



The 'Talking Trees' Project

[2016-2019]

**'A Public Health Forum Addressing
Maternal Deaths In Kenya'.**

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Project Summary:

- In 2016-2019, the “Talking Trees Project” - 'A public health research and forum, addressing maternal deaths prevalent among pastoralists’ communities of Kenya' was launched and implemented in *Narok*, and *Kajiado* Counties by the Enduring Voices Foundation (EVF).
- The project was introduced in several participatory phases in **Kajiado County:** *Kule, Namanga, Ngong, Kiserian, Jerusalem, Olkeri, Oljororok, Ntilal, Naijile Oltinga, Naadadapo.* **Narok County:** *Sere Olipi, Lauragi 2, Lengarde/ Leshunyai, Lenchekut, Lorian and Sionta 2.*
- During the project implementation, numerous changes took place. While knowledge of human rights improved, maternal healthcare, education, personal health responsibilities, attitude and behavioral change against FGM/C increased. Also organization of public declarations on the Abandonment of FGM/C evolved significantly.

Project Modules:

The EVF through its Wellcome Trust's - International Public Engagement Award, organized the 'Talking Trees Project' around the following modules:

- Maternal healthcare
- FGM/C
- Alternative Rites of Passage
- Women's Health (Sexuality, Pregnancy Management & Child-birth)
- HIV/Aids and Mortality)
- Human Rights
- Child Development
- Early Child-marriage.

Project Partners:

Throughout the implementation of the 'Talking Trees Project' the EVF collaborated with the following partners:

- Kajiado County
- Narok County
- Ministry of Health
- National Anti FGM/C Board
- NOSIM Radio
- Nomad Radio
- Girl Generation – UK
- Wajir County
- Garissa County
- Girl-Kind Foundation
- Reproductive Health Network Kenya (RHNK)





Project Objectives:

- To engage the pastoralists' communities through participatory health research forums and debates designed to enlighten and change their attitude towards Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting - also known as (FGM/C).
- To bring together a multidisciplinary team of experts and pastoralists communities to discuss and develop an understanding of the discrepancies between modern science and outdated traditional practices that would help the researchers to understand the causes and ways through which maternal deaths could be prevented or reduced.
- To identify challenges and support gaps in research dissemination to the general public, so as to develop appropriate information materials in indigenous languages that will actively contribute to community outreach work and in raising FGM/C awareness
- To compile an inventory of existing indigenous health care training and capacity building activities relevant to management and sharing of data in order to improve research collaborations and to share research findings in ways that accelerate progress in public health.

Project Outcomes:

The 'Talking Trees Project':

- Increased and accelerated Public Declarations on the abandonment of FGM.
- Raised awareness on the dangers of FGM.
- Decreased rates of girls wanting to be cut 2%.
- Awakened the interest of pastoralists' communities and intensified their participation in their own community health research and project implementation.
- Advocated for behavioral and attitudinal change towards the practice of FGM.
- Improved pastoralists' communities' livelihoods through regular workshops and seminars.
- Strengthened project collaborations between the project team, researchers, gynecologists and the pastoralist communities.
- Created stronger collaborative capacity in quality public engagement in terms of FGM/C work locally, regionally and globally
- Helped organizations and health workers 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.





Challenges Encountered

The 'Talking Trees Project' was not implemented without challenges. The project team encountered massive backlash due to **Cultural Sensitivity** and owing partly to what was deemed as **Insensitive Project Approaches**. To mitigate this, the project adopted the "**Do No Harm**" Ethical Principle, that helped the team to avoid:

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

The Interdisciplinarity Of The Talking Trees Project:

To accomplish success in the aforementioned outcomes, the project team encouraged:

- Clear Interdependence and collaboration among the team and the implementing partners.
- Open communication.
- Shared decision-making.
- Definable project participation.
- Group consciousness.
- Shared vision and sense of purpose and
- Co-ordinated actions.





Interdisciplinary Project Team:

The need for an interdisciplinary team work in the “Talking Trees” project was necessitated by the following factors:

- An increasing indigenous population, with more complex healthcare needs associated with FGM/C related cases;
- The increasing complexity of skills and knowledge required to provide comprehensive care to FGM/C victims;
- Increasing specialization within health professions and a corresponding fragmentation of disciplinary knowledge resulting in no-one health care professional being able to meet all the complex needs of their FGM/C victims and patients;
- The current emphasis in many countries’ policy documents on multi-professional team work and development of shared learning on FGM/C, Maternal health and human rights issues.



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