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How outlawing female genital mutilation in Kenya has driven it underground and led to its medicalization

By Damaris Seleina Parsitau

The Brookings Institution (19.06.2018) - <https://brook.gs/2MqJVQx> - The fight against female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) has been fraught with both success and failure, resistance and acceptance. Since Kenya banned the practice in 2011, FGM/C is now increasingly conducted underground, secretly in homes or in clinics by healthcare providers and workers.

The medicalization of FGM/C—defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as any “situation in which FGM/C is practiced by any healthcare provider whether in public or private, clinic or home or elsewhere”—has received recent media and public attention. Earlier this year, a doctor filed a court case asking the Kenyan government to declare the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act 2011, which outlawed and criminalized FGM/C, unconstitutional. Further, she wanted the Anti-FGM Board, a body created to help eradicate FGM/C and early marriage, also declared unconstitutional.

The doctor, Dr. Tatu Kamau, argues that the dignity of traditional practitioners of female circumcision is disregarded by the law which has failed to stop FGM/C in the country. She claims that FGM/C is still largely practiced in Kenya and is increasing due to medicalization. In Kenya, there is evidence that scrupulous medical personnel collude with parents to circumvent the law by cutting girls in their homes or in their private clinics away from public view.

This trend is evident in both rural and urban Kenya where 15 percent of women and girls have been cut by a medical practitioner. The practice is especially prevalent in Kisii counties in Western Kenya where FGM/C is nearly universal. Drawing on interviews with girls and women who have been cut by health providers, my research shows that parents are increasingly having their girls, some as early as 5 years old, cut by nurses or other healthcare workers either in homes or in health clinics.

Moraa (not her real name), an 18-year-old college girl from Nakuru in the Rift Valley, explained to me how her mother, a primary school teacher, brought a nurse to their home during school holidays to cut her at dawn when she was barely 8 years old. Moraa feels resentful and bitter towards her parents, especially her mother for colluding with a nurse to have her cut without her consent, and has considered suing her parents for violating her rights. Moraa’s story is just one of many cases of medicalized cutting.

The commercialization and medicalization of FGM/C

Throughout my larger research on FGM/C and early marriage, I came across many stories of medicalization of FGM/C both in rural and urban areas in Kenya. A nurse I spoke with told me that she carries out the cut for money. "Look," she said, "when parents call me to perform the cut on their girls, both in urban and rural areas or even in my clinic, I respond because they pay me handsomely. Some even pay for my bus fare and accommodation; I travel widely to cut girls and women. I see no reason why I shouldn't do this. I have not forced anyone to undergo the cut. I simply provide my services to those who need them."

Medical professionals who perform cutting services claim that they are fulfilling the demands of communities and that they help enhance women's values and marriageability in communities that do not want to abandon the practice. They believe that by doing so they respect patients' cultural rights since some are of a mature legal age.

However, the real reason driving this is its economic value. Medical professionals are cutting girls and women for payment, replacing the traditional cutters in rural villages. Additionally, the commercialization of FGM/C helps parents and guardians to avert the law and authorities. The medicalization of FGM/C not only provides legitimacy to the cut but it continues to put millions of girls at risk from the consequences of the cut. It also continues to perpetuate and give tacit approval of the harmful practice by discouraging changed behavior and attitudes, thereby leading to the normalization of the cut in medical spaces.

While the medicalization of FGM/C is not a new phenomenon, its growing popularity is worrying and points to emerging shifts and tensions in the war to end it—a cat and mouse game between resistant communities and authorities. And while the medicalization of FGM/C went under the radar as authorities and stakeholders focused on traditional cutters in rural villages as well as alternative rites of passage, it is now emerging as a new frontier in the war against the harmful practice. Global, regional, and local focus should now shift away from traditional cutters to medical practitioners.

Poverty drives some Kenyans to rent out their wives

Poverty and unpredictable tourism industry forcing men on the east coast to send spouses into prostitution.

By Osman Mohamed Osman

Al Jazeera (28.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2umTEDa> - It's a cloudy Sunday morning in Kenya's Kwale county and Sande Ramadan just woke up to get ready for another weekend of work.

Wearing a green vest and khaki shorts, he washes his face and proceeds to the living room where his wife Janet Wambui serves him breakfast.

"Thanks for waking me up, I hate being late for my client," the dreadlocked father of three tells his wife. "She asked me to be with her until next weekend," he adds as he sips black tea.

Ramadan is a male sex worker.

Wambui, his tall dark-skinned wife, works in the same industry. She came back home two nights ago after spending 10 days with a German tourist in an expensive cottage house, a few kilometres from Maweni village where the couple resides.

Ramadan and Wambui have been married for 20 years now.

But it wasn't always like this. One day in 2006, Ramadan was hawking clothes to tourists along Diani Beach in Kwale town, 30km southwest of Mombasa, when a German tourist approached him. He wanted a lady to spend some time with until his holiday ended.

The 37-year-old, who speaks fluent German and teaches his wife the language, promised the man he would introduce him to his sister.

"My husband came home that evening and asked me if I can act as his sister and take up the offer. After a few days of deliberation, I agreed," says Wambui, 38, sitting near Ramadan while tightening her black turban.

Wambui saw how life changed for other women who entered prostitution. She was a housewife who depended on Ramadan's income, which was too little.

"Life was tough for us. My husband's unpredictable income was not enough and when he asked me to accept, I had no choice," she says.

The family can now afford three meals a day and the children's school fees.

In Kenya's coastal towns, such stories are not new, especially in poor neighbourhoods such as Maweni. Husbands agree to rent their wives to rich tourists, mostly from Europe, without them knowing the women are their spouses.

"Why would I make another woman rich while I have a wife at home?" Ramadan said. "This was an opportunity for us to make some cash to pay our bills."

Tourism reliance

The East African country received more than one million tourists in 2016, according to the Kenya Tourism Board, a government corporation. This number translated into \$100m earned in taxes, making Kenya one of the top tourism destinations in Africa.

In 2017, TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel website, ranked Kenya's Diani Beach in Kwale, where Ramadan and Wambui live, the seventh-best beach in Africa.

But all these accolades do not translate into success in the villages where locals survive solely on tourism.

Ramadan Juma, 43, has been a beach operator for more than 20 years. It's a sunny Saturday afternoon and Juma is at Diani reflecting on existence with his colleagues.

"Life is becoming difficult by the day," he said, wearing his black sunglasses to fend off the glaring sunlight.

On a good day, he earns about \$40 by helping out tourists navigate the blue waters of Indian Ocean. But nowadays, he complains the situation has become desperate.

"We have been neglected. We depend on tourism as a source of living. Since most of us do not have a constant income, my colleagues go to the extreme and give away their

wives to have a good living," said Juma, who also chairs the Diani Beach Boys Association.

Kwale County's chief tourism officer Anthony Mwamunga says the local government is training beach vendors and guides to gain skills to help them earn a decent living. He adds there's not much that can be done about prostitution.

"These cases are from poor men and women who have nothing to do," Mwamunga told Al Jazeera. "Tourists come here to have a good adventure and having a partner is part of it. This makes it hard for us to stop these cases."

Back at the spectacular white-sand beaches on the Indian Ocean, Tobias Juma, 42, woke up one day to find his wife had packed up and left him.

In 2012, he was working for an Austrian man who asked Tobias to hook him up with a lady.

"That is how I connected my wife to the Austrian man. All I wanted is my family to have a better life. But they fell in love along the way and they agreed to move to Europe," he said.

Before she left, Tobias' wife was providing for him and their daughter.

"She was our family's breadwinner. She would bring an average of \$400 every month for my daughter and me after staying with the Austrian tourist. I have been struggling since she left," he said.

Tobias hasn't heard from his wife since, and now takes care of his daughter on his own.

Dangerous risks

Communities along the Kenyan coast have seen a dramatic increase in HIV cases annually.

The National Aids Control Council estimates that Kenya's coastal counties reported 5,335 new HIV/AIDS cases in 2016, surging from 325 reported in 2014.

Faith Mwende is the Kenya advocacy manager for AIDS Healthcare Foundation, a global non-profit creating awareness about HIV prevention.

"The danger is when such women engage with more than one sexual partner, the chances of getting sexually transmitted diseases and infections are very high, especially when she doesn't know the status of the other person," Mwende said.

Despite these dangers, Ramadan and Wambui are not about to give up on the sex trade. The rent for their house is about \$80 a month, and they have three children to feed and educate.

"I am doing this to have a better life. It sounds immoral, but my husband is aware and supports it. So why not?" Wambui said as she bid Ramadan goodbye.

Trivializing sexual abuse is not entertainment

Media should champion an end to widespread violence against women

By Agnes Odhiambo

Human Rights Watch (22.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2fog8Y0> - "You are so beautiful; everybody wants to rape Pasis."

Those words, directed by a man at his female political rival on a popular, national TV show, have deeply shocked Kenyans and renewed the debate here about the treatment of women in the country.

The comments – made by Miguna Miguna, a former aide to opposition leader Raila Odinga who plans to run for governor of Nairobi next year – were directed at a fellow guest Esther Pasis, who is also eyeing the same seat.

Miguna also made disparaging comments about Pasis's looks, and openly mocked her. "A woman who has absolutely no integrity. A socialite bimbo whose only claim to fame is because she is looking for billionaire sponsors [sugar daddies]."

Jeff Koinange, a former CNN correspondent, hosts the show, which has been criticized by Kenyans for tolerating misogynist and hateful talk.

The heated exchanges between Miguna and Pasis may have deeper roots. Miguna has come out to say Pasis had earlier on called him a rapist during a commercial break, according to media reports. But for Kenyans who watched and listened to his remarks, the background narratives are not important. They find his remarks deeply offensive. Many took to social media to express their anger and repulsion.

Women in Kenya face widespread violence. According to the 2014 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, 45 percent of women ages 15 to 49 have experienced physical violence, and 14 percent have experienced sexual violence. The same survey shows high rates of acceptance of wife beating in Kenya among both men and women.

The media has a role to play in combatting gender stereotypes that discriminate against women and promote respect for women.

It is outrageous that Miguna, who aspires to be a political leader who will bear responsibility for addressing violence against women, would publicly joke about the rape of the woman running against him. It is also outrageous that he was able to do so on air without being challenged by the show's host. His comments reinforce a culture of misogyny and abuse often directed toward female candidates.

Kenya is set to hold general elections next August. The government should take all necessary measures to ensure that women can participate freely as voters and aspirants, free from violence and intimidation. Miguna owes Kenyans an apology. A stronger response from the government condemning intimidation of women political aspirants is needed.