

Full Length Research Paper

Eradicating Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Kenya: Lessons Learnt from Gikuyu Women Change Stories

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Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has widely been practiced across Africa. The Gikuyu considered the rite of passage central in transforming girls into women and it stood at the epicentre of the Christian missionaries' and Gikuyu nationals' controversy in 1920-1930. However, from early 1970s, it started declining. Through oral change stories from heroic women, this paper documents social transformation models and processes of change. It picks the socio-cultural and economic domains of transformation and thus develops a Theory of Change Model, which is hoped to be transposed to other communities that continue practicing FGM. The TOC model is perceived to supersede legal and policy frameworks in addressing the notorious practice in Kenya.

Keywords: Female genital mutilation, Gikuyu, rite of passage, paradigm shift, theory of change.

INTRODUCTION

Female circumcision whose origin remains unclear, and also known as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting (FGC), has for generations been widely practiced across Africa (Tanui 2006, Cheserem 2011). Chai, Sano, Kananga, Baada, Antabe – (2017) observe that “the Kenyan government passed the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act”, which criminalizes any act of FGM and anything that stigmatizes women who have not undergone it citing Jerlström A, Johansson M. (2015) and UNICEF (2005), UNICEF 2017; UNICEF 2016) they observe that “the proportion of girls and women in Kenya who have undergone FGM declined from 32% in 2003 to 27% in 2013. However, “despite this achievement, there are still regional variations, with 98% of women in the North Eastern Province having undergone FGM Keleher, Franklin, 2008 and Oloo, Wanjiru, Newell-Jones (2011). Duncan and Hernlund (2002) observe that reasons for the rite vary across countries, but religious, cultural, personal, health, political and societal beliefs stand out. Muteshi and Sass (2005), and Kenyatta (1938) observe that the traditional practice is considered to be a thread in

the social fabric that defines a woman's social standing and ultimately a community's identity. Perceived to transform girls into womanhood, it guarantees value, which leads to increased good marriage prospects; hence virginity, purity, and sexual restraint are emphasized. FGM compliments male supremacy demonstrating gender power dynamics in the family and in the society. It solidifies female subordination as it cements a gender conformity ideology of who a woman should be. Without realising the gender power dynamics involved, girls and women rigorously advocate for it. There have been numerous strategies to promote its abandonment. During the colonial era, its ban in 1929 was at the height of nationalism in 1920-32. Kenyatta (1938) refers to it as *conditio sine quo non*, a rite without which Gikuyus could not do without. It did not just knit the tribe together but also transformed girls into women. Missionaries described it as a barbaric practice for the heathens, unacceptable in the eyes of Christians (Shell-Duncan and Hernlund 2000). This perception split the Gikuyu community into two; those who in missionary's eyes were *athomi* and *acenji* (Wamue 1988). The Protest-

ant Church compelled Christians to sign the *kirore* pledge, repudiating the practice and by so doing any Christian caught thereafter participating in it would be suspended from the Church indefinitely. The *kirore* infuriated Gikuyu nationalism and led to revolt song *muthirigu* -of the 'uncut girl-*kirigu*.

In post- independence Kenya, enormous awareness campaigns primarily focusing on FGM as a "harmful traditional practice that mutilates the body have been landing on deaf years. The Kenyan Government has criminalized it and active public discussion dates back to late 1990s. Needless to say, laws have not succeeded. Alternative Rites of Passage (ARPs), a strategy heralded by both international donors, NGOs and the Church, which advocate for rites without "the cut" unfortunately alienate girls from their parents, and for the weeklong exclusion allegedly 'transform' them into women. Relapse is common (Hughes 2018, Droy L., L. Hughes, M. Lamont, P. Nguura, D. Parsitau, G. Wamue Ngare (2018).

Interestingly, after independence, the rite went on unperturbed among both Gikuyu early Christians and non-Christian families except for the fundamentalist born-again *tukutendereza/ahonoki* group. Nationalists and ex-freedom fighters, all former cultural diehards, remained mum; after all, independence had shifted dynamics. Interestingly, without the much hyped persuasion by NGOs, media, and government laws, the practice quietly started taking a different shift among the Gikuyu. Mungiki, a group that attempted to revive Gikuyu indigenous culture in the 1990s, key among them female circumcision, did not go far (Wamue, 2001). The clamour died yet another natural death.

There is no empirical research documenting the factors that contributed to Gikuyus' disinterest in a rite that was initially so central to them. It is clear that a rather radical approach that gave meaningful, effective and sustainable transformation, thereby challenging gender conformity and giving new definitions to womanhood must have been at play. Phenomenal stories of change are important in understanding, assessing and evaluating sustainable change processes (Stein and Valters, 2012). Consequently, by documenting the change stories from Gikuyu women, the parameters that unlocked in particular, gender power relations nurtured through FGM, would be understood, thereby finding answers to fundamental questions that current models find hard to crack.

Socio-cultural meaning of FGM

FGM is widespread in Sub-Saharan Africa and is deeply embedded in psycho-social, cultural symbolism, values, and norms of a community in question. In many, it

symbolizes a female's assumption of new socially constructed roles and responsibilities, status and gender identity (Kanogo 2005, Momoh 2005). Among the Gikuyu, the rite plays a key role in the socio-cultural construction of womanhood. Gachiri (2000) observes that for a young Kikuyu woman or girl, the process of initiation was a series of events which culminated in her passage into womanhood and participation in her age-group. In this, she was entitled to rights and responsibilities only reserved for those circumcised, key among them marriage and giving birth. Traditionally, lack of circumcision ruined a woman's social standing, unworthy of marriage and unable to have children, which would affect her bride wealth (Wamue-Ngare 2019).

Many men will neither consider marrying nor paying dowry for a girl who has not been cut. To refuse it, results to social isolation, ostracization, and prohibition from marriage (Braddy, 2007). Such a woman is ridiculed and referred to in derogatory terms, often denied access to roles reserved for adult women, age notwithstanding. Speaking about the Gikuyu, (Kenyatta 1938) notes that it signified cultural identity, thus abandoning the practice was unthinkable.

Gender Construction of Womanhood through FGM

FGM strives to maintain a gendered construction of womanhood by linking it to a mark of self-identity. Through it, one enters womanhood and gains acceptance in her natal family, peer group, wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, grandparent, or a member of the numerous women Councils (Kanogo, 2005 (Shell & Duncan 2000, Malmström 2016 Hernlund, & Shell (2006), Hernlund & Shell (2007).

It compounds a gender identity defined through prescribed maturity. Though the rite, roles and entitlements are defined, unfortunately crippling women's empowerment and subsequent socio-economic status (Naguib, 2012). By circumcising young girls, and subsequently transforming them into women, the rite maintains a gendered social order, where submission is expected. As gender roles are learnt and maintained, women's empowerment is subdued to men's advantage (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2017).

In such cultures, the procedure is also believed to be necessary in reducing a woman's sexual desire (IRIN, 2005). Women who have not undergone the procedure are thus believed to have uncontrollable and overactive sex drives, both signs of inevitable promiscuity and adultery. With the existence of FGM, young girls are taught to believe that having any sexual pleasure is strictly allotted to their husband and that the possibility of their own sexual desire is disgusting and in-appropriate (Braddy, 2007). Braddy also notes that in societies where women rely on community and spousal support for

survival, a decision to forgo circumcision may have negative outcomes. As such, women themselves are often the strongest advocates of the practice, because, by their daughters' transforming into women, despite the age, they become an advantage for economic opportunities attained through marrying upwards. Thus, a vicious cycle is perpetuated between men who have sense of ownership over women and women who have been brought up believing this is the norm or status quo. With these foundations strictly in place, it's no surprise that "womanhood" is valued within circumcising communities.

Strategies That Have Been at Play in Addressing FGM

Different approaches have been used to eradicate FGM mainly focusing on health risks, circumcisers, laws, alternative rites, community-led approaches, and public statements. The health approach for instance, delivers factual and didactic messages around physical complications and adverse health outcomes, loss of sexual pleasure as well as male sexual dissatisfaction (Sundby, Essén, Elise and Johansen 2013). Observably, such information only increases knowledge about FGM, as the health-related theory is not buyable to communities that practice it (UNFPA 2016).

Hashi and Sharaf (2007) confirm that some of the practices include legal systems. Though laws are necessary, by themselves, they are not sufficient. UNFPA (2014) highlights the engagement of religious leaders to discredit the belief that FGM is a religious obligation. However, the religious path may be a challenge due to the capacity of complicated belief systems such as curses.

More recent Alternative rites without the cut, advocate for social acceptance (Parsitau, 2017). These alternatives use sometimes models that are traditionally unacceptable to the communities. Though important, as has been seen, relapse is common once girls get back to the society (Kaplan et al. 2014). Traditional practitioners have also proved futile (Setswe, 1999, Kaplan et al. 2014). Regrettably, this has only reduced or made them go underground.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Research Design

The study utilized "The Most Significant Change Technique", a model developed by Lennie, Tacchi, Koirala, Wilmore and Skuse (2011). This is a participatory descriptive evaluation that involves the collection of phenomenal change stories at different levels of intervention and collectively decides the most significant

domains. The broad categories entailed examining and documenting domains of socio-economic, gender, and cultural transformation from recipients of change [girls] who resisted FGM in the early 70s/80s.

Two Counties in Kenya; Kiambu and Kirinyaga, were purposively selected, one for its nearness to the Capital City, and the other for its distance. The target was women born from 1960 and 70 decades currently aged between 50 and 60.

The Gikuyu People

The Kikuyus, also known as Gikuyu or Agikuyu are Bantus and Kenya's most popular and largest ethnic group, well known for political and economic influence in Kenya. Most of them live in the Central highlands and Mount Kenya. They are mainly farmers but have migrated to major towns for business. Their encounter with the British was initially amiable (Wamue 1988, Kamuyu -wa-Kang'ethe 1991). However, when the British started confiscating some of their fertile land, enforcing labour, and interfering with core religious, social and economic practices, they formed the formidable *Mau Mau*, and ardently fought, among others for Kenya's independence (Barnett 1966).

Economically, they are very successful, and majority, both men and women well educated. Their ability to adapt to new realities has resulted into adopting many aspects of modern culture. Traditionally, they upheld initiation for both boys and girls which was a prerequisite for dowry and marriage. Paying dowry (bride price) was and still is an important aspect of Gikuyu culture, which has resisted modernity (Wamue-Ngare 2019). Observably, some of Gikuyu indigenous culture has eroded with time. However, they have maintained certain aspects such as language, which is widely spoken both in Nairobi and Central Kenya, by even none Gikuyus almost becoming Kenya's third language of choice. In addition to maintaining their economic stability, the Gikuyu have continued to dominate leadership and politics in Kenya.

Selection of Respondents & Data Collection

Due to the 'hidden populations', respondents were picked from friends, relatives, colleagues or other significant contacts, a type crucial where populations are not easily accessible (Green & Torogood 2013). Using the ground theory approach, the sample was 20 participants. Data was obtained through spoken 'narrative' gained through direct encounters with participants. Interviews were informal, conversational and encouraged respondents to express themselves naturally. Two research assistants were taken through the processes of conducting oral history interviews and were utilized. Stories were recorded, interpreted, analysed and filtered. Domains of

change were identified by evaluating what has broadly changed in the community's approach to social, cultural, economic and gender concepts in regards to FGM.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings and discussion of this study in the sub-titles of demographic characteristics; The Paradigm Shift, Processes/Mechanisms of Transformation, Gikuyu's Socio-cultural Construction of Womanhood after FGM, Challenges Faced by the Girls in Resisting FGM, Theory of Change Model and Conclusion.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic variables for analysis were: age, marital status, education, and occupation.

Age Characteristics of Respondents

Respondents' age was between 50 and 60, with a minor variation of 2, which may mean that resistant started slightly earlier than 1970. As observed, there were more categories as the years progressed, as the resistance's popularity progressed.

Marital Characteristics

Marriage was a critical reason for FGM among the Gikuyu. Marital demography was hence deemed necessary for analysis. This is shown in Figure 1.2 below. As observed, 2(10%) of our responds were single, 1 (5%) divorced, 1 (5%) widowed and 16(80%) married . Marriage by then was considered a virtue and a must for all; divorce abhorred and singlehood not a norm (Wamue-Ngare 2019.) The main focus for girls' circumcision was after all to prepare them for marriage, hence circumcision preceded marriage and only then could the later happen. However, the data indicates that that it was and still is possible for uncircumcised Gikuyu women to acquire spouses, hence linking circumcision with marriage was not just a theory but a fallacy.

Education Characteristics

Education is perceived to have been a critical change mechanism.

As observed from Figure 1.3 above, all respondents proceeded to high school, with none dropping at primary school. Nine went on to complete advanced levels with 8 proceeding to University and beyond. Considering how women's education has been a struggle in Africa, it was no mean achievement for these girls. Majority were pioneers not just within their families, but also clans and

progressively became role models and key icons of change. They set education as a strong catalyst for social transformation.

Occupation Characteristics

Education in Kenya is linked to occupation, which transforms recipients to enormous levels of gender, economic and socio-cultural empowerment. By the 70s, very few Gikuyu women made it to formalised careers (Wamue 1999).

This study sought the occupations for our respondents and data is presented below.

As the data above indicates, besides succeeding in education, our respondents progressed into very prominent and paying careers and or business. Considering the transformative power of formal employment particularly for women, as it gives them financial autonomy, this is commendable. It elevated them socially and economically transformed them and their families into a class that could not be ignored. They gradually became role models for others.

The Paradigm Shift

The Gikuyu community strongly defended FGM against missionaries and the colonial government, arguing that, the rite was synonymous to *Gikuyuhood*, a transformation of girls into women (Kenyatta 1938). The campaign for it sustained the Mau Mau struggle. Incidentally, the Gikuyu were later among the pioneers to achieve a community shift against it. It is definitely no longer a rite of puberty for girls.

Processes/Mechanisms of Transformation

To achieve such an enormous transformation is worth documenting. Through the change stories of the few women who resisted it, this study documents the processes and mechanisms that facilitated it, presented below.

First, personal conviction played a significant role. This surprisingly came from young girls aged 12 to14, who as some of them noted, had foresight and though not very clearly defined; their young minds could link FGM with failure.

My two elder sisters had undergone the rite at different years. Both were previously performing very well in school, and they were my role models. I was then in class Four. After they matured "kugimara" as the rite was referred to, they each gained enormous freedom from my parents. They could mingle freely with boys and girls, for they were perceived to be adults. Their escapades involved late-night roaming in the villages. Unfortunately, though they did exams at subsequent years, each failed

the then Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) exams and repeated Class Seven. After re-failing it again, one dropped out and got married, while the other joined a local mixed day secondary school. I was disappointed and vowed not to go through the same fate. My desire was to continue with education and do better than them. And since I associated their failure with the liberty circumcision gave them, I started strategizing how I would avoid it when my turn came" (Lucy* ¹O.I 2019).

Lucy, at that tender age linked FGM to her sisters' failure in both school and life, an outlook shared by many of our respondents. FGM superimposed a false perception of maturity to both girls and their parents. Maturity was equated with freedom, a concept too complicated for such young minds. With uncontrolled liberty at age 13, the assumption of maturity, ironically, became the very essence of their failure.

Second, parents equally played key roles in facilitating the change process. Mothers in particular were instrumental in the physical and emotional resistance. In some instances, they would deter a girl who was peer pressed to engage in the rite. Muthoni (O.I 2019) narrated her own experience when she informed her mother that she was due for the cut. Her mother informed her that she would get to her later. In two days' time, she went and got a pumpkin, from their farm, cut it into two halves and scooped out from the other half, all its contents. Using the pumpkins Muthoni's mother asked her:

"Muthoni, do you understand what circumcision for girls entails?" No, I replied, wondering the connection between the question and the pumpkins. "Look at these pumpkins. My genitals were once like this (referring to the piece with seeds). Then I was cut....cut really cut with a blunt razor. I bled. And now I look like this (referring to the empty piece). I look empty, I feel empty.

Do you want me to show you?" Ngai (name of God), please mum, don't. No, I want you to see. I don't want to see, am scared, am confused, and am so sorry. I don't want to ever think about it.

Imagine how I got shocked, scared and disgusted. I didn't bother anymore, and I really sympathized with those girls who were boasting about it. To me, they were "kibege"-empty scooped half pumpkins. " (Muthoni O.I, 2019)"

Muthoni narrated this story amidst lots of laughter. She informed us that at that particular time, the story told by her mother was true, otherwise why would she want to show her; if it was a lie? We asked her why she didn't want to see, to which she responded; **"Ngai, are you mad? Would you really want to see your mother's genitals honestly?"** As she narrated her story, she informed us that it took so many years to doubt her mother's story as she realized that her

mum was simply working on her psychology. She informed us immediately went and looked for her two close friends, demonstrated her mum's story and they too believed it. However, though one later succumbed to peer pressure, sneaked from their camp and got circumcised, the two, were tricked by the story and through it, they escaped the cut. They remained friends and to date, Muthoni noted, they call each other "Kibege". Our respondents had numerous stories of how their mothers' either dissuaded them out of FGM or supported them when they voiced disinterest.

Fathers too played significant roles. Theirs had higher influence. Gikuyus are patriarchal and the father is supreme head of a household, whose word in many cases is final. He was also a protector for his family from all kinds of influence especially which he did not condole. Jennifer (O.I 2019) recalled how her father stood his ground when her paternal grandmother insisted on her and her sisters being cut.

"My father had a set mind that we his (girls) were not to undergo "FGM" no matter what". He cared less of what his mother said about us, we were his children, not hers. So one day cucu (grandmother) came fuming to our house and demanded a clear explanation as to why our "silly mother" was keeping so many irigu. We were four girls. Do you want them to experience the curse? She asked my dad. In her argument, her grandmother, or somebody like that had died and left a curse that no girl in her lineage would escape the rite. Cucu threatened to curse dad too if he followed his wife. Imagine she blamed it on my mum, who was not her best of friends anyway. She always complained that mum controlled dad. However, my father stood his ground. He told cucu that he was categorically the one who is preventing us from circumcision and not my mother. He also told her that he was ready for all curses, known and unknown. After a bitter exchange of words between the two, my father grabbed her and pushed her out of our compound, with stern warning never to step here again, as long as she harbored such thoughts. Cucu kept off our home for about two years, but eventually I saw her and my father talking. She later told us that she had no grudge against us as we were her grandchildren anyway. ...You should have seen her during my wedding.....telling everyone how she facilitated my success (Jennifer O.I 2019).

In such circumstances, fathers had foresight that FGM would deter their daughters' progress in school; marry early, as was common after circumcision. This kind of protection was inevitable as in many cases; it was the extended family that was putting pressure on the girls. Thirdly, FGM also takes place at the onset of puberty when peer influence is at its maximum. Peer solidarity thus became a strong catalyst for resistance. In such cases, two or more girls would stand in harmony and decide not to undergo the cut whatsoever. One of our respondents, noted:

¹* used to indicate that the name used is not one's real name.

This is used to conceal identity as the Ethical consent had indicated.

We vowed not to be cut. We had to strategize how to tell our mothers. Fortunately, they were good friends. We thus decided to make some nice food in one of our homes one Sunday afternoon, as we had overheard our mothers confer that they would go there after Church. After Sunday school, as usual, we went home earlier and left them in the Church. They later came home and found very sweet Chapattis and stew made by us. As they commended us for this great achievement, we dropped the bomb shell and the two were shocked. They interrogated us for so long but we stood our ground “no circumcision or else we run away”, we retorted. We insisted that by making Chapattis we had proved maturity. Our mothers looked at each other and to our surprise; they unanimously said “it’s ok”. Those words still echo in my ears to date. Imagine we have stood together since then (Mugure O.I, 2019).*

The other girl was Nyambura* and we visited her. She echoed the same sentiments amidst lots of laughter. Fourthly, teachers equally played a significant role. In certain cases, a female teacher would pick a few selected girls (those very bright) and talk them against the rite. Such teachers and the girls would resolve to inform the parents and in some instances, it worked.

Key requirements needed for the resistance were determination, courage, strong moral character and resilience. These were vital ingredients not just for the girls but also their support agents.

As we shall see later, resistance was not without a price and especially due to the negativity they encountered. Nduta observed;

Well, because of my parents’ determination, courage and resilience, I was set not to let them down. My mother had pre-warned me that resisting would not make things smooth for me, but she encouraged me to remain strong. In any case I needed to prove that I was far much better without the ‘CUT’ as compared to the ones who had undergone it” [O.I Nduta 2019].*

To prove oneself without the cut, a girl needed strong moral character

I and my friend Wangui decided to uphold strong moral character {anyway boys were not interested in us as we were irigu} just to prove a point to others. Our biggest fear was to get a child while in school. We would really be laughed at. So we kept off all boys including those who didn’t know our hidden reasons. Imagine I got my first boyfriend when I was completing University at 24, and I still didn’t consider him a boyfriend. For me, a boy would make me pregnant marry me and give me so many children, which I really dreaded. Though I looked odd

especially to other girls who knew I didn’t have a boyfriend, I had to restrain from things that would keep me off track (Wambui O.I 2019).*

This also indicates that the girls had to be resilient in their course, which most of them said they did. Their change agents equally worked together in solidarity.

Education and in particular boarding schools equally became a key catalyst for transformation. Due to performing well, most of our respondents, unlike their counterparts who did not perform well and hence either dropped out or enrolled in lower class local- day schools these girls joined prestigious national schools like Alliance girls. In such schools, the girls encountered others from communities that did not practice the rite. For the first time, as majority put it, they felt accepted by friends. Circumcision in such schools was not a mark for heroism or recognition. One gained recognition through excelling in class. As Waithira* puts it, the environment was conducive for learning, and even when she closed school, she hardly mixed with “locals”. She belonged to a new social class, the educated elite, which soon became a symbol of envy.

Gikuyu’s Socio-cultural Construction of Womanhood after FGM

FGM for many communities that have always practiced it, the Gikuyu being no objection, has a key objective of transforming girls into women. It is however, a structural issue linked to gender discrimination and to a big extent, poverty. A cross survey across Africa indicates its continuation in regions most underdeveloped where peoples’ livelihoods to a large extent is mainly dependent on rearing of animals (pastoralism) with high level of mobility from arid areas to wet places to look for water and pasture (Andarge, M.Y (2014). By its many rituals, it gives a gendered socio-cultural construction of womanhood where submission especially to men is expected. To the practitioners then, such transformation guarantees marriage and subsequent dowry, in addition to giving circumcisers socio-cultural honour, which also comes with economic returns. By foregoing it, girls and their families as well as the circumcisers thus risk an opportunity, which compromises a lifestyle. Consequently, by foregoing it, one is not just defying a critical rite of passage, but also a social order that gives new meanings to womanhood. Within the Gikuyu worldview, the new dispensation of foregoing the rite, new definitions were hence outlined. Through the stories of change, these have been discussed in the domains of (i) Social (ii) Economic (iii) and Cultural transformation.

Social Transformation

The female rite of passage, practiced at the onset of puberty was a key social and community affair. Kenyatta (1938; 155) notes that:

The initiation of both sexes is the most important custom among the Gikuyu. It is looked upon as a deciding factor in giving a boy or girl the status of manhood or womanhood in the Gikuyu community. No proper Gikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised, and vice versa. It is taboo for a Gikuyu man or woman to have sexual relations with someone who has not undergone this operation. If it happens, a man or a woman must go through a ceremonial purification, kurutwo thahu or gotahikio megiro-namely, ritual vomiting of the evil deeds (ibid.)

In Gikuyu's perception, female circumcision was supposed to among other things increase women's marriageability. This was achieved through a deliberate preparation for the girl. A neophyte had to be fed with fattening foods to bring out her feminine morphology, fullness of breasts and youthful skin, which was bolstered with castor oil. For the first time, she would be introduced to sex education by her *mutiri* (guardian or sponsor). It was assumed that the one month or so seclusion period would transform her into a woman. Her prospects of a suitor thus boosted, she would easily get one and soon get married. This made these girls extremely proud of themselves as they suddenly became centers of interest both within their families, peers and the larger community. It was made clear to them that they would be celebrated soon as their suitors came to pay dowry. Dowry was a big family and communal affair that involved massive celebrations. It was characterized by plenty of food, drinks, dancing and exchange of gifts. It was, and still is a huge booster for the parents and girl's ego. The richer a suitor, the more elaborate the event. Dowry was paid in the form of goats, beer, foodstuffs, farm tools, ornamental (necklaces), clothes (blankets) etc. and particular members of the family received specific gift-items. As the newly circumcised girls became fascinated by the elevation that wifedom and subsequent motherhood would bring at such tender age, little did they know that the very acts were literally militating against their empowerment. Soon, they would face the challenges of adulthood, especially as they became wives and mothers. Early marriages simply robbed them off their childhood.

Unfortunately, the social risk of avoiding the cut, and all associated privileges, superseded any logic against it. Few girls and their parents could logically see any benefits for foregoing the rite. The risk of not securing a suitor rated highest, for Gikuyu customs demanded that all women get married. Besides, it was considered taboo to marry an uncircumcised girl as she was still construed a child irrespective of her age. As has been discussed above, our study found that all girls who took the risk and decided to forego FGM proceeded to high school. To

them as they retorted, marriage and getting suitors at age 13 looked ridiculous, irrespective of any social status it may bring. The mere discussion about it was a fallacy. In this context, Njeri* noted:

I didn't think of getting a man. How? I had not even started my periods and found it weird that my previous friends, who were my age-mates, were talking about marriage, womanhood and children". Such information drove me further from circumcision. It sounded weird' (Njeri O.I 2019)

These sentiments were echoed by almost all respondents who observed that their focus was joining high school, completing education, getting a job, look for a husband, get married and get children, in that order. Even without chronologically counting the years, that seemed a long way to go. Would foregoing FGM complicate or favor the process? A key goal for any Gikuyu woman is to get married, an act that brings her father great honor especially through dowry payment. This was associated with very high social status (Wamue-Ngare 2019, Kenyatta 1938). Delayed marriage was perceived as risky, and girls were warned against ***gukurira riiko*** (*getting old at the kitchen-which is a derogatory term to express spinsterhood*). Our study sought to examine how our respondents fared when time came for them to seek suitors.

A common belief prevailing in Gikuyuland then was that uncircumcised girls who delayed their marriages would not get suitors and even if they got, no-one would pay dowry for them. However, the stories of change revealed the contrary. Jane* noted:

*Initially during my high school years, no boy was interested in me especially from our village (laughter)... Remember I was still a **kirigu** and the **anaake** could not risk to be seen wooing me. It was taboo to befriend or have sex with an uncut girl. In any case, I was not interested in any. However, when I joined college, I felt I was ready. Strangely, I don't know how this leaked to the young men because I started getting several dates. I was spoilt for choice. At least I had a Plan A, B, C and even D (laughter). I settled on one who won my heart and trust me; he quickly kicked off the marriage process. He paid a huge dowry for me. My father told him that I was highly educated and proudly showcased me to the entire village. My dowry was paid in real cash, not those miserable goats my colleagues' suitors gave. (Jane* O.I 2019).*

We later talked to her father, Karanja* who affirmed the story and added;

*I had five girls and none went through that useless cut. My neighbors at first ridiculed me quite a lot, thinking I was a fool. Some could not even invite me to their homes when their daughters' dowry was being paid. How would they? When would I pay back with all these **irigu** in endless schooling? Let me tell you, they later were shocked. My girls got married, one after the other. All the five and not to local riff-raffs from next door"... You should see my sons-in-law. They are "big" people in the society. They have elevated my social status (laughter)... Do you know one took me to tour America? Another bought me a car! Some of those laughing at me have not even stepped in Nairobi!! (Karanja* O.I 2019).*

Education raised a girl's value subsequently increasing her dowry from goats to cash.

As observed, education delayed marriage and raised a girl's social bar. By so doing, it improved the prospects for marriage as the horizon of choice of partners diversified. Girls were exposed to a wider geographical, social and economic space, unlike their counterparts who just married within their next-door neighborhoods.

Education & career redefined socio-economic status = e.g. church weddings, driving a car

The transformation that came with education, career, and character transformed men's outlook in women's qualities as wives and mothers. In this model, new parameters for gauging social status, for example, wedding in church, driving a car, living in a better home, wearing better clothes, earning a salary etc. described new gender identities for women. Fortunately, this shift was infiltrating within the Gikuyu community. This opened new horizons for women, who could speak in public and gradually, started being elected into positions of leadership such as Church and School Boards. Soon this new class became symbols of modernity, and the Gikuyu worldview on FGM transformed.

Economic Transformation

As already noted, circumcision acted a visa for marriage and subsequent dowry, a means to many that increases wealth thereby reducing poverty. Dowry was significant among the Gikuyu especially for men as it brought them wealth (Wamue-Ngare 2019). As such, any move that would increase a girl's worth and subsequently raise her economic value was welcome. The challenge becomes the timing as education obviously delays the process.

However, as our study found increased value for a girl through both education and career raised her dowry prospectus. Foregoing circumcision may delay dowry but subsequently increase it. For instance, a father could "bid

higher" for an educated career girl, citing the amount of money he has invested. Payment of dowry for such girls is also rated using money, not goats, foodstuffs or clothes; and obviously, it would so inflated. Our respondents boasted of high dowries paid for them as elders haggled over their worth. In addition, uncircumcised girls' exposure improved lifestyles, characterized by fewer, healthier, spaced children, as opposed to their counterparts, who had got accustomed to village life. Most of these had married early, got many children who were proving to be economic burdens. Besides, self-value-addition acquired through schooling, guaranteed better returns improving not just the girls' economic status but also their families'. Our study found that majority of these girls raised their nuclear families' standard of living by educating their younger siblings and transforming sometimes grass thatched huts, common in Gikuyuland in the 60s, 70s and 80s, into modern iron corrugated-roofed or stone-walled homes. Grass thatched mud walled huts were symbols of poverty. Such modern homes especially coming from uncircumcised girls became a power-symbol that shifted the community's worldview on FGM and women. Indeed, through these girls, a new economic culture was being defined and change was inevitable.

Cultural Transformation

FGM was a medium for transmitting important cultural values. For instance, for both boys and girls, it marked an age-set system. Those who belonged proudly guarded it. In addition, it prescribed womanhood and manhood. Through the stories of change, we sought to find the new cultural meanings that foregoing the rite brought. For instance, the school system replaced the age-set culture, which started losing meaning as 'Classmate/comrades set in. In addition, new concepts of demonstrating maturity especially for the uncut cropped in. How did uncircumcised girls perceive these? And how were they perceived by the community? Our respondents gave a wide berth of their numerous responses;

I became mature when I realised I can handle myself-manoeuvre through life, for instance stay away from my parents for three months in school, find my way to and fro school across the "big city", when I carried a lot of money to pay school fees, and never lost it. When I got employed and put in charge of a big office. ..When I started managing my own money, when I got married, when I got my first child and started a family and the list was endless.

To many, a mature woman meant one who is reliable, independent, confident, courageous, responsible, amiable & dignified; one who is hardworking, able to raise

her family, able to live amicably with others, morally upright etc.

Observably, as notions of maturity shifted, education and joining careers started giving new gender identities to women. Contrary to prevailing perception, existing gender stereotypes that uncircumcised girls could not give birth, get married, have children, or uphold morality became challenged. Time had disapproved this perception. Instead, new gender perceptions that women could join formal work, work away from home, delegate domestic chores, negotiate marriage partners, marry when and where they want and dictate the number of children they wanted, started gaining momentum. Of importance was the notion that uncut girls could secure husbands and give birth safely. Sexuality could be transmitted through teachers not necessarily puberty rites, and uphold girls from immorality. This new gender dispensation started dispelling women as mere housewives and male substitutes in family matters. Women could become leaders and use their voice to challenge gender biased beliefs and practices. After all, they had critically questioned FGM's purpose, gradually changing the culture of silence and conformity that characterised the biased culture.

Challenges Faced By the Girls in Resisting FGM

Having listened to so many success stories, the study felt it paramount to explore how the mountain that FGM is was scaled. Stories revealed that the price to be paid took either social, physical, or emotional dimensions as summed up below.

Many of them expressed the price for resistance, which was mostly associated with social pressure, for instance loss of friends, peers and former playmates. Considering that the initiation rite meant separation from one lifestyle of childhood to adulthood (Kenyatta 1938), those who deliberately opted out had to be ostracized, rest they defiled the circumcised with their "dirt". Intermingling with those perceived cut and "clean" was considered a disgrace and taboo. On this note, *Wanjiku* * noted:

My childhood age-mate underwent the "cut" without my knowledge. As usual, I went to visit her. Before I could get close to the door, her elder sister denied me access instructing me harshly to retreat. I was chased away from her home compound and openly referred to as "a smelling kirigu". I felt ashamed, confused, bitter and betrayed. She had not even informed me (Wanjiku O.I.2019)*

Abrupt cut off from peers and playmates was a drawback especially for a 13 year old, notwithstanding the bullying, ridicule and name calling using derogatory terms like *kirigu/irigu*. Uncircumcised girls were actually required by

custom to give way to those circumcised and ran errands for them. This as Mary* noted "was very disgusting". Such discrimination led to encounters where battles of supremacy had to be fought. One incidence narrated by Eunice* demonstrates this:

*I was one day insulted by a girl who had undergone the rite as we fetched water at the river. Actually, she started it by forcing me to fill her **mutungi** (water barrel). I refused and asked her whom she took me for. She called me a kirigu. I got so raged, dropped my pail of water and thrashed her properly. She couldn't believe it. She recollected herself feeling very embarrassed and warned me that I would face her mother's wrath. I dared her to try that, retaliating that I would beat them both... I took my water and left for home. A few minutes later she and her mother came at my home fuming. They started shaking our gate incessantly. Before my parents knew what was happening, I took a panga and went outside. I told them that I would definitely cut them into pieces if they crossed over. You can't believe it, after several exchange of insults, they both left. My parents just watched the drama in silence. Later on, I explained the saga and the matter ended there. That girl or any other never joked with me again. They feared me like hell (Eunice* O.I.2019)*

However, as Waithira* noted the negativity they encountered became a springboard for excelling in all that they did. These girls had to prove to everyone, that they were not as useless as they were perceived, and through their resilience, the Gikuyu community became transformed. Summing up all these factors, this study developed a contextual Theory of Change model, hoped to be used by stakeholders and communities fighting FGM. This is displayed in the next section.

Proposed Theory of Change Model

The Change Stories collected from Gikuyu women and men were meant to help develop an intervention model that would hopefully address FGM more effectively. This is based on the assumption that current models are ineffective. As observed, some of these for example, Alternative Rites of Passage target girls due for the cut. As earlier noted, foreign actors running Internationally-heavily funded NGOs, segregate them into secluded areas, teach them about girls and women's rights and graduate them without the cut. Once done, these girls are subsequently paraded for media view where key actors claim to have "salvaged them from cultural violence". Observably, focusing mainly on the medical part of FGM, and labelling it mutilation, they ignore the essence of initiation as it means to those who practice it. By concentrating on "Cutting", they emphasize poor hygiene, pain, bleeding, disfiguring of genitals, and sum FGM as a

violation of women's rights, which in essence, it is. In addition, actors target the traditional circumcisers, equally showing the unhygienic conditions they practice in and the later claiming that they do it to earn a living. As such, these "village surgeons" have been given alternative means of livelihood, which unfortunately serve as a decoy. Once they receive aid from the NGOs, as reports show, they go back to their business as usual albeit more discreetly.

As noted, these methods miss essential facts about the perception of FGM among communities that continue practicing it. By alienating girls from their families and communities, and releasing them back after a while, only delineates and disorients them further. By so doing, such girls become victims of cultural impeachment as they are seen as rebels, who may have to be disciplined. As they re-join their communities, only to be subsequently cut amidst more pain and ridicule (Droy et.al 2018, Parsitau 2017). Prevailing communities do not equate FGM with the negative hullabaloo it is associated with, especially by the media. However, due to the money involved, some members exploit the situation acting changed or as change agents and pocket the money involved. Meanwhile, FGM continues as young girls are further subjected to confusion and exploitation, manipulated by parents, community gate keepers and the "donors". As observed above, community behaviour change especially on something that is core needs specifically determined people, resilient and ready to take a risk. In addition, it takes time, as benefits of change, gradually trickles down to observable objects or lifestyle transformation. It also needs collaboration and support from all actors involved.

The TOC path of change proposed by this study is individual centred, which is purposed to identify self-determined girls, boys, men, and women from the Gikuyu community and map them with their counterparts from the communities that continue to practice FGM, such as the Tharaka, Maasai, Kisii, Kuria, etc. Mapping and modelling can be done through existing social forums like Churches, Mosques, *Nyumba Kumi* initiative, and schools. Specifically, the change agents are persons who can openly discuss and demonstrate the social, cultural and economic benefits of abandoning FGM, and by so doing, help their counterparts identify and desire for such change. It is hoped that, these change agents would be taking their counterparts through a transformative emotive journey and hopefully invite them to their homes, schools to literally link change with FGM. For instance, fathers would talk to their counterparts on the link between education, late marriages and improved dowry, hence a better economic return, albeit delayed as mothers do the same. Of interest is young Gikuyu male youth, who would speak to their counterparts and show them the possibility of dating and marrying uncircumcised girls. It should be noted that community to community

modelling is not a new concept in Kenya. The model has been used to build peace especially during post -election violence as well as inter-ethnic conflicts.

CONCLUSION

The above study has demonstrated that there is a lot to be learnt from the stories of change from Gikuyu women on FGM's resistance. These women, out of their determination, focus, resilience and vision, transformed themselves, their families, and by so doing, the entire community. Transformation, as seen above, came from courage and solidarity that was provided by a network of parents, family, teachers and friends. As FGM was always a communal affair, it lost meaning when the community embraced the change. The lessons learnt from the Gikuyu Change model imply that FGM can indeed stop if a community's worldview and mindset are transformed, a real visible paradigm shift. This may take a few people, a long time, different avenues, but most of all, determination and willingness to see it happen. Current models need to pass this test, because as earlier discussed, many actors are simply acting. The TOC model proposed above can be tried in other communities as it summaries the path for meaningful transformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings of this work indicate that indeed, FGM can be addressed effectively, as is the case with the Gikuyu. Lessons learnt point to determination and joint efforts especially between key factors involving girls and parents. The TOC also recommends family-community efforts that are properly constructed unlike the current fragmented efforts that seem to compete among so many actors. One recommendation thus is a mandatory coordination and collaboration of all actors, which should be put down as a Policy. This should be controlled by the government and all actors to comply. In addition, incentives especially for girls who willingly abandon FGM should be spelt, for example advanced education paid directly to schools and parents given compensation should they willingly opt out of the rite. These, coupled with proper allocation of resources and proper designing of relevant approaches that involve the communities 'at large, significant change may be possible. Future research involves trying the proposed TOC to other communities still practicing FGM. In addition, it is important to hear the experiences of Gikuyu women who continued practising FGM.

Ethical Approval

The study sought ethical approval and respective clearance from Kenyatta University's Bio-Research Board

(Approval No. PKU/981/11033) and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) permit No. NACOSTI/P/19/47628/30198. Respondents were taken through the ethical requirements and signed a consent form before interview.

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GLOSSARY OF NON-ENGLISH WORDS

1. *Acenji* (plural) **muchenji** (singular): [derived from Kiswahili "shenzi"]; derogatory term used by the early missionary and early Gikuyu converts. It referred to non-Christians, heathen, barbaric, uncultured. Anyone carrying on with the Gikuyu cultural practices was seen as *muchenji* (singular).
2. **Ahonoki**: (plural) *muhonoki* (singular): Christians who have confessed having been born again. Born again meant that one is "de-touched" from all worldly life and is set-apart for "heaven". The difference between the two was sometimes ridiculously defined.
3. **Anaake** (plural) **mwanake** (singular): young unmarried men who have been initiated into manhood and adulthood. According to Gikuyu age set guilds, one remained a *mwanake* until he got married, irrespective of age. Their role was to serve as warriors, raid cows to accumulate wealth for meeting dowry obligations. Upon marriage, he became a junior elder.
4. **Athomi**: (plural) **muthomi** (singular): early Gikuyu converts, majority who had also acquired formal schooling were thus referred. Githomo means education, and hence the term. Due to their mannerisms, especially in interaction with formal education and Christianity, the terminology also became associated with Christian adherents, perceived as civilized and modern.
5. **Cucu**: grandmother
6. **Gotahikio megiro-[gotahikio mugiro]** also: *kurutwo thahu* ritual vomiting of the evil deeds. Gikuyus believed that one would be cursed, bewitched or

contaminated in any ritual object, or act, perceived to be unclean, and hence contaminate one. If such happened, a victim would undergo the ritual to be cleaned, failure to which brings disaster, calamity and untold suffering. /**Kurutwo thahu**: Gikuyus believed in ritual contamination if one came in touch with any defilement. If something believed to contaminate someone occurred, he/she was taken to a witchdoctor and the contamination removed. The ceremony involved sipping a liquid as prescribed, spitting it on the ground and verbally undoing what may be bad and hence consume one. The spitting is the one referred to as “gotahikio megiro” literally meaning “vomiting curses”

7. Gukurira riiko: Gikuyu girls were supposed to get married almost immediately after initiation. If one missed to marry at her “right age”, that is with her age mates, and years advanced, she was considered a spinster. Since this was abhorred, a derogatory description was associated to her –“getting old at the kitchen-which” growing old in the kitchen. Unmarried girls stayed in the kitchen with their mothers hence the kitchen terminology.

8. Kibege”-Derogatory terminology to signify emptiness, useless, hollow and unevenly chopped.

9. Kirigu (singular) **Irigu** (plural); Derogatory term of abuse for uncircumcised girls.

10. Kirore: thumbprint- In 1929, the female rite was banned by missionaries. Any Gikuyu Christians who

adhered to the ban had to “sign” a document affirming that. Since many did not write, the then signature was the thumbprint. It was a term used to signify pledge, repudiating the practice and by so doing any Christian caught thereafter participating in it would be suspended from the Church indefinitely. The **kirore** infuriated Gikuyu nationalism and catalysed their revolt. .

11. Muthirigu –A famous Gikuyu dance sang during the colonial error to ridicule uncircumcised girls and praise the heroes spearheading the anti-colonial revolt.

12. Mutiri: supporter-used to denote a person who served as a mentor to a circumcised girl or boy. A mentor and neophyte bond would be of mutual respected and lasted a lifetime.

13. Mutungi : a water barrel

14. Ngai (name of God). Used at times as a means of exclamation of either shock or happiness.

15. Nyumba kumi: literally means ten houses. A Government of Kenya initiative which congregates ten households rendering members responsible of each other. This is aimed to curb crime but it has transformed to social and economic blocks in some instances. It is mainly headed by a leader and the initiative cuts across all communities.

16. Tukutendereza: Baganda term meaning praise the Lord- a common slogan used by early born again Christian adherents mainly at a start of conversation to distinguish them the others.