



Dialogue with Elders in Bungoma County, Kenya: Rites of Passages for Boys, and Opportunities to Reduce Risk and Vulnerability to Gender-based Violence

BACKGROUND

On October 13, 2022, Elders/Cultural Leaders representing all five indigenous communities of Bungoma were invited to a dialogue session. A wide range of other stakeholders were present, including members of the County Gender Sector Working Group (GSWG), Civil Society, along with representatives from the Governments of Kenya (national and county) and Finland. The discussion was meant to focus on root causes of gender-based violence (GBV) and opportunities for prevention as identified by the GSWG. The goal was to create a space for reflection, inspire new thinking around how communities are educating and

preparing young men as they transition into adulthood with a particular focus on harmful cultural practices, and identify opportunities to reduce the risk and vulnerability to GBV.

METHODOLOGY

While the initial plan for the dialogue was to have a small group, consisting primarily of Elders, Cultural Leaders, and members of the County GSWG; due to scheduling and coordination challenges, the session emerged as a facilitated dialogue with over 80 stakeholders. This brief summarizes the content of the exchange, emerging recommendations, and observations from the Programme Management Team (PMT).

EXPERIENCE SHARING & OBSERVATIONS FROM THE ELDERS

Elders acknowledged that the rites of passage (ROP), while still important across Bungoma is not being conducted as per the tradition. They noted that the traditional ROP includes songs, education, and mentorship for boys, and male circumcision to mark their transition into manhood – and emphasizes positive values and norms of behaviour such as righteousness and discipline. While other participants in the dialogue questioned the content of some songs and the potentially harmful messages¹ they convey, the elders indicated the guidance during the ROP has been strictly regulated and the songs do not promote or condone sexual violence. However, the elders noted other challenges in how the ROP are changing – see following page.

Traditional rites of passage for boys include songs, education, mentorship, and male circumcision to mark the transition into adulthood.

¹ During the dialogue, male and female participants noted that the lyrics of some songs promote sexually aggressive behaviour. They also noted the potential of using the ROP to promote more gender equitable behaviours.

During the dialogue, Elders did not identify any aspect of the traditional ROP that might be contributing to GBV. However, they highlighted the following concerns:

- **Absence of support from families/community**, including fathers and uncles – before, during, and after undergoing the ROP. The Elders argued that boys and men are not receiving adequate guidance from men and from the community. They further noted how the absence of father figures in single parent households reduces father-son communication and supervision, and limited guidance and mentoring from the wider community as they transition into manhood.
- A ‘hostile environment’ where **new societal norms encourage ‘bad behaviours’** - citing how women dress², lack of discipline/corporal punishment³, loss of opportunities to convey cultural values & teachings (children being prevented from staying with the grandparents), and parents not adhering to culture.
- **Medicalized circumcision** where the practice is conducted at an earlier age in a hospital setting without the ROP education and mentoring.

CONFLICTING VIEWS FROM OTHER PARTICIPANTS IN THE DIALOGUE

Several participants (both male and female) expressed concerns around the types of messages and behaviours encouraged during the ROP:

- Cultural expressions such as references to “open and closed doors” – to signal different behaviour norms, i.e. respect married women while looser conduct is acceptable toward unmarried women.
- Song lyrics that encourage male aggression.

Similarly, several male participants who underwent the traditional ROP cited concerns on (1) **cultural songs that encourage sexual violence**; (2) **pressure from men to demonstrate their manhood**; and (3) the **separation of the boys from the family home**. In addition, the youth representative highlighted gaps in **parental commitment and time – including teaching, supervision, and guidance, and emphasized the need for more peer-to-peer learning, and safe spaces where young people can gather, get information, and be empowered** [to make informed decisions regarding for their well-being.] Finally, the representative from the Muslim community called for a

complete change in the practice to align with their religious beliefs.

PROPOSED WAY FORWARD FROM THE DIALOGUE

Due to time constraints, the following recommendations were rapidly captured and may not reflect the views of all participants– see below:

1. Need to **educate and support parents** to guide and to be there for their children.
2. **Targeted education and mentoring of boys, and men of all ages** is needed to support future fathers, husbands, and leaders to respect and protect women and girls.
3. Seek ways to **preserve positive cultural norms and values**. This could include finalizing the draft Culture and Heritage Policy, conducting the ceremonial ROP during the prescribed mid to late-teens, and using ceremonial songs that are sanctioned by elders.
4. Communities, and leaders at all levels, need to **recognize and speak out about the criminal nature of GBV**, encourage reporting, and provide support to survivors.

² Fashion choices should never be used as a justification for sexual harassment or violence.

³ Corporal punishment interferences with the right of all children to live with dignity, and free from violence; it is prohibited by law in Kenya.

Post-Dialogue

REFLECTIONS & OBSERVATIONS

Lack of agreement on the root causes of GBV.	The drivers of GBV are not widely known and accepted. Similarly, cases of GBV - including defilement, rape, and intimate partner violence, are not recognized as criminal acts. Reporting is therefore limited, and cases are handled at all levels of the community without clear oversight and assurance of protecting and preserving the dignity of survivors.
Opportunities to reduce GBV risk and vulnerability through the ROP are not yet well-established.	Culture is a strong influence on norms and behaviours, and Elders/Cultural Leaders continue to play a key role in ROP of boys. However, Elders/Cultural Leaders do not fully recognize the possible risks and vulnerability associated with some elements of the ROP, i.e., night gathering, teachings, messages, and songs. They appear to be advocating for a return to the traditional modes of guiding/educating boys as they transition into adulthood.
Parental & community efforts throughout the various life stages of boys/men need to be reinforced and scaled.	There is widespread recognition on the need for improved parenting skills ⁴ , quality time with children, and supervision as a strategy for guiding and supporting boys and young men into adulthood. In addition, all participants called for mentorship and positive role models for boys and men to guide them through key ages and stages of life – alongside information and skills to respect and protect women and girls.

CONCLUSION

There is a need to work with elders/cultural leaders to (1) become aware and to identify the different forms of GBV, (2) understand the negative effects of GBV on society – including the physical, mental, and economic well-being of survivors, and (3) engage them as Champions in addressing key drivers of GBV and reduce risk and vulnerability. With this, the Elders/Cultural Leaders will need to clarify their role, vision and goals around prevention and response to GBV – thus enabling more organized and systematic engagement, targeted capacity strengthening, and support.

While the Programme has supported the development of a Model for Coordination, with a calendar of risks and vulnerabilities, and identified priority drivers of GBV, there is a need to engage other actors, especially Elders to build agreement around the root causes of GBV, along with collective leadership to reduce risk and vulnerability. These efforts are part of the wider system strengthening agenda in the programme which requires time, continuous dialogue, and commitment.

Amid this drive to improve quality and advance coordinated service delivery, the GSWG needs to define and urgently roll-out evidence-based interventions (EBIs) to scale the delivery of parenting programmes, and mentorship for boys/men which can complement the education provided within the traditional rites of passage of boys.



⁴ This includes parenting training that is informed by human rights and adapted to the Kenyan context.