Everyone Achieves More) which moves from one school to another encouraging the girls. Those who have gone through the SWT programme have become mentors of others. So far, this initiative is in five schools.

The initiative targets girls in primary, secondary and even those in the village. At the beginning they used sweets to motivate the girls to attend the counselling sessions. Eventually, they have been able to identify two girl leaders in every school to be trainers of trainers (ToT).

"The initiative has yielded very positive results with a big number of girls finishing their primary and secondary education without getting the cut, but there's still a big room for improvement," Learpanai says giving a mark of 20 percent success.

Encouragingly, Samburu Women Trust was struggling alone to fight the vice in Oldonyiro, but today the voices that are opposed to the FGM culture are increasing giving hope of a better tomorrow to the Samburu girl-child.

According to Learpanai, there is a school of mind among the community patriarchs that still believes in FGM and would not hesitate invoke a curse on those opposed to the practice.

When you engage in anti-FGM activities as a man you become a marked and sometimes viewed as an outcast for 'misleading' the community.

Often some community forces unhappy with the anti-FGM campaign and sabotage his efforts to sensitize the community.

"When I need to talk to parents, I can't mobilize directly because they will be prevailed upon not to show up because they know I'll be talking against FGM. So I use other ways to mobilize," Learpanai says.

He proposes a sensitization initiative targeting elders from all the nine Samburu clans where they can make a commitment to end FGM as a harmful and retrogressive culture and bless all those campaigning against it.

Right from his *moran* days, Learpanai resolved to be different from his peers by believing in the Samburu girl-child and pursuing her rights. It's a path that many of his age-mates have not chosen. Texan Learpanai is anti-FGM champion.









Nean Kididi's

She stopped 'cutting' girls and turned to cutting trees

Nean Kididi's dilemma

Nean Rindole Kididi's manyatta lies about 100 metres off the dusty Kipsing- Oldonyiro road; about a kilometre from Kipsing centre just after crossing the wide seasonal river.

There isn't much to look at in her homestead except for the two traditional huts in the middle of the wind-swept compound which is ringed with dry thorny branches of acacia tree, a livestock pen and a mean-looking dog stretching its body in front of the main hut.

Nean- a 61-year-old diminutive woman looking ten years older than the age on her national identity card, moves around unsettlingly as we approach her apparently not sure how to receive.

Her husband, Leputai Lemungesi also emerges from the hut in crutches and approaches where we are standing as his wife ransacks the two huts for seats.

Despite her small physique and calm demeanor, many girls targeted for FGM shudder at the mention of her name. She has been the female circumciser around Kipsing and outlying areas.

"I have nothing –no sheep, goats or cattle. I have already quit that dirty work to look for another form of livelihood," she says after handing us two old plastic chairs.

Nean says she resorted to circumcision of girls after raiders drove away the entire flock of her family's goats and sheep and impoverished it in one night.

Her husband was incapacitated after he was involved in a motorbike accident and dislocated his hip and now depends on her for survival. Nean says she turned to brewing and distillation of a traditional gin before she was overwhelmed by the temptation to be doing female genital mutilation of girls around Kipsing.

"I would be paid 2,000 shillings for every girl that I cut. It's a lot of money for me because we are poor," she said, but quickly adds that she has not done any FGM for the past year.

So feared was Nean that her granddaughter has never gone back home since going for education in Nyahururu, Laikipia. The grandfather says she fears being forced to undergo FGM.

Lately, Nean has ceased distilling the traditional gin 'after realizing that we are drinking too much with my husband.'

Oblivious of her contribution to climate change, Nean now survives by burning and selling wood charcoal to support the family and educate her son. On average she sells four bags of charcoal in a month fetching 900 Kenya shillings on each. She does not relate the prolonged droughts, flash floods, conflict over water and pasture on her charcoal burning activity.

To Nean cutting down trees and burning charcoal is a lesser evil compared to subjecting girls to risky FGM procedure.

"Female genital mutilation is not good and doing it is a very risky job- you can get arrested, get infected or you infect her with a disease or the subject can die in your hands in which case it will be like I have killed her. It's a dirty job," she says as she spits on the ground.

Nean never went through any form of training or apprenticeship on carrying out FGM. She doesn't know the action to take in case her victim develops complications.

All she needed was the courage driven by need for money to fend for her family. Little did she know that her action have a ripple effect on the entire community.

Grandmother pulled me out of school to herd father's goats and sheep, but I escaped

In 2016, Ripitoi's mother enrolled her to the Play Group class of a nursery school near her home about a kilometre or two west of Oldonyiro market. Though she doesn't know how to read or write, Teresa's mother knew that education was the best thing to bequeath her daughter.

But her mother-in-law (Ripitoi's grandmother) didn't think so. So when she learnt that Teresa, then aged 8, had started attending school, she vigorously opposed it ordering the mother to pull her out.

She bedecked her with traditional beaded necklaces and bangles on her wrists and sent her off to the fields around her home to look after her father's goats and sheep. She was too young to fathom the implication of her grandmother's action.

One day Ripitoi's step mother approached her mother with a request: "Let Teresa come over to my home to help me with grazing my sheep and goats since I am heavily pregnant with a child." Ironically, her daughters were in school. Teresa's mother agreed.

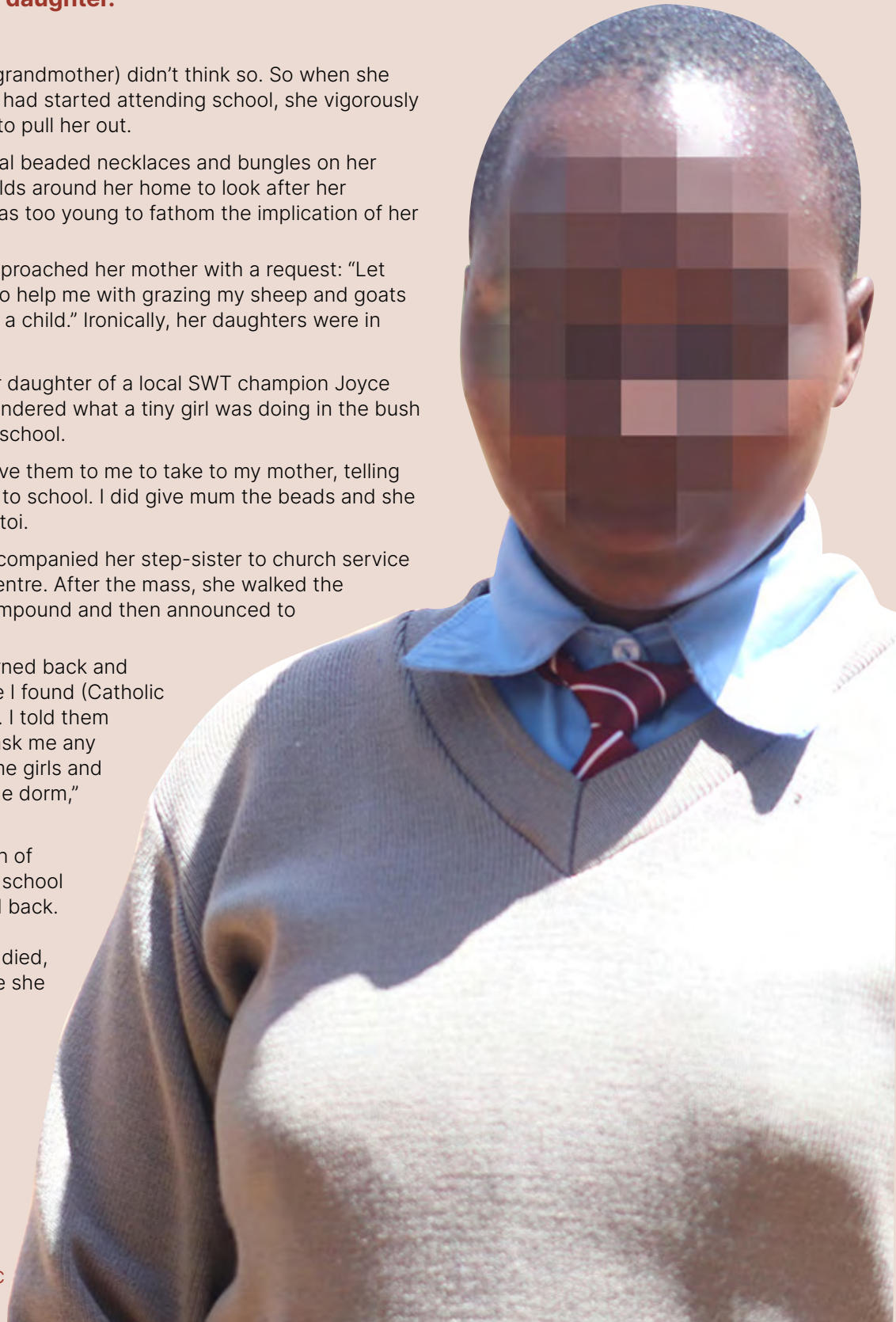
While herding livestock, an older daughter of a local SWT champion Joyce Lesoito, approached her and wondered what a tiny girl was doing in the bush yet girls of her age should be in school.

"She removed the beads and gave them to me to take to my mother, telling me to tell my mother to take me to school. I did give mum the beads and she ever uttered a word," recalls Ripitoi.

The following Sunday, Ripitoi accompanied her step-sister to church service at Oldonyiro. Catholic Mission centre. After the mass, she walked the step-sister out of the church compound and then announced to her:

"I am not going back home'. I turned back and headed straight to church where I found (Catholic nun) sister and Fr Peter Gitonga. I told them I wanted to learn. They did not ask me any other question. Sister called some girls and requested them to take me to the dorm," she recollects.

That is how her journey in search of knowledge at Oldonyiro primary school began and she has never looked back. She is now in Grade 7. While her paternal grandmother has since died, she can't remember the last time she met her father but it was before she joined Oldonyiro primary school eight years ago.





Although her mother visits her frequently, Ripitoi rarely visits her home apparently for fear of being pressurized to undergo FGM. She spends her holidays at the Catholic Mission which is near the school. Her absence from home has kept her safe from the harmful cultural practices.

“FGM is a harmful practice. It leads to a lot of bleeding and those who undergo through it have difficult labour during child birth. I have seen it happen in my community,” she states.

Ripitoi has been attending a lot of mentorship programmes organized by Samburu Women Trust and has learnt a lot from them. She discusses with her peers about the harm caused by FGM to those affected individually and to society in general. She also speaks to her mother and other women about it, too.

This way Ripitoi influences transformation of her Samburu community in her own small way. She ranks among top seven in her academic performance and aims to become a medical doctor.

She is an inspiration to many of her peers in and outside Oldonyiro primary school.



‘The Girls’ forum’ is transforming *Morans* into defenders of Girl-child rights

Miriam Napiyok Ekiru, a guidance and counselling teacher at Oldonyiro primary, is determined to see the success of the girl-child in her community. She is one of the facilitators for the Samburu Women Trust mentorship programme.



Miriam Napiyok Ekiru

Her major concern is the existence of female genital mutilation, early pregnancies and child marriages. After girls go through the mentorship programme, Miriam follows up with them during the holidays since it is during that period that they become more exposed and vulnerable.

“I normally follow on what they do once they close the school. I can say that how they disseminate the information that they learn during the mentorship sessions is very impactful,” Miriam says of girls who have undergone through the SWT mentorship programme.

The teacher believes the war against FGM, early pregnancies and child marriages is slowly being won as the level of awareness increases. More and more girls faced with the threat of forced FGM and early marriages are running away and know where to escape to.

“For instance, last week there was a Grade Four girl from Laikipia who escaped to the (Oldonyiro) catholic mission as her father was about to ‘sell’ her off. Girls are running many kilometres to report to the police station before they are brought to school here,” says Miriam.

She attributes the trend mostly to the training that Samburu Women Trust has been conducting under the Mentorship Programme. The girls are taught on courage, building confidence, boosting self-esteem and positive attitude.

Together with several lady teachers and one male at Oldonyiro primary school, Miriam has initiated what has been dubbed 'The Girls' Forum'. This is a forum where girls and boys in Grade five, six, seven and eight or any other pupil who has reached puberty are put in one class and engage through debates and drama, twice a term.

The teachers normally contribute from their savings some money to buy refreshments like soft drinks and biscuits as a motivation to the pupils.

"We decided to include boys so that they can go and talk to their fathers to remove that notion in their minds that girls should be subjected to FGM and married off instead of educating them," says Miriam.

During the holidays, Miriam tracks the progress of the girls by constantly keeping in touch with them and their parents. According to her, the number of cases of girl pupils dropping out of school due to pregnancy has dropped significantly as a result of such efforts.

"It's encouraging that the (anti-FGM) fire is still burning and those targeted are increasingly becoming aware that they can live normal, and perhaps even more prosperous, lives without it," she says.

The involvement of government administrators particularly chiefs has helped a lot.



Oldonyiro View

**I will not subject
my daughters to
FGM – it's harmful,
it's risky**



Njabar Lesinkiran

Njabar Lesinkiran is a typical Samburu rural woman but quite organized if the look of her manyatta is anything to go by- a neatly swept compound with well-maintained circular thorn fence around the neat igloo-like huts.

Two acacia trees at the centre of the manyatta provide a soothing comfort from the high temperatures of Oldonyiro. We sit on a log under one of the trees so that we get a clear view of the rolling hills in the distance.

Welcome to Njabar's home at Labarishereki. The home is just behind Labarishereki primary and secondary schools, about ten or so kilometres south west of Oldonyiro market in Isiolo County.

Njabar is 50 years old but cannot converse in any other language except her mother tongue. She adores and observes Samburu culture so much that she cannot answer me when I ask her the name of her husband.

"In Samburu culture, a wife is not supposed to mention the name of her husband," Boni my interpreter helps. She's in a polygamous marriage and her husband Lesinkiran is not always in her home. He has three wives.

“We used to do it in our culture but some of us have come to understand its shortcomings. I have witnessed women dying shortly after giving birth and we ‘ve realized that it’s not something good,” she says.

Njabar has been a traditional midwife and has seen firsthand women developing difficult labour during childbirth – some even dying days after giving birth- as a result of undergoing female genital mutilation.

To set a good example, she has resolved that her last two daughters will not undergo the cut although they have reached the age. The fear among her peers who succumb to pressure to subject their daughters to FGM is that they will not get Samburu suitors if they do not do it. However, that does not seem to worry Njabar.

“We pray a lot for our daughters not to get pregnant out of wedlock because such children are supposed to be killed according to our culture. The community does not accept them,” she says.

Njabar understands that the people living around her are the main factor in perpetuating or eradicating retrogressive cultures like FGM. If they say there are circumcising, the rest of the community does it. So quietly, Njabar has been influencing fellow women in the village to support and adopt her stand on FGM- quietly because it is a sensitive and emotional issue.

“Some of the villagers, mostly women and a few men, have supported me in this noble crusade,” she adds.

Luckily for Njabar, she has two co-wives and the husband takes time to visit her home. As the daughters grow up (one is 13 and the other 14), she knows the husband will eventually wonder why she was not summoning him to bless the girls which ordinarily happens before they undergo the cut.

“I don’t go around shouting that my daughters have not undergone FGM because that would be a very risky thing to do. I just resolved that I will not do it and kept my silence. I encourage other women in my village to do so because we are living in a community where men have the say,” says Njabar.

She has not spoken to her girls yet on her decision not subject them to FGM and they have not asked her about it too.

“I am waiting for them to mature a bit before I sit down with them so that we could talk as women,” she says.

The blessing rite involves a father pouring ghee on their forehead- a ritual which Njabar personally feels contributes to FGM. In spite of her efforts, she believes the war on FGM cannot be won without involving men since their word is final in line with the community culture.

In addition, she feels sensitization against harmful practices should be done more on local radios to drive the message home. Through her bold stand and efforts to sensitize fellow village folks about the harmful effects of FGM, Njabar is a hero!

Despite being ardent practitioner of Samburu culture and her interior rural setting notwithstanding, Njabar has courageously opposed one of the most harmful and also emotive cultures- female genital mutilation.

Single-handedly, Njabar has been leading a quiet campaign against female genital mutilation in her conservative and rigid Labarishereki community environment.

I blessed sons, daughters to exercise liberty and marry whom they love



At 55, Simon Lekoona would ordinarily be in an age-group of elders that is considered to be the defender of culture and morals within his Samburu community.

But he has chosen a different path – a very different one from that of many of his age mates. Unlike many men in his community, Lekoona has been waging a brave campaign against three harmful cultural practices in the Samburu community that are oppressive to women; female genital mutilation, child marriages and killing of children born of uncircumcised mothers.

As a pastor of Gospel Church International in Oldonyiro, Lekoona, loves his bible and lives close to the good book. Lekoona tackles many of his daily challenges from a biblical perspective.

When we arrive at his humble abode at Oldonyiro market centre and settle down under a shady tree, we ask him about his stand of FGM among the local members of his Samburu community. Before uttering a word, Lekoona retreats back to the house and emerges seconds later with small, dog-eared bible and reads a verse.

"I read the bible to them. There's no place where it advocates for FGM. I told them I'll embrace all other Samburu cultural practices except the three," he recalls.

This response sparked a debate in the gathering as they sought the origin of FGM practice among the Samburu. According to Lekoona, FGM was a practice that started to suppress and oppress the Samburu woman right from the word go!

It happened one time that Samburu men were very few as a result of war and other calamities. On the other hand the community had women too and the community decided to circumcise them to prevent them from wandering elsewhere in such of men.

"After reminding them of this account, I told them that the Samburu community has more men today and therefore they should stop subjecting their girls to FGM and they fully agreed with me," Lekoona says.

And to demonstrate that he was preaching water and drinking water, the pastor summoned all his children, both sons and daughters, and blessed them giving them the liberty to marry whomever they want- whether cut or uncut.

"The children, especially my sons, were very happy. One of them married a woman who has not undergone FGM and they have a three-year-old son who is very healthy contrary to the cultural myth," he adds with a sense of pride.

His sons and daughters are all married. With his firm stand against the three vices, Lekoona has managed to convert many men to reject FGM and girl-child marriages. He says the war has been won 60 percent so far.

For his brave, unwavering stance against the harmful cultural practices, for using his position as a pastor to speak for the Samburu girl-child rights and for influencing his peers in the community, Simon Lekoona is a champion!

"Female genital mutilation has no place in Christianity," he says with finality, then adds as an afterthought: "There's no difference in the eyes of God between the cut and the uncut. Furthermore, the world has moved forward and the uncut is even perceived as more wholesome."

In 2003, when he converted into Christianity and started speaking against FGM, marriages of minors and killing of children born of uncircumcised women alongside the gospel of his church to the Oldonyiro community, some highly charged elders confronted him questioning why he was being in conflict with the Samburu culture.



Simon Lekoona

Armed *Morans* confronted us as we rescued a minor from marriage



Sometime in 2021, Barnabas Kimotok, the assistant county commissioner of Oldonyiro Sub-County in Isiolo County, received a call. It was a report about an underage girl who was being married off at Lotingai village some kilometres outside Oldonyiro market centre.

He quickly assembled his security team- the officer commanding (police) station, administration police commander and three armed police officers- and set out to the scene to rescue the girl. The planned rescue was unsuccessful.

"It was a big ceremony and when they spotted us, the *morans* fled with the girl. But moments later they regrouped and charged at us with spears. We were five of us and the *morans* outnumbered us by far so we retreated for our own security," recalls Kimotok.

An almost similar incident would replay in July this year at Namelok village. Again, Kimotok received a call from one of the Samburu Women Trust anti-FGM champions reporting that an underage girl was being married off.





Police, progressive citizens and Samburu Women Trust champions stormed the homestead. It was a big crowd and the *morans* again became defensive facilitated the suspect to run away with the girl.

“The girl rescued herself on Thursday last week (September 14, 2023) and the man who had married her was arrested immediately,” says Kimotok.

As an administrator in this area, FGM and marriages of minors are some of thorny issues that Kimotok has to contend with in his day to day work. Administrative chiefs and assistant chiefs working closely with the community and CSOs are critical players in enforcing as well as protection of women and girl-child rights.

Kimotok says positive change has been noted in the past four years as far as the war on FGM and marriages of minors are concerned and estimates the success to be at 60 percent.

He enumerates several indicators to support his estimates; first, there have been increased reporting by the minors faced with threat of FGM and early marriage. Many would-be victims are now fleeing to the administrators’ office, police station, school or church compounds.

Secondly, an increased number of community members have agreed to report on planned FGM and child marriages apparently because they do not approve of these practices.

Thirdly, the presence of SWT anti-FGM champions at the grassroots is helping in eradicating these vices as they are able to reach out to the relevant stakeholders faster.

Fourth, there has been increased sensitization initiatives by civil society organizations like SWT, National Government Administration Officers (NGAO), among other stakeholders.

“We’ve been taking a lot of time to explain to our chiefs and village elders the repercussions of condoning FGM or marriage of minors- that if you don’t report an incident within your area you risk prosecution,” says Kimotok.

By September, only two cases had been reported -the one in Namelok and another involving a migrant from Kajiado. “But we can’t rule out the possibility that it’s happening secretly,” he’s quick to add.



Areas in the interior of his area especially where there is no mobile phone network still pose a challenge to the fighters of these vices. Some conservative families are migrating to such areas before subjecting their daughters to FGM. They know reporting them would be difficult due to communication network.

“In January, we arrested a man for subjecting his two daughters to FGM after we got a tipoff from members of the public. He had migrated from Kajiado,” he says.

To completely win the war, Kimotok says there is need for all the stakeholders, especially CSOs and NGAO, to coordinate their activities. “For instance, sometimes we receive information that a certain CSO is having a meeting with the public and the chief, the ACC or OCS is not aware,” he says.

In addition, some champions identified by some CSOs are not linked to the security offices. Sometimes, they can get resistance from the community which can be risky without government officers being present.

According to Kimotok, there is also need for agencies championing the rights of girls and women to onboard men so that they can embrace change.



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