



Cultural Leaders & Elders Take Stock of Progress since the Kisima Declaration to End Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) & Child Marriage

BACKGROUND

On March 5, 2021, leaders representing each of the nine clans in Samburu County, committed to end female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage in their community. Gathering in Kisima, a sacred place in the Samburu culture, the cultural elders signed a Declaration recognizing their role as community leaders and custodians of culture to work with government to eliminate FGM and child marriage. In addition, the cultural leaders committed to the protection of women and girls from harmful cultural practices, to promote girls' education and to bless¹ all girls who have not undergone FGM and will not undergo FGM in the future.

In September 2022, the cultural elders gathered at two sites in Samburu County: Kisima - the site where the original declaration was signed, and Logorate – a hard-to-reach community. These meetings were organized to reflect on the progress achieved, discuss challenges, and seek recommendations to guide further efforts to end FGM and child marriage in the county.

METHODOLOGY

A Senior Chief was invited to facilitate the first meeting held at Kisima, which included an open discussion whereby each of the clan leaders were invited to share their observations, together with women leaders. The second meeting in Logorate was more structured, beginning with a clause-by-clause reading and simultaneous translation into the local language, Maa, followed by a guided discussion² which was led by the County Education Officer. At both gatherings, representatives from the Anti-FGM Board, the State Department for Gender (SDfG), Samburu County Government, and County Commissioner's Office also gave remarks to reinforce key messages from the Declaration. In addition, a representative from the Kenya-Finland Bilateral GBV Programme highlighted the importance of education, and the role of elders in leading communities – drawing on other settings/experience outside of Kenya.

DECLARATION BY THE CULTURAL ELDERS FROM THE SAMBURU COMMUNITY ON ELIMINATION OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM) AND CHILD MARRIAGE AMONG THE SAMBURU

AT KISIMA, SAMBURU COUNTY

5TH MARCH, 2021

We the Samburu elders recognize that female genital mutilation and child marriage are a violation of women and girls' human rights, with negative physical and psychological consequences.

We recognize and appreciate the Government of Kenya for its support in the campaign to end female genital mutilation and child marriage.

We recognize our role as community leaders and custodians of culture and our duty to guide and protect our community members. We appreciate the contribution and role of our women and girls when they are empowered and protected from harmful cultural practices.

Therefore, we the cultural Elders from the Samburu community, hereby **declare** on this 5th day of March, 2021

1. **We affirm** our commitment to end female genital mutilation and child marriage in our community;
2. **We affirm** our commitment to work with the Government of Kenya to eliminate female genital mutilation and child marriage in our community;
3. **We commit** to the protection of our women and girls from harmful cultural practices through creating awareness in our community and promoting education for the girl child;
4. **We, therefore**, lift the curse that has been bestowed on uncircumcised girls;
5. **And**, as traditional gatekeepers, we bless all girls who have not undergone and will not undergo female genital mutilation in the future.

¹ In Samburu culture, elders play a very important role in leading the right of passage for girls and boys into adulthood; their blessing signifies readiness for marriage.

² The facilitator asked a series of questions and invited responses from all participants, taking care to ensure that the female participants were also given an opportunity to speak.

REFLECTIONS & OBSERVATIONS

Progressive awareness raising on the declaration: Among the cultural leaders/elders present, some were signatories to the Declaration, or even met with the President of Kenya and Anti-FGM Board to formulate the declaration, while others were learning about it for the first time. For those who had signed the declaration, they were proud to be recognized as Champions among their peers.

Open discussion & emergence of new Champions: Nearly all elders noted that FGM can now be openly discussed in communities, including by men. Also, there is greater awareness that the practice is illegal and harmful. The elders noted that amongst themselves, and other key groups such as religious leaders, women, and young men (including Morans – boys aged 13-20), there are individuals who are actively speaking out against FGM, and promoting the education of both girls and boys as a strategy for empowerment and development and in turn addressing the harmful practises.

Differing levels (and perceptions) of progress: While some leaders cited that FGM was largely eliminated in their community, others were reluctant to give estimates on the rate of progress, and/or cited how the practice is now hidden. A general lack of verified data and statistic on FGM prevalence is a challenge in the county. In general, women seemed to be less optimistic on the rate of progress.

Changing practice: Both men and women acknowledged that the FGM practice is hidden and is often conducted without the other traditional elements to mark the right of passage. For example, pre-Kisima, FGM was traditionally carried out at sunrise, and accompanied with family life education, anointing oils, and cultural celebrations to mark the right of passage. However, with greater awareness of the law prohibiting FGM and since the adoption of the Kisima Declaration, FGM is often carried out in the late evening hours, or in-secret after a woman has given birth, or in another community away from home. In addition, the education and family lessons are largely absent.

Desire to uphold and preserve the culture:

While some elders clearly articulated how they continued to support the traditional ceremonies to mark the rights of passage for girls without FGM, many elders were not sure how to go about this. With this, some raised concerns about how their Clans will struggle to select the next generation of leaders due to the traditional requirement to select a man who has married a woman who has undergone FGM.

Shared responsibility for preventing/promoting FGM among males and females:

While the Kisima Declaration highlights the role of cultural leaders (who are predominantly men) in ending FGM, several members highlighted the important role of women, girls, and adolescent boys. For women and girls, this can include promoting/continuing the practice due to a desire for acceptance, ensuring marriage prospects, or a sense of belonging. While for the Morans, they believe that they cannot assume certain leadership positions in the Clan unless they marry a woman who has been circumcised.

Stigma and discrimination: Some elders cited that there are growing divisions among females due to the changing norms around FGM. For example, some girls who have not undergone FGM experience stigma as they are told that they have not been blessed, and cannot be married. While girls and young women can also be stigmatized in schools outside of the County for having undergone the procedure.

Need for increased knowledge on the procedure/practice: of FGM: Among the participants, the strongest and most confident advocates against FGM highlighted the importance of the educational video explaining the procedure. Nearly all the participants, including both men and women, called for greater use of the video, citing that most men do not understand what is involved in the procedure and how harmful it is and would turn against the practice if they are informed.

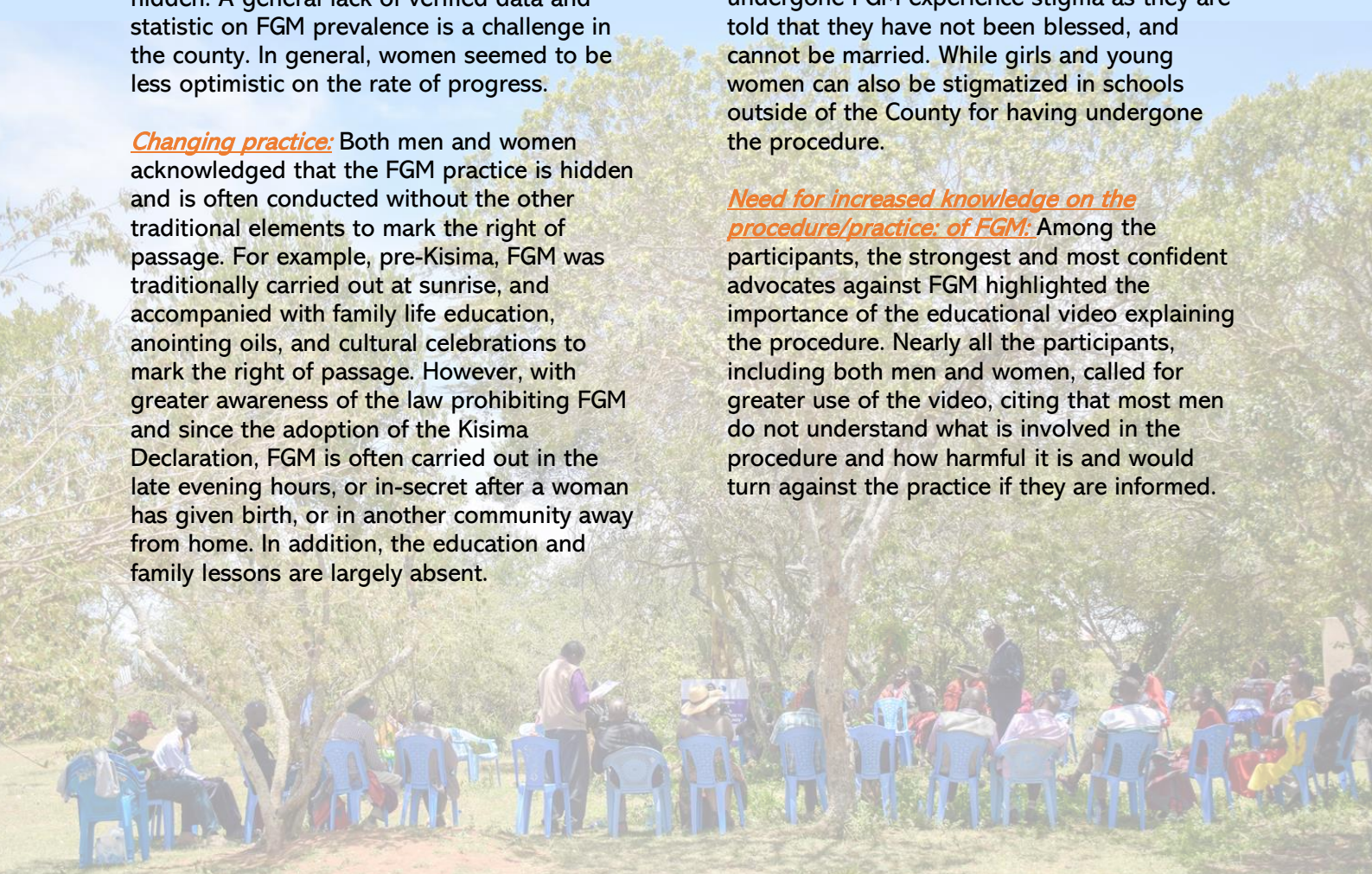




Photo of Clan Leaders who signed the original Kisima Declaration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Key recommendations emerging from the dialogue in support of eliminating FGM:

1. Continue to **build awareness and provide information**. This includes ensuring all cultural leaders/elders are familiar with the Declaration and their duty to speak out against FGM and child marriage; engaging other groups and platforms, including the Chief's Barazas (monthly meetings), schools; Supporting peer discussions led by Champions from within the same peer group; and using videos and other real examples from the community to help communities understand the harmful effects of FGM.
2. Promote and emphasize **primary and secondary education** for both girls and boys in school as a protective strategy as well as supporting broader development goals linked to equal opportunities for women and girls, and empowerment.
3. Continue to bring attention to **Champions in the community** to serve as role models and to positively influence others and **provide more platforms for them to share real-life stories to promote transformation** – highlighting rites of passage without FGM, facilitating discussion on how to break connotation between FGM and acceptance for marriage, and promoting women in leadership, and men as allies in supporting equal opportunities for girls and women and other vulnerable groups in society.

Suggested ways to engage Champions across multiple levels

- A. Hold a meeting in Nyiro³ with the elders representing each of the six mountains to review the declaration commitment and forge a way forward to address the challenges to ending FGM and child marriage.
 - B. Continue to educate and empower girls to understand that they were blessed by the elders⁴ and reduce stigma that forces them to feel that they are outcasts in the community if they are not circumcised and opt to request it by themselves
 - C. Reassure communities that the traditional blessings from the elders was done during the Kisima Declaration and create awareness about the details of the Declaration to address misinformation and misunderstanding.
 - D. Support elders to lead the process of sharing information on radio, in schools and in the community. This could include radio talk shows by elders to sensitize the community on the declaration – helping Girls to understand that they are blessed, and Morans that they can marry women who have not undergone FGM. It could also include talks in schools where they sensitize children and staff on what transpired during Kisima Declaration.
 - E. Encouraging village-level monitoring where elders lead on early warning and reporting of FGM and child marriage – both leading by example, but also reinforcing the messages that FGM is no longer acceptable.
4. **Encourage community-level monitoring** – particularly among the Chiefs who are responsible for security in their respective village. By monitoring the arrival of unaccompanied girls and adolescents, they can be proactive in identifying families who are preparing to carry out FGM, sending their children to other locations so that the practice can be hidden from others. This will enable them to engage the respective Cultural Leaders/Elders in the location, as well as improve early warning and reporting.

CONCLUSION

The Kisima Declaration provides a clear vision which unites the Samburu Elders/Cultural Leaders in ending FGM/child marriage. While there is notable progress, there are also significant challenges that require continuous engagement with and between Elders/Cultural Leaders and young men. Women and girls also need information and reassurance that changes in the traditional rites of passage will not hinder their life choices and will help to improve their well-being and health. Finally, the recommendations focused on education, supporting the emergence of new Champions and community-level monitoring, speak to the need for engaging all members of the community in this effort to support transformational change at scale.



³ Nyiro is a community site with immense cultural significance – discussions and decisions taken at this location would be held in this highest regard by the people of Samburu.

⁴ Up until the Kisima Declaration, a girl undergoing FGM was deemed to have been blessed by the elders and ready for marriage. Without FGM, some members of the community believe that girls will not be eligible for marriage in the future.