

# Christine Naylor advocates against FGM



**Journey.** Christine Naylor is an FGM survivor who is now advocating against the same cultural practice.

BY YAHUDU KITUNZI & ANDREW WABUSHENDA

Christine Naylor, a 24-year-old from Alapat Village in Lemusui Sub-County, Amudat District, has defied the odds stacked against her. A survivor of female genital mutilation (FGM), she has turned the scars of her painful past into a powerful mission. Today, she works as a health worker and community advocate, determined to protect girls and women from the same practice and to champion their right to live free from harm.

Naylor recalls that at just 11 years old, while in Primary Four at Lemusui Primary School, her family planned to subject her to FGM. By then, she had already heard terrifying stories from girls in her village who had undergone the cut. She had seen their pain firsthand — the crying, the bleeding, the collapsing after the procedure. Those haunting images filled her with fear and strengthened her resolve to reRev Srt.

Because she refused, Naylor says her parents withdrew their support for her education, denying her scholastic materials. With the threat of FGM looming over her, she made the brave decision to run away from home to save her life and protect her future. She later enrolled at Kalas Girls Primary School after learning about a “Back to School” campaign in Amudat District.

While still at Lemusui, she remembers that conversations among her peers revolved largely around FGM, which was considered mandatory in the commu-

nity. Most girls openly discussed when they would be circumcised. But Naylor could not silence the fear inside her.

“I could see my friends crying, bleeding, and collapsing after being mutilated,” she recalls. “I knew I could not endure such pain, so I had to run away.”

In her community, girls were typically circumcised between the ages of 11 and 14. Any girl who delayed beyond that age was labelled weak. Families feared the shame of a girl “jumping off the stone” during the procedure, an act considered disgraceful.

What troubled Naylor even more was the practice’s unsafe nature. She says a single knife was often used on several girls, heightening her fear of contracting HIV/Aids and other infections.

“At that age, parents would tell girls they were ready for circumcision,” she says. “They were warned that delaying would bring shame to the family.”

She says many girls dropped out of school after being mutilated. Most left in Primary Three, Four, or Five, with only a handful reaching Primary Seven. Once a girl was circumcised, parental support for her education often faded. Instead, attention shifted to marrying her off in exchange for bride price — often starting at 25 cows or more. Education, she says, was widely regarded as worthless.

According to Naylor, the situation has improved slightly due to sustained sensitization efforts by non-governmental organizations. While the practice has reduced, it has not been eradicated. In-

stead, it is now carried out in secrecy. Many cases only come to light later during childbirth, when women suffer severe complications.

After joining Kalas Girls Primary School in 2012, Naylor found safety within the school compound, staying there even during holidays. She completed Primary Seven in 2015. But when she briefly returned home, she faced verbal abuse from community members who told her that her “eggs were rotten” — cruel remarks intended to discourage her from continuing her education.

With support from NGOs and well-wishers, Naylor completed Senior Four in 2019 at Pokot Secondary School. Determined to make a difference, she later pursued Nursing and Midwifery.

## Naylor, the nurse and advocate

Today, Christine Naylor is a nurse and midwife volunteering at Lemusui Health Centre III, where she supports young and older mothers. She credits ZOA International and the Karamoja Women Umbrella for supporting her education and rebuilding her life.

Now an ambassador of change, Naylor moves from village to village, sensitizing families about the dangers of FGM. Drawing from her own painful experience, she says she has witnessed girls suffer severe complications — and some even lose their lives — because of the practice.

In Karamoja sub-region, harmful cultural practices continue to undermine the rights and futures of young girls. Among the most entrenched is FGM — outlawed in Uganda in 2010 but still deeply rooted in communities such as the Pokot, Sabin, and Tepeth.

In December, Naylor was among the youth who participated in a rural-urban symposium organised by ActionAid Uganda. The gathering aimed to identify and promote young leaders capable of implementing innovative solutions to

Christine Naylor an advocate against FGM. PHOTO/ ANDREW WABUSHENDA

## QUICK NOTE.

**Numbers say.** According to the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (2022), while only 0.2 percent of women nationally have undergone FGM, the prevalence in Karamoja stands at 2.2 percent — a stark reminder that behind each statistic is a girl fighting for her body, her dignity, and her future.

FGM is a supposed rite of passage into womanhood. Refusal can result in stigma, social exclusion, and diminished marriage prospects.

address negative socio-cultural practices affecting youth, including FGM, early pregnancy, and child marriage.

The symposium sought to harness youth potential by empowering young innovators to design, test, and sustain gender-transformative digital and social initiatives that challenge harmful norms and promote inclusive change.

Ms Esther Acheng, assistant health officer for Maternal and Child Health in Amudat District, acknowledges that FGM is still practiced secretly in some communities.

She notes that some girls are taken across the border into Kenya for circumcision before returning home, a practice that often leads to childbirth complications and contributes to maternal deaths.

“We want the youth to mobilise and sensitise communities to end these harmful practices,” Ms Acheng says.

She emphasises that far more needs to be done including intensified community mobilisation, organising community barazas, and empowering youth to lead the fight against such acts.

FGM and other harmful practices in Karamoja continue to devastate young girls. They cause immediate health risks — severe pain, excessive bleeding, infections — and long-term complications such as childbirth difficulties, chronic pain, and deep psychological trauma. Many girls drop out of school and are pushed into early marriages, stripping them of their childhood and forcing them into adult roles far too soon. Child marriage, gender-based violence, and denial of rights further entrench cycles of poverty and silence their voices.

## Bad practices

The prevalence of these practices is driven by cultural norms, peer pressure, economic survival, and fear of social exclusion. Although Uganda’s Anti-FGM Act exists, enforcement remains weak. Still, survivors, health workers, activists, and international organizations continue to push for stronger law enforcement, expanded education, improved healthcare, economic empowerment, and sustainable alternatives to end these violations and restore hope for future generations.

Sr Prossy Natenge, head teacher of Kalas Primary School in Amudat District, says over the past 10 years, the school has supported more than 270 girls who are survivors of FGM, early marriage, and denial of education.

She notes that the number of survivors at the school has declined because many girls return to their villages after being encouraged to reRev Srt FGM and serve as ambassadors of change. However, peer pressure remains strong, as some girls still believe circumcision is necessary to fit into society.

“In some cases, girls are influenced by men who want to marry them,” Rev Sr Natenge says, recounting an incident last month in which a co-wife arranged for a girl to be cut after discovering she had not undergone FGM. The girl was reportedly taken to Kenya for the procedure.

Currently, the school has 12 girls who are survivors of FGM.

Rev Sr Natenge emphasizes the need to intensify sensitisation efforts, particularly by engaging men in remote areas who continue to uphold cultural practices that discourage girls from pursuing education, promote early marriage, and perpetuate mutilation.