

## LETTER OF THE DAY

# Let culture lead the fight against FGM

Every year, the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence challenge us to look beyond statements and campaigns and ask a harder question: what is really changing for girls on the ground? We have become very good at branding the 16 days; the real test is what happens on the 17th day and the rest of the year.

In Uganda, one uncomfortable truth remains. Despite strong laws and very low national prevalence, girls in parts of the Sebei and Karamoja regions are still being subjected to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). In these districts, FGM is not an isolated act. It is a social expectation tied to respectability, marriage and identity. Families weigh the risk of legal punishment against the very real fear of social exclusion. Too often, fear of the community wins and the practice survives in the shadows, reinforced by silence.

If we are serious about what the 16 Days of Activism stand for, information campaigns and legal frameworks, while essential, are not enough. We must shift the shared expectations that keep FGM alive. That is the space of social and behaviour change. In this space, one of the most powerful tools has come from within the communities themselves, namely music, dance and drama (MDD).

In high prevalence districts in Sebei and Karamoja, local groups, supported by government, district local governments and a UN agency, are using MDD as a frontline resource in the struggle to protect girls. Young people, elders, survivors and local leaders are working together to turn cultural performance into a disciplined platform for dialogue and change.

What makes MDD so compelling in this context is not only that it is familiar, but what it enables.

It breaks the silence. Careful-



ly crafted plays, songs and dances in local languages allow communities to see their own realities on stage without attacking specific families. People recognise the pressure to conform, the fear, the health consequences. Performance creates just enough distance to make it safer to name the practice and question it in public. A subject that was once confined to whispers becomes something that can be discussed in the open.

It brings survivors to the centre. In many performances, women and girls who have been cut are not spoken for; they speak. They choose to stand on stage in their own villages and tell their stories through drama and song. In doing so, they shift

the centre of gravity of the conversation. Authority on the issue no longer sits only with elders or external experts. It also sits with those who have lived the experience and who can describe with credibility why the practice must end.

It mobilises entire communities. MDD draws large, mixed audiences to school compounds, trading centres and markets. People come for the music and stay for the message. When the performance ends, structured discussions begin. Men, women and young people react, ask questions and, in many cases, make clear commitments. Fathers say publicly that they will not cut their daughters. Young men say they want to marry un-

cut women. Elders call for girls to remain in school. Because these commitments are made in front of peers and relatives, they start to reset what is seen as acceptable and respectable.

Equally important, MDD allows communities to protect their identity while rejecting harm. The objective is not to declare culture a problem, but to distinguish between traditions that sustain life and those that destroy it. Through song, dance and storytelling, communities affirm their pride and cohesion while sending a clear message that girls do not have to be cut to belong. Culture becomes a source of protection, not a justification for violence.

As we mark this year's 16 Days of Activism, there is a wider lesson for how we think about ending FGM and other forms of violence against girls.

For policymakers and partners, the implication is clear. If the 16 Days of Activism are to be more than a season of slogans, we need to invest in locally led cultural approaches like these. Approaches that open honest dialogue, shift expectations and make it both acceptable and desirable to protect girls. If our budgets speak as loudly as our speeches during these 16 days, girls in places like Sebei and Karamoja will feel the difference long after the banners come down.

In the end, it may be the very culture that once justified FGM that provides the most powerful means to end it. Messages alone will not change societies. People will, when they use their own voices, stories and traditions to imagine a different future for their daughters.

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