A staggering 200 million women and girls, mostly in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, bear the gruesome physical and emotional scars of Female Genital Mutilation – an outdated and unspeakably horrendous practice, whose prevalence in Kenya presently stands at 21 per cent. Beyond the statistics, a single case of FGM is torturous enough to sear the human conscience to its core!

Yet, like many other forms of discrimination and violence meted out against women and girls, FGM remains widely accepted and normalized in close to 50% of Kenyan communities, spread across 22 out of the 47 counties. Data reveals shocking and unimaginable proportions of women and girls who have undergone the practice in some communities like the Somali (94%), Samburu (86%), Kisii (84%) and Maasai at (78%), according to the KDHS 2014 report.

This year, UNFPA partnered with World Vision to work closely with community based organizations in strengthening the anti-FGM movement at the grassroots level. These are organizations working with the youth, male champions, survivors of FGM, artists in the creative industry, as well as duty bearers such as teachers, healthcare workers, and other accountability partners to build strong surveillance and response systems towards ending FGM. We share some of their stories in this edition of the newsletter.

No explanation, religious, cultural, social or biological, can claim legitimacy for subjecting women’s bodies to the dismemberment associated with FGM. It is a callous and repugnant attack on their human rights, the autonomy of their bodies, and sanctity of their lives. Justification of the practice as necessary for containment of women’s sexuality is base and void. Sexual vitality is resident in the mind, not the clitoris.

Women and girls who have undergone FGM face lifelong health afflictions, and the increased risk of preventable mortality. Cesarean sections, hemorrhages, long stays in hospital, death during childbirth, neonatal resuscitation and episiotomy are some of the health conditions and challenges prominently attributed to the mutilation. Bouts of depression and withdrawal symptoms post victimization have equally been underscored as psychosocial effects of the practice.

FGM is more than a health and social issue. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that health care for women living with conditions caused by FGM amounts to USD 1.4 billion annually. It also estimates that 130,000 years of life is lost for 15-year-old girls undergoing FGM. Translated into working hours, the economic burden occasioned by the practice could exceed the cost of the Second World War to the global economy.

Covid-19 has converged an interplay of factors that promote perpetration of FGM while slowing down the momentum hitherto attained in mitigation and response measures. Closure of schools and rescue centres deprived girls of the protective institutional environment that kept cutters at bay. Deepening household indigence as a result of the impact of Covid-19 on incomes has heightened the persuasion to circumcise girls as a rite of passage that paves way for marriage eligibility to earn bride price for the family. Community surveillance and response mechanisms have faced unprecedented impediments during Covid-19 as a result of lockdowns and curfew restrictions. This also affected the capacity of duty bearers to monitor and enforce sanctions against the practice that has morphed into secrecy, including being packaged as religious events. Uptake of health services by survivors has declined visibly during the pandemic period due to fear of Covid-19 infection. The partial closure of courts has given the impression that perpetrators can go scot free, not being held accountable for the heinous act.

While on his State visit to Kenya, the immediate former President of the US, Barrack Obama, decried FGM and child marriage as archaic and untenable traditions. “There’s no reason that young girls should suffer genital mutilation. There’s no place in civilized society for the early or forced marriage of children. These traditions may date back centuries; they have no place in the 21st century,” he asserted.

We must race to achieve an FGM free nation. Audaciously, President Uhuru Kenyatta, speaking during the Women Deliver Conference in Canada and the International Conference on Population and Development Nairobi Summit last year set 2022 as the year when this atrocity against women and girls must come to an end! UNFPA continues to work with the government, civil society, and other organizations from the grass- root to the highest level to ensure that this becomes Kenya’s new reality.

Dr. Ademola Olajide - UNFPA Representative
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Over 400 young people from across Kenya gathered in Nairobi on 7th December 2020 for the launch of the #KenyaNiMimi Youth Campaign, a nationwide dialogue platform established by the Ministry of ICT, Innovation, and Youth Affairs in partnership with UNFPA. The campaign, whose main goal is to bring young people together in collective action, was officially commissioned by His Excellency President Uhuru Kenyatta, who kicked off the launch with a townhall dialogue session, where young people got a chance to ask questions to the president.

Delegate Aisha Hussein from Isiolo County is the founder of Every Girl’s Dream, a community based organization working to end FGM amongst communities living in Isiolo. As a survivor of FGM, she knows all too well the harmful effects of the practice on women and girls, and took the opportunity to raise the issue with the President. “I have seen so many girls on the country being exposed to gender based violence such as teenage pregnancy, child marriage, and FGM. I would like to confirm from you, how can we as a country comprehensively end this vice?”, she asked.

President Kenyatta in his response to Aisha recognized that FGM and gender based violence remain a big challenge, and has become particularly exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic. “We want to eliminate FGM in this country by 2022 and this is one of the tasks that the Ministry of Gender is working on. We have made it clear that where we find societies and communities that are endeavouring to continue with this outdated practice, we will take action,” said the President.

President Kenyatta put local administrators on notice, reiterating that all leaders from the grassroots to national level must take responsibility to end the vice, by ensuring all perpetrators of FGM are brought to book. He called on the youth to partner with the government in developing innovative technology that can help in the fight against FGM. “We are working to develop technology where girls can anonymously report their seniors who are engaged in this vice, to allow us to take action. This is an area where young people in this forum can partner with the government,” he said.

President Kenyatta urged women and girls to speak their mind and come forward to report cases of GBV and FGM in order to receive help and to help authorities in combating the practice. He fur-
ther called on men to respect and protect womens and girls rights. “It is important for us to recognize that women are equal partners to men. We must remove the idea that women are objects. Change your mindset, and these things will come to an end,” he concluded.

Coming a year after the Nairobi Summit ICPD25 that was hosted by the government of Kenya under the leadership of His Excellency the President, the launch of the #KenyaNiMimi youth campaign adds momentum to the realization of commitments made by the country to the youth. They include the commitment to harness the demographic dividend through investments in health and wellbeing, education and skills training and empowerment of young people by 2022; the commitment to end FGM by 2022, and the commitment to end teenage pregnancies, new HIV infections, child marriages and Gender Based Violence (GBV) by 2030.
Community based organizations lead the way in championing social norms and behavior change towards eliminating FGM

On March 13th 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in Kenya, causing a lockdown and other restrictions initiated by the government to prevent the spread of the disease. As schools, businesses, and other social amenities began to shut down, the country experienced a rise in reported incidents of gender based violence, including increased vulnerability of women and girls to harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM). Organizations working to monitor and respond to cases of FGM were hindered by the restrictions in movement, and remained largely unable to access communities where FGM was taking place.

In early June 2020, UNFPA, working with World Vision Kenya and the Anti-FGM Board, partnered with community based organizations operating within the 22 FGM hotspot counties to engage communities in the prevention of FGM. The 26 grassroots organizations were identified and received capacity building on financial management, communicating for behavior change, as well as risk management, to enable them take on the implementation necessary to scale up their outreach. Armed with education and information materials, the organization within their communities and engaged stakeholders at a local level in driving the conversations around ending FGM. “With our support, these community based organizations are making a difference within the communities by building forums where people can discuss what was once considered a taboo topic,” said World Vision Kenya Gender and Development Specialist George Ndung’u.

The initiative has empowered more than 180 social change agents including anti-FGM champions, community health volunteers, and activists to lead the conversation on negative cultural practices. As members of the community, they are able to use their unique position within the community as well as existing structures such as policing model known as Nyumba Kumi (ten households) Initiative
to interact and share information with the locals. With their knowledge of the cultural and religious beliefs driving FGM, as well as the ability to reach the community using the local languages widely spoken in the counties, the organizations have created spaces for candid conversations, engaging traditional leaders, unreformed circumcisers, mothers, and young girls on the dangers of FGM. Where necessary, the teams are able to conduct surveillance geared towards the prevention of FGM.

“The partnership with smaller community based organization has been very rewarding in the fight against FGM. They have been able to reach out to women and girls at a grassroots level, beyond what larger organizations could have done with the pandemic restrictions. As UNFPA, we made the decision to support these organizations as we believed that they had the capacity, knowledge, and motivation to take on this fight, due to their unique connection with the community,” said UNFPA representative Dr. Ademola Olajide.

Some of the community based organizations working within this partnership include Adventure Youth Group, Men End FGM, Every Girls Dream, Somali Girls Foundation, Msichana Empowerment Kuria, ArtPlus organization, among others. “I want to commend this initiative. It is a disruption in this field, that you can work with grassroot CBOs to do advocacy on FGM and other harmful practices affecting our communities,” said Men End FGM official Peter Kemei.

“This support is really opening up communities to the conversation around FGM. Yesterday we had a meeting with traditional leaders and what came out strongly is that they have come to the realization that the FGM that is taking place right now is a violation of girls rights. We are digging deeper into conversations that have not been had before.” said Msichana Empowerment Kuria official, Magdaline Majuma.

Although progress has been made, Anti-FGM Board CEO Bernadette Loloju says that much work remains to be done. “Due to emerging trends in FGM, we are receiving reports from different counties which were previously not earlier mapped FGM hotspot counties. These include counties like Kericho and Kirinyaga, where FGM was not an issue before. There is need to stop FGM at family level, and more anti-FGM champions are required, especially amongst the male population,” she observed.

Proponents of FGM within the communities continue to fight back against efforts to eliminate the practice. The main arguments that are used to encourage the cut is that a girl who has undergone FGM attracts higher bride price, and is a source of pride to the family. Women and girls who have undergone FGM can also perform special rituals at sacred places. Because FGM is a deeply rooted cultural practice, conversations around this is sometimes difficult. However, the use of videos and survivor voices highlight the devastating impact of FGM is helping to change mindsets amongst FGM adherents.

UNFPA will continue to support the work of community based organizations in the new year as we work to accelerate the elimination of FGM by 2022 as per President Uhuru Kenyatta’s directive.
A text message notification flashes across the screen on George Ndungu’s mobile phone.

“Six girls from Kacheptiol and Kachemwotin were rescued from the cut this morning at around 4.00 a.m. at Kabetwo, a few kilometers from Chesongoch. Thanks to surveillance groups for information. Mr. Rotuk, ACC Tot”

A few days earlier, he had received another message, but the news was a mixed bag of good and bad:

“Marakwet east FGM incident: One adult woman in Endo ward underwent the cut with the aid of her sister. This is after the mother declined to perform the illicit rite. Through youth and women surveillance team both have been arrested at police custody Tot police station while the woman is recovering at Tot sub county hospital. Meanwhile, the boys are undergoing circumcision in Area of Kapkopil, kabetwa, koibirir and mokoro locations. The surveillance teams are vigilant on any case of FGM being cover up of the boys.”
Ndung’u is the Gender and Development Specialist at World Vision Kenya, coordinating the organization’s anti-FGM efforts in 22 hotspot counties. The message has been sent to him by the local chief, who is part of a community surveillance team set up to monitor incidents of FGM in the area.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced organizations like World Vision to innovate around the fight against FGM. Major funders have redirected resources to health response, severely limiting civil society organizations and communities who need the resources to tackle the practice of FGM. Restriction measures introduced by the government such as the closure of schools and temporary girls’ rescue centers has meant that more young girls are left at risk of undergoing the cut in the secrecy and isolation accorded by curfew and movement restrictions. The directive issued by the Ministry of Health limiting public gatherings has also curtailed community sensitization efforts on ending FGM. “We realized that we had to quickly shift our approach to focus more on enhancing the capacity of individuals to act as protection agents in looking out for girls at high risk of FGM,” says Ndung’u.

In Elgeyo Marakwet County, World Vision is piloting a community based surveillance reference framework, where local administrators, community leaders, anti-FGM champions and youth are trained to work within the community to detect and report suspected cases of FGM and gender based violence (GBV).

“Messages such as the one sent by the local chief contribute significantly to the mapping of vulnerable and at risk girls. So far, the surveillance team in the pilot program has conducted a mapping of 450 girls in the Chesong and Argor areas of Elgeyo Marakwet County. Of the 450, 26% had already undergone the cut, while 74% had not yet been cut. Among the uncut, the surveillance team believed 64% to be at high risk of undergoing FGM. This information will inform the follow up mechanisms deployed to ensure that the girls do not suffer FGM.

The active participation of community members in detecting, reporting, responding to and monitoring FGM events in the community strengthens the collection of data while creating a sense of ownership and responsibility within community members in the fight against FGM.

“Our hope is that as the surveillance team carries on the work of monitoring FGM cases, their interactions with those around them will result in further sensitization of the community on the harmful effects of FGM on women and girls health, and the need to eliminate the practice by 2022,” adds Ndung’u.
The Road to Zero: National prevalence of FGM through the years (KDHS 2003-2014)

GOAL 2022-Zero FGM!

2003: 32%
2008/9: 27%
2014: 21%
Secrecy, stigma, perpetuate FGM in humanitarian settings

FGM is a practice that is common in the Somali community, and is considered as a rite of passage for girls as young as 7 years old. At the Hagadera Refugee Camp in Dadaab, the cut is conducted by a group of elderly women who are considered to be well-respected members of the community. Despite evidence that the harmful practice is still happening in the camps, humanitarian organizations working within Hagadera rarely receive reports on FGM cases from the community. Over the last year, only one case has been recorded by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), while Terres Des Hommes had two cases of attempted FGM reported in the period between April to November 2020.

The community continues to uphold this illegal practice in secrecy due to cultural and traditional beliefs. At a focus group organized by Terres Des Hommes, women invited to participate indicated that their advocacy for FGM is driven by the immense stigma and discrimination faced by those who have not undergone the cut. “A young girl cannot find a husband or get married if she has not undergone the cut,” said one focus group participant.

Families that reject FGM are also shunned by the community, and their daughters excluded from peer activities. “We have seen cases of discrimination and violence as a result of refusal to undergo FGM that were so bad we have had to transfer the survivors to a safe haven,” said one respondent from Terres Des Hommes. Those who report cases of FGM face the toughest form of discrimination and rejection by the community. “Reintegrating young girls who have refused to undergo FGM and instead chosen to report FGM attempts to the authorities is always the hardest task,” says one anti-FGM champion at the camp. The intervention of community leaders is sometimes required to ensure the safety of these women and girls and their families.

Efforts are being made by agencies operating within the camps to develop protection mechanisms for women and girls. Survivors of FGM are identified for case management, where agency staff work with them to assess their needs and risk factors. For minors, an assessment is made on whether they represent a heightened protection concern. In such cases, a multi-agency panel will meet to develop recommendations in the best interest of the child, before action is taken and further follow-up conducted.

While Covid-19 restricts gatherings that have in the past proven to be instrumental in sensitizing the community on the need to end FGM, radio messages have proven to be crucial in reaching the Hagadera population with anti-FGM messages. With increased awareness on the harmful effects of the practice, the goal is to ultimately change the beliefs and behaviors that drive FGM within the camp to achieve the goal of zero FGM by 2022.

Reintegrating young girls who have refused to undergo FGM and instead chosen to report FGM attempts to the authorities is always the hardest task.
Photo: Pokot elder Joseph Lopetokori addresses community members in Tamugh, West Pokot County.
Across generations, men rally against harmful cultural and social norms that drive FGM

For a long time, men voicing their opposition to the practice of female genital mutilation was seen as interfering in women’s affairs. However, a recent shift in male attitudes brought about by a greater understanding of the impact of the cut on women and girls has led to increased participation by men in the fight against FGM. Where once considered a prerequisite for marriage in some cultures, young men are finding the courage to speak out publicly and state their willingness and preference to marry girls who have not undergone FGM.

Key in leading the change in cultural and social norms that drive FGM have been male elders, who are considered authorities in the community. In West Pokot County, the Pokot Council of Elders have been instrumental in conducting advocacy campaigns against FGM. At a recent community gathering held in Tamugh area of West Pokot, the elders gathered the community for a sensitization meeting to campaign against the practice. “We encourage the community to educate young girls, and also speak against child marriage and domestic violence,” says elder Joseph Lopetokori. According to Lopetokori, efforts by the council of elders are bearing fruit, as evidenced by the decrease in cases of FGM in the county. In addition to community meetings, the elders also champion community surveillance efforts, and have been featured in local radio talk shows where they speak against the practice. “As elders, we have the power to give orders in the community, and our word against FGM is taken seriously. We have largely been able to traverse the West Pokot lowlands, but in highland areas such as Lomut and Masol wards, we have more work to do. We use the media, and radio in particular to reach far off areas with our message,” adds Lopetokori.

In Garissa County, a younger generation of men is championing an end to FGM using their unique position in the transport sector to engage the community in eradicating the practice. Motorcycle taxi operators, also known as “boda-boda riders,” have partnered with the Somali Girls Foundation to raise awareness on the harmful effects of FGM through colourful roadshows that have traversed Masalani, Hara, and Korisa areas of Garissa. The riders depart in convoys with their motorcycles, making stopovers in village centers and market areas where they address crowds gathered on the harmful effects of FGM. With an extensive footprint in the community, the boda-boda riders have become a key ally in the fight against FGM, as they pass on awareness messages to passengers on their rides.

“The majority of Boda-boda operators in Garissa county are young men with social ties to the community. By involving them in the campaign to eradicate FGM, we have also been able to further educate this generation of men on the types of FGM, and the effect the practice has on the health and well-being of women and girls. Most of them were not aware of these details,” says Somali Girls Foundation Chairperson Maryan Dadle.

“We encourage the community to educate young girls, and also speak against child marriage and domestic violence,” says elder Joseph Lopetokori.
A survivor reveals the cruel reality of Female Genital Mutilation

Rosaline Gollo Guyo is the founder of Waso Hope, a community based organization working to fight against FGM in Isiolo County. A survivor of the cut, Rosaline knows all too well the devastating effects that FGM has on the lives of women and girls who undergo it. “I was six years old when it happened to me in a village near Merti in Isiolo County. I knew they were going to cut me because a lot of my friends had gone through it,” she says.

Rosaline’s mother had travelled, leaving her older sister and her in the care of relatives. One day, her aunt and uncle arrived at the school where the sisters were taking their lessons and informed them that it was time for them to undergo the cut. They had to abandon their classes and leave with them. “I was six and my sister was eight years old. The woman who cut us was my grandmother’s sister. They used ropes to tie our legs apart, and used a razor blade to cut us. I have no memory of the cutting, but I could hear lots of painful screaming from the other girls,” she adds.

Unfortunately for Guyo, the trauma was repeated when she was 12 years old, after her aunt examined her genitalia and determined that she was not sufficiently cut. “They dragged me to a midwife who lived a few streets away, and cut me again. This time they made sure that they closed me up, she narrates. She developed an infection from the infibulation and had to be rushed to hospital for emergency care. “The doctors told me that I could never have children, via the birth canal because of the infibulation. When I started having my periods, I had to go and see a doctor to be opened up so as to allow the flow of the menstrual blood,” she says.

Guyo explains that she suffered further complications throughout her life, including complicated

“I was six years old when it happened to me at my rural village near Merti in Isiolo County. I knew they were going to cut me because a lot of my friends had gone through it,” she says.
delivers through caesarian section, psychological trauma, recurrent urinary tract infections, as well as permanent scarring from the multiple operations she has had to undergo.

A nurse by training, Guyo runs Waso Hope, a community-based organization that focuses on empowering young girls and women to overcome all gender barriers. The organization campaigns against FGM and gender-based violence in Isiolo County, through monitoring and reporting of suspected cases of FGM, child marriage, and sexual violence. Waso Hope also conducts health outreaches in the community, offering cervical cancer screening, HIV testing, health talks on family planning, as well as the distribution of menstrual hygiene products.

“I encourage other survivors to use their voice and share their stories in order to bring an end to FGM. We need to change traditions and inform the girl-child on the risks and realities of FGM, as well as reaffirm girls rights to decide what happens to their bodies,” in her parting shot.
Program Officer at Hope Beyond shares his insights during the champions trainings.
Among the Borana community, FGM has so far remained a deeply entrenched and culturally significant practice with a high prevalence rate in regions occupied by the community. The fight against the practice received a major boost on 15th October 2020, following a declaration by the Borana Council of Elders that the practice would be outlawed in the community. The elders also committed to support the fight against FGM, and vowed to work with the government in ending the practice by 2022, as per President Uhuru Kenyatta’s directive.

The declaration was borne out of the 41st Gummi Gayo (community elders) assembly held in September 2020, which resolved to also outlaw rape, teen pregnancies, and early marriages. The elders also called for the equal treatment of boys and girls in accessing education.

The declaration was made during the celebration of the International Day of the Girl Child, which was marked at the Sololo Primary School grounds. The event was officiated by the Chief Administrative Secretary in the Ministry of Public Service, and Gender, Hon. Rachel Shebesh, who lauded the commitment by the elders to fight FGM and improve gender equality in the community.

“We welcome the declaration made by the elders here today, that will bolster our efforts in ending FGM by 2022. Through their influence, elders have the power to lead the total abandonment of the practice by the Borana community,” said Ms. Shebesh.

In attendance also was Marsabit County First Lady, H.E Alamitu Guyo Jattani, who called for community dialogue and the implementation of anti-FGM awareness campaigns on local vernacular radio stations in order to reach people at the grassroot level. Ms Jattani promised to continue to engage elders and youths across the county in educating residents on the harmful effects of FGM.
In 2013, Tony Mwebia started #MenEndFGM, as an online campaign to rally men and young boys in the quest to end FGM. What began as a hashtag has now evolved into the Men End FGM Foundation, a leading voice in the campaign against FGM, child marriage and gender-based violence in Kenya. The movement draws its membership from individuals as well as other community based organizations working primarily with men.

“Our men engagements are informed and grounded in the fact that in patriarchal communities, men are the custodians of cultural practices and therefore, they play a critical role in driving the abandonment of FGM, child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence,” says Mwebia.

Over the last five months, the Foundation has been carrying out training of male champions on how to lead their communities in abandoning harmful and retrogressive practices such as FGM, in a culturally sensitive manner. The training also focuses on changing negative and toxic ideals of masculinity.

Men End FGM targets male champions who are key custodians of cultural practices, including traditional leaders, chiefs, religious leaders, teachers, and youth leaders who have the platform to amplify the knowledge gained.

Through World Vision Kenya, UNFPA supports Men End FGM to carry out the trainings as well as online campaigns against FGM. So far, the organization has trained 117 men and boys as anti-FGM champions in Meru, Isiolo, Garissa, Wajir, Baringo and Elgeiyo Marakwet Counties.

The impact of these trainings has been observed in the change in attitude by men who previously saw FGM as a beneficial practice, as demonstrated in the feedback given by participants. “For a long time NGOs, government agencies and many activists have taken our women and girls for anti-FGM trainings without involving us. But they forgot we are the heads in our families and every time they came back home we made sure they followed the rules in our homes. Now that you have called us here and shown us films on the actual cutting we know how painful it is and we will now join the fight against FGM,” said one elder at a recent training held in Elgeiyo Marakwet County.

The training involves interactive activities with selected male champions aimed at impacting skills on how they can facilitate and enable the required change process through effective community dialogue.

“Our goal is to awaken men to actively participate and engage other traditional decision making institutions in dialogues on how to lead their communities in abandoning harmful practices such as FGM,” says Mwebi.

“This training has handed to us capacity and knowledge on how we can use our traditional
approach in ending FGM. We will use our cultural and traditional elders to dialogue and once we come up with the way of ending it we will lead the community in adopting our resolve just like we always do on other issues,” Pokot elder after undergoing a Men End FGM training.

“Our goal is to awaken men to actively participate and engage other traditional decision making institutions in dialogue on how to lead their communities in abandoning harmful practices such as FGM,” says Mwebia

Participants at a recently held Men End FGM training

Anti FGM Champion from Men End FGM during the community dialogues
A Pokot elder addresses the community during an anti-FGM dialogue in West Pokot County. UNFPA/Luis Tato
It was a colorful performance of song, poetry, and drama at a recently concluded gathering of artists organized by Artplus, a community based organization that uses art to promote the eradication of FGM and all forms of Gender Based Violence (GBV).

The event brought together over 20 participants from the performing arts, who gathered to learn about how they can become better advocates against FGM using their talents and art. Over two days, the artists received comprehensive training on FGM, the different types of mutilation, as well as an in-depth review of the Anti-FGM Act.

Participants explored different ways of using art to raise awareness on the dangers of FGM, while bearing in mind the “Do No Harm” approach that calls for the denouncement of the practice and not the people while advocating against GBV and FGM in the society.

“The “Do No Harm Approach” is important as it ensures that people in the society, and particularly survivors, are not provoked, harmed or sidelined in any way as we champion the elimination of FGM,” said ArtPlus trainer, Peter Macharia.

At the end of the training session, the artists were tasked to come up with one piece of work that features a strong message against FGM. There were strong performances by different artists which featured powerful messages on ending FGM and GBV. They included a skit on how parents can protect their children against FGM, different songs performed by artists such as Kapelo, Gheto boy and Real G, as well as a spoken word poem by artist Steve the Great.

UNFPA is supporting ArtPlus to build the knowledge and capacity of professionals in the creative industry in support of the fight against FGM and GBV.

“The “Do No Harm Approach” is important as it ensures that people in the society, and particularly survivors, are not provoked, harmed or sidelined in any way as we champion the elimination of FGM,” said ArtPlus trainer Peter Macharia.
Reformed circumcisers protect the next generation of women and girls in West Pokot County

In careers spanning over 3 decades, Chepchongil Cheleston, Kokarupe Lorwu, and Cheporai Lokuda collectively performed female genital mutilation on more than 10,000 girls in West Pokot County. Now in their early and late seventies, the women have all reformed and turned their backs on the blade, choosing instead to fight against FGM in their communities, and encourage the younger generation of women to reject the practice.

We meet the three women at Lokuda’s home in Chepareria, where they have gathered for a meeting with the chief and other anti-FGM champions in the area.

Listening to their stories, a common thread emerges that sheds possible light as to why they may have chosen to engage in the harmful practice in their youth. All three explain that they were once heavy tipplers, and would sometimes receive payment in the form of alcohol to perform the cut on young girls. Kokarupe Lorwu was a circumciser for 20 years. “Every evening, young women would be gathered in a particular household and I would be called to perform the circumcision. After a night of singing and dancing, the girls would wake up at the crack of dawn and shower. We would then proceed to the cowshed where I performed the cut. I would be paid between Kshs 500-Kshs 1,000 per girl. Sometimes I would be paid in alcohol,” she narrates.

Chepurai Lokuda’s story is similar, and as the oldest in the group, she explains that the girls she cut are now much older women, but her actions still

“Every evening, young women would be gathered in a particular household and I would be called to perform the circumcision.”
weigh heavy on her conscience. “I performed the cut on over 5,000 girls. If the job was done during the day, I would get paid in alcohol. If I worked at night, I would be paid Kshs 500 per girl,” she explains. Chepurai learnt the practice from her grandmother, who was also a circumciser. She was reformed after receiving sensitization on the harmful effects of FGM at events from a local pastor, who encouraged her to down her tools and join the church.

Chepchongil Cheleston explains that she abruptly became a circumciser to make money. “I only did it for three years, to over 1,000 girls. I can say that at the time I was drinking heavily,” she confesses. The women credit a new found faith in God and the training and information they received on the negative effects of FGM on women and girls health in helping them reform. However, it was not an easy decision to let go of the practice as it was also their main source of income. Through World Vision International, the women received six goats each to help them earn a livelihood and support themselves without having to engage in FGM.

Eunice Chemwok, an anti-FGM champion in Chepararia says cases of FGM in the area have reduced, as more people become aware and sensitive to the harmful effects of the practice. Eunice is part of an intergenerational group of champions who work to fight FGM at a community level. However, she notes that even with gains made in fighting FGM, women and girls continue to face many challenges including gender based violence, child marriage, and school drop-outs.

“One way to mitigate this is to bring back alternative rites of passage ceremonies which have been halted due to a lack of funding as well as Covid-19 restrictions. At these ceremonies, young girls learn so much, including the dangers of early marriage, the importance of staying in school, as well as their basic rights,” says Chemwok. This in turns helps young girls navigate the perils of adolescence and young adulthood with better outcomes.
What must we do to realize the vision of Zero FGM cases by 2022

Ending FGM is a conversation on social norms. An all-of-society approach is critical in reversing and eliminating perceptions that hinder transformation. Ultimately, it is the voices of women and girls that should hold sway. There should be no alternative to what they see as the panacea to a form of discrimination that debilitates their station in life. Their solution is the authentic norm.

Kenya’s labyrinth of anti-FGM laws and policies is commendable. The Constitution outlaws discrimination and all forms of violence regardless of the premise, and explicitly prohibits compelling another person to perform, observe or undergo any cultural practice or rite. The Children’s Act (2001) and the Prohibition Against FGM Act (2011) reinforce and articulate the sanctions against the practice more specifically and comprehensively.

Establishment of the Anti-FGM Board, currently led by the iconic women’s rights champion Agnes Parreoyo, has strengthened the institutional context for prevention of and response to FGM in the country. The Board developed the National Policy for Eradication of Female Genital Mutilation in 2019 and is rolling out an accelerated implementation plan. Collaboration, urgency and accountability are cornerstones of the anticipated success.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that ending Female Genital Mutilation by 2030 in 31 priority countries including Kenya requires $2.1 billion. An accelerated programme like what Kenya has envisaged would therefore need more funding that requires a shift in resource mobilization approaches and strategies that goes beyond traditional sources. Leveraging community resources and the dexterity of the private sector has prospects of addressing gaps

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and entrenching sustainability.

The pressure to eliminate FGM in Kenya has catalyzed new trends such as medicalization, mutilation in infancy, and secrecy, as opposed to brazen and overt acts of the past. The cross-border phenomenon where mutilation is planned to take place in neighbouring countries is equally a novel feature of the practice that calls for review of intervention approaches and methods. Engaging youth and deploying technological innovations will firewall some of these new trends while emphasizing watertight implementation of laws and policies against diehards of the practice.

Structural causes of violence against women and girls such as poverty, limited access to quality education, and exclusion from decision making drive and perpetuate FGM. While awareness and knowledge of FGM as a gross violation of women’s health and rights expands, deliberate actions to empower girls through education and life skills programmes should be considered. Women’s economic empowerment and visibility on decision making platforms will similarly occasion the appropriate counterweight against FGM. Men and boys should lead in re-imagining an FGM free society.

The President’s pronouncement and commitment to eradicate FGM by 2022 is unparalleled in the immensity of political good will. All stakeholders should harness this optimally to deliver a conclusive blow to the practice. What must be done cannot wait beyond yesterday. One more case of FGM on the Kenyan soil is an indictment of our sovereignty and justice for women and girls. The clock is ticking!