

UNSUNG HEROES



VOICES AND ACTIVISM OF ANTI FGM CHAMPIONS IN KENYA



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface---02

Foreword---04

Amplifying Voices of Anti-FGM

Champions

I am a survivor---06

The Cut is not a sign of purity--- 07

No Longer 'Egesagane'---08

#MyVoiceMatters---09

Girls Voices Hold Power---10

Her Story!

My Story!---13

Because the community said so!---14

TuWezeshe Fellows 2021

I am wonderfully made, don't cut me!---17

Changing the narrative on girls' rights!---19

Appreciation--- 20

PREFACE

Over the past five years, FORWARD, a UK Diaspora African women-led not-for-profit organization, has implemented a ground-breaking new initiative called TuWezeshe Akina dada. Its intensive, feminist leadership training aims to inspire a generation of young African change-makers to undertake social and civil action to tackle FGM and other forms of VAWG in their communities. TuWezeshe is a Swahili term for 'empowering our sisters.' The 1-year leadership programme nurtures upcoming young women leaders and advocates while amplifying their voices. It has run successfully in the UK, continental Europe, and across five African countries, helping to build a movement of feminist change-makers in Africa and among the diaspora.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, an opportunity was presented to scale up the innovative TuWezeshe young women's leadership programme.. Dubbed Accelerating African-Led FGM Change Makers, this timely initiative was a collaboration between FORWARD and Akili Dada, a young women's leadership incubator [Kenya], as well as the End FGM European Network [Brussels] and Think Young Women [the Gambia], with support from UN Spotlight Programme.

In Kenya, 25 young women participated in this leadership fellowship programme. After attending virtual and in-person training sessions led by FORWARD and Akili Dada, the young women were provided with sub-grants, leadership mentoring, and well-being support. They went on to collectively implement multiple social action projects on FGM, targeting six Kenyan counties: Elgeyo Marakwet, Garissa, Kajiado, Kisii, Tana River, and Samburu.

The *Unsung Sheroes* publication seeks to showcase the journeys of female activists of different ages in Kenya and TuWezeshe Fellows.; We hope their positive stories of change can help us understand Kenya's challenges, hopes, and opportunities to bring about sustained change. Kenya is one of the few countries in Africa with a stable government and the legal support needed to tackle FGM, where FGM prevalence has significantly reduced to 15%. For this reason, it is a beacon of hope for seeing the end of FGM within our generation.



TRIGGER WARNING



This publication highlights personal experiences related to FGM and its various adverse side effects.
Please be mindful of this and possible triggers in the following pages.

FOREWORD

Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs) have impacted African women and girls across generations, religions, and cultures. Therefore, it is critical to recognize that such HTPs are not specific to a single culture or belief across the African continent. In this publication, however, among the many HTPs, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage will be the key practices discussed in Kenya. In this East African country, these two practices are widely prevalent.

Several milestones have been passed in Kenya in recent decades in tackling child marriage and FGM. These have included the entry into force of several international conventions, local and regional agreements, and national laws. In addition, the worldwide adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 (gender equality) and SDG 3 (good health and well-being) has further amplified the objective of eliminating FGM and child marriage – and the complex poor health outcomes that they lead to – by 2030. The current data on FGM prevalence showed a reduction to 15 % (DHS 2023)

FGM constitutes a form of intersectional inequality, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and a grave human rights violation. It is also a major public health concern. The root causes of FGM are certain gender norms embedded in patriarchal societies. In addition to communities' conformity to these patriarchal gender norms, FGM's key drivers include culture and tradition, links to identity, female sexuality, womanhood, and religion.

The consequences of FGM, meanwhile, are far-reaching and complex. In particular, in the communities in which it is practiced, FGM greatly impacts women's and girls' physical, mental, and socio-economic capabilities. Using FGM as a broader public health issue and a form of VAWG, FORWARD has been working to end this practice for over 30 years. On the other hand Akili Dada has been keen on ensuring that girls and young women are free from harmful practices and are able to enjoy their rights especially access to education.

We welcome you to read and listen to these young women's voices of hope and to join the campaign to end FGM. We must all work together to achieve the final goal of seeing an end to FGM – forever. Furthermore, please share with us the stories of any unsung "sheroes" whom we have missed so that we can add their journeys as change-makers.

Naana Otoo-Oyortey
Executive Director, FORWARD

Joy Zawadi
Interim Executive Director, Akili Dada



Amplifying Voices of Anti-FGM Champions

I am a survivor

The Wardei community in Tana River, coastal Kenya is well known for its unique cultural dances and a particular meat product called "nyirnyir." This delicacy is part of their daily diet. At the same time, entrenched cultural practices, such as FGM and early marriages, still hinder women and girls in the community from reaching their full potential. These practices are still rife, despite national laws banning them. As a result, girls and women within the Wardei community are denied the opportunity to exercise their fundamental rights.

“Our biggest challenge as a community is child marriages. When a girl turns nine, she is automatically rendered ready for marriage and is married off mostly to older men as second wives.”

Judith

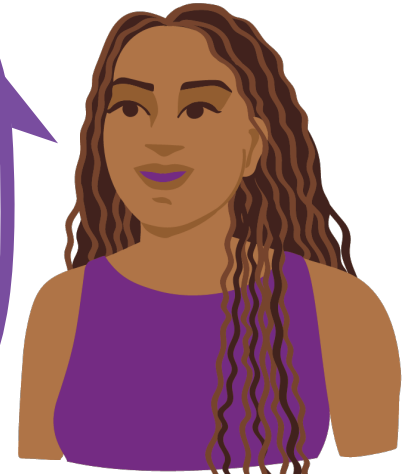
She adds that FGM is mainly practiced out of a sense of pride, thus making ending it a bigger challenge. She also notes, however, that there have been some changes in recent times. These days, instead of being practiced publicly, FGM is practiced secretly, with girls undergoing infibulation (FGM type III involves both cutting and stitching). Despite its adverse effects on girls and women, FGM remains broadly endorsed by women, men, and cutters, including husbands of FGM survivors, in the Wardei community.

*The name Judith has been used as an alias.

*FGM's direct negative health effects include difficulty during childbirth, excessive bleeding from the 'cut' of the female genital organ, and sometimes long-term disability.

"I became disabled after undergoing FGM. In my case, I was infibulated, and my legs were tied, resulting in me losing the ability to use my legs,"

Judith



The Wardei community also limits women's and girls' access to leadership spaces. Very few women hold leadership positions, and those that do are often perceived as promiscuous. Men usually occupy leadership positions, including those available on supposedly women-only platforms. As an FGM survivor, Judith was inspired to start a women's group of other FGM survivors who are also highly affected by having been subjected to FGM.

“The purpose of our group is to sensitize women and girls to the harmful effects of FGM. Most of our members have suffered a fistula or other reproductive health damages because of the practice.”

Judith

She adds that she is proud that they have successfully ended FGM in two villages and are keen on spreading their work to other towns. She believes partnering with like-minded organizations and government agencies to fight FGM is a big step toward ending FGM. Her main recommendation to the government of Kenya is to take the policies they enforce seriously and ensure they are being enforced.

The cut is not a sign of purity!

Women and girls in the Munyoyaya community, Tana River, often see their basic freedoms undermined and denied opportunities such as education. Related to this, most girls are married off at a young age, leading to high illiteracy levels within the community.



My community does not believe in educating girls, they think it is a waste of resources, and this often results in early marriages and slow progress within the community, given that women are the initiators of development.

Maryanne

Maryanne adds that women are believed to belong in the kitchen and that their key roles are seen only as caring for their children and husbands. For this reason, they are rarely able to reach leadership roles.

The few women who show an interest in leadership roles are stigmatized within the community and made to feel like outcasts. Due to the few opportunities available, women in the Munyoyaya community have created an alternative local group, popularly known as the "merry-go-rounds," where they come together to discuss issues affecting them in their households and the community at large. Unfortunately, FGM Type III is still widely practiced in the Munyoyaya community and is endorsed by women, men, and cutters.

Despite its side effects, such as excessive bleeding, disfigurement of the female genital organ, and disability in some cases, it is still justified by the mentality that having undergone the 'cut' is evidence of purity and preserves the girl's virginity. Our Shero, Maryanne, believes that her community still has a long way to go to end FGM and other forms of VAWG. Nonetheless, she thinks it will one day be possible, especially with financial support (from NGOs and the Kenyan Government) for community-based organizations working to eliminate FGM and child marriage.



"As I continue to advocate for eliminating FGM, I wish to see more FGM survivors speaking up and protecting girls from the act. Through my organization, I aim to sensitize communities to drop the act and educate their girls on the side effects of FGM."

Maryanne

*The name Maryanne has been used as an alias.

No Longer 'Egesagane'

The Kisii Community prides itself on its soapstone carvings and lush, fertile land, which produces delicious bananas and indigenous vegetables. Nevertheless, the underutilization of locally accessible resources is one of the biggest challenges limiting the Kisii community's progress in achieving its full development. For women and girls, the major challenge limiting their progress is the over-dependence on their husbands and the men of the community. When it comes to exploring and getting into leadership roles, only a few Kisii women can do so, and it's only ever at the community level.

“ Women's participation in leadership roles is meager; for example, there are no elected female members of parliament from the Kisii region, and only a few women are appointed to the Kisii County Assembly. Like religious platforms, women are given auxiliary roles but not ultimate leadership. In schools, particularly mixed schools, boys are head prefects while girls are invariably assistants.”

Ntabo M Nyamoita

FGM is mainly carried out on girls between the ages of six (6) and twelve (12) during school holidays. Many women also undergo FGM after giving birth. Traditional circumcisers used to perform it in the past, but now the procedure is carried out by local medical professionals.

"I went through FGM when I was nine years old. The government was against it, and I was the only one in my class who had not gone through it. This resulted in my classmates and friends teasing me a lot because I was still "egesagane" [a local term for uncut girls]."

Ntabo

Having undergone the 'cut' has affected her physically and mentally. In addition, she fears that as she grows older, she will lose her desire to have sex, given that she is married and also suffers back pain. However, not all is lost, she says. Due to her experience, she participates in platforms where she can talk to girls and women about FGM's health and social consequences.



#MyVoiceMatters

Community activist Amina Omar comes from a community that still upholds its rich culture, including food, dance, and raising livestock, especially Gala goats and Borana cows. Nonetheless, despite all the vibrant and positive cultures within the Hola community in Tana River, Coastal Kenya, Amina acknowledges that her community still faces challenges. These include high illiteracy levels, especially among girls and women, due to a lack of educational opportunities, as they are believed to be 'weak.'

“
Women are the backbone of the community's progress, yet retrogressive cultural practices such as FGM hold them back. The patriarchal system is also a big challenge for women and girls, especially when it comes to decision-making.”

Amina

Amina's culture determines whether women and girls are given space in leadership and decision-making roles in regard to community development. As a survivor, Amina is keen on sensitizing her community on the effects of FGM through community dialogues, social media advocacy, and holding duty bearers accountable.



“Undergoing the cut is what I cannot wish any girl to go through, and this inspires me to act towards ending FGM through advocacy within the community. I believe that we can end FGM by 2026 as mandated by the President of Kenya if we all come together and fight FGM,” she says.

She adds that the government needs to enforce serious laws and policies and that communities must come up with alternative rites of passage.

Girls' Voices Hold Power



Despite FGM's adverse effects on girls and women, such as health problems and poor access to education, it is still widely practiced in the Wardei community, Tana River. Girls still undergo FGM as a rite of passage, following which they drop out of school and are married off. As a survivor of FGM, Makkah Moge and her four co-founders created the "Tawfiq Girls Champion" group in 2020. The group advocates for the end of FGM and child marriage and the elimination of gender-based violence while seeking to advance girls' access to education, promote access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights, and promote peace within the Wardei community. They have also helped girls seek justice and be heard in courts. The first case they successfully supported was a defilement case, and they currently have three ongoing child marriage cases in court.

Unfortunately, their advocacy journey hasn't been easy due to various issues, including hostility from the community. They say other people in their community are unhappy with girls and women knowing their rights and standing up for themselves.

The main challenge we have experienced since our inception is hostility towards us from the community, mainly because for ages, Girls' and women's opinions have never been valued, and the idea of us understanding our rights and fighting back.

This, however, cannot stop us from amplifying our voices.

Makkah

She also adds that the lack of a physical office has slowed down the progress of their work. "Having a physical office would make our work easier and create a space where girls can easily access and come to us. The office can also double up as a safe space for them to engage and uplift one another," she says.

As an anti-FGM champion, Makkah has learned through her advocacy that more girls in the Wardei community have the power to stand up and let their voices be heard.

"Being an FGM survivor highlighted the adverse side effects girls and women face when they undergo the cut. I was affected negatively. As a result, we founded the Tawfiq Girls Champion Group, for we do not want to see other girls and young women be affected."

Makkah

“
An ideal world where FGM is no longer practiced would be one where women and girls are free from all harmful cultures, are allowed to exercise their human rights and voice their ideologies. ”

Amina Omar

“
An ideal world where Female Genital Mutilation(FGM) is no longer practiced would be one where every girl has access to education and can fulfill their dreams. ”

Judith

“
In an ideal world where FGM is no longer practiced, our girls are safe from harmful practices like FGM, and the presidential directive to end FGM by 2026 is fulfilled. ”

Ntabo M Nyamoita





Her Story!

My Story!



"My community is renowned for its rich culture. However, the culture also includes the belief that girls must undergo the 'cut.' And the women have no option but to agree to the terms and conditions the men give. The biggest challenge limiting progress for my community is the high level of poverty. This contributes to the rampant engagement in harmful practices, where girls undergo FGM, and the women, in turn, receive gifts from community members for allowing this practice to continue.

Most girls and women in my community are uneducated, limiting their involvement in decision-making processes. Those who are engaged in leadership do so through formal employment or lobbying conducted on their behalf by the community. Men and older women who have undergone FGM are my community's most prominent endorsers of FGM. They firmly believe that FGM is a rite of passage and that a circumcised woman/girl will keep her marriage, leading them to advocate actively for FGM in the communities.

The girls are the most affected by this practice since they drop out of school and are forced to marry early. FGM occurs during holidays when schools are closed, with the highest cases reported during [the] April, August, and December holidays. I am inspired to continue advocating against FGM because, since we started sensitizing and training people on FGM and child marriage, the number of girls undergoing the 'cut' has declined yearly."

"I would like to recommend the Kenyan government to allow the law to take its course for those who practice FGM in the community."

Jerop, Elgeyo Marakwet, Kenya.

*The name Jerop has been used as an alias.

Because the community said so!

"The memories of undergoing FGM are still fresh in my mind. I remember being so innocent that day without fully understanding the whole picture. All I knew was that my obligation as a girl in Tana River, coastal Kenya, was to undergo the cut. It was a painful experience, but all I could think about was I had to do this because the community said so. Fast forward to when I was giving birth to my first daughter when I got to experience the adverse effects of the cut. The pain was extremely unbearable, making the whole delivery process a nightmare.

As women, our bodies are designed to give birth naturally; however, once we undergo FGM, it becomes a big challenge because of being cut, reducing the size of our vaginas. This also affects how the child comes out, and I remember my daughter coming out with an elongated head as there was not enough space for her to come out naturally. During that process, all I could think about was not wanting my daughter to undergo the cut. I didn't want her to experience the kind of pain I experienced.

This whole experience and pain ignited the fire in me to start my organization Brighter Society Initiative with the aim of creating awareness of the side effects of FGM, ensuring my daughters, nieces, and girls in Tana River don't go through a similar experience and pushing for a world free of harmful practices while leaving behind a legacy where adolescent girls and young women can raise their voices without fear.

It's unfortunate that despite the fact the community is aware of the side effects of FGM, they don't allow women to seek medical care, especially maternal care. During my delivery, I was forced to give birth at home, yet there were no proper tools; instead, they used razor blades to cut me open. Despite the pain or the risk of bleeding to death, no one cared; instead, they believed that if you die during the process, it is your time to die, not because of the unsafe delivery process.

Under my organization, one of the main things we advocate for is access to maternal services and sexual and reproductive health rights. It's essential for women, especially those who have undergone FGM, to have access to maternal health because they are safe and can give birth through cesarean delivery and not risk further effects on their reproductive health. Girls and young women need to share their stories and experiences with FGM as it creates a clear picture of the side effects of FGM and what we go through. As much as we get to read about it, the stories are better told by survivors like me. As I continue to actively advocate against FGM within my community through Brighter Society Kenya, we have managed to rescue many girls. I have also published two books, A New Dawn For Children and The Hidden Scars Of Female Genital Mutilation, to share my story and advocate for the elimination of harmful practices."

"The future looks brighter for girls and young women if we continue to join them in fighting for a violence-free world and access to sexual reproductive health rights."

**~Shujaa Sadia Hussein
Founder Brighter Society Initiative, Garissa.**



“An ideal world where FGM is no longer practiced would be one where every girl has access to their rights and can enjoy them fully.”

Makkah Moge

“An ideal world where FGM is no longer practiced would be where every girl goes to school, achieves her dream, becomes a leader in her community, and mentors other girls.”

Azenath Okemwa.

“A world where FGM is no longer practiced is a world where: girls go to school; there is no more child marriage; we have more empowered and respected women and more women in leadership positions there are low poverty levels, as this will accelerate the elimination of harmful practices in my community.”

Jerop





**TuWezeshe
Fellows 2021**

I am wonderfully made, don't cut me!

Five TuWezeshe Fellows in Kisii county have set up a social action project named 'Ntongire Ogokumia, Tonsara,' which translates to - I am wonderfully made, don't cut me - in Kisii, that targets girls aged between seven to 13 years old who are at a high risk of undergoing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Kegogi area. The project currently involves 20 households consisting of girls and their parents. This has been done by sensitizing the community to the effects of FGM. The project aims to promote the rights of women and girls, giving them a voice to speak up against retrogressive cultural practices that have been violating women's and girls' rights for generations. Understanding this violation and taking action towards ending it ensures that the current and future generations don't undergo the same.



This social action project is important because I have undergone FGM and understand its challenges. I would not want any other girl to go through the pain and trauma that I went through.

Collete Gesare, TuWezeshe Fellows 2021.



Over the years, advocacy has continued to raise awareness of the violation of women's and girls' rights. It has also increased the knowledge needed to help change the community's perception of FGM. Through advocacy, fellows like Azenath have been rescued from undergoing the cut by a local organization keen on creating awareness about ending FGM in Kisii.

Currently, there have been many changes in the community after the implementation of the project. The fellows acknowledge the willingness of the community to attend training, openness during discussions, and increment of awareness of the health, social and psychological effects of undergoing FGM. Azenath wishes to modify its project by targeting women, promoting the participation of men, and mobilizing more stakeholders.

Through the TuWezeshe social action plan project, the fellows have received financial support, creating a platform for young women in Kisii county to come together and sensitize the community on the effects of FGM and mentorship training on the implementation and reporting strategies of creating FGM programs.



"The TuWezeshe social action plan project has helped us engage households directly and educate them on the effects of FGM. The project has also helped increase our knowledge and skills, leading to the understanding and implementing strategies in FGM programming through the mentorships and training we have received." Sarah Bosibori, TuWezeshe Fellows 2021.

Before the implementation of the project, most beneficiaries embraced FGM, whether traditional or medical. However, after the training, most have created change by engaging with the facilitators and sharing their experiences as lessons. As a result, many parents openly and Confidently agreed that they wouldn't cut their daughters, and the girls decided to say no to FGM. If the parents insisted, they would report the issue.

"Being in a platform with beneficiaries willing to share with their peers and the community at large about their experiences of undergoing FGM has increased my passion for ending FGM and mobilizing for more funds to continue building our project," Azenath. She adds that continuous sensitization and involvement of relevant stakeholders have the potential to create a more significant impact within the community.

“ There is still the need to sensitize women to understand their rights. Men also need to be educated on the effects of FGM and the fact that it affects both men and women. ”

Sarah

The fellows advocate for a world where women and girls feel safe and protected, where parents and their children jointly decide against retrogressive cultural practices such as FGM. A world where mothers and grandmothers are passing on teachings to their daughters and encouraging them to value themselves as uncut girls. A world where men and the community stand firm and voice out women's and girls' rights.



Changing the Narrative on Girls' Rights!

Five TuWezeshe Fellows in Samburu County set up a social action project focused on community mobilization to end FGM within the community. The project was set to bring empowerment and create awareness of the need to end harmful cultural practices (FGM) and women's rights.

“
Having been born and raised in a community where women and girls do not enjoy their rights, this was the perfect project for me given that it seeks to empower and create awareness on the importance of ending harmful practices in my community.”

TuWezeshe fellows 2021 (who prefers to be anonymous)

The TuWezeshe social action has created a safe space to discuss and create solutions by creating awareness via platforms like local radio talk shows and community sensitization in the manyattas (a temporary settlement for Samburu communities).

“
We realized that the community had a lot of questions and concerns but needed to know whom to ask. The community dialogues have helped young women and girls come up with solutions towards ending the challenges they face within the community.”

Lenkuyeyo Faith Kasoni, TuWezeshe Fellows 2021

During the project's implementation, the community learned a lot about the effects of FGM, which led to positive reception from them compared to the previous years. The fellows also noted that there is a need to improve their approach to addressing the issue and involve men in ending FGM. The fellows wish for a world where women do not have to sacrifice anything to please their community.



APPRECIATION

The *Unsung Heroines* Publication captures and narrates the voices and experiences of Kenyan community activists (Anti-FGM Champions) who advocate for the end of harmful cultural practices that violate women's rights and girls, above all, FGM and child marriage. We are grateful and inspired by the fierce anti-FGM advocates leading change in their communities: Amina Omar, Azenath Okemwa, Collet Gesare, Faith Kasoni, Makkah Moge, Ntabo M Nyamoita, Sarah Bosibori, Shujaa Sadia Hussein, and all the other fellows who opted to remain anonymous. They truly reflect what it means to amplify girls' voices and champion girls' rights.

We thank the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UN spotlight program, and Comic Relief for their invaluable support of the report's development. We acknowledge your support toward African women leaders influencing change within their communities across Kenya.

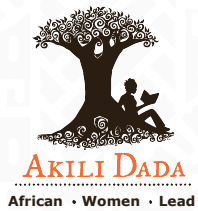
We are grateful to our Kenyan partners: Malkia Initiative in Kajiado, the Pastoralist Girls Initiative in Garissa, the Samburu Girls Foundation in Samburu, the Marakwet Girls Foundation in Elgeyo Marakwet, and Msichana Empowerment Kuria for their contribution towards the publication.

Thank you to the Akili Dada sisters who continue to contribute to the success of the TuWezeshe Fellows programme 2021 and the publication of the *Unsung Heroines*: Vivian Kwame, Joy Zawadi, and Jane Kamau. We also thank the FORWARD sisters for their unwavering support: Naana Otoo-Oyortey, Adwoa Kwateng-Klavitse, Angela Lagat, Wossenyelesh Kifle, and Seble Belay.

Together Let's End FGM!

We also like to extend our deepest gratitude to Comic Relief, UNFPA and its UN Spotlight Programme for resourcing the project.

Join us today in working to achieve the final goal of seeing an end to FGM- forever.



Spotlight Initiative
To eliminate violence against women and girls



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