

A Short Case Study

“TALKING TREES” PROJECT

‘A public health research forum addressing high maternal deaths among pastoralists’ communities of Kenya’.

Project Location:
Narok & Kajiado Counties

Researchers:
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(IAGAS)

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**A PROJECT FUNDED BY THE:
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PROJECT BACKGROUND



Key facts on FGM:

- Female genital mutilation (FGM) includes procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.
- The procedure has no health benefits for girls and women and is a severe violation of the human rights.
- Procedures can cause severe bleeding and problems urinating, and later cysts, infections, infertility as well as complications in childbirth and increased risk of newborn and maternal deaths.



WHO IS AT RISK?

- Procedures are mostly carried out on young girls between infancy and age 15, and on adult women.
- In Africa, more than 3million girls are estimated to be at risk for FGM annually.
- More than 125 million girls and women alive today have gone through FGM in 29 countries in Africa and Middle East where FGM is active .
- The practice is mostly common in the western, eastern, and north-eastern regions of Africa, in some countries in Asia and the Middle East.



PROJECT PURPOSE:

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT WAS TO:

- Engage the pastoralists' communities through an all inclusive participatory health forum and dialogue designed to enlighten and change their attitude towards FGM in order to embrace alternative rites of passage.



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- Develop appropriate information materials in indigenous languages that would actively contribute to community outreach work and in raising awareness on FGM and by communicating modern medicine and science using indigenous languages to solve severe health concerns facing Kenya's pastoralists' communities.



PROJECT GOALS:

THIS PROJECT WAS INTENDED TO:



- Awaken the interest of pastoralists' communities and intensifying their participation in future community health research and project implementation.
- Raise awareness on the dangers of FGM and to advocate for behavioral/ attitude change towards the practice of FGM.

Anti FGM Campaign With The Youth

Ngong Town - Kajiado



PROJECT GOALS:

THIS PROJECT WAS INTENDED TO:



- Develop community health research infrastructure and improve pastoralists' communities' livelihoods- through project workshops and seminars.
- Forge stronger project collaborations among the researchers, gynecologists, pastoralist communities and the public.



PROJECT GOALS:

THIS PROJECT WAS INTENDED TO:



- Strengthen capacity for future collaborations in quality public engagement work locally, regionally and globally
- Involve pastoral communities in participatory health forums to deepen their understanding, to impact their behavioral change around FGM/C.

PROJECT CAMPAIGNS



PROJECT GOALS:

THIS PROJECT WAS INTENDED TO:



- Develop strategies for galvanizing positive social change, in order to influence policies that support the development and promotion of alternative rites of passage through scientific research, tested and proven approaches for programs that promote best practices in abandoning FGM practices.

PROJECT CAMPAIGNS



PROJECT OUTCOMES:



- Awakened interest of pastoralists' communities in their community-based-research.
- Increased awareness of the pastoralists' peoples on the short-term and long-term effects of FGM.
- Increased change of attitudes towards the practice of FGM.
- Intensified participation of Pastoralists' project implementation.

PROJECT CAMPAIGNS



PROJECT OUTCOMES:



- Development of the much needed community health research infrastructure.
- Improvement of pastoralists' communities' livelihoods- through project workshops and seminars.
- New project collaborations among researchers, gynaecologists, public health providers and the pastoralist communities.
- Strengthened capacity for future collaboration in quality engagement work locally, regionally and globally

PROJECT CAMPAIGNS



PROJECT SUCCESSES/RESULTS:

- To achieve success in this project team designed and adopted a ***‘Do No Harm’*** ethical principle to underpin the ‘Talking Trees Project’ research, health and social programming, shielding researchers and the multidisciplinary project team from causing intentional harm to the pastoralists’ communities.

PROJECT CAMPAIGNS



PROJECT SUCCESSES/RESULTS:

- This ‘*Do No Harm*’ approach was invented to mitigate the risk of advocating for social change interventions inadvertently creating societal divisions, particularly in contexts of conflict and fragility or unforeseen and unintended negative effects.

Anti FGM Campaign With The Youth



Ngong Town - Kajiado

PROJECT SUCCESSES/RESULTS:

Thus, far the types of harm that the project team avoided included:

- ✘ Reinforcing support for the practice of FGM.
- ✘ Cultural insensitivity evoking backlash and denial which could set back efforts to end FGM.
- ✘ Undermining local efforts and leadership to end FGM by reinventing the wheel rather than building on existing work.
- ✘ Fragmenting efforts or causing divisions among actors working to end FGM.
- ✘ Rigid donor-led approaches which may be out of sync with local realities.
- ✘ Putting activists, survivors, young people or other potentially vulnerable people at risk.
- ✘ Stigmatising or causing emotional distress to those who have undergone FGM.
- ✘ Replacing the most severe forms of FGM with so-called minor forms.
- ✘ Increasing corruption.



THE PROJECT IMPACT:

The broader impact of this project is being felt through:

- ✘ **The creation of multimedia materials** - which will further be disseminated by the respective Counties.
- ✘ **Project materials'** - which is contributing to knowledge and increasing awareness on maternal health care and enlightenment of pastoralists' communities on shunning outdated practices like FGM.
- ✘ **Further collaborative research** - as an increased effort by researchers in providing new research data and findings to enhance the 'up-to-recently-none-existent-public-health-research-data' on FGM and maternal deaths, for comparison with other experts across the region.





THE PROJECT IMPACT:

- ✘ **The training of pastoralists' communities** - in their own community health research, data collection and dissemination - thereby contributing to their quest to self-determination, increased awareness and knowledge.
- ✘ **Advanced socio-cultural knowledge**, discourse patterns and research data on FGM.
- ✘ **Contribution to a greater realization** of the pastoralists' women's rights to a dignified life.
- ✘ **Development of a project website** with materials which will be accessible both electronically and in print by the pastoralists' communities and FGM researchers in accordance with the pastoralists' communities' approval.



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Kajiado Shopping Center



PROJECT DIFFICULTIES: KEY CULTURAL ISSUES ADDRESSED



- FGM is a sensitive, taboo and sometimes highly politicized and perceived religious issue that goes to the heart of Indigenous peoples' gender identity and gender relations.
- Insensitive approaches and implementation could risk driving the practice underground, undermining existing efforts to end the practice, contributing to a backlash, adding to additional tensions to an already volatile subject.

Anti FGM Campaign With The Youth

Narok Town Caravan



PROJECT DIFFICULTIES: KEY CULTURAL ISSUES ADDRESSED .



- Some form of backlash, particularly from social and religious conservatives, was unavoidable when our advocacy on social change appeared like it was shifting power dynamics.
- The backlash and protests the project team encountered, posed a positive opportunity to discuss the issues surrounding FGM more openly, engage the pastoralists' community in dialogue, and move towards conflict resolution.

PROJECT CHALLENGES AND INSIGHTS



EXAMPLE I

- A protest by Maasai women in Narok County, who wanted to have Kenya's anti-FGM laws repealed following an arrest of a local chief who had organized the cutting of a little girl.
- The backlash helped the 'Talking Trees' project team to bring various FGM health-related issues into the open and enabled them to be addressed to a certain degree.
- After dialogue and consultations, the women changed their position and agreed that promoting education for girls was better than promoting FGM.

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Rongai Town - Kajiado

- In some situations, complete abandonment of FGM lead to loss of income and status for those who perform and preside over FGM;
- Some women who have undergone FGM and men from target FGM practicing communities were angered by constant calls for change (which they perceived to be from external actors).
- Putting this in a historical context of Indigenous peoples' marginalization by the Government, they perceived any criticism of FGM as cultural imperialism.
- In rebutting such claims supporting FGM as culture, the issue of credibility of those responding was crucial.

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Rongai Town - Kajiado

EXAMPLE II

- It was very important to avoid unnecessary (non-productive) backlash that could actively set the back the agenda of the 'Talking Trees' project. We also avoided that which could alienate, politicize or discourage those who would otherwise have supported an end to FGM.
- Thus, we avoided the following interventions that could derail the 'Talking Trees' project and lead to non-productive backlash:
 - 1) **Simplistic media exposé of FGM**, which was sensational and demeaning to girls and women who had undergone FGM (e.g. focus on graphic images on mutilation and screaming of girls).

TOGETHER WE CAN DEFEAT FGM:



2. Use of inappropriate terms like **‘barbaric’** and **‘savage’** in relation to those practicing FGM
3. Lack of authenticity of messengers becoming the public face of campaigns
4. **Poor messaging** on health consequences of FGM
5. Inability to translate international human rights law on FGM into convincing local messages that make sense to the Pastoralists’.
6. Blaming one religion or ethnic group for the rise of FGM.
7. Blaming all men as responsible for FGM

STAKEHOLDERS MEETING:



8. Inflexibility on the use of terminology of FGM
9. Strident or aggressive messaging focusing on women's rights and sexual freedoms which could alienate some social conservatives who otherwise might support an end to FGM.
10. Using FGM to attract and drive organizational funding for other issues not necessarily connected to FGM
11. Lack of transparency and accountability in the use of FGM funds



PROJECT CHALLENGES AND INSIGHTS

- Additionally, the project team encountered unavoidable circumstances during the project implementation, namely:
 - Currency crash - This was largely due to the much hyped 'BREXIT' - campaign that crashed the British Pound before we received the grant from Wellcome Trust in July.
 - Prolonged Rainy Season from July to September - which made it extremely difficult to navigate and access the vast Masaai Land by car – which bore rough-black-cotton soil that was not navigable when it rained) – The Project Team got stuck twice on tarmac roads leading to the interior bowels of Masaai Land.
 - The terrains got very rough, especially in the afternoons, often making transport to these villages impossible, which further delayed, changed or simply altered the project commencement/implementation date by one week.



PROJECT CHALLENGES AND INSIGHTS

- The poor road networks from Nairobi to Kajiado, the physical landscape and the mountainous terrain with roads leading to some project sites was a very taxing exercise and walking long distances to the bowels of Narok and Kajiado demoralized the project team.
- Electricity and Power Black-Outs were rampant – making it very difficult to key-in vital information in the computers. Many a times, the PI had to travel back to mainland Narok town in order to access electricity and save some project data.
- Internet connection was none existent. And although the access to network providers was present, the reception and access was very poor.
- Telecommunication Networks were very minimal, making telephone access very poor.



PROJECT CHALLENGES AND INSIGHTS

- Sleeping arrangements for the project team were often uncomfortable at the best of times. In the event of heavy rains, which characterised the region, the project team abandoned the leaking tents and 2-inch mattresses and sought refuge in neighbouring homes or in nearby hotels.
- Unavoidable personal problems: The PI's Father suffered from Cancer and she had to abandon the project for two weeks in order to take her father to the hospital. Unfortunately, the PI's dad succumbed and is now resting with the Lord.



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HOW THIS PROJECT DIFFERED FROM THE ORIGINAL PLAN.

- Prolonged Rainy Season, Power Black-Outs, Lack of Internet Connection and poor road networks delayed the implementation of the project. In the first days of the project by about one week.
- The project Grant, activities and project locations decreased threefold, pushing high the project costs. It is anticipated that the end, the project expenditure would surpass the initial project Budget by **1, 500.00 GBP**. All of which will paid by The Enduring Voices Foundation.

Thank You

