

Chapter 7

Research Note on a Grassroots Movement to Eradicate Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting Among Kenyan Maasai



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7.1 FGM/C Among Maasai Girls

The Maasai are pastoralists who live in northern Tanzania and western Kenya. In Maasai culture, boys and girls undergo “circumcision,” called *emurata* in Maa, as rites of passage into adulthood when they reach about 15 years of age. In Kenya, *emurata* of girls, which institutions such as the United Nations call female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), is strictly forbidden by the 2011 “Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act.” However, FGM/C is still prevalent among the Maasai despite many eradication programs.

The author studied the eradication of FGM/C between January 2013 and September 2019 in a Maasai community in western Kenya (Hayashi 2021). This paper focuses on the activities of an organization called “Oсотua” (a pseudonym for privacy) that was established by a Maasai woman in the 1990s to eradicate FGM/C.

7.2 CBO Activities on Anti-FGM/C

Oсотua is a community-based organization (CBO) that has five major aims: to protect girls, provide reconciliation programs, organize alternative rites of passage (ARPs), conduct enlightenment activities, and generate income for retired circumcisers.

Oсотua’s first project was the establishment of a rescue center for girls who have escaped from traditional harmful practices, such as FGM/C and early marriage. Oсотua has a broad network and works with cooperating chiefs, pastors, and teachers in the community. These individuals keep in touch with the Oсотua staff and report

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FGM/C or early marriage by mobile phone. The rescue center provides accommodation, food, clothing, and education for these girls and provides them with support until they complete their secondary school education.

As a second initiative, Osotua organizes reconciliation programs for the parents, so that they do not enforce FGM/C or early marriage of girls. The CBO suggests that the parents allow education for the girls until the end of secondary school. Once they have completed this education, Osotua holds reconciliation meetings to reunite the girls with their parents.

As a third initiative, the CBO has organized an ARP program. As recommended by the Anti-FGM Board of the Kenyan Government, the ARP provides training for girls enabling them to enter womanhood without cutting their genital parts, and is considered an effective program for eradicating FGM/C. The Osotua ARP consists of a 4-day empowerment program for girls. In the program, Osotua staff provide information about the reproductive health and rights (RH/R) of girls. On the fifth day, they have a graduation ceremony and invite the girls' parents, relatives, and local people to congratulate the girls on their coming-of-age experience without FGM/C (Hayashi 2017).

Osotua's fourth program is the organization of enlightenment activities to eradicate repressive customs such as FGM/C and early marriage. Osotua gives seminars on the adverse effects of FGM/C and information on RH/R.

The fifth element involves organizing income-generating activities for retired circumcisers who have lost their jobs due to the anti-FGM Act. One such example would be preparing 100 acres of land for retired circumcisers to produce cash crops.

7.3 Reactions of the Girl, Her Mother, and a Neighbor

Osotua has been working enthusiastically to eradicate FGM/C, and this section covers local people's reactions. In 2016 the author interviewed a girl who attended the ARP in 2015, as well as her mother and a neighboring woman who has a little girl. All of the interviewees' names are pseudonyms for privacy.

- **The girl's case**

Ann was 12 years old, the fourth of six children and the second daughter. She was in fifth grade at primary school. Her older sister dropped out of primary school and got married after undergoing FGM/C, but Ann wanted to continue her secondary education. She joined the ARP in 2015 on her mother's advice. She enjoyed the program and made some female friends there. She liked the venue, a private school built with support from an international NGO. The school had high-quality facilities and accommodation, attractive to Maasai girls because remote villages lack teachers and classroom equipment. She wrote the workshop lessons in her notebook and brought them back to her village. Some friends from the same village also participated in the program. She talked about FGM/C with her friends in the village and they also opposed it. She insisted to her parents that she would

not undergo FGM/C. She hoped to finish primary school and go on to secondary school. She said that she wanted to become a professor.

- **The mother's case**

Ann's mother June was 37 years old. She had four sons and two daughters, and ran a small business that sold milk. She had never gone to school but was a pious Christian who prayed every day. June said that she did not want her daughters to undergo the cruel type of FGM/C (type II) or early marriage. She also mentioned past financial hardship and appreciated Osotua for providing fees for girls' education and for empowering Maasai women.

In 2015 June had encouraged her daughter Ann to join the Osotua ARP program and she, June, participated in the graduation ceremony. Ann had enjoyed the program and said she wanted to be admitted to the school. After the ceremony, Ann insisted that she would not accept FGM/C. She was given the Osotua hotline number so that she could call the CBO whenever she felt she was being forced into FGM/C. June noted that the hotline had an impact on her daughter and on herself.

Did you know the girls were given the Osotua hotline number? My daughter told me that she remembered the number perfectly. When something happens that she does not like, she pretends to call to Osotua in front of me. All I can do is just to watch her calling in surprise. Therefore, we, as parents, fear our daughters, because we cannot do anything wrong.

June also mentioned other Maasai women's opinions about Osotua. She said that Maasai women, who prefer traditional culture, do not stop FGM/C because "they keep girls in an inferior position." June also said that some local Maasai women did not think well of Osotua, saying that the CBO is too "progressive." According to June, many village women were not convinced because the Osotua representative who was against FGM/C was herself circumcised. When the ARP was announced in 2015, one of June's neighbors did not support her daughter's participation. June stated that "the Osotua philosophy had not entered her body."

- **The little girl's mother's case**

Nancy is 27 years old and was married in 2009. She is June's neighbor and has a 4-year-old daughter. She raises vegetables as a cash crop. Although Nancy had never gone to school, she was eager for her daughter to be educated and sent her to the preschool in town. Nancy went to church every Sunday where she received information about the ARP. She was interested in the CBO program that teaches girls not to undergo FGM/C, and she attended the ceremony. She knew that some of her neighbors' daughters insisted that they would refuse FGM/C. She said that the girls' parents would accept the daughters' will, because their daughters knew the Osotua hotline number. These days, parents fear that their daughters will call the hotline. I asked Nancy about her daughter's FGM/C, and she answered that she would respect her daughter's wishes.

I would not have undergone *emurata* (circumcision), if I knew that *emurata* had no benefit. I decided to undergo *emurata* because all my older sisters and peers had. My

daughter might also say that she wants to undergo *emurata* like her friends. In this case, I would support her. I would prepare her *emurata* in secret at midnight.

This study has several findings. First, the girl who wished to undergo secondary education was attracted by the high-quality schools supported by the CBO, because their remote village has few teachers or facilities. ARP events give girls the opportunity to have a better education. Another interesting finding is how the hotline plays an important role as a warning to parents not to force their daughters to undergo FGM/C. Finally, the network for protecting girls is important and the hotline and network of cooperators in Osotua provide alternative options for Maasai girls.

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