

Faith-based approach to tackling female genital mutilation in Kenya

An indigenous church in West Pokot in Kenya is actively engaged in a variety of strategies to change community perceptions and practices towards ending the practice of female genital mutilation. With community guidelines and forums, as well as a rescue school for girls under threat of female genital mutilation, the church seeks to prevent girls from undergoing this practice. Because of the link between female genital mutilation and child marriage, efforts to abandon female genital mutilation also contribute to a reduction in the rate of child marriage.



Kenya has enacted a comprehensive legislative framework including the Children's Act 2001 and the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act 2011. However, while the country has made significant progress, total abandonment of the practice has not yet been realised, and it remains particularly ingrained in some communities. The Pokot community is one of these. National prevalence of female genital mutilation in Kenya stands at 21% (KDHS 2014) compared with 32% in 2003.

One church in West Pokot is playing an active role in working towards the abandonment of female genital mutilation. The Dini ya Roho Mafuta Pole Church (Church of the Gentle Holy Spirit/Mafuta Pole) is an indigenous church under the umbrella of the Kenya Chapter of the Organisation of African Independent Churches (OAIC), which guides Mafuta Pole on various development issues including the female genital mutilation initiative in discussion. OAIC has also brought on board Faith to Action Network to provide technical support to Mafuta Pole by way of development of organisational documents and content for community training sessions.



Jerusalem Girls School, West Pokot (credit: OAIC)

With over 30,000 members within the county of West Pokot, the chances of sustainable norms change are high

The change that Mafuta Pole wants to bring is in the perceptions of the community relating to female genital mutilation. The church has over 30,000 members within the county of West Pokot. With active agents of change within the community, the chances of community behaviour towards female genital mutilation changing are high. The initiative is targeted at community members, most of whom are congregants of the church. The church has in place various strategies to tackle female genital mutilation. One of these involved the development of guidelines known as Boma Guides. These give direction and provide

guidance to the local churches, called Bomas, on how to cater to and advise the local community. In its organogram, the headquarters of the church is known as Jerusalem, the mid-level as Zion and the smallest unit, represented by the local churches, as Boma. One of the provisions of this Boma Guide commits to the abandonment of female genital mutilation by the community. The Boma Guides also condemn child marriage. This is important, considering that in West Pokot and many other communities, once a girl undergoes female genital mutilation, she is considered fit for marriage. As such, tackling FGM will also reduce the incidence of child marriage.

African Independent Churches (AICs) were founded during the colonial period, and have developed indigenous forms of worship, theology and social organisation. They often see themselves as custodians of African values. AICs have played an ambivalent role in terms of advancing women and girls' rights. In some cases, they have tolerated female genital mutilation and other harmful practices as a way of resisting what they perceive as cultural imperialism. On the other hand, they are more gender-sensitised than missionary churches; women are very present in AICs and have made an invaluable contribution to the growth of the churches. The work of Mafuta Pole and the OAIC to fight female genital mutilation is a considerable shift towards the progressive promotion of women and girls' rights in the church and its communities.



Technical assistance visit: OAIC, F2A and Mafuta Pole faith leaders, West Pokot, 2017

The church strategies also seek to strengthen girls' education through encouraging school attendance and retention. The church has established a rescue school for girls who are under threat of female genital mutilation as well as for others who are in need. This initiative is locally supported: the church members contribute livestock, which are then sold to sponsor school fees for the girls in the school. Other initiatives, often led by youth, contribute to progress on the female genital mutilation initiative. The youth section of the church holds regular meetings during school holidays, thus targeting both school-going and non-school-going youth. During these retreats, young women are taught about health issues, including female genital mutilation and menstrual hygiene. Joint sessions with both young men and young women enable them to discuss female genital mutilation and can influence both genders' perceptions of the practice.

These strategies work collectively to provide security for girls and young women, removing them from a potentially harmful environment all the while educating them and building their capacity—all of which increases their chances of resisting the practice.

In addition to the specific strategies, the church itself also leads by example, as it adheres to the Kenyan Constitution's two-thirds rule of gender representation in its leadership and programmes. For example, among its leadership, five out of fifteen are women; out of eighty in a theology class offered by the church, thirty are women.

In terms of results, several church leaders note that their neighbours are beginning to emulate their actions by preventing their girls from undergoing female genital mutilation, and also by enrolling them in school. There is also an anticipated impact on child marriage.

The initiative has not been without difficulties. Mafuta Pole is an indigenous church, meaning it is built on both cultural and biblical values. Traditionally, women in Pokot have not enjoyed equal status, and their value, recognition and leadership have been muted. Members of the community who hold onto this traditional view are still against recognition of girls' value, including in education, health and inheritance, among other areas. Church leaders address these constraints by holding education community forums targeted at villagers on the elimination of female genital mutilation, relying on both health- and science-based and biblical arguments to change perceptions. For instance, before this initiative began, this area had one of the highest rates of fistula in Kenya. Older women who were mutilated and now suffer from fistula are thus used as change agents



Dini Ya Mafuta Pole faith leaders, West Pokot, 2017

to demonstrate the harms of female genital mutilation. In addition, the church uses religious texts to work towards the total abandonment of female genital mutilation. Another way the church addresses difficulties is that each Boma has a mechanism for resolving household conflicts. This is like a council that also has women elders. If a family comes to the mechanism with a conflict, its members rely on both scripture and culture to resolve it. Where resolution fails, the council rescues the child if the dispute is female genital mutilation-related. There are also consequences for errant members in this regard, ranging from being stripped of leadership roles and being de-flocked (excommunicated) from the church community, which affects status and trade, as most of the members of the community are members of the church. In this regard, the church has a positive and exacting influence on the community.

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