



USING THE MEDIA TO ADDRESS FGM/C AND CHILD MARRIAGE

THE CASE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF MEDIA WOMEN IN KENYA

Girls Not Brides member organisation: Association of Media Women In Kenya (AMWIK)

Country: Kenya

Programme start and end date: 2018 to 2019

Supported by: The Girl Generation

Summary

This case study showcases the positive impacts of using the media to change attitudes and harmful gender norms related to female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in the context of Kuria, Western Kenya. It highlights successful approaches to promote the rights of girls and women and shares key insights from the Association of Media Women In Kenya (AMWIK).

Successful approaches include **mobilising families and communities through locally-produced content and debate, training journalists on ethical and gender-sensitive reporting, promoting partnerships and networks to collaborate and share learning, and influencing laws and policies.**

This case study can inspire others and contribute to debate and learning between *Girls Not Brides* member organisations about approaches to end harmful practices and underlying social norms.



MAP: Location of Migori county in Western Kenya, East Africa. By NordNordWest, licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0 DE](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/).

Background to FGM/C and child marriage in Kuria

Both FGM/C and child marriage are illegal in Kenya: FGM/C under the 2011 Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act and child marriage under the 2014 Marriage Act, which sets the age of marriage at 18 years with no exceptions. Despite this, 23% of girls in Kenya marry before the age of 18, and 15% of girls aged 20 to 24 have already undergone FGM/C.¹ However, there is wide variation in prevalence of both practices within Kenya.

The Kuria are a marginalised ethnic community in Migori County, Western Kenya. In Kurian tradition, FGM/C² is a rite of passage preceding marriage, typically occurring when a girl is 13 to 14 years old, but more recently when they are as young as eight. As FGM/C is seen as a precursor to child marriage, the majority of girls who undergo the cut get married shortly after healing. At 84%,³ the Kuria community has one of the highest FGM/C prevalence rates in Kenya. Migori County also has the lowest median age at first marriage⁴ of any county in Kenya, with girls and women marrying on average at 17.1 years.⁵

As in many contexts, FGM/C is believed to ensure premarital virginity and marital fidelity – thus increasing the marriageability of girls – because it lowers their sexual pleasure and libido. However, FGM/C is also associated with longstanding Kurian beliefs, and is used in witchcraft and to appease their gods.

Harmful social norms

- FGM/C is a precursor to child marriage.
- FGM/C is used to appease the gods and is underpinned by harmful gender norms.
- Witchcraft is a powerful social sanction, as elders threaten to curse people who challenge them.
- FGM/C plays a role in being a “proper Kuria.” Those who go against it are seen to threaten the way of life of the entire community.
- Uncut girls face severe social sanctions and exclusion.
- Girls with lower educational levels are more likely to undergo FGM/C and child marriage.

Economic

- Parents receive a dowry (10 to 15 cows) for marrying their daughters.
- Circumcisers receive KSh 1,000 (over US\$9) for every girl they cut.
- There is widespread poverty in the region.

The challenges in responding to them

- Discussing FGM/C and child marriage is considered taboo.
- Limited opportunities to disseminate messages.
- Elders involved in FGM/C or child marriage may refuse to participate in community discussions for fear of legal reprisals.
- FGM/C is not prioritised as an issue by local or national-level media outlets.
- Lack of awareness of laws and policies that protect girls from early marriage and FGM/C.

¹ Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, [Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2014, 2015](#)

² The WHO defines FGM/C as “a traditional harmful practice that involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons.”

³ Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, Op. Cit.

⁴ Disaggregated data on child marriage prevalence – that is, the percentage of girls marrying before age 18 – is not available for the Kurian community or Migori County. The overall prevalence of child marriage in Kenya is 23% and prevalence of FGM/C is 21%.

⁵ WHO, [Female genital mutilation](#), n.d.

FGM/C – and the rituals surrounding it – are carried out in secret, led by community elders. The latter are key influencers and decision makers. They are perceived to have the power to curse those who challenge them and therefore encounter little resistance from community members.

Before declaring the cutting season open, they perform rituals to placate the gods and guard against death. Rites of passage – ceremonies when cutting usually occurs – take place in remote areas away from the rest of the community, and can go on for several days. Deaths do occur, but the exact numbers are unknown due to the secrecy of the rituals and the unwillingness of elders to report them. Dying during FGM/C is seen as a bad omen, so girls' bodies are disposed of in remote areas away from community lands and parents are strictly forbidden from sharing their loss with the rest of the community.

After FGM/C, girls are given a month to heal, during which time they are encouraged to have sex with the circumcised boys, which frequently results in unintended pregnancies. Parents who can afford to will help their daughters get abortions, but those who cannot may offer their daughter to an older woman who is unable to have children. She will find the girl a husband, with whom she will be expected to have as many children as possible. She and her children will likely be mistreated and will not inherit any property from the woman and her family. This practice is referred to as “Nyumba mboke.”

Uncut girls face social sanctions which perpetuate the practice and even encourage girls to undergo FGM/C if they are not offered timely support. These sanctions comprise exclusion from fetching water at communal watering points, harvesting from farms, speaking and playing with cut girls, and community ceremonies such as weddings, as well as denial of care by parents, verbal abuse and bullying.

Although awareness of FGM/C and its negative impacts is generally high, harmful social norms and lack of awareness of the laws and policies that protect girls from early marriage and FGM/C have perpetuated the practice.

AMWIK's approach

AMWIK is a non-profit membership organisation based in Nairobi, Kenya, with over 600 members and projects, and activities in over 30 of the country's 47 counties. They bring together women from media houses, public relations professionals, independent content producers, journalists and communication students, and employees of non-governmental organisations (NGO) and other institutions with a background in communications. AMWIK use the media to promote an informed and gender-responsive society in Kenya, and Africa more broadly. They use radio, television, community radio listening sessions, newsletters, magazines and social media to influence gender norms, promote social change and achieve gender equality.

They have addressed FGM/C in Kilifi, Garissa, Moyale and Isiolo, and both FGM/C and child marriage with the Kuria population of Migori County. This case study focuses on their [Accelerating efforts to promote abandonment of FGM/C practice through community media and social media](#) programme, funded by The Girl Generation⁶ and implemented in Kuria

⁶ [The Girl Generation](#) is a DFID and Human Dignity Foundation-funded project to end FGM/C in 10 African countries and strengthen the Africa-led movement to end FGM.

county from 2018 to 2019. This case study also highlights some of AMWIK's relevant national-level work.

In this programme, AMWIK use a range of communication tools to raise awareness and knowledge around FGM/C and child marriage. Their work focuses on:

1. Mobilising families and communities through locally-produced media content and debate.
2. Training journalists on ethical, gender-sensitive reporting.
3. Building partnerships and networks to promote collaboration and shared learning.
4. Influencing laws and policies.

Their projects and activities cover two of the four strategic pillars of the *Girls Not Brides Theory of Change*: **mobilising families and communities**, and **legal and policy reforms**.

AMWIK's activities

1. Mobilising families and communities through locally-produced media content and debate

Radio content to spark community dialogues. AMWIK used pre-recorded radio programmes – which they co-created with community leaders – to start conversations with different community groups. In the radio programmes, they discussed the impact of FGM/C on women and girls, the longstanding beliefs that drive harmful practices, and sexual and reproductive health. They also interviewed and incorporated the voices of community representatives – including teachers, religious leaders, elders, women and young people – in the form of drama, documentaries and talks.

In addition, AMWIK conducted live discussions and hosted “community radio listening sessions,” where a facilitator visited community groups and schools to play the radio content and encourage discussion. Some community groups, after listening to the radio programmes, purchased a radio for their own outreach work. Radio content was tailored for each audience, including children, adults, religious leaders and health practitioners.

Youth-led art and drama to raise awareness. AMWIK encouraged children in primary schools in Kuria to write stories and create drama related to FGM/C, child marriage and other gender-related issues. They held an essay-writing competition, and the best of the 60 entries were published in the [Sauti ya boke](#) – “Voice of youth” – booklet. In the essays, contributors discuss the negative effects of FGM/C, its links to child marriage, impact on girls and the importance of girls' continuing their education. They were also encouraged to think about how they would address FGM/C if they were the county governor.

“It was very nice to see young children express themselves through the short stories and say no to FGM. This is the generation that will end FGM and child marriage.”

Bernard, AMWIK



PICTURED: Front cover of the Sauti ya Boke – “Voice of Youth” – booklet, containing 60 essays about FGM/C and child marriage written by primary school children in Kuria.

Engaging traditional leaders to help end FGM/C and child marriage. AMWIK have built relationships with Kuria traditional leaders in the belief that – if they are made aware of the negative impacts of FGM/C and child marriage on girls and women – they have the power to influence the community to end both practices.

Community outreach to promote change. AMWIK held inter-generational conversations in churches and schools, bringing together respected champions, elders, religious leaders, young people and girls who had undergone FGM/C, child marriage and motherhood. Through this, they encouraged the community to end both practices.

2. Training journalists on ethical, gender-sensitive reporting

The media plays a key role in influencing people’s thoughts and beliefs, and journalists create the stories that are shared through the media. Often, reporting of FGM/C and child marriage is sensationalist and does not respect the rights of those who have undergone or been involved in the practice. This generates negative debate and re-traumatizes and endangers the lives of those involved.

AMWIK offers training for journalists on how to report on FGM/C, child marriage and other human rights issues sensitively and in ways that are inspiring, spark meaningful debate and encourage action without shaming or condemning communities and individuals. AMWIK use their own manual, focusing on child safeguarding and promoting the “do no harm” approach used by The Girl Generation. They also offer training on compiling in-depth stories – rather than short inserts – and encourage media outlets and editors to secure enough time and space to focus on these issues.

3. Building partnerships and networks to promote collaboration and shared learning

AMWIK belong to *Girls Not Brides Kenya* – a formalised partnership of *Girls Not Brides* member organisations in Kenya – and the Movement to End FGM, which allow them to collaborate, support and learn from other organisations working on the same issues in different places, as well as build the momentum of advocacy initiatives. For instance, AMWIK partnered with local organisations in other counties, sharing their radio programmes to enrich conversations and strengthen local capacity to conduct community dialogues.

4. Influencing national laws and policies

Thanks to their experience of promoting social change through the media, AMWIK were invited to participate in the expert committee led by the Kenyan government to draft policy

and laws to end FGM/C and child marriage. They recognise the role of an enabling regulatory framework in ending both practices and supporting their community work.

AMWIK's achievements

- **Knowledge of FGM/C increased and attitudes towards it and child marriage changed** among school children, teachers, youth, religious leaders, community elders and women.
- **AMWIK enlisted a community elder to act as a change agent.** Joseph Ngaina Sigore previously supported FGM/C and child marriage but is now publicly taking a stand against both practices. As elders wield such influence, he is a powerful indication that attitudes to FGM/C and child marriage will change in his community.
- **Discussing FGM/C and child marriage was taboo in Kuria, but now there is open debate.** This is evident in the number of call-ins and quality of debate on radio stations, which indicate the greater awareness and knowledge of the issue across the county and beyond. There is also greater participation in public events such as road shows, where before no one wanted to be seen publically working to end FGM/C and child marriage.
- **Girls Not Brides Kenya and the Movement to End FGM are stronger.** AMWIK collaborated with Msichana Empowerment Kuria – also a *Girls Not Brides* member organisation – sharing their communications approach to enrich their community dialogues. AMWIK have also shared their radio programmes with local organisations in other counties.

In numbers: AMWIK's achievements

- **Over 85%** of school pupils can correctly identify the health complications caused by FGM/C.
- **90%** of school pupils are aware of the links between FGM/C, school dropout and adolescent pregnancy.
- Community members and **85%** of school pupils agree that demeaning statements such as “omosagane” – an insulting term for a girl who has not been cut – cause stigma and discrimination.
- **87%** of pupils agreed with the statement that “FGM/C is an abuse of women and girls' rights.”

“I have decided to marry an uncircumcised woman so that I can be a role model for my fellow men.”

*Moses, * a 13-year-old student at Kugitimu Primary School*

- **The Kenyan Government passed a law to end FGM/C.** This law criminalises FGM/C and has been instrumental in the work to end the practice in Kenya. Prosecutions have already been made, contributing to changed attitudes and reduced prevalence of FGM/C.

“It’s better for FGM to end. We have always celebrated FGM without knowing its effects, but when we listened to the radio, I have understood why my sister was married off soon after being circumcised. She was operated on twice when delivering her children and she can no longer have more children, and the family has challenges with that. I am telling my friends to reject FGM and support their sisters to avoid the practice and continue with their education.”

David, Maeta Youth Network*

The challenges AMWIK has faced

- **Communities may not have access to radios to listen to the programmes.** AMWIK supports communities in accessing radios despite their limited funding, but more partners are needed to help communities or homes acquire radios.
- **Elders who promote traditional practices are unwilling to participate in projects and activities for fear of legal reprisals.** While the government intends to enforce the law by arresting leaders who support and implement FGM/C, criminalisation risks driving the practice underground and limiting the participation of these leaders in work to end the practice because they fear being reported and/or arrested. They may also censor what they say in public, for fear of being arrested if they speak openly.
- **The continued use of short insert stories by media outlets does not give FGM/C and child marriage sufficient attention.** Neither practice regularly makes headlines or receives in-depth coverage, making it difficult for the community to get meaningful information.

Five key insights that made **AMWIK’s** programme successful

1. **Co-creating radio content to include the voices of trusted local community members gives messaging authenticity and contributes to buy-in from the community.**
2. **Understanding the local context is key to developing tailored materials and avoiding community backlash.** Using external material can result in backlash and loss of credibility. Unknown names and unfamiliar language can alienate communities, who can experience this as the imposition of foreign messages by outsiders. AMWIK conducted

a baseline study prior to beginning work in order to understand the context, drivers and norms impacting on the practice of FGM/C and child marriage. Visiting communities also helped them map out power and social structures beforehand.

3. **Traditional leaders publically taking a stand against FGM/C and child marriage helps communities to initiate change**, as it is these people who begin cutting seasons and sanction those who refuse to participate.
4. **Layering communications helps ensure that messaging is complemented and reinforced in different ways**. In this case, combining the dissemination of pre-recorded content with face-to-face community engagement encouraged meaningful debate with diverse groups of people.
5. **Making space for all community stakeholders to participate ensures that everyone has a voice and can promote change**. Some groups – like parents who have already cut their daughters – are often excluded from FGM/C and child marriage prevention programmes. Including these parents can help to influence change as they witness the effects of FGM/C on their daughters and can act as a voice of caution to others.

Looking forward

AMWIK plan to scale up their reach by:

- Sharing radio content with other organisations working in different geographic locations where FGM/C and child marriage are prevalent.
- Digitising radio content so that it is easily accessible to a wider audience.
- Developing guidelines for ethical, gender-sensitive reporting, which can be shared with other organisations.
- Incorporating like-minded, local partner organisations when developing programmes, since the local context varies from one community to another.
- Building partnerships with organisations working on other issues – for example, those working in humanitarian contexts – to create an integrated approach that addresses interrelated problems.
- Leveraging strategic media partnerships by enabling members of AMWIK to link up with national media outlets.
- Building an online resource centre for AMWIK members to easily access materials and information.
- Exploring partnerships with the private sector, particularly with organisations that have corporate social responsibility programmes.

This case study was built on interviews with AMWIK staff based in Nairobi, under the guidance of Marceline Nyambala, Executive Director of AMWIK. We would like to thank for all their time and insights.

*Names have been changed