

Promoting Eradication of FGM through Alternative Rite of Passage: a Study of Community Engagement Strategies in Keiyo-Marakwet Country, Kenya

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Abstract

Based on studies that revealed the cultural significance of FGM as an important stage in transition to adulthood, a new approach was initiated in Kenya in 1997 to provide an alternative rite of passage for girls in communities that traditionally practiced FGM. The new approach included most of the cultural ceremonies and traditional practices that communities engaged in during traditional circumcision ceremonies, but excludes the 'cut'. This approach was adapted among the Keiyo community of Western Kenya in 2003 and named 'Tumdo Ne Leel'. However, while the alternative rite of passage has generally recorded notable success in many parts of the country, there is evidence that FGM is still common, and indeed on the rise, in parts of Keiyo community. This study thus aimed to understand why the intervention appears to have failed in parts of the country by analyzing the public perceptions of the communication strategies used to promote Tumdo Ne Leel in Keiyo community. This was a cross-sectional study where interviews and focus group discussions were used to generate data from selected community opinion leaders, parents, traditional circumcisers and adolescent girls. Study findings suggest that the use of religious institutions as the main platform to engage the community regarding alternative rite of passage has largely contributed to the failure of the project in parts of the community. Most of those who practiced FGM do not subscribe to the church doctrine, hence any project promoted by the church is conceived as a cultural interference. It also emerged that circumcision was ideologically constructed within the community as a process through which women attain respect in society, hence uncircumcised women were ostracized. The paper proposes a participatory community engagement approach that will enhance community ownership of the programme.

Key Words: female genital mutilation, alternative rite of passage, communication, public perceptions

The cultural significance of FGM

As the debate on the cultural significance of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) continues, several questions have emerged. Some of the salient ones include: Should consenting women be allowed to engage in the practice also called female circumcision? Are critics of this practice justified in trying to outlaw it, or are they guilty of ignorance and cultural imperialism? Is there evidence of expressions of joy and ecstatic celebrations of womanhood during FGM processes, or hidden experiences of coercion and subjugation? What is not in doubt, however, is that FGM has harmful,

sometimes devastating, effects the reproductive health of those who undergo the rite (Toubia, 1994).

Even though FGM has, for years, been viewed as a rite of passage in the communities practicing it, it is also seen as a violation of human rights against women and the girl child at the international level (Baumgarten and Erdelmann 2003). According to the UN release (2007), there are social, psychological and medical consequences of FGM hence many Western countries have enacted laws against the practice. In 1985, for example, Britain passed a law - Female Circumcision Act - that prohibits the immigrants from circumcising their daughters in the country (Olenja and Kamau, 2001).

Responding to the need to stop FGM, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) set up a joint programme in 2008 that aimed to encourage communities to collectively abandon FGM. This intervention used culturally sensitive approaches including dialogue and social networking that brought together various groups within the community including religious leaders and young girls themselves. Rather than condemn FGM, the programme encouraged collective abandonment to avoid alienating those that practice it and instead bring about their voluntary renunciation (press release London/Geneva, 6 February 2010).

In Kenya, efforts to eradicate FGM date back to pre-independence period when the Protestant Christian missionaries in Central Kenya campaigned against the practice. In 2001, the Children's Act was enacted, which describes girls who are likely to be forced into circumcision as children in need of special care and protection. The Act further provides for courts to take action against the perpetrators (UNFPA, 2007). The Ministry of Health in collaboration with the National Plan of Action initiated a twenty year plan with an aim of hastening the elimination of FGM (Chege et al., 2001).

The Kenyan government has also ratified various international conventions on the rights of women and children. It adopted the recommendations of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing (1995), which cited FGM as both a threat to women's reproductive health and a violation of their human rights. Kenya is also a signatory to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) and of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, Maputo Protocol (2003) (Döcker, 2011). It is also a signatory to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1990). The UNCRC, an international convention from which the Children's Act has been heavily drawn, provides for observation of children's rights at global, regional and national levels. It defines and upholds basic rights for all children in the world up to the age of 18.

Despite all these policies which have been put in place to aid in eliminating FGM, the practice continued unabated in some communities in Kenya, hence public health practitioners were forced to re-think their strategies in combating the vice. Studies have shown that FGM has a cultural significance in communities that practice it, especially as an important indicator of transition to adulthood among women (Chege, 1993; Creider & Creider, 1997; Chege, Askew & Liku, 2001; Chebet & Dietz, 2003). With this realization, practitioners and scholars involved in the anti-FGM campaign developed culturally appropriate alternative rites of passage for girls of circumcision age, that would satisfy

community expectations with regards to transition to adulthood, but which would exclude the 'cut'. This new approach was introduced in Kenya in 1997 and was dubbed 'Circumcision through Words'. The new approach avoided blunt prohibition of FGM, by offering an attractive alternative where the customary procedures were included in the program but only excluding the 'cut' (Ballenger, 2008).

Tumdo Ne Leel as a Culturally-Appropriate Alternative

The alternative rite of passage proposed an approach that mainly focused on the communicative aspect of the cultural practice. Implementation of the programme varied from one community to the other, but it mainly involved assembling willing young girls of circumcision age in one place where they were taken through a curriculum developed (with expertise from organizations such as the PATH Foundation). Old women, who traditionally participated in circumcision ceremonies, were in most cases invited to facilitate some sessions (Chege, Askew & Liku, 2001).

Among the Kalenjin community in Western Kenya, the alternative rite of passage has been adapted and is commonly referred to as '*Tumdo Ne Leel*' (which literally means the 'new' circumcision). *Tumdo Ne Leel* involves a week-long programme of community education about the challenges and requirements of transition from childhood to adulthood and specifically focuses on traditional rites, body changes and development, relationship, hygiene, respect, developing self-esteem and self concept, empowerment and morals. The young women are secluded for a week to undergo these classes. Family members also undergo health education sessions and men in the community are taught about the negative effects of female circumcision. The programme culminates in a coming of age ceremony for young women, where those who participated are then introduced to the community as adults. The programme thus provides the forum for the community to implement a cultural process of inducting girls through the societal expectations of adulthood but excludes the 'cut' (Chebet, 2007). In spite of such initiatives, media reports have recently highlighted the prevalence of FGM practice in some communities in Kenya, including the Keiyo community, one of the sub-groups of the Kalenjin community. Without doubt, FGM is a harmful traditional practice and a form of violence that directly infringes upon women's (and children's) rights to physical, psychological and social health. Problems on the definition, comprehension, description, and understanding of female circumcision have been evaluated by several scholars. Yet the reluctance of circumcising communities to abandon the practice

despite the many initiatives discussed above remains an enigma.

Several studies have already been conducted to enhance knowledge on the complexity of the practice of FGM and factors that determine perpetuation. However, the perception of communication strategies used to promote *Tumdo Ne Leel* as an alternative approach in transition to adulthood among the Keiyo is yet to be adequately understood. Such an understanding would provide a basis for developing strategies for improvement, and also enhancing knowledge on planning community engagement strategies, especially with regards to projects that involve rural communities.

Study Objectives and Methodology

This paper is based on a masters-level study undertaken between 2011 and 2012 to explain the persistence of FGM in parts of Keiyo in spite of the ongoing campaign to promote an alternative rite of passage. The study focused on understanding community responses to the alternative rite of passage by analyzing public perceptions on *Tumdo Ne Leel*. Specifically, the study was aimed at responding to the following questions; what are the public perceptions on the communication strategies used to promote *Tumdo Ne Leel* among the Keiyo community? What challenges surround the adoption of *Tumdo Ne Leel* as an alternative rite of passage among the Keiyo?

To achieve the objectives of the study, a qualitative approach involving the use of in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions was used to generate data from a cross-section of the members of the community. The study was mainly focused on Keiyo community living in the Kibargoi Division of the Keiyo-Marakwet County in Western Kenya. *Tumdo Ne Leel* programme was first initiated in Keiyo but cases of FGM practice are still rampant in Kibargoi division. A total of 45 respondents including four opinion leaders, twenty four parents and seventeen adolescent girls were sampled to participate in the study. The girls were selected from the only two primary schools located within the division. The class eight girls were chosen because at their age, they have understood more about FGM. It is also at their age that the girls are often circumcised and married out in this community.

An interview guide was developed to allow a systematic and consistent generation of data from the selected opinion leaders and traditional women circumcisers. Before the interview, consent to participate in the study was sought after explaining the objectives of the study and the research process to each participant. With permission from participants, the interviews were audio recorded to ensure that the conversation was well captured. Each participant was interviewed for

approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were mainly conducted in the evening when the respondents were through with their daily duties. Such times were also good since most families came together after day long's activities and they tended to be relaxed unlike during the day when they were busy with their duties.

Focus group discussions were used to generate data from the school girls and the parents. The FGDs helped the participants to interact and express their feelings. One FGD was conducted in one of the primary schools because the number of girls could not warrant more than one group, while two FGDs were conducted in the second school. Purposive sampling strategy was used to select girls who were willing to participate in the FGD sessions that took between 45 minutes to 1¹/₂ hours. FGDs with the girls were undertaken in the evening during games time so as to avoid interrupting their classroom programmes. All the FGDs and interviews were conducted in the local language (Kalenjin) and later transcribed and translated to English to enable easy analysis and interpretation of data. During the whole session the researcher was conscious and took note of the non-verbal cues which included body language and facial expressions.

Convenience sampling was used to select the parents where only those parents who were at their homestead or at the shopping center and were willing to participate in focus group discussion were interviewed. This being a region with scattered population, it was difficult to get parents, especially fathers, at home because most of them are involved in communal activities in morning hours and go out to meet with peers in the afternoons. Most men were thus interviewed in the evening at the shopping center where most of them met.

Transcriptions of the interviews and the FGDs were done before translating to English. The process of analyzing the data began with familiarizing with the data through reading and re-reading the information gathered in an interactive way. Thereafter, coding was done by collecting features of interest from the entire data in a basic but systematic way. This was done by cutting and pasting out key quotes that appeared to be significant in the study from the transcriptions. Themes were searched then the information was categorized into relevant themes. Relevant information was selected that would fit each theme. Categories were first reviewed to ensure that they accurately reflected the transcribed information. Themes were named and renamed throughout the process and sub themes generated to tell the story within the major theme. Data was then presented in form of narration giving credence to the voices of the respondents. Extracts illustrate an argument that relates or answers the research question.

Theoretical Approach

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Paulo Freire outlines a useful participatory framework that has been widely accepted as one of the most effective approaches to address societal problems. Freire's approach aims at developing critical consciousness about the underlying problems amongst members of the society which will then motivate community members to develop their own solutions to the problems. Freire argues for a bottom-up approach where the community comes up with their own solutions, rather than a top-down (banking approach) where solutions are imposed on the community by external agents. In Freire's pedagogy, the role of the educator is significantly diminished to generate a bi-directionality in the learning process, where the educator problematises the world that surrounds the oppressed (community members) so as to generate conditions in which learners are able to reflect on their own realities (Freire, 1970). Community members are thus conceptualized as agents, rather than, subjects of change. Freire argues that top-down approaches generates naïve consciousness amongst the members of the community, where individuals are aware of the situation but do not undertake any concrete steps to change it. Instead, Freire proposes a participatory pedagogy where the educator and the educated both contribute towards the learning process.

Key Findings

Study findings suggest that the practice of FGM was still prevalent parts of this community but, unlike in the past where the practice was associated with celebration and fanfare, it is now being undertaken secretly. This is probably as a result of the increasing efforts by the government to bring perpetrators of the practice to justice. Participants admitted that the practice existed in some households where it was carried out secretly, as captured by one participant:

Elder: Let me explain to you. For now we might not be in a position to tell the exact number of those who were circumcised last year because nowadays the practice is done secretly by the family members only and there are no celebrations which used to be the peak of the practice.

This reflects a changing trend in the practice of FGM where the public celebrations and fanfare that surrounded the practice traditionally have now been replaced by a secret practice. This further demonstrates that the perpetrators of FGM understand that the practice is illegal, hence the secrecy associated with the current practice. Traditionally, however, certain aspects of FGM have always been treated with absolute secrecy

and can only be discussed among people who have already undergone the cut. In fact, during this study, the researcher was asked whether she had undergone the rite. The researcher was only able to proceed with the study after an intervention by one of the elderly women who knew the researcher and who assured the participants that all was well, hence the green-light and support to the researcher to continue with her study. During the seclusion period, the initiates take an oath never to reveal what they were told during the initiation, both as a measure to protect the integrity of the process, but also to encourage curiosity among the yet-to-be circumcised girls who would then be inspired to find out what their friends go through during this period. This act of secrecy frames circumcision as a step towards a status of privilege within society.

Findings of the study also suggest that community perceptions on uncircumcised adult women had a significant bearing on young girl's decisions to undergo the 'cut'. Most of the girls who participated in the FGDs felt that the community would despise them if they did not undergo the rite, as shown in the extract of the conversation below:

Interviewer: when you grow up, would you like to be circumcised?

Interviewee: Yes

Interviewer: why?

Interviewee: All my cousins have passed through the practice and I want to be respected. I don't want people to laugh at me or to be told to go back to my mother when I get married like Susan who was circumcised last year. I heard my aunt say, she was behaving like a baby in her matrimonial home and she was sent back (most of the girls in the FGD appeared to support this view).

The view of uncircumcised adult women as children was also evident in interviews with other participants. In an interview with one of the women who has been facilitating FGM in the community, she perceived her task as assisting girls get accepted in the community, and especially by men:

Respondent B: It is embarrassing to see our girls being send to their parents because of lack of knowledge. You know in Kalenjii community, Keiyo in particular, men don't believe that women can grow if they are not circumcised. That is why we are only helping them to gain their respect.

These responses indicate that circumcision is not only a physical practice but also an ideological construct that serves to distinguish adulthood from

childhood. Women who have not undergone the cut are seen as children irrespective of their age, education, and other positions within society. Undergoing the cut therefore significantly alters the power structure among women in the society, hence increasing the interest in circumcision.

When asked whether they had heard about *Tumdo Ne Leel* and where they got the information, it emerged that most of the participants were aware of the programme. Most of them indicated that they had heard about it from those who go to church. Most of the participants who were church-going also indicated having heard about the programme in church, while some were aware of when the programme was conducted:

Elder: We went for diocese meeting in Choroget and it was announced.

Respondent 4: I was also told by Florence, a lady who works with Chebet as a motiriot (counselor) of the girls.

Pupil 7: They said it in church during branch youth meeting which was held in Kiptulos (a village few kilometers away).

Even though Christianity is almost the sole religious denomination in this region, Christians form a small segment of the population in this remote part of Kenya. Much of the population still engages in traditional practices, and Christians are largely despised as misleading the community by bringing into the community foreign practices.

When asked about their views on *Tumdo Ne Leel* as an alternative rite of passage, opinions were sharply divided between those who subscribe to Christianity and those who don't. Some of the respondents felt that *Tumdo Ne Leel* is for those going to church and they justified their argument by stating that it was being done in the church and the people leading the program were the women church leaders.

Respondent 5: Don't be cynical that thing is for the church goers. Have you ever heard non-Christians take their girls? You heard them say the girls were camping in a church so can you start by going to the church first.

Others appeared to adopt a wait-and-see approach as indicated in the following response:

Respondent 3: Let the religious start then we will follow (smiling). You know it is not good for all of us to go into it. Someone has to lead the way.

The objection of the programme by those who did not subscribe to Christianity appears to be tied to the overall perception of Christianity as a foreign ideology that is aimed at destroying their cultural values and traditional practices that had huge significance in their worldview. As such, such participants perceived the programme as harmful since it was 'misleading' young people to abandon their traditional practices:

That is meant to mislead the young generation. If our people want to loose all our girls and end up in tears, it is by bringing such misleading programs to this place. There will be no future again and I don't know what will happen to our boys; may be they will marry from other communities and before they are thirty they will not be able to walk upright (meaning they won't be taken good care of by such wives).

For most in this community, and as suggested in other studies cited before, the concern was with the preservation of culture. Hence the skepticism with which the new programme was being treated appeared to be associated more with the concerns of the impact of such new programmes on their cultural values and not necessarily the absence of the 'cut' in the programme:

Respondent 5: the practice (FGM) has been very educative to our girls and also the new program the way we have heard it is not so bad but now we are not very sure it will be able to give enough teachings to our daughters or these church goers are exaggerating their teachings, because as said by Mzee eliminating FGM is like building a grave for our girls. You know our main concern is to have decent girls who are morally upright girls who will never bring shame to the family".

Study findings further suggest that there was a general lack of adequate engagement with the community in this area, such that the community perceives the programme as religious, because it has mainly been presented through the church platform. The majority of the participants felt that the campaign would have succeeded if community based activities were used as forums to communicate the concept of *Tumdo Ne Leel*.

Discussion

In a study by Population Council, Kenya (2011) about *The role of Alternative Rites of Passage (ARP)* in Kisii and Kuria Districts in Kenya, it was established that the ARP has largely been successfully adopted in these communities through integration with girls' empowerment programmes. The approach used in Kisii and Kuria appears to have largely succeeded mainly

because it was implemented through projects that were mainly community driven. On the contrary, findings discussed above suggest that the ARP in the part of Keiyo that participated in the study has been mainly introduced to the community through a platform that the community still largely treats with suspicion. It should be noted that the majority of those who subscribed to Christianity rarely practice FGM, to the chagrin of the 'traditionalists'. As such, the programme has encountered resistance from those who do not subscribe to Christian ideals, and who form the majority in this community. This clearly demonstrates the consequences of failing to effectively engage the community in programme development and implementation, through frameworks that are supported by the community.

Some in the community felt that the programme would have succeeded if it had been introduced through an appropriate channel, for example, through women groups and other community based organizations. The lack of effective community engagement has thus contributed in inviting resistance from the community members who treat the project with suspicion. Community engagement is often considered to be an important function of communication.

Community engagement requires using communication effectively as it is vital in earning and maintaining the good-will between the community and the change agents. Barnett's study reveals that the practices of community engagement rely on communication whereby the dialogue enhances mutual understanding between two change agents and the local communities (Bessette, 2004). Bessette points out that, traditionally, communication involved one-way flow of information which did not yield the expected results. In this regard, appropriate communication strategies are required so as to adequately involve the community.

The participatory approach proposed by Paulo Freire facilitates dialogue within the community that enables community members to identify, analyze and prioritize problems, formulate and implement concrete initiatives to respond to (Freire, 1976). Bessette, (2004) notes that, participatory processes bring together all stakeholders in a dialogue and exchange of ideas on developmental needs, objectives and actions. To effectively use communication as a catalyst for social change, change agents need to adequately understand the structures and systems within the community, and to partner with local community in developing and implementing social change interventions. Bessette's study revealed that

change agents must consider the people they want to communicate with as partners in a development effort, and not merely as beneficiaries. This will facilitate genuine dialogue based on mutual trust between community members and the change agents and among the community members themselves, hence leading to sustainable social change.

Conclusion

The challenges of the *Tumdo Ne Leel* concept lie in inadequate knowledge of the program, illiteracy, societal values which are still deeply rooted, and lack of women empowerment, which was evident in the community. Most of the decisions are made by men including FGM which, though is a purely women's affair, is ideologically controlled by men who regard uncircumcised women as children. This construction serves to increase pressure on uncircumcised women to undergo 'the cut' as a means of attaining a higher social standing within the community and thereby commanding respect within the society. The strategy used to promote the alternative rite of passage thus fails to challenge this ideology especially in its strong association with a religious group whose ideology is largely contested by those who practice FGM. This, therefore, calls for the re-thinking of the approach within which alternative rite of passage is promoted so as to challenge the existing ideologies relating to female circumcision within the community.

The participatory methodology proposed by Freire thus becomes necessary in the context of anti-FGM campaign not only because it enables the conscientization of community members on the risks of FGM, but also because it creates the framework for a bi-directional learning process where community members develop interventions in ways that work for them. Participatory learning creates a dialogical process in which community members are able to willingly tackle problems based on a clear understanding of the nature of the problem. The resultant dialogue will ultimately contribute in trans-forming the problematic social norms, practices and ideologies that encourage the practice of FGM. In addition a Freirian participatory approach will lead to the adoption of a community-led framework where community members do not just see themselves as learners or as participants in the course but, more importantly, feel the ownership of the entire programme.

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