

## GIRLS ARE SMUGGLED ACROSS BORDERS FOR THE PROCEDURE

NAROK

Maasai women erupted with mocking heckles as a community elder, wrapped in a traditional red blanket, said female genital mutilation had all but stopped in their community in southern Kenya.

The women know that mutilating young girls by removing their clitoris and inner labia – framed as a rite of passage – is still an entrenched practice in some remote villages of Narok county, around three hours from the nearest tarmac road.

One local nurse told AFP that some 80% of girls in the area are still affected, despite the practice being made illegal in 2011.

“Why are you telling people that you have stopped, when we have teenage girls coming to the hospital who have been cut?” said a woman in the crowd, gathered in Entasekera village to discuss the issue.

The women nodded emphatically, while the men sat stone-faced.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) has survived decades of pressure to end it, from British colonialists and later Kenyan and global non-governmental organisations.

It still exists not only among the rural southern Maasai, but also in Kenya's northeast – with parts of the Somali diaspora community in the region reporting rates over 90% – as well as in some urban areas and among educated groups, where campaigners have highlighted the rise of so-called medicalised FGM.

A 2022 government survey said the number of affected teenage girls had fallen from 29% to 9% since 1998 nationally. But that does not reflect reality in some areas.

“We don't circumcise girls because the culture has changed,” Maasai elder Moses Letuati, 50, told AFP – before admitting one of his four daughters was cut.

Many of the Maasai men at the meeting said it should end.

## CRIES AND CURSES

“I was screaming and struggling,” said Martha, 18, who was 10 when

## WHY GENITAL MUTILATION STILL CUTS DEEP IN RURAL KENYA

## 'A MONSTER'

The Maasai remain among Kenya's poorest communities and have faced decades of land loss due to colonial settlers and now tourism, and some remain suspicious of outsiders trying to change their way of life.

One young Maasai man told AFP he had friends who still believed in FGM, but said girls were no longer cursed – a form of social control, used by elders – for refusing it.

Cynthia Taruru would disagree. Her father cursed her when her college-educated sister rescued her from FGM aged 11.

“I could see myself dying, or not getting children, because I believed my father had just cursed me,” Taruru, now 23, said.

“I had to pay my father a cow to get the curse lifted,” she said.

Local health officials said victims of FGM often suffer fistulas and obstructed labour in childbirth, exacerbated by long distances to health facilities.

Many young women, hoping to protect their families from arrest for allowing FGM, opt for home births, raising the risk of complications and death, although officials said data was lacking on exact numbers.

two women, under pressure from their community, cut her at home in Narok East on her father's say-so.

She later fled to a local shelter run by activist Patrick Ngigi, who says his

organisation Mission with a Vision has rescued some 3,000 victims.

The shelter, supported by the United Nations Population Fund, has video surveillance and panic buttons to protect the girls from fathers and elders who disagree with its mission.

“It's a dangerous job... You make so many enemies, but slowly with time,

you get used to it,” Ngigi, who has faced curses by community elders, said.

The work is endless: at the village meeting, Ngigi was quietly approached by women pleading with him to take six more girls at risk of FGM.

The practice persists among the

community thanks to beliefs that a girl should be cut ahead of marriage, and should she not undergo it will face ostracism.

As a result, Ngigi said change requires education, dialogue and an end to corruption.

Police officer Raphael Maroa rejected the accusation of corruption but admitted FGM was entrenched.

He criticised the community's lack of education – roughly half of Narok's population is illiterate, according to 2022 figures – but then admitted to AFP that his two daughters had also been cut, to avoid “conflict with my parents”.

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Juvenile girls, most from the Maasai community, take part in tailoring training on December 1 at the House of Hope, a centre that shelters and educates under-age girls rescued from genital mutilation in Narok