On the 4th of June, 2019, His Excellency (H.E) President Uhuru Kenyatta made a firm commitment to put an end to female genital mutilation (FGM) by the year 2022. The enactment of the Prohibition of FGM Act, 2011 was a key milestone in the campaign to end FGM in the country. Despite the legislative and policy measures put in place to prohibit the practice, it still persists in certain communities.

The President reaffirmed his commitment to end FGM by 2022 on the 8th of November, 2019 at the High Level Elders Forum, at State House. The event convened cultural and religious leaders from communities with high rates of FGM. It was a milestone in the fight against FGM, as the leaders signed commitments to support the President's vision. During the occasion, the President directed the relevant government agencies to ensure that the law is enforced and that action be taken against all perpetrators.

In the recently concluded Nairobi Summit on International Conference on Population and Development at 25 (ICPD25), the President reiterated his commitment to end FGM by 2022, by bolstering coordination in the areas of legislation, policy, communication and advocacy as well as evidence generation.

“I would like to restate my personal commitment and that of the Government of Kenya to providing the requisite leadership to ensure that Female Genital Mutilation ends in this generation.” - H.E Uhuru Kenyatta
On 6th February 2019, the Loita Maasai community came together to witness their clan elders declare abandonment of FGM and bless the newly named Loita Rite of Passage.

This event was the first of its kind in the community. The clan elders publicly blessed and embraced the Loita Rite of Passage. This signified that women and girls who undergo this rite could now participate in all aspects of the maasai cultural life.

On 4th and 5th of February 2019, representatives from state and non-state organizations from the 22 counties with high rates of FGM convened at the Maasai Mara University in Narok, for the second annual National Conference to end FGM.

The delegates in conference took stock of achievements, challenges and lessons learnt in the campaign to end FGM. The Conference culminated in the signing of a Resolution re-affirming the commitment by all stakeholders to eradicate the practice.

On the 17th of April, 2019, the Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender through the Anti-FGM Board, UNFPA and UNICEF Kenya brought together representatives from the governments of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Republic of Kenya, the Federal Republic of Somalia, the United Republic of Tanzania and the Republic of Uganda, to adopt the Declaration and Action Plan to end Cross-Border FGM.

The meeting, which was convened as a forum to galvanize political action in the fight against the cross-border dimensions of FGM, ended with reiterations regarding the importance of strong partnerships, multi-sector engagement, harmonization of national laws and policies to end cross-border FGM.
Johari Beads Initiative

Johari is a Swahili word which means precious and adored. In this context it connotes a jewel embodying the African and particularly Kenyan woman’s story. African women and girls are precious assets to society, epitomizing a mix of positive cultural values, tenacity in the face of adversity and a steady humility. They harbor incubated potential, which if cultivated can nurture their confidence and self-esteem as change agents within and beyond their immediate communities.

The Johari Beads Initiative is a partnership between UNFPA, the Anti-FGM Board, Ushanga Kenya Initiative and EcoBank which is geared towards the economic empowerment of women.

The Initiative seeks to transform bead-work practiced by pastoralist women into a viable commercial enterprise which creates sustainable livelihoods in FGM practising communities. It will be implemented in seven counties, namely: Narok, Kajiado, Samburu, West Pokot, Elgeyo Marakwet, Marsabit and Baringo over a period of five years.

Through the production, marketing and branding of the Johari Beads on a large scale, communities will be economically empowered, support the education of girls, engage in community based FGM prevention and protection interventions, thereby contributing to abandonment of the vice.

The Initiative will mobilize women into groups, provide infrastructure and the requisite access to local and international markets.

The Johari beads initiative is a partnership between UNFPA, the Anti FGM Board, Ushanga Kenya initiative and EcoBank.
Formalization Of The Johari Beads Initiative Partnership

On the 27th of June 2019, H.E Deputy President Dr. William Ruto officiated the signing of the partnership between UNFPA Kenya, Anti-FGM Board, Eco-Bank and Ushanga Kenya for the Johari beads initiative. This initiative is a national project that seeks to not only end FGM but also empower women and girls by creating a sustainable source of income through bead work.

The Deputy President noted that FGM is a blatant violation of the rights of women and girls and affirmed the government's support as well as commitment to explore all available opportunities to work with partners towards its eradication.

Johari Beads Initiative Stakeholders Meeting

On July 11, 2019, stakeholders from community organizations, the private and public sector, as well as community leaders, convened together with the Johari Beads Initiative partners to deliberate and draw up a road map that would ensure a meaningful and sustainable process to empower girls and women.

The elders who are the custodians of culture, noted that involvement and partnerships among young people, women's organizations on the ground, as well as government officials is crucial to ending FGM. They also highlighted the necessity of forming oversight and monitoring committees to educate communities on the importance of abandoning the practice of FGM.

Stakeholders at the meeting were in agreement that economic empowerment without behaviour change cannot end FGM because the practice is rooted in cultural behaviour norms. Programmes targeting FGM should therefore include components on behaviour change communication.
The FGM to Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Initiative was formed to encourage the use of sciences as a solution to the complex problems faced by girls in marginalized communities. Partners in the Initiative include UNFPA Kenya, Brands and Beyond, KEPSA, AMREF and the East African Community of Women in Energy.

Against that backdrop, a breakfast meeting was convened in October 2019 to create awareness about the Initiative and establish ways of integrating science, technology, engineering and mathematics into the daily lives of girls from counties with high rates of FGM, to realize their potential and tackle challenges.

The initiative seeks to rescue girls from FGM, early marriages and teenage pregnancies.

"We as Parliamentarians have made laws to strengthen the Anti-FGM Board but as long as one girl remains vulnerable to FGM, our work remains incomplete” Hon. Beatrice Elachi

"We must be able to change the narratives on FGM and put an end to it” Dr. Olajide Ademola
High Level Elders Forum To End Female Genital Mutilation

On the 8th of November 2019 at State House, H.E President Uhuru Kenyatta hosted religious and cultural leaders from 22 counties with high prevalence rates of FGM. In the presence of development partners and representatives of various governments, the community leaders signed commitments affirming their support of the President's vision to end FGM by 2022.

The elders committed to lead community dialogue, convene education sessions and issue statements and public declarations renouncing FGM.

Speaking at the ceremony which was also used to launch the National Policy on the Eradication of FGM, the President thanked the elders for leading the onslaught against FGM and assured them of the government's backing.

On his part, UNFPA Representative, Dr. Ademola Olajide thanked the religious and cultural leaders for their commitment and efforts at ending FGM, and reassured them of UNFPA's support.

"FGM is a retrogressive practice whose continued existence in our country in actual fact, it assaults our individual and national consciousness...." H.E Uhuru Kenyatta

"The vision of H.E President Uhuru Kenyatta to accelerate #EndFGM aligns with transformative results of the UNFPA, UNFPA is committed to support the Presidential vision”

Dr. Olajide Ademola
On the 8th of November, 2019, H.E President Uhuru Kenyatta launched the Johari Beads Initiative at State House, Nairobi. The Initiative, aims at promoting entrepreneurship through beadwork, by building the capacity of women and strengthening their bargaining power.

On the same day he also launched the National Policy for the Eradication of Female Genital Mutilation towards a society free from harmful cultural practices. The policy identifies key issues and proposes high impact strategies to address FGM across various sectors with emphasis on community participation.
Partners from the Johari Beads Initiative led by UNFPA Kenya Representative, Dr. Ademola Olajide presented the Johari Beads to H.E Deputy President Dr. William Ruto at his offices on December 10, 2019.

At the ceremony, H.E. Deputy President Dr. William Ruto affirmed the government’s full commitment to achieve H.E President Uhuru Kenyatta’s declaration to put an end to FGM by 2022. He noted that FGM and early marriage undermine the health, education and social economic well-being of women and girls.

“Engaging the community as a whole to eradicate FGM is key in ensuring that women and girls realize their full potential.” H.E Dr. William Ruto
With the view of ensuring that the President’s directive is implemented, the Ministry traversed five counties, namely: Kajiado, Meru, Tharaka Nithi, Samburu and Migori during the month of December 2019. The anti-FGM strategy was articulated during these visits.

“**The county commissioner framework holds the key to putting an end to FGM in Kenya**” Prof. Margaret Kobia

Following the H.E. President Uhuru Kenyatta’s commitment to end FGM by 2022, the Ministry of Public Service Youth and Gender, under the able leadership of Cabinet Secretary, Prof. Margaret Kobia, with support from UNFPA developed a strategy to end FGM.

The strategy entailed conducting grass roots consultative meetings with County Commissioners and Chiefs from the 22-hotspot counties with high rates of FGM, to ensure that the President’s commitment was well understood.

The 5 counties were visited as part of a larger strategy that the government of Kenya has developed, and which will be rolled out to all the 22 counties with high prevalence rates of FGM.

The existing cross border mobility in certain counties has created unique challenges in the campaign to end FGM. An example is Migori and Kajiado Counties where the Kuria and Maasai communities respectively, traverses the Kenya-Tanzania border.
In December 2019, Kajiado County launched a robust Anti-FGM policy designed to end FGM at the community level. The launch followed the assent to the Policy by Governor Joseph ole Lenku in August 2019. Kajiado County became the first county in Kenya to launch an anti-FGM Policy. The county has recorded that 46% of its girls aged 15 – 19 years reported having undergone FGM.

The Kajiado Anti-FGM policy provides a framework to end the retrogressive practice by educating the community on the dangers of FGM. It also informs the community on the illegality of FGM that is based on the violation of basic human rights.

The policy seeks to empower and support cutters to abandon the knife and embrace alternative sources of livelihood, while strengthening community involvement to end FGM by 2022.

Speaking at the launch, UNFPA Representative Dr. Ademola Olajide lauded the county on the milestone and committed to supporting the implementation of the policy.

Kajiado County First Lady, Ms. Edna Ole Lenku, and the CEO of the Anti-FGM Board, Ms. Bernadette Loloju were among the dignitaries present at the occasion.
How one Kenyan school shelters girls from FGM, early marriages

By Lilian Kaivilu

James Lokuk patrols Morpus Primary School compound in West Pokot County on a cloudy Wednesday afternoon a few days to Christmas. All schools are closed but it is not yet holiday time for the head-teacher. Morpus Primary School also serves as a rescue centre for girls who have escaped female genital mutilation and child marriage. There are about ten girls in the school compound, all under the age of 18.

At the school, Lokuk wears the hat of a head-teacher when school is in session while holidays and weekends, he serves as a father and caretaker of the young girls who have escaped harmful cultural practices. Lokuk has been the head-teacher of the institution since 1998.

“I have to be here throughout, even during school holidays, to ensure that all the girls are safe. We cannot have our Christmas holidays elsewhere as some of the girls still face the threat of re-marriage,” says the head-teacher.

In one of the classrooms, a few steps from him, the eight girls huddle together conversing in low tones. Holiday seasons always find the girls in the school.

A closer look at their faces reveals devastation and pain, but their strength is evident when they start to narrate their stories.

Chebet (not her real name) was rescued from early marriage in 2017 at the age of eleven. “To me, this is an answered prayer,” says Chebet. Her journey from Kacheliba area in Pokot North, was not an easy one. She recounts the horrendous journey that led her to the safe haven she has since known as her home.

Chebet, the second born in a family of eight children, arrived at Morpus Primary School two weeks after escaping the homestead into which she had been married. Chebet went through FGM in May 2017. Her parents then immediately married her off to an arranged suitor. She recounts the ordeal, “A man came home to pick me up. I was told he is my husband and I had to follow him home. I was tightly secured; heavily guarded. I was unhappy.”

Chebet’s experience, reflects the grim picture of 12 million other girls globally who are married off every year before the age of 18. Sadly, many of them undergo FGM to usher them into marriage. According to Lokuk, the youngest girl in his school is 12 years old, while the oldest is 17 years.

Globally, at least 200 million women and girls aged between 15 and 49 have undergone FGM. However, there has been progress made in the fight against FGM and child marriage. UNICEF estimates that an additional 150 million girls will be married off before their 18th birthday. UNFPA estimates that another 68 million girls are likely to undergo FGM without concerted and accelerated action to end FGM.

By Lilian Kaivilu
Asili means natural in Swahili. By its very definition the word implies something that is not man-made, acknowledging the creative power of nature and the stark reality that anything that adds, takes away or alters the original form and concept from birth, compromises that idea of being natural. Consequently, the word asili defies all practices and standards that seek to interfere with the bodily integrity of women and girls, especially those that expose them to harm such as female genital mutilation (FGM).