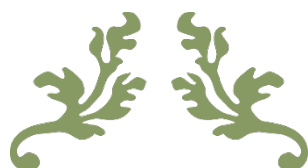




# Senses

*Today it's an idea. Tomorrow it's reality.*



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## THE WOMEN EMPOWERMENT CHALLENGE FOLLOW-UP

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Report



1 MAART 2019

## Content

1	Problem Definition .....	3
2	About the Women Empowerment Challenge Follow up.....	3
2.1	Methods .....	3
2.2	Data Collection .....	3
3	Results .....	4
3.1	Government Employees .....	4
3.2	Self Help Groups (SHG).....	5
3.3	Local NGOs .....	5
3.4	Individuals .....	8
4	Reflection .....	8
4.1	Progress in the Community .....	8
4.2	A different outlook on human rights.....	9
4.1	Involving Communities in the research agenda .....	10
5	Conclusion .....	10
6	References.....	12
	Acknowledgements .....	13

# 1 Problem Definition

The two challenges that were done were the Female Rights Challenge was to find out whether there was a decline of female circumcision in Kisii and the Women Empowerment Challenge, based on the respondents' requests. While the findings on the female rights challenge revealed that female

circumcision cannot be looked at in isolation, during the Women Empowerment challenge, we decided to investigate whether female circumcision among other cultural practices were a barrier to the enhancement and empowerment of women.

## 2 About the Women Empowerment Challenge Follow up

The Women Empowerment Challenge follow up took place in February – March 2019.

### 2.1 Methods

I decided to go back to some of the respondents from the different self-help groups (SHG) in Nyaribari Chache Constituency to see how far they had gone with economic enhancement. I used semi-structured interviews and observation as methods to collect data.

*"We have bought a car, new chairs and a new sound system"*

Research participant, from one self help group (Kisii)

Other stakeholders that I approached were government workers. The

government has different roles both on the county and national level that assist the self-help groups. I also interviewed a few non-profit organizations and individuals that work with the people in the community.

### 2.2 Data Collection

I interviewed 10 people in total and attended four different events to observe the progress of the community.

*"We're living in a fast changing world. Mum was a housewife, but my wife is not."*

Male Research participant, about women empowerment (Kisii)

### 3 Results

I divided the interviewees into three categories: SHG, Government employees, NGOs and Individuals.

#### 3.1 Government Employees

The Centre manager (also a district officer) of Huduma centre, a place where people go for all kinds of administrative assistance, including getting the national identity cards. There are twenty-seven departments in total at the centre. One of the duties is to give guidance to SHG and assist when there are disputes. The SHG get assistance on what is required for the groups to be registered, and what forms they need to fill out. They also have a project called Huduma mashinani (Social service in the deep rural areas), where they go to the interior of the rural areas once a month to talk about different social services. This has led to the centre cooperating with organizations that are helping women, for example the Women Enterprise Fund, which give training to women in SHG (if requested by the SHG) on how to get loans with a very low interest rate and National Government Affirmative Funds which trains on what different projects the SHG can undertake and also provide funding that doesn't need to be paid back. Both say that women should be the ones in leadership in the SHG. Through her position as the centre manager, the participant stated that she learned how

to resolve different issues within the community and attended barazas (public meetings). She stated that she chose to sit down and talk about challenges instead of giving orders to the employees.

*"Communication is key to execute anything"*  
Research participant, from the Government (Kisii)

Where women empowerment is concerned, the participant stated that the community is enlightened in so many ways. Most people didn't value education before, but they do it now, and more women are supporting families through businesses. More people go to the health centres now as well. She stated that female circumcision is still an issue because there is still a lot of value in it and nurses and doctors are being used, but different local organizations, like Fulda Mosochi are fighting this for example by organizing holiday camps for girls. What she stated needed more urgent improvement was empowering the children, because there are more children on the streets, yet they have families. She was also more concerned about the lessons that girls are getting after circumcision instead of the act itself, because she stated that traditionally, female circumcision was a rite of passage, but now 8-year-old girls are circumcised and they feel grown up and even decide to go and get

married. She stated that education for the girls needs to be more than just how to be a woman, but also how girls can be empowered on what they need to do in the society. As a member of the community, the participant stated that she also learned the benefits of SHG, for example groups of women now own properties and are trained on how to get loans with low interest rates.

Where corruption is concerned, the participant stated that it is difficult to be corrupt at the Huduma Centre because the employees are monitored. As a woman with a position in government, the participant stated that the society looks at her in a microscope, so her challenge is to be consistent, avoid shifting goals and make sure issues are handled with integrity, transparency, impartiality and fairness.

In conclusion, the participant stated that the community can be improved even further by empowering children, and parents should not just think the solution is taking the children to boarding schools. There are boarding schools for up to 6-year-old children. She further stated that the government should come up with policies on how old a child should be to go to boarding school, and more importantly, there should be sensitization forums for parents. Women representatives should be able to organize this, and other empowerment projects, because they have money at their disposal.

### 3.2 Self Help Groups (SHG)

A member from one of the SHG (Muungano) that I interviewed stated that they had improved over the two years. She stated that they had bought a car, to transport the chairs and sound system, and made more money doing that. She further stated that the amount that was contributed was increased, but they were also planning to buy mattresses, for each household, and then duvets.

One of the SHG (Wela) was dissolved. The members came to an agreement and divided up the money. Five of the members joined Muungano SHG. They had not had any government representative visiting them.

### 3.3 Local NGOs

There was an increase on local NGOs and individuals who are working with the community in different areas.

Muungano is one of the organizations that partners with International Solidarity Foundation to implement different projects. One of the main themes for the organization is Gender Based Violence (GBV). According to the program coordinator, the organization holds monthly discussion forums where it brings together different stakeholders to discuss issues on GBV in the community

(<https://www.facebook.com/MuunganoGenderForum/>) . They tackle specific issues every month. They also have school projects, where they go to different schools to talk about different issues, like hygiene and female circumcision. The organization is also working with the local health and

administration facilities to create gender friendly clinics as well as gender friendly police areas.

The topic of the monthly meeting that was held in February was on female circumcision. According to the coordinator, the forum showed that female circumcision is a hot topic, and the biggest challenge is that it is done in secrecy. Furthermore, the coordinator stated that the practice is now medicalized and this has made it an economic source for some health practitioners. According to the forum, the coordinator stated that the agreement was that since some laws don't work, the attendants agreed to mitigate the practice by teaching young ones in schools of the effects of the practice, include men and health practitioners in community dialogues. I attended and observed one of the monthly forums on "Empowerment for change" (27 March 2019). In this forum, there were two panelists who opened the discussion by defining what women empowerment is, how women are left behind because they don't have access to various things in the community, e.g., property, loans, agriculture, etc. One of the panelists stated that in order to empower women, there should be platforms where women and girls can interact with professionals, e.g., lawyers or bankers, The panellist also stated that women representatives have money to give women in the rural communities, but it doesn't get to the women. The panelist said that everybody in the community should be empowered. There should also be forums where parents and children are

trained together for parents to respect their children.

The other panelist stated that gender inequality through roles in the household has reduced farming production. Women work more on the farms and then have to also work in the house and take care of their spouses and children. The panelist stated that if the men and women share the work, they will have more time on the farm and get more input. The panelist also stated that people in the community can get consultation from an agricultural officer, something that is made available by the government. Women should also be given access to funding and other development services like access to markets.

One of the challenges that was brought up was how women do the work and men get the benefit. An example that was given was a woman who had bought a cow after joining an SHG. When the cow got a calf, the husband took over, sold the milk and used the money. When the milk dried out, the role was then given back to the woman. Centre for Community, Mobilization and Empowerment (CECOME) is another local organization that deals with teenage pregnancy, GBV, reproductive health rights, and property ownership. The organization started as an SHG, and grew to become an NGO in 2012. The organization also works with youth that are out of school. According to the director of the organization, the organization has worked with the community and rape cases are now being reported. The director stated that the organization is working with male

groups where they discuss issues of sexual violence. The organization also started a project where women are given a small amount of money to work with and return it with a small interest, and they also work with the capabilities of the women, because some can pay the money back earlier than others. Challenges the organization faces is when leaders themselves are perpetrators, for example a member of the county assembly was a brewer of chang'aa, an illicit brew, and a member of parliament stated that female circumcision should not be stopped. Another challenge is theft in SHG where someone runs away with the funds. Lack of financial resources to expand, information and skills are other challenges SHG face. She gave an example of a group that was given a solar dryer for drying fruits and vegetables which they never used because they didn't get training to use it.

The participant stated that research should include what is really happening on the ground and monitoring systems should be improved.

I attended and observed two events that CECOME had organized. One was on Women's Day (8 March 2020) where they celebrated women in the society. The women themselves presented a skit on how difficult life with a spouse who drinks alcohol can be difficult and how women in the village help each other out. The other event was a women's meeting to talk about women development. Women from different SHG talked about the benefits they got from joining the different groups. One

group got a loan, bought land and planted trees. They then bought a bodaboda (motorcycle used for public transportation). Another group started by giving money every two weeks and saving up. They then got a loan and bought land where they planted vegetables. They used the proceeds to buy house goods. They also stated that CECOME helped the women in the groups to keep their children in schools, especially encouraging girls to go to high school instead of getting married after primary school.

Challenges faced by the women was the fact that they were not able to take over some of the economy. An example they gave was a couple having trees, and while the woman is not allowed to chop them down and sell them, the man can sell them without even letting the woman know. Other challenges were alcoholism, teenage pregnancies, rape and defilement (rape of children who are 17 years and below) and sexually transmitted diseases like HIV. The participants drew a tree to see how it represents the challenges. the root courses (like alcoholism) were considered to be roots, the tree trunk was considered the environment that nurtures these root courses (for example alcoholism and not going to school being considered as normal) and the fruits were the consequences to the community (like teenage pregnancy, poverty and diseases).

To solve these problems, the participants agreed that people in the community should work hard, there should be continuous empowerment of women and men through barazas,

community networks and outreach, strengthening of SHG, education and maximum use of available resources. Another event I observed was a leaders meeting. CECOME brought together different community leaders. They mainly talked about causes of alcoholism, teenage pregnancy, incest, and rape and defilement in the community. The participants stated that parents should be encouraged to take more responsibility of their children so that the children can be free to let them know if they have any needs. Families should also get group counselling.

### 3.4 Individuals

There were individuals who created their own consulting firms and cooperate with organizations to assist with implementation of different projects. Esnahts is one of those individuals. She had talked to girls in nineteen schools and we went together to the 20<sup>th</sup> school. She talks about different issues like hygiene, pregnancy and female circumcision. She stated that the girl children need to be tamed economically, socially and physically. She stated that she has worked with over 300 girls. She assisted a young girl who had been circumcised and developed fistula. She took the girl to a home in Nairobi where she is being educated. She also makes sure that at least two students are given the government funding (bursary) for education. She also works with SHG and helps them mobilize, gather problems they have and present them at Barazas. She said the main problem she has is

funding. A lot of the problems come from corruption and theft. She stated that she could not finish a project from the United Nations because she did not receive the full amount of the money that was allocated to the project. She also started the farming of butternut squash in Nyamira county, but someone stole the money.

Another participant, Edna, works with several organizations. She also founded a theatre group, which is now an NGO that uses theatre to tackle community problems. She is also working with a local organization on sex rights and LGBTI issues, something she said is still a very sensitive topic in the society.

She said the age of girls being circumcised has decreased to 6–9 years. She stated that research organizations should follow up on research and triangulation should be used, on top of sensitization. She also stated that what worries women most is taking good care of their family, and that is why they join SHG. Based on that, local organizations are coming up with new strategies on livelihood projects. One example is the Food Hub, where women grow vegetables and are assisted with the distribution.

She stated that there should be more women in leadership positions from local levels.

## 4 Reflection

### 4.1 Progress in the Community



The findings of the follow-up show that the people in Kisii community work on a daily basis to empower women and men socially, economically and politically. Empowerment is multidimensional in nature and contextual. What I learned from the challenges is that empowerment is a process. I also learned that people in the community face different constraints. Even with the constraints, the community members work together to bring about social change and transformation. Their strategies were collaborative and community based.

#### 4.2 A different outlook on human rights.

When I first went to Kisii, my aim was to learn about the community's thoughts on female circumcision, a practice that is widely considered a human rights violation. What I have learned is summarized by M. Anne Brown in her book, *Human Rights and the Borders of Suffering: The Promotion of Human Rights in International Politics* (Manchester University Press, 2002). *Approaching human rights as tools with significant but ambivalent potential places them as part of a broader conversation, across as well as within cultures and communities, on how to live well together. The significance of this is threefold. First, if we are considering whether and how we might work with a particular area of abuse, it helps to clarify which matters we are trying to pursue and which problems we are trying to make progress with. There are often many*

*agendas at work in human rights promotion, certainly in the international arena. It is important to recognise which of any given set of circumstances is being accorded priority. Second, this more general approach to human rights*

*allows discussion to step aside from the assertion of or the search for certainty that drives much work on human rights. And, third, a reduced preoccupation with certainty can encourage greater openness to the idea, and the task, of listening. For in the effort to shift those social and political practices in which systemic injury is often embedded it can be more valuable to be able to listen than to imagine we always have the answer. Such an approach enables the work of grappling with the concrete reality of abuse and suffering to step back from the assertions of ideological rectitude which often characterise rights talk. (p. 7).* I learned that female circumcision is a complex social behaviour, and it cannot be addressed in isolation. That is why I went back for the women empowerment challenge. What I observed is that the Kisii people use holistic, nuanced responses to address the underlying issues that sustain gender inequality. I also learned that while women wanted economic empowerment and formed SHG, the social benefits were more than the economic betterment, and the women experienced a greater betterment in the non-economic spheres of their lives.

#### 4.1 Involving Communities in the research agenda

While gender issues remain complex, the fight for gender equality is multifaceted and must be adaptable to diverse situations. However, mainstream literature disregards the work of the affected rural communities. Rural women are agents against gender inequality and catalysts of sustainable development. There is a need to understand diversity between communities and the different information and support needs they may have. Learning from these communities' experiences is informative and enriching.

## 5 Conclusion

Exploring the role of the Kisii community in addressing everyday issues including female circumcision and women empowerment allowed me to learn how crucial community voices remain marginalized and could be better heard and supported. Results demonstrated that it is possible to work alongside potentially affected rural communities, benefit from community perspectives and expertise, develop meaningful partnerships and support community-led interventions. The people in Kisii are taking small, but candid steps in empowering both women and men in the community. Their strategies have created an opportunity to redefine development

and provide for tangible implementation mechanisms for economic, social and cultural rights, globally. I realized that it is mostly those who are close to affected communities that are consistent in its uplifting for all needs. It is therefore important to adopt sustainable methods of supporting women and girls, rooted in community context, creativity, and sustainability. Research on gender equality in communities like Kisii “should include the voices of affected women and girls, as those best able to describe their lived experiences and needs and to contribute to the additionally sensitive topics of prosecution and redress” (Connelly, et. al. 2017).

Through these challenges, I learned and benefited from community perspectives and expertise, and support community-led interventions. I also learned that research should be co-produced with the communities that it seeks to understand and serve.

In light of this, a new perspective on gender inequality should be adopted – one that is based on the perceptions and felt experiences of the women concerned, and notably their capacity for resilience, and that ceases to rely exclusively on forms of mainstream discourse that too systematically ignore rural women's own points of view on their situation. As we continue to look at women's rights and women empowerment, we should

remember that “in international life ... confronting questions of human rights can underscore the reality of difference (in forms of understanding and practice) –... Particularly if the intention is to have an effect on a certain practice in a certain place rather than simply to denounce it, response to abuse often involves concrete engagement with other forms of social practice in other political and legal jurisdictions. Thus, in an inversion

of the domestic analogy, working with human rights in international life brings to the foreground the need to take difference seriously – something that is arguably essential to the ways we understand human rights more generally” (Brown, 2002, p. 11). We should therefore create opportunities from which to hear and add previously unheard voices to the debate around gender equality.

## 6 References

Brown, M. A., "Human Rights and the Borders of Suffering: The Promotion of Human Rights in International Politics", Manchester University Press, 2002.

Connelly E., Murray, N., Baillot, H. and Howard, N., "Missing from the debate? A qualitative study exploring the role of communities within interventions to address female genital mutilation in Europe". *BMJ Open* 2018;8:e021430. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2017-021430.

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