



Sebei's search for a new rite of passage

Turning point. Despite being outlawed 15 years ago, female genital mutilation persists in parts of eastern Uganda, now largely among adult women. As Sebei cultural leaders prepare to roll out an alternative rite of passage in 2026, the question is whether culture can finally be preserved without harm. **P.20**



For generations, Female Genital Mutilation has been a rite of passage for teenage girls in the North-Eastern communities of Tepeth, Pokot and Sabinu. PHOTO/FILE

Beyond the cut: Sebei's search for a new rite of passage

Despite being outlawed 15 years ago, female genital mutilation persists in parts of eastern Uganda, now largely among adult women. As Sebei cultural leaders prepare to roll out an alternative rite of passage in 2026, the question is whether culture can finally be preserved without harm.

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

Female genital mutilation (FGM) was banned in Uganda in March 2010 with the enactment of the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act. For generations, the practice has been a rite of passage for teenage girls in the North-Eastern communities of Tepeth, Pokot and Sabinu. Traditional surgeons removed parts of the external female genitals for non-medical reasons, but rather cultural ones. The practice

marked an important transition from childhood to adulthood.

A study by the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) found that the tradition was, and in many ways still is, so deeply ingrained that adult women who had somehow dodged or missed being circumcised were later forced to undergo the practice simply to be considered for marriage.

The anti-FGM law came into effect on April 9, 2010, criminalising the practice and imposing severe penalties on

those who perform or assist in it. Yet 15 years on, FGM persists. Interestingly, according to a UNICEF study, 95 percent of women in affected communities support the discontinuation of FGM, and yet the practice somehow continues.

Why FGM persists

Peter Swilikei, a cultural leader from Sebei, says FGM persists because, on a psychological level, it still means a great deal to the communities that practise it. He explains that FGM is closely associated with success and luck in life, especially in marriage.

"Female genital mutilation is a cultural practice that has been done for generations. It still persists even after it was criminalised because it is deeply psychological. Today, any woman who faces challenges in life tends to assume that maybe it is because she did not undergo FGM," Swilikei says.

While cases of young girls undergoing

WHY MEN MATTER IN ENDING FGM

While female genital mutilation is performed on women and girls, research across East Africa shows that men often play a decisive, if indirect, role in its continuation. Studies by UNFPA and local civil society organisations indicate that marriage expectations, sexual myths, and peer pressure among men frequently influence women's decisions to undergo FGM, especially later in life. In communities where FGM is practised, some men believe circumcised women are more faithful, more respectful, or more suitable for marriage. Even when men do not explicitly demand the procedure, offhand comments, jokes, or comparisons with other women can reinforce pressure on wives to conform.

Programmes that have successfully reduced FGM rates in neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia have increasingly shifted focus to male engagement. These initiatives include men-only dialogue groups, involvement of male elders and religious leaders, and public pledges by men to marry uncircumcised women.

Experts argue that alternatives to FGM are unlikely to succeed if they focus solely on girls and women. Without challenging male expectations around marriage, sexuality, and womanhood, women may continue to feel compelled to "complete" themselves through cutting, even in adulthood.

As communities such as Sebei explore alternatives such as SWAROP, advocates say meaningful involvement of men could be the missing link between cultural reform and lasting change.

the practice as a rite of passage have significantly reduced, Swilikei notes the emergence of a new trend.

Adult women and the hidden pressure to be cut

"The biggest demographic of females undergoing FGM in Sebei today is adult women who missed being circumcised after 2010. It is not so much young girls. It is older women, married women, who return home and say, 'I want to be cut,'" he says.

Caroline Chekwech, a mother in her 30s from Sebei, strongly agrees. She believes adult women now account for well over 90 percent of current FGM cases.

"It is people's wives that are being mutilated. Every so often, you hear that so-and-so's wife has been circumcised. Someone with three or four children suddenly feels the need to be circumcised," Chekwech says.

Swilikei is sympathetic to these sentiments, noting that the cutting itself was only a small part of the traditional rite of passage.

"There was a lot of learning and mentoring that happened before the cutting. It helped girls become responsible mothers and taught them habits that made them Sabinu women. For example, once you were married, it was a lifetime commitment. Running away from marriage was not considered," he says.

He adds that the rite also discouraged casual sex, as girls feared being shamed during circumcision if it was discovered they were not virgins. As a result, virginity was highly valued.

"Today, things are different because that rite of passage is missing. Teenage pregnancies are rampant. Early marriage was almost impossible before, but today it happens," Swilikei says.

Clearly, the rite of passage offered benefits despite the harm of FGM itself. Those benefits partly explain why, even without openly defending FGM, many Sabinu women still gravitate towards it. This reality has informed the need for an alternative.

SWAROP: Replacing the blade with mentorship

"We have come up with what we call the Sabinu Women Alternative Rite of Passage, SWAROP. Girls will still go through the traditional mentoring process and graduate after about a year, but without genital cutting," Swilikei explains.

A curriculum has already been developed and approved by elders, with roll-out expected to begin this year through mentor training.

"The mentors will teach both traditional and modern skills. Reproductive health information that was lost after the banning of FGM will be restored. We do not want to lose what helped our women succeed and become women of character," he says.

The mentorship will take place during school holidays, allowing even school-going girls to participate. Graduation will be marked by a ceremony where girls receive a traditional bangle symbolising maturity and completion of the process.

"Our intention is to satisfy the spiritual yearning created by the absence of the traditional rite of passage. The messaging will be there, minus the cutting," Swilikei says.

Chekwech, however, believes progress will be limited if men are not involved. She argues that many adult women are pushed, directly or indirectly, by their husbands.

"I think men are the problem. It makes no sense that so many women seek circumcision years into marriage. If men are not targeted by this alternative, not much will change," she says.