

6

KENYA: CREATING A SAFE HAVEN, AND A BETTER FUTURE, FOR MAASAI GIRLS ESCAPING VIOLENCE

Though proud of her Maasai heritage, Agnes Pareyio knew that certain traditional practices in Kenya needed to change. For years she travelled on foot from village to village, with a wooden model of the female reproductive system in hand, explaining the dangers of female genital mutilation/cutting to anyone who would listen. In Maasai culture, genital cutting is an initiation into adulthood. It is also considered a prerequisite for becoming a bride, which occurs, on average, at the tender age of 14. With support from UNFPA and V-Day, Ms. Pareyio and her colleagues created a safe house for girls attempting to escape this fate, and enrolled them in school. A network of like-minded organizations, alternative rites of passage and awareness-raising in the community are helping to ensure that Maasai girls in the future will have a wider range of options.

THE CONTEXT

Kenya lies along the equator on the east coast of Africa. It ranks 154 out of 177 countries in the 2005 Human Development Index and has been a multiparty democracy since 1991.

The population of Kenya was estimated at 32.7 million in 2003, and is growing at a rate of 2.5 per cent a year.¹ Fifty-six per cent of the population were living below the poverty line in 2002, up from 52 per cent in 1997. A higher proportion of poverty occurs in female-headed households, which accounted for 37 per cent of all households in 1999.² Despite difficult economic conditions in Kenya, efforts are being made to enhance the welfare of women and children, especially the poor and disadvantaged. The Children's Act of 2001, for example, ushered in free primary education in Kenya, which has contributed to equal opportunities for girls and boys and gender parity in the early grades.

The incidence of gender-based violence, which is high in Kenya according to recent national and international reports, remains a major obstacle to women's enjoyment

of their rights. In its combined third and fourth periodic report on Kenya's compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Government stated that discrimination on the basis of sex was outlawed in a 1998 amendment to the Constitution. However, it also acknowledged that subsequent clauses in the constitution undermine this amendment by permitting discrimination in customary and personal laws (which govern marriage, inheritance and property-related issues), in effect, give men greater rights and authority over women.³

The lack of an adequate legal framework for the protection of women and girls has reinforced the use of gender-based violence as a tool of patriarchal control. According to a 2003 Demographic and Health Survey in Kenya, about half of all Kenyan women have been victims of violence, and one in four reported incidents of violence in the previous 12 months.⁴ Among married, divorced or separated women, about one in four has experienced emotional violence from their current or most recent husband; 40 per cent have experienced physical violence and 16 per cent have experienced sexual violence.

1 *Human Development Report 2005*. Published for the United Nations Development Programme.

2 UNFPA. 2003. Country Programme Document for Kenya. Available at: www.unfpa.org

3 Customary laws are mostly unwritten and constantly evolving norms that exist in parallel with statutory law. The Judicature Act (Ch. 8, Article 3 of the Laws of Kenya) provides "that courts' jurisdiction must be exercised in conformity with the constitution's statutes and other sources of formal law, adding that customary law should guide courts so far as it is applicable and is not repugnant to justice and morality or inconsistent with any written law." Traditional leaders (such as elders) and local authorities, such as government-appointed chiefs, are the primary enforcers of customary laws. Kenyan feminists have argued that the enforcers of customary law are men who bring a subjective interpretation that disempower women. See Atsango Chesoni. 1996. Federation of Women Lawyers of Kenya (FIDA Kenya) Annual Report.

4 Ministry of Health and National Council for Population and Development. 2003. Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, Key Findings. Nairobi: Kenya Bureau of Statistics.

WOMEN AND VIOLENCE IN KENYA

According to a 2003 Demographic and Health Survey:

- Early marriage is still prevalent in some parts of Kenya, resulting in the forced marriage of girls as young as 12 to older men. About a quarter of youths between the ages of 20 and 24 were married by the age of 18.
- Currently, one quarter of women aged 20 to 24 and 20 per cent of women aged 15 to 19 have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting, compared to 48 per cent of women aged 40 to 49. The practice is more common among some ethnic groups than others. The highest incidence of genital cutting among girls and women in Kenya is found among the Somali (97 per cent), Kisii (96 per cent) and Maasai (94 per cent).
- Forced early marriage and teenage pregnancy contribute to dropout rates among girls: Nearly 14 per cent of girls who leave school each year either get married or have a child.
- Nearly half of all adolescent girls give birth before the age of 20.
- One in five girls is coerced or forced into her first sexual encounter.
- Almost half of adolescents without education have begun child-bearing.
- Four in every 10 women who die from unsafe abortions are adolescents.
- Unmarried girls are under pressure to have sex because of their economic vulnerability. Statistics show that 6 per cent of young women exchange sex for money. Adolescents in rural areas are likely to have an earlier sexual debut than those in urban areas.

Physical and sexual violence are common among pubescent girls, who are vulnerable to harassment and attack by stronger and older males. The home is the first site of abuse and the violence continues to spread as girls are exposed to the wider community.⁵ In childhood, girls are frequently sexual prey for male relatives and for men and boys outside the family.⁶ In adulthood, Kenyan women surveyed reported that their physical and sexual abusers were intimate partners and relations within and beyond the family—a wide array of males from household staff to neighbours, ex-husbands and landlords.⁷ Sexual violence increases women's vulnerability to HIV, which is taking a disproportionate toll on young women: 37 per cent of females in Kenya aged 20-24 years are infected with HIV, compared to 11 per cent of males in the same age group.⁸

The low status of women also contributes to their vulnerability. According to Kenya's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for 2001-2004, women's earnings in Kenya are less than half that of men's.

Although women are more than half the population and 60 per cent of the voting population in Kenya,⁹ they are poorly represented in political decision-making. The number of women parliamentarians is on the rise—from 5 in the 1990 general elections to 18 in 2002. Still, they comprise only 8 per cent of the total parliamentary membership.

KENYA AND CEDAW

In 1984, the Government of Kenya ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.¹⁰ However, the recommendations of CEDAW have yet to be incorporated into domestic law and its provisions have not been invoked before the courts. Moreover, the existence of multiple laws on marriage and divorce and customary laws and practices perpetuate discrimination against women.

Following Kenya's 2003 report on its progress towards CEDAW, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women issued these recommendations:

5 Population Communication Africa. April 2002. *Violence and Abuse of Kenyan Women and Girls*. Nairobi: New World Printers.

6 Ibid., p. 12. Women surveyed were asked about physical abuse in childhood and in adult years: 53 per cent of women and girls surveyed reported multiple physical abuses in childhood; 45 per cent of women reported one or more episodes of sexual abuse in childhood.

7 Ibid.

8 UNFPA. 2003. Country Programme Document for Kenya. Available at: www.unfpa.org

9 Social Watch. 2005. Social Watch Annual Report 2004. Available at: <http://www.socialwatch.org/en/informelImpreso/tablaDeContenidos2004.htm>

10 The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/states.htm>.

- Incorporate the provisions of CEDAW into domestic law and ensure that the provisions of the Convention are reflected in the Constitution and in all legislation.
- Eliminate all discriminatory laws, practices and traditions to ensure women's equality with men, particularly in marriage and divorce, burial and devolution of property.
- Enact relevant bills, including the Domestic Violence (Family Protection) Bill (2002); the Equality Bill (2001); the National Commission on Gender and Development Bill (2003); Criminal Law Amendment Bill (2002); HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill (2002); Public Offices Code of Ethics Bill (2002).
- Adopt comprehensive measures to address violence against women and girls, including domestic and sexual violence.
- Initiate gender-sensitive training for public officials, particularly law enforcement personnel, justice officials and health providers.
- Establish shelters and counselling services for survivors of violence and sexual harassment.
- Develop a plan of action to eliminate female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).
- Increase the number of women in decision-making roles.
- Define the mandate and responsibilities of mechanisms for the advancement of women and gender equality and allocate sufficient budgetary resources to this end.

Since these recommendations were issued, the following actions have been initiated:

- A National Commission on Gender and Development has been formed.
- A public-awareness campaign to eliminate FGM/C has been complemented by effective law enforcement. The campaign is targeting both women and men and has received the support of civil society, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
- The media is gradually projecting a more positive image of women, promoting the equal status of women in both the public and private spheres.
- The national machinery for the advancement of women has been given greater autonomy within the Ministry of Gender, Sports, Culture and Social Services.
- The Public Offices Code of Ethics was passed and the draft Constitution of Kenya (2005) proposes to reserve one third of all appointed and elected seats in Government to women.

In addition, the Government has formulated a five-year plan of action based on all 12 areas of critical concern listed in the Beijing Platform for Action. The plan is being implemented by the Ministry of Gender, Sports, Culture and Social Services.

A Legal Framework for Children's Rights

A legal milestone in Kenya was the Children's Act of 2001, which was created to put into effect the principles enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The act provides a comprehensive legal framework for responding to early marriage, FGM/C and the rights to survival, health and medical care. Furthermore, the act offers guidelines for protection from child labour, sexual exploitation, prostitution, harmful drugs and legal assistance by the Government.

The legal provisions spelled out in the Children's Act strictly prohibit harmful cultural practices such as FGM/C and early marriage. Any person who is found guilty of contravening the provisions of the act can be imprisoned for a maximum term of 12 months and/or be subjected to a fine not exceeding \$735.¹¹ Alternatively, an individual may be charged with subjecting a child to cruelty, which includes causing injury to a child's health, which attracts a stiffer penalty of imprisonment for a maximum period of five years or a fine not exceeding \$2,950.

THE UNFPA COUNTRY PROGRAMME

UNFPA has been a long-term development partner of the Government of Kenya. Its Sixth Country Programme for Kenya (which covers the years 2004-2008, and has a total budget of \$12 million), is contributing to the quality of life of the Kenyan people by supporting population and reproductive health policies and programmes. The country programme adopts a rights-based approach in order to empower males, females and adolescents, particularly girls, in exercising their sexual and reproductive rights.

The country programme has two components, namely (1) reproductive health services, including HIV prevention, and (2) population and development coordination and management. Gender equity and equality as well as women's empowerment have been incorporated into all components of the country programme. In order to achieve its stated objectives, the country programme identifies strategic partnerships through which joint programming and sharing of technical expertise are being carried out. These partners include government agencies, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, national specialized

¹¹ At the current exchange rate of 1US\$ = Kshs 68.00.

training and research organizations and bilateral/multilateral agencies. It is in this context that UNFPA has partnered with several community-based organizations, such as the Tasaru Ntomonok Initiative, in sensitizing communities to the effects of harmful traditional practices.

THE PROJECT

The subject of this case study is a project called 'Safety Net for Girls Escaping Female Genital Cutting and Early Marriage'. It has a budget of \$60,000 for the period 2003-2006. The project is being implemented by the Tasaru Ntomonok Initiative (TNI), a community-based organization in the Southern Rift Valley. The organization operates within the Narok district, which has a population of more than 500,000 people,¹² and was formed to support young girls escaping early marriage and FGM/C. (*Tasaru ntomonok* means 'rescue the women' in the local Maa language.)

In the traditional culture of the Maasai, the average age at which girls are married is 14 years. Genital cutting, which is considered a prerequisite to marriage, is usually performed at age 10. Girls who undergo cutting not only miss an opportunity to explore and appreciate their youth, but frequently end up in polygamous marriages with co-wives as old as their mothers and husbands as old as their fathers. Most girls are identified for marriage and reserved by their eventual husbands even before they begin schooling. A bride price is paid in instalments from the time a baby girl is identified and selected for marriage.

In the Maasai community, unmarried women are regarded as pariahs, and it is widely believed that genital cutting is the only way a girl can enter adulthood—and thus prepare for marriage. It is also believed that marrying an uncircumcised girl is a bad omen since her blood is 'unclean'.

A study undertaken in the early 1990s by a local NGO found that nearly 90 per cent of girls and women over the age of 14 had undergone FGM/C, often under less than hygienic circumstances.¹³ In addition to the health risks, including trauma, bleeding, difficult childbirth and HIV infection, 80 per cent of these girls dropped out of school due to forced early marriage.

One objective of the project is to provide a 'safe house' for girls seeking refuge from genital cutting and early

marriage—the Tasaru Rescue Centre. But it also seeks longer-term solutions to the problem, by reconciling runaway girls with their families and communities and discouraging the practices of early marriage and FGM/C, thereby reducing the number of girls needing help.

RESULTS TO DATE

- All of the girls who have been rescued from forced early marriage or FGM/C have gone back to school.
- None of the rescued girls who have been reconciled with their families have undergone cutting or been forced into early marriage.
- Community understanding of the project's benefits has contributed to its success. Community leaders, elders and members of the provincial administration support the project and regularly consult with project leaders on emerging cases.
- The project has supported construction of a girl's dormitory in Sakutiek Secondary School. The provincial administration, through the District Education Committee, has recommended the construction of dormitories in all primary schools to ensure that girls between the ages of 8 and 14, who are most vulnerable to early marriages and genital cutting, are protected.
- Women who perform FGM/C are developing alternative livelihoods, including operating a maize grinding mill purchased through the project. They are also training to become traditional birth attendants.
- More than 1,000 women from various women's groups, as well as officials from the provincial administration and district law enforcement officers, have been sensitized to the dangers of early marriage and genital cutting. Some religious leaders, including those representing the African Inland and Full Gospel churches, have lent their support to the project through regular sermons and public-awareness initiatives.
- The project has introduced new perspectives on cultural values and practices in a community that is deeply traditional.

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES

The founders of the Tasaru Rescue Centre began their work by making a personal commitment to change. One of the founders, Agnes Pareyio, a Maasai herself and women's rights activist, says that her passion stems from personal experience: Ms. Pareyio was circumcised

¹² Government of Kenya Central Bureau of Statistics. 2000. Population Census 1999: District population breakdown. Government printers.

¹³ Maendeleo ya Wanawake study on FGM/C in 1991/1992.

RESCUING A NINE-YEAR-OLD BRIDE

Narok, Kenya—Silvia Selula looks dazed and lost. A faint wrinkle creases her otherwise cherubic face. Occasionally a furtive smile appears at the corner of her mouth. Her face says a lot about what she has endured, especially in the last few weeks, and about her optimism about the future. Silvia is the latest addition to the Tasaru Ntomonok Girls Rescue Centre in Narok, Kenya.

Most of those who listen to her mumble her story shake their heads and wonder how the fate that almost befell Silvia could be tolerated in Kenya today. Silvia is nine years old. A few weeks ago, her father married her off to a 40-year-old man. She had no say in the arrangement. Neither did her mother, who reluctantly acquiesced. It is, after all, still a man's world on the rolling plains of the Southern Rift Valley, the home of the Maasai.

All the wedding rites were performed according to Maasai custom, wedding photographs were taken and Silvia was being frog-marched to her husband's home to become his fourth wife. But luck was on Silvia's side. Somebody alerted Agnes Pareyio, the indefatigable director of the Tasaru Rescue Centre. She enlisted the assistance of the local government authorities and freed Silvia. The groom escaped, but Sylvia's father was tried and jailed for one year.

— From a 9 September 2005 article entitled 'A Safe Haven for Girls Escaping Harm in Kenya'. Available on the UNFPA website at www.unfpa.org

at the age of 14 and later forced into marriage. Her goal was to demonstrate to the wider community that FGM/C is not only harmful, but an unnecessary and senseless cultural practice.

It was not an easy task in a culture that, for thousands of years, has retained the traditional values of its pastoral lifestyle.

For years prior to the establishment of the centre in 2001, Ms. Pareyio travelled from village to village on foot, carrying a model of the female reproductive system that could be separated into its component parts. Despite social norms to the contrary, she brought the issue of female genital mutilation/cutting out in the open, explaining to thousands of girls and boys, mothers and fathers, what she remembered of her own circumcision day, and the dangers of the practice.¹⁴

The project started with awareness-raising. Ms. Pareyio and her colleagues at TNI rescued a number of young girls who were being forced into early marriage, which became high-profile cases. And they launched public education campaigns to explain how early marriage and FGM/C were harmful and unnecessary. One of the strategies employed was teaching Maasai families that educating their girl children could increase the family's chances of earning more money. The goal was to con-

vince parents that it is in their interests to allow their daughters to choose for themselves when they want to get married—and that genital cutting should play no part in that decision.

Once parents agree to abandon the idea of FGM/C, their daughters are sent to participate in an 'alternative rite of passage', which is facilitated by Tasaru Rescue Centre staff. Through these rites, girls are initiated into adulthood, as is customary in Maasai culture, without being cut.

The ceremonies take place in August and December of each year, when FGM/C is traditionally performed. Older Maasai women volunteer to act as godmothers to girls who are coming of age. Over the course of five days, and in seclusion, the girls are encouraged to ask questions about sexual and reproductive health and are made aware of the importance of making informed decisions about their lives. They are also taught what their community expects of them as adults. TNI believes the teachings are important and should continue—without the mutilation. "We appreciate the significance of some of our traditions, and we included these in the programme," says Ms. Pareyio.¹⁵

For those girls who find themselves with no other options, the Tasaru Rescue Centre offers a safe haven.

¹⁴ Alisha Ryu. 15 September 2004. 'Kenyan Activist Makes Headway in Effort to End Female Genital Mutilation Among Maasai Women'. Voice of America. Available at: <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2004-09/a-2004-09-15-241.cfm?CFID=2182332&CFTOKEN=23806346>

¹⁵ V-Day website. Available at: <http://www.vday.org/contents/vday/vcampaigns/amea/kenya>

The centre was built through financial contributions from V-Day, a global movement that helps anti-violence organizations expand their work on the ground, while drawing public attention to the larger fight to stop violence against women. The centre currently shelters 68 girls, all of whom are attending primary and secondary school.

The girls are referred to the centre by Ministry of Education officials who receive case studies from provincial administration staff working in various parts of the district. According to the centre's staff, this referral procedure ensures that the cases are genuine and also protects the centre from allegations of abduction and kidnapping. Once a girl is formally accepted at the centre, she is inducted through a process of education. She is sent to school and encouraged through mediation to reconcile with her family and re-establish herself in the community. One of the main goals of the project is to support girls' education, the importance of which was emphasized by the girls attending the centre.¹⁷

Workshops and training sessions involving the provincial administration, community leaders and head teachers have also been held to communicate the dangers of FGM/C. Adolescent girls receive additional training on issues including HIV/AIDS, the rights guaranteed through the Children's Act, and drug and substance abuse.

The success of the project, according to TNI board members as well as UNFPA staff, is due to the collaboration and commitment of numerous institutions, including the provincial administration, the Children's Department of the Ministry of Gender and Social Services, the ministries of education and of health and several NGOs based in the district. These include Action Aid, World Vision and Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Development of Women). Local religious organizations, including the African Inland Church, the Presbyterian Church and one evangelical church have also aligned themselves with the project's goals.

MEDIATION AND NEGOTIATION

The project faced resistance not only from traditionalists, but also from the political elite. According to Ms. Pareyio, these challenges stem from the fact that FGM/C means different things to different people. For boys, it means a suitable wife. For poverty-stricken parents, it means that their daughter is now marriageable and a potential source of income. For those who

do the cutting, it is a livelihood.¹⁸

For politicians who do not want to offend their supporters, most of whom are influential traditionalists, the emergence of women leaders who challenge traditional practices is perceived as a threat.

For these reasons, the project was designed to target girls and women as well as men, community power structures and women practitioners of FGM/C. Through successful edu-

cation campaigns, several female cutters have changed their attitudes about the practice. During focus group discussions, the women explained that they acquired new knowledge and information about the dangers of the practice through workshops and seminars conducted by the project. The training also opened their eyes to different perspectives on cultural norms. For example, the women observed that despite the outward support that Maasai men give to FGM/C, in their extramarital relations they prefer uncircumcised women from other communities.

Paradoxically, it is Maasai women, more than men, who have insisted on keeping the tradition of FGM/C alive. Most mothers believe that their daughters would not be desirable as wives if they were not circumcised.

On the other hand, most men, once they understand what the practice entails, are horrified by it and oppose it. In Maasai culture, the excision typically performed is severe, and cuts away every part of the female genitalia, without anaesthesia. As more and more men become educated about the practice, they are realizing that it is cruel and should be stopped.¹⁹ Furthermore, the community is becoming sensitized to the fact that there is no cultural value

“We discuss the importance and the benefits of education. It's important for [girls] to have their own jobs, be able to make their own informed decisions, to earn a living and be happy with their lives.”

— Agnes Pareyio, in a 2004 interview with Voice of America¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ During a focus group session on 8 December 2005, six girls staying at the Tasaru Rescue Centre indicated that education was their prime interest. They unanimously agreed that the centre's focus on education was one of its major achievements.

¹⁸ In Narok district and neighbouring areas, cutters are paid the equivalent of about \$15 for every circumcision. If a cutter can circumcise 20 girls a year, she can collect \$300, a substantial income for a rural woman.

¹⁹ Ryu, 2004.

in circumcision, per se. Alternative rites can be performed that prepare women for adulthood—without the cutting.

Since community education began in 1991, awareness and acceptance of TNI's activities have grown. According to TNI board members, more than 2,000 girls have been saved from genital mutilation and early marriage in the last eight years alone, and the demand for assistance continues to rise. As a result of greater awareness, women who perform FGM/C are dropping their trade and developing alternative sources of income.

In collaboration with other governmental and non-governmental organizations working in the Narok district, the project is also helping to develop sustainable mechanisms for the elimination of FGM/C. This is being carried out, in part, by the creation of the social safety net of groups that are working together to identify and rescue girls. A case in point is Esther Kitheka, a 14-year-old who sought the assistance of her school headmaster and the area's district officer upon hearing of her impending circumcision and marriage. Esther successfully escaped her fate, but other girls are not so lucky. Despite increased awareness in the community, some parents remain adamant that their daughters should be married off to older men.

PARTNERS

- *Tasaru Ntomonok Initiative* is the implementing organization for the project. Its founders and board members support the project by volunteering their services and expertise.
- Since 2003, *UNFPA* has provided financial support for awareness campaigns carried out by TNI and other project components. This includes the construction of a classroom at the Tasaru Rescue Centre, which is used to tutor uneducated girls in preparation for enrolment at nearby schools, and the procurement of two tractors to be used in wheat production. The funds generated from the wheat sales have been used to support the girls staying at the centre. UNFPA also purchased a maize grinding mill, which provides an alternative source of income for a women's group, which includes former FGM/C practitioners.
- *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* pioneered the fight against FGM/C in Kenya, and played a formative role in the establishment of TNI. The two organizations continue to work together.
- *World Vision* is involved in community development projects in Narok district. Both World Vision and *Action Aid* collaborate with the project in community-awareness initiatives and in supporting the education of rescued girls.

- The *provincial administration*, consisting of the district commissioner, district officers and chiefs and representatives from various government ministries, provide much needed political and policy support for project goals.
- *Local churches* support the project through civic education and awareness seminars for members of their congregation.

LESSONS LEARNED

Through the development of alternative rites of passage and community-based education and awareness-raising, the project is demonstrating that harmful traditional practices are subject to change.

The success of the project is largely due to effective networking and collaboration with the community.

Under the leadership of the Tasaru Ntomonok Initiative, the project has developed a network of like-minded institutions that collectively serve as a safety net for endangered girls. This has helped all the institutions achieve their objectives, including strengthened implementation of the provisions of the Children's Act. Through the District Education Committee, for example, an interministerial mechanism for coordinating issues relating to female children, there is greater harmonization of governmental and non-governmental efforts to safeguard girls and promote their rights. The committee includes representatives from the community as well as community-based and non-governmental organizations.

At the community level, enhanced awareness of the harmful effects of FGM/C has resulted in the effective monitoring of incidents. An early warning system, developed by community leaders, is helping to identify girls at risk of circumcision and early marriage.

Advocacy is most effective when it conveys the potential benefits of a project for individuals and communities.

An effective strategy employed by project staff was convincing Maasai families that educating their daughters could increase their family incomes. The goal was to convince parents that it is in their interests to allow their daughters to continue their education and choose for themselves when they want to get married—and that genital cutting should play no part in that decision.

To address harmful traditional practices, project leaders should hold consultations with the community well before implementation begins.

As the project leader, Agnes Pareyio initiated consultations with male opinion leaders to allay their fears and misconceptions about the project. She also sought their advice on developing

strategies for change. Such consultations were necessary to develop a consensus and to negotiate a change in perspectives on prevailing social norms and practices. They also helped divert any anticipated—and unanticipated—challenges and threats.

Men are important allies for change. A major threat to the success of the project was the emergence of dominant male family members who arranged to have their daughters undergo FGM/C, despite the fact that they had been rescued. This happened mostly during school holidays, when girls were encouraged to return to their family homes. One of the strategies adopted to counter this trend was to target men for awareness-raising. Through such efforts, male supporters of the project were recruited to join in the fight against FGM/C and to help transform the patriarchal nature of Maasai culture. One such recruit, Moses Nkormbai, says that the project made him realize that traditional practices have their ‘time and place’ in a community. In his view, FGM/C has no progressive function in the Maasai community today. He is working to mobilize community members for civic education campaigns to raise awareness of harmful traditional practices. Moreover, he has joined a local team that monitors incidences of FGM/C and reports them to local law enforcement agents. He explains that educating and changing Maasai men is difficult, but educating future generations of girls and boys will have a positive effect on development of the community. “The single most important issue for Maasai girls,” says Mr. Nkormbai, “is access to education.”

Equipping girls with education and life skills is integral to the fight against FGM/C. The project not only provides runaway girls with temporary shelter. It also prepares them for adulthood by equipping them with life skills. The training provided to the girls is geared to changing behaviours that can lead to HIV infection and drug abuse and to educating them about their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

For FGM/C to be eliminated, practitioners must have an alternative source of income. The project has purchased a maize grinding mill that offers a steady livelihood to former cutters—and an alternative to the seasonal income they used to earn. The Posho Mill is run by a women’s group that is part of TNI. Besides operating the mill, the former cutters are developing

their skills as traditional birth attendants, which will provide another source of income.

Project leaders need to be fully engaged and committed to the project’s values and goals. They must set an example and cannot be seen to condone in any way the practices they seek to eliminate.

PRACTICES THAT WORK

Offering a culturally acceptable alternative to FGM/C. Female genital mutilation/cutting is a traditional initiation rite from childhood to adulthood. Alternative rites of passage acknowledge the importance of that transition, and offer the same instruction, while rejecting the violence associated with FGM/C. TNI organized a colourful ceremony in August and December of 2004 and 2005 in which more than 250 girls graduated from these rites of passage. The challenge now lies in getting the Maasai community to embrace these rites as a culturally acceptable alternative to FGM/C.

Supporting projects that are initiated and ‘owned’ by the community. One of the unique features of the project is that it is entirely ‘homegrown’: It was initiated and led by women from the community, who have become identified with the challenges of development and progress. The impact and results achieved are therefore based on local experience and knowledge. This has contributed to the project’s sustainability and represents a significant contribution to the local development agenda. One illustration of this is the fact that those who traditionally performed FGM/C in the community have turned into powerful allies in the fight against it and are assisting in the rehabilitation of runaway girls. Such transformations validate the position advanced by African scholar Claude Ake, who writes that “building on indigenous knowledge and practices is the necessary condition for self-reliant development to which there is now no alternative.”²⁰

Acknowledging women pioneers of change. Though FGM/C was prohibited in 2001, the law still lacks ‘teeth’. Agnes Pareyio decided she could do something about enforcing the law and, in 2004, was elected deputy mayor of Narok district.²¹ In 2005, she was named ‘Person of the Year’ by the United Nations in Kenya. This distinction has increased her stature and that of other TNI board members in the community.

20 Claude Ake. 1988. Culture and Development in Africa, Building on Positive Cultural Practices. UNFPA and the African Union.

21 V-Day website.