

FEATURE / WOMEN'S RIGHTS

'It ruined my life': School closures in Kenya lead to rise in FGM

With classrooms closed to curb coronavirus, girls are more at risk of FGM, teenage pregnancy and child marriage.

by **Andrea Dijkstra**

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Sarah says she was raped by a boy who offered her food in exchange for sex after her school was closed and her parents could not afford to feed her [Jeroen Van Loon/Al Jazeera]

Maikona, Marsabit County, Kenya - Thirteen-year-old Gumato* can finally walk again without feeling pain.

The hot desert wind blows through her curly hair as she strolls between the portable, dome-shaped huts, made of acacia roots and covered with grass mats, colourful textiles and camel hides. In the near distance, a caravan of more than 50 camels passes by.

Gumato is from the Gabra, a nomadic camel-herding tribe that lives in a semi-arid region in northeast Kenya. Until mid-March, she had put on her pink blouse and dark blue skirt every day to go to school. Nowadays, she only wears her long traditional dress.

"I loved school and dreamed of becoming a science teacher," says Gumato.

Her dream seems to be further away than ever.

Three days after Kenya recorded its first COVID-19 infection in mid-March, the government decided to close all schools. A few weeks later, Gumato's parents decided to have their daughter undergo female genital mutilation (FGM), which is prohibited in Kenya but still practised by some tribes.

Since the enactment of laws against FGM in 2011, its prevalence in Kenya has dropped from 28 percent of women aged between 15 and 49 in 2008 to 21 percent in 2014.

But due to its great ethnic and cultural diversity, there are significant regional variations, with prevalence ranging from 0.8 percent in the west to more than 97 percent in the northeast (where the Gabra and Borana - which are Somali-Oromo ethnic groups - live) and 78 percent in the south, which is home to the Maasai people.

"We were happy that schools closed, because this gave us a better opportunity to circumcise our girls," Gumato's mother explains as she sits on the earth floor beside a small fire inside one of the huts. "School holidays normally are a bit short for the girls to fully recover."

She wanted her daughter to undergo FGM, she says, because Gabra men only marry circumcised girls.

In early April, Gumato and two other girls were taken to a house in a village behind the hills without any roads or official administration. They were told to wash themselves with cold water - believed to be an anaesthetic within their community. Then, one by

one, they were cut.

Two women held them from behind, two women held their legs, one woman covered their eyes and another did the cutting.

"It was extremely painful but I kept quiet, as the women assured me that if I would scream or cry, I would be seen as a coward and nobody would be willing to marry [me]," Gumato recalls.

After the procedure, the wound was not treated or cleaned. "We stayed with all the blood while our thighs were tied together for four days," says Gumato. "We had to pee in a bucket and were forbidden to drink any water."

After seven days, the girls were returned to their homes.

But Gumato's wound became infected. She was scared it would never heal, she says. "For two months, I felt so much pain while I could hardly walk." It still hurts to urinate, she explains.

Gumato worries about her future now.

"The predominant belief in my community is that as soon as a girl is cut, she's ready for marriage," she explains. "My family is poor, we have only five sheep and seven goats and not a single camel."

Her father did construction work in their village before the coronavirus crisis, but now construction has come to a standstill and the family struggles to find enough food.

"I'm afraid that I'm soon married off because there is no school so we just sit idle at home while when I'm married off, my father will receive three camels as dowry," she says.

'Schools were a safety net'

"Before this corona crisis, schools were functioning as a strong safety net," explains Talaso Gababa, a facilitator with the medical organisation, Amref Health Africa.

"Teachers educated children about the risks of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

When a girl would be cut while school was open, schoolmates would communicate this to the teacher who would report the parents to the police. This prevented many parents from having their daughters circumcised."

Gababa is 26 years old and, like Gumato, is from the Gabra tribe. She has advocated shortening school holidays, as those are the riskiest times for girls.

"Imagine if we would have known what kind of catastrophe we were heading [towards] with this on-going school closure," she reflects.

FGM is not the only danger facing girls. With schools closed, they are also more susceptible to forced early marriage and sexual assault.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) recently forecast that an additional 13 million girls globally could be forced into child marriage, and two million more than would otherwise have been expected could undergo FGM between now and 2030 as COVID-19 disrupts global efforts to end both practices.

Even before the pandemic hit, 33,000 girls around the world were being forced into early marriage every day, frequently to much older men, according to the UNFPA report, and an estimated 4.1 million were already at risk of FGM this year.

Public awareness programmes against FGM have been disrupted in many countries, while rescue centres which help girls fleeing forced marriages and FGM have been closed partially or even totally due to the pandemic.

"I had to send home 24 out of our 52 girls," says Priscilla Nangurai, the founder and director of the Grace Nanana Rescue Center in Kajiado.

As the centre also functions as a school, it had to comply with the nationwide school closure due to the coronavirus pandemic. "After negotiating with the government, I was allowed to let 28 girls stay as they are on very high risk to be forced into child marriage after undergoing FGM," Nangurai explains.

"With the parents of the 24 other girls, we had already started a reconciliation programme, where the parents signed a contract promising not to have their girls circumcised or married off. Unfortunately, after sending them home, two girls have

been threatened with circumcision already," she says.

She calls this a "very scary" situation and is currently in contact with the local chiefs who promised to stop the parents having their daughters undergo FGM.

Nangurai says her centre is able to track the girls who have returned home via local community leaders and because they know their addresses. "But as this isn't the reality at most Kenyan schools, I wonder how many girls nationwide will ever return to school when they reopen," she says.

'September is the wedding season'

"Parents and elders [in the Gabra region] nowadays are feeling the freedom to do whatever they want with young girls, as teachers have left because of school closures. The staff of many international organisations have been pulled out because of the risk of infection from COVID-19," Gababa explains.

"Parents tell their children that corona is here to stay and that schools will never open again. Some girls have already been promised to a certain boy before they were even born and many parents see it as a waste of time to let these girls sit idle at home."

"On top of that, families are facing huge economic hardship as transport of animals towards the capital is forbidden as part of the measures to fight the pandemic while the community's main source of income is the sale of livestock. So parents start to marry off their daughters, as they will receive a dowry."

In several regions, including Samburu, Marsabit, Migori and Kajiado County, campaigners have already rescued dozens of girls from forced marriage since the school closure, according to local media.

But Gababa predicts the number of child marriages will rise in the coming month "as September is the wedding season".

As in Kenya - where all primary and secondary schools are closed until further notice - schools are still closed across most of the African continent. The World Health Organization (WHO) says of 39 countries surveyed in sub-Saharan Africa, only six have fully reopened schools.

According to the UNESCO Global Monitoring of School Closure, schools in 11 countries in Africa have been closed since March and remain fully closed with more than 121 million pupils out of school. A lack of access to radio, television, computers and the internet have left many students unable to engage in remote learning.

A recent report by Plan International and the African Child Policy Forum concludes: "The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and added yet another layer of vulnerability to an already dire web of vulnerabilities of girls in the African continent."

While there is no accurate data on the growing number of girls facing FGM, sexual assault or forced marriage, calls to helplines have surged in many countries. A national helpline supported by the department of gender affairs in Kenya reported a more than 10-fold increase in calls - with 1,108 calls in the month of June compared with just 86 in February. Many were reports of child rape.

Raped and pregnant at 15

"This pandemic has ruined my life," says 15-year-old Sarah*. The teenager, who lives with her parents and two younger sisters in Nairobi's Kibera slum, was in her first year of high school when schools closed.

"Life became tough," she says.

Both of her parents are casual workers; her mum washed clothes for other families and her father was a mason, building houses. Due to the pandemic, there is no work and food has become scarce. "While before the pandemic I had lunch at school and another meal at home, I now often don't eat for the whole day," Sarah explains.

She started to spend time with girls who claimed to know how to get money for food, clothes and sanitary pads, which she used to receive for free at school. "When I told them that I was hungry, they left me with a boy who said he would help me. The boy offered to buy me chips but wanted sex in return."

When she tried to escape, Sarah says the 16-year-old pushed her inside a room and raped her. "I tried to get the boy off me and shouted for help but nobody heard me."

She later realised she was pregnant. "I felt so ashamed and hoped that God would just take me," she says.

As soon as her mother found out about the pregnancy, she tracked down the boy. She says he confessed to the rape but, when she tried to report him to the police, he fled Nairobi with his family.

Sarah's father was furious about the pregnancy. "He came home with a machete several times and threatened to slaughter me and my mum," Sarah explains.

For several weeks, she slept in a nearby market stall with her mum and two sisters. "My dad blames me for wasting all his hard-earned cash that he spent on my school fees while my mum, according to him, has failed as a wife and mother."

Sarah is convinced none of this would have happened if schools were not closed. "I still would have been in school, I wouldn't have been strolling around in the streets and I would not even have been thinking about asking a boy for food as I would have got lunch in school and I wouldn't have been hungry."

Reopening Schools

Recently, a group of more than 275 former world leaders, economists and educationalists expressed their concerns about the risk of creating a "COVID generation" - children who have lost out on schooling and whose opportunities are permanently damaged as a result of the pandemic. They are especially concerned about the fate of an estimated 30 million children globally who, according to UNESCO, may never return to school.

"For these, the world's least advantaged children, education is often the only escape from poverty - a route that is in danger of closing. Many of these children are adolescent girls for whom being in school is the best defence against forced marriage and the best hope for a life of expanded opportunity," they wrote.

The WHO and UNICEF recently urged African governments to promote the safe reopening of schools. "Schools have paved the way to success for many Africans. They also provide a safe haven for many children in challenging circumstances to develop

and thrive," said Dr Matshidiso Moeti, the WHO's Regional Director for Africa. "We must not be blind-sided by our efforts to contain COVID-19 and end up with a lost generation."

The Kenyan government faces a difficult dilemma, however. While handwashing is necessary to curb the spread of the virus, most public schools in the country either lack running water or have no water at all. Maintaining a 1.5-metre (five-foot) physical distance is also challenging, as many schools are overcrowded, often with more than 60 students in one classroom and pupils sharing books and desks. According to a WHO and UNICEF report, a quarter of schools in sub-Saharan Africa have basic hygiene services, while 44 percent have basic drinking water and 47 percent have basic sanitation services.

Reopening boarding schools will be even more problematic, as students often sleep with eight or more in a cramped dorm.

"Nobody knows when we will be able to go back to school," says 17-year-old Halima Alinoor, who slept alongside 20 other pupils in a dorm at the Said Fatimah girl's boarding school in Garba Tulla, Isiolo County, which closed on March 16.

The teenager is from the Borana tribe where FGM and child marriage are still common.

Halima says she wants to become a journalist "to become the voice of people who cannot speak up".

"This school closure is very discouraging," she says while looking at some of the school books she brought home. "Recently I was studying under a tree when a man walked along and told me that I should stop wasting my time. 'Just burn those books. There is no returning to school', he told me."

According to Halima, the school closure could take many communities, including hers, decades back in time. "Most people in my community still believe that girls are not supposed to go to school but are destined to stay at home to take care of the children. With this school closure, this idea is again getting stronger."

*** *Some names have been changed to protect identities.***