

Why do these women in Kenya support female genital mutilation?

Stopping female genital mutilation has been a global priority for years. But the BBC's Anne Soy has been speaking to a group of women in Kenya who support FGM, as it's often referred to. She attended a meeting that was attended by over a thousand women from eight different clans belonging to the Maasai tribe in Kenya.

"They said that no one consulted them even when the country was coming up with laws that prohibited FGM, and so they felt that they were being discriminated against and they needed their voices heard," Soy says.



In 2001, Kenya passed a law to criminalize FGM, especially for girls under 18. It went into effect in 2011.

The meeting of the Maasai women was part of a series of gatherings that came about after a court case was brought against parents of a girl who was circumcised and died as a result. The women told Soy that the practice has been handed down to them from previous generations and they see no reason for it to be stopped.

They also argue that men are circumcised too — a practice that has been encouraged because it may help reduce the number of HIV/AIDS cases.

Soy says for the Maasai women, FGM is an important rite of passage.

"It marks the point when a girl stops being a girl and becomes a woman. In their eyes, anyone who is not circumcised is not a woman and not fit to carry out certain traditions," she says.

Soy points to a study that was carried out in 2009 and showed that 7 out of 10 Maasai girls undergo FGM. She says the few Maasai women who have abandoned the practice have been shunned in the community.

Soy says when she first thought about reporting on this story, she was afraid — because she comes from an ethnic community that traditionally has practiced FGM.

"I know from my own culture that a woman who is not circumcised is seen as a child in front of a woman who has been circumcised. I thought that would be a barrier," she says.

But she was finally able to find women who were willing to talk about the issue.

"Most of the people who still want to carry on with this practice are illiterate. They feel left out. Representatives come from Nairobi to their villages and tell them that this has been decided on and they have to stop this practice. They feel like they haven't been consulted," Soy says.



Kenyan 'cutter' says female genital mutilation is her livelihood

Margaret, who has put more girls through FGM than she can remember, says cutters ask her how they will eat if they stop

There can be few women who understand both the agonies and the economics of [female genital mutilation](#) better than Margaret, a grandmother in her 70s from Pokot, northern Kenya.

Her life has spanned the clumsy colonial efforts to ban the practice, which saw it become a cultural cornerstone of the Mau Mau uprising against British rule, right through to independent Kenya's decision to reimpose the prohibition.

She has also put more girls than she can remember under the knife. When Margaret started, the tool of choice was a curved nail; more recently this has been replaced with imported razor blades.

The work, she concedes, is gruelling: frightened young girls would typically sit naked on a rock; once done, their excised clitorises would be thrown to the birds. For the cutters, or "koko mekong", who can earn 2,500 Kenyan shillings (£18) for each girl, it is a livelihood.

"The cutters ask me: 'If we leave doing this thing, what will we eat?'" Margaret says. "Tell the government to give us what to eat. If it's just workshops then it will be no use. The circumcisers will not leave their career simply because they're being told to leave it."

The "cut" has been outlawed in [Kenya](#) since 2001. Despite this, a public health survey in 2009 found that 27% of women had been subject to FGM. Among some ethnic groups – such as the Somalis (98%) and Masai (73%) – that figure is much higher.

A second set of laws passed in 2011 made it illegal to promote or to facilitate what used to be known as female circumcision, and stiffened penalties. But changing the law was easier than changing practice.

Among communities such as the Endorois, who live near the picturesque Lake Bogoria, the cutting season has endured. But the ban has driven it underground, according to Elijah Kipteroi, the government-appointed chief of nearby Lobo, a role he describes as part policeman, part doctor, with a dash of marriage counsellor thrown in.

"In the old days there were preparations that you could see," Kipteroi said. "Now, because of the law, the practice is carried on in hiding. It's happening without ceremonies." The laws are still seen as foreign by many Endorois, especially the male elders, says the chief. They accuse him of criminalising their culture.

Underpinning the practice is a sharply divergent vision of the roles of sons and daughters. In Kenya, a dowry is paid by the groom's family. As a result, girls are seen as a valuable asset to their families, if they can be offered for marriage in the "right" condition.

"The daughters are seen as cattle to be sold," said Kipteroi, who added that a bride price would be typically counted in livestock, worth perhaps as much as 30 cows. "No one will even negotiate a bride price for uncut girls."

On the surface, communities in places such as Lobo are broadly supportive of traditions such as FGM. Uncut girls, sometimes referred to as "raw" as opposed to mutilated "ripe" women, can expect to be shunned by their neighbours. They are forced to walk for miles to fetch water so they don't "contaminate" pumps and wells; local midwives even refuse to deliver their "unclean" babies.

Reuben Orgut, a wiry man in his 60s with a sprinkling of silver stubble, one of the elders in Sandai, is unapologetic about FGM and the economics behind it.

"When I get this dowry it's a way to support the other siblings. It means that when my sons also marry I have something to give out."

He says the girls who refuse to be cut and married off are "stealing" from their own families. "It is not fair since they are a source of wealth. Some who have not been circumcised leave the family without us getting the bride wealth."

However, not everyone is so keen to defend the rite. Joseph Kapkurere is one of a trio of local teachers who have been trying to change ingrained attitudes among pupils and parents, even if doing so comes at the cost of frequent confrontation with relatives, friends and neighbours.

Kapkurere escaped the strictures that he grew up with when he went to college in Kisumu, a city in western Kenya where female genital mutilation is not common. "I was able to question why this happens and make up my own mind," he said.

He married a woman from another ethnic group and resisted his relatives' entreaties to have her undergo FGM. In Kapkurere's home community he estimates that nine out of 10 girls are mutilated. As a teacher he found that schoolgirls would tell him that their parents were arranging for them to be cut against their will. He decided to start offering sanctuary during the school holidays which were often used by parents to have the girls mutilated.

"We thought at least we can keep them in school for longer, we can buy some time and subvert the parents' plans," he said. And so now, during the longer holidays, dozens of girls will stay in the sanctuary of the school in Sandai to avoid the rite of passage. The Cana girls' rescue centre, set among the dark volcanic rock, aloes and thorny acacias north of Lake Baringo, is home to more proof of the limits of legislation in changing lives. The Rev Christopher Chochoi, a Catholic priest, set up the



shelter in 2002 after praying with a young girl as she died from the rat poison she had consumed rather than return to the violent and abusive old man she had been forced to marry.

Today, it houses around 50 girls, some of whom have fled forced marriages, as well as runaways or outcasts who have refused to submit to FGM and have been ostracised by their families. One of them is Diana, 16, who came to Cana two years ago. She walked for nearly three days through the bush to avoid being married off after being pressured into being cut – a brutal procedure that left her angry and disillusioned.

"I knew I was going to be circumcised because we were being pressurised but I didn't know it was bad and would lead to marriage afterwards," she said.

She had been expecting a "good adventure", she remembers ruefully, and was ignorant of what was coming when she went to see the koko mekong with four friends.

"I regret having undergone the circumcision because some of my friends, after undergoing it, bled to death. Some of them had challenges when giving birth because of age and as a result they ended up dying while giving birth."

Chochoi's wife, Nelly, hopes that the experience of young women such as Joan Rikono, who stayed for five years at Cana, will inspire other girls. The 25-year-old earned a scholarship at a college and returns to mentor the rescue centre's current residents.

Nelly hopes Rikono can show the community they are wrong to think of educated girls as lost or worthless.

Nonetheless, the job of persuasion is slow and dangerous. The centre's matriarch came to face to face with the risks two years ago when furious and armed male relatives of one of the girls stormed into the centre. They demanded that one of the girls who was due to be cut and married off be handed over. A tall woman with a strong, clear voice, she stood her ground: "I told them we don't have any wives here, just schoolgirls."

