



Female Circumcision Still Eludes the Law

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Consolata Nyansu, 11, is a girl in distress following pressure from her family to face the circumciser's knife.

Her uncle has vowed to make real his threats to have her forced to face circumcision despite undergoing an alternative rite of passage.

As more than three hundred girls prepare to leave a local mission station after graduation from the training, Nyansu does not know where to go.

"My mother died while I was young and my father followed a few years later. My uncle cares for my three siblings and me. I ran away because my uncle and other relatives tried to force me be circumcised," she says.

Her uncle had threatened to bar her from returning home if she shunned circumcision.

"I sell bananas to meet my basic needs like school uniform. I decided to come to this centre to escape the cut," says the third-born daughter in a family of three.

Nyansu's dilemma exemplifies the challenges confronting girls and anti-female genital mutilation (FGM) crusaders in Kuria.

Nyansu was among 400 girls who graduated after undergoing training at St Theresa's Catholic Mission in Kehancha and Komotobo.

Komotobo School for the Deaf presented a poem titled 'I am sitting, waiting without explanation. Must I be circumcised? No!'

The participants received training on life skills, reproductive health, HIV and Aids, spiritual nurture and the children rights. Adventist Development and Relief Agency (Adra), World Vision and Education Centre organised the training.

Alternative rite

World Vision manager for Kegonga-Ntimaru Integrated Programme Area Joseph Emathe said the number of girls undergoing alternative rite of passage had gone down because many went for the 'cut'. "We witnessed many ceremonies at

Nyabasi and Kegonga. Last year, we had 500 girls here but the number has since gone down," said Mr Emathe. Kuria East Children's officer Joyce Keno said the girls had been empowered to shun the 'cut'.

"We have enlightened them on the negative effects of the 'cut' and how to deal with stigma besides the need to continue with schooling. We wanted to train more than 400 but managed to get 300 girls only," said Ms Keno.

She added: "Some of the girls fear they would be cursed if they don't face the 'cut'. We tried demystifying these myths during the training".

Nyabasi West Location chief Samson Kerario, whose daughter was among those who escaped circumcision this year, acknowledges FGM was still rife because parents valued bride wealth due to poverty.

"Many girls hardly complete secondary school. Once circumcised, they think they are mature enough and attractive to men. At my office, we have rescued many from forced early marriages," says the chief.

Mr Kerario said stigma associated with uncircumcised girls and cattle rustling were partly to blame for the situation. Men steal cattle to use as bride wealth after the circumcision season.

Parents also marry off their daughters to get livestock to compensate for those lost to rustlers.

"An uncircumcised girl Omosagane is looked down upon by the community. The circumcised ones Abaiseke are valued in Kuria and the circumcisers Ngariba are a tough lot to deal with because it is big business," he says. While many are quick to blame elders for perpetuating the retrogressive culture, local female rights activists blame women.

Towards stemming the practice, Adra recently took 30 elders from Kuria on a cultural exchange programme in Meru to interact with Njuri Ncheke members.

"We wanted the elders to learn how to discard some aspects of culture that are no longer useful. We realised it is women who are the problem. We blame elders yet it is parents who take their children for the 'cut'," said Adra programme manager Robert Onsando.

Eradicating vice

"We have a huge role as women in eradicating this vice. FGM has no value in a girl's life," said Ms Jane Chacha, a parent.

Rabu Boke Yusuf, 50, from Ntitaru never underwent FGM because her resolute father stood by her.

"It is parents, especially women, who excite the desire to undergo the 'cut'. A parent falsely tells her daughter that her age mates have been 'cut' to make them interested. Women are yet to believe their daughters can be married without being circumcised," says Boke.

She adds: "Circumcision is only the ceremony and the feasting. It is no physical mark on the face. Some parents bribe circumcisers to perform a false cut on their daughters to avoid pressure from society".

However, the Education Centre for the Advancement of Women chair Dennitah Ghati says FGM has a psychological effect, too.

"It is in the mind. Once they undergo the ceremony, these girls perceive themselves as mature and ready for marriage, which is the real challenge. School dropout rate among girls in Kuria is alarming," says Ghati. She says the Government should seek strict laws to eradicate negative cultures that refuse to die to protect the girl child.

Eunice Ochieng', a teacher at Nyamome Primary School in Migori County, blamed the worrying dropout statistics on retrogressive cultures in Kuria.

Elizabeth Burke, a Peace Corps volunteer teacher at Komotobo School for the Deaf says the culture would not go away until circumcisers get an alternative source of income.

"Circumcisers get up to Sh2,000 per girl and nearly 100 are circumcised on a day. Money is the motivation besides culture. Sensitisation should be done all year round instead of waiting until the season sets in," says Ms Burke.

She says not all the girls circumcised in Kuria are Kenyans as some come from Tanzania.

Kuria West Children's Officer John Lagat said residents know FGM is illegal yet they cling to it. "Now, we have new laws, which allows us to invade ceremonies and arrest those flouting children's rights," he said.