

KENYA: Schoolgirls to face compulsory tests for pregnancy and FGM

Girls in Narok County will be made to reveal identities of babies' fathers and tell police about female genital mutilation

By Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (04.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2sa02YU>– Plans to subject schoolgirls in Kenya to mandatory tests for female genital mutilation and pregnancy are a violation of victims' privacy, campaigners have warned.

All girls returning to school this week in Narok, Kenya, will be examined at local health facilities as part of a countywide crackdown.

Girls found to have undergone FGM, which is illegal, will be required to give a police statement. Those who are pregnant will be asked to identify the man involved, according to George Natembeya, the Narok County commissioner.

Narok County has the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Kenya, while FGM is prevalent among the Maasai community. But campaigners say the tests are humiliating for girls, do not tackle the root causes of teenage pregnancy, and are unlikely

to improve prosecution rates for FGM.

“One of the biggest gaps in the prosecution of FGM cases is lack of evidence. It’s not [a lack of] evidence of girls being cut, but evidence of the actual act,” said Felister Gitonga, programme officer of an Equality Now team devoted to ending harmful practices.

Gitonga said that the county’s efforts to tackle FGM were welcome, but added: “We need a different strategy ensuring we respect the girls’ right to privacy and also that we have a clear plan of what we do with the information.

“When we find out that a girl has gone through FGM, what will be the consequences? Will there be psycho-social support? Or does this mean that she will be denied permission to go to school?”

Mandatory examinations risked further victimising girls who have experienced abuse, warned Gitonga.

All forms of FGM were criminalised in Kenya in 2011, as was discrimination against of women who have not undergone the procedure. Failing to report a case to the authorities was also made unlawful, together with aiding the performance of FGM or taking a Kenyan woman abroad to perform the procedure.

The practice is becoming less prevalent across the country, where one in five women and girls aged 15 to 49 have undergone

FGM.

Campaigners say tackling FGM is crucial to stopping teenage pregnancies and child marriage. “For girls who have undergone FGM, the community believes that those girls become a woman. Therefore every other violation that happens at that point happens [after] the FGM,” said Gitonga. “If they are having sex even with older men the community does not recognise it as defilement.”

In Narok, four in 10 girls become pregnant as teenagers, according to Kenya’s most recent demographic and health survey, produced in 2014.

Efforts to reduce teen pregnancies will fail unless gender-based violence and poverty are addressed, added Gitonga.

“For girls living in informal settlements, it is very hard; there is a risk of sexual violence. Sometimes they have to do sex work to help with educating their siblings. So you need to understand their situation,” she said. “You can’t just punish people for getting pregnant.”

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