

# Managing the tensions between a rights-based approach and traditional practices.

*A case study of a project to eliminate Female Genital Cutting  
(FGC) in the Maasai community in Kenya.*

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## **Executive summary**

Organisations are often trapped in the ongoing debate between Human Rights principles and local traditional practices. In the particular case of Female Genital Cutting (FGC), most legislation and eradication programmes don't seem to bring change and there is an obvious need to assess the necessity for projects fighting FGC and the likely success of such interventions.

This paper is the result of a research conducted in 2007 on a project run by Girl Child Network (GCN) in Kenya to tackle FGC in the traditional Maasai community. The most important findings are connected to the different ways that NGOs and target populations perceived the intervention and its impact: the most important being that a gap between the needs as expressed by the community and the needs tackled by the NGO had been highlighted, questioning the real priority to tackle directly FGC in some communities. Finally, a set of opposing forces of change and permanence in relation to FGC was defined in order to analyse it and picture future initiatives.

## 1- Introduction

Is it possible to apply Human Rights universally? The debate between Human Rights principles and local cultural norms is especially relevant when it comes to traditional practices like Female Genital Cutting (FGC): if women have the right to be protected, they also need to be recognised and accepted within their own community. Should conflicting beliefs be challenged or tolerated?

In a short span of decades, FGC has become the target of unified international action (Boyle, 2002). International, regional and national legislation has been implemented but is often challenged or not publicly known (WHO, 1998). In Kenya, despite late law enforcement, the prevalence is over 50% (Ibid). Programmes fighting FGC have been implemented by a variety of NGOs, but their impact is not measurable (WHO, 1999).

This paper summarise a longer research conducted by the author in Kenya with The Girl Child Network (GCN). Although GCN –as a network- doesn't usually implement a project directly, they decided to develop a particular project to tackle FGC; a priority for them.

The project is implemented in Ensonorua, home of the Maasai community in Kenya, where the prevalence of FGC is still 100% despite previous interventions. GCN's intervention is based on a strong learning process from their partners' experiences and a determination to have the community choose to abandon the practice itself. The thrust of the research was first to assess how GCN's project was designed and implemented in its particular context. Only then the impact of this project, as perceived by the NGO's staff and the target population, was considered.

Through the particular case study of the GCN's project, this paper will therefore, also contribute to the on-going research on the need and the likelihood of success of anti-FGC interventions.

## **1- Looking at FGC within the dilemma between human rights principles and local norms**

One of the typical ethical dilemmas encountered by INGOs during the course of their work is the conflict between Human Rights principles and local cultural norms (Bell, 2004). Human Rights are often not respected because of local cultures and traditions (Messer, 1993). The fact that Human Rights must be contextualised, interpreted and negotiated is critical. Therefore, is it possible to apply Human Rights universally? Should NGOs develop a Human Rights approach when facing conflicting local cultural norms?

The debate between Human Rights principles and local norms is crucial when dealing with local practices such as Female Genital Cutting (FGC). The motives for the practice are diverse (PLAN, 2005) and nowadays, the FGC culture is even sometimes a symbol of cultural integrity, of opposition to modernity (Ibid). Even if women are aware of the loss, the respect and the social acceptance that arises from the ritual are more valuable than the loss that women suffer (Walley, 1997).

### **Can we fight FGC?**

All African countries are supposed to pass legislation on FGC, but there is a wide discrepancy between the laws and reality (PLAN, 2005). Law enforcement has sometimes given positive results in fighting FGC but has also pushed the practice underground (Ibid). A lot of field action faces the same kind of contradiction: considered first as a success, many criticisms are raised afterwards. It is the case with medicalisation for example (Messer, 1993) or in the Maasai community; FGC practitioners now use clean knives for each girl (IRIN, 2005). What could be considered as an improvement concerning FGC? Can NGOs bring a change?

#### *The relevance of developing an FGC eradication project*

If FGC is a tradition, why not give it up like numerous others? This practice is often associated with identity and is also a source of pride. Previously stated, the phenomena of resistance arose from this fight for cultural integrity (PLAN, 2005). A lot of other factors are also at play, explains Boyle (2002): education, mass media, and working outside the home could affect women's attitudes and behaviour with regards to FGC. Conformity is one of the reasons for the resistance phenomena. Practices are often changing to resist anti-FGC interventions: in the Maasai community for instance, girls are circumcised younger to avoid having them make the informed choice to not undergo the practice (IRIN, 2005).

#### *Is FGC a priority?*

The idea defended by Sen (1999) is that freedom is the principal end for development and not the other way around. If by encouraging development you aim for freedom, would you aim for development by enhancing freedom first? Will you aim for development if you fight

for the freedom of the women from FGC? If factors of development such as education and access to media have a positive influence on FGC, wouldn't it be better to prioritise a general development to enhance the general welfare of people before tackling FGC directly?

NGOs are facing ethical dilemmas that constrain their efforts 'to do good in foreign lands' (Bell, 2004:303). NGOs' representatives experience conflicts where they must decide between promoting their version of Human Rights norms and respecting local norms that may differ from theirs. The efficiency of development projects is hardly measurable and measured. Often, only a really small part of the targeted population is reached. Finally, resistance phenomena make projects counterproductive. All these facts bring into question the necessity of interventions against FGC and their likelihood to succeed.

There is a real need for further research on the reasons for the practice and the causes of behavioural change from certain individuals and groups (WHO, 1998). In some places, new variables like education or women empowerment are encouraging a decrease in the prevalence of FGC (Boyle, 2002). It is therefore important to consider what could be the relative impacts of education-empowerment interventions and FGC abandonment projects?

### **Build an efficient project**

To build an efficient project, there must first be an emphasis on contextualisation and community ownership (PLAN, 2005). Then, the main problem to address is the 'mental map': all the myths, beliefs, values, and codes of conduct 'that cause the whole community to view women's external genitalia as potentially dangerous, that if not eliminated, has the power to negatively affect women who have not undergone FGM, their families, and their communities (WHO,1999). Looking at the bigger picture is crucial in addressing the problem, and all the connections among the aspects of the practice must be researched.

All community members have a role in the perpetuation of the practice (IRIN, 2005) and so, should all be involved in the project. WHO recommends developing partnerships between GOs, IGOs and NGOs in policy making, project design, implementation and advocacy. FGC prevention activities must be institutionalised and mainstreamed, staff must be properly trained, programmes must be tailored for specific audiences and based on sound formative research, populations must be positively involved at all levels in the programme from design to evaluation including advocacy, as should urban elites. Anthropologists can provide good insights and methodology in order to identify the social forces and cultural perspectives that underline the continuity of the practice (Gruenbaum, 1996).

### **The particular case of GCN project**

This paper is the result of a research conducted on a project run by Girl Child Network (GCN) in Kenya to tackle FGC in the traditional Maasai community. The aim of the research was to explore the changes brought by a project tackling FGC. In 2007, GCN was running an FGC abandonment project in the Kajiado district, home of the Maasai community in western

Kenya. The study was conducted in the Ensonorua sub location where the project is actively implemented, and in Nairobi at GCN and its partners' headquarters.

The case study was the main research strategy as it allowed an in-depth exploration and the possibility to draw conclusions permitting generalisations (Saunders and al, 2003). The socio-cultural mechanisms observed in the Maasai community where GCN implemented its project, helped to draw conclusions and recommendations that could be generalised to other communities and programmes. An inductive approach was preferred as it allowed more flexibility and offered the possibility to explore how people understand and modify their own environment. The exploratory aspect of the research helped also to determine new insights. During later focus groups, an active-orientated research was conducted in order to be able to draw recommendations with the beneficiaries on how the FGC-prevention project(s) should be developed in the future.

The study population was the community of Ensonorua where the project had been implemented.

However, the sampling frame includes GCN, the host organisation, and its partners' staff members. The research was based on qualitative data. The major issue investigated was the practice of FGC and the factors of change or permanence towards it with regards to the NGO's intervention. A snowball sampling was then conducted to allow a deeper exploration of the community and a wider diversity of cases. Nobody was excluded from the interviews recruitment, as an extensive view of the different situations and positions towards the practice were sought.

The access to the relevant information was facilitated by GCN who gave unrestricted access to their resources centre and data-bases. Participant observation was conducted at the head office (staff meetings) and in the field (health workshops, education workshops, community gatherings).

As communities are not homogenous groups (Stepping Stones, 2007), focus-group discussions were conducted in small peer groups. The group discussions were based on the Stepping Stones approach (Ibid), as a way to collect information from the people themselves on the way they think about their acts and the way they think their community could evolve for the better. People were separated by gender and age: within the safety of their own peer groups, they felt free to express themselves which would have been difficult in mixed groups (Ibid). With children, creative workshops were conducted to allow them to express their knowledge and feeling about the practice without creating discomfort (girls and boys aged 10 to 15 years old). Further individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members and within the community (with life-stories). The research process was facilitated by a female assistant fluent in English, Kiswahili and Kimaasai. As a teacher in the village, she knew the Maasai community, its culture and the people themselves. Independent, being not from the village herself, she was a great source of information. However, during focus-group discussions with men, a male interpreter was used in order to relieve the embarrassment men would/may have experienced when talking about sensitive issues in front of a woman from the same community.

The active research analysis was done partly in the field with the community during the focus-group discussions, based on the Stepping Stones approach model (2007). The participants were indeed invited to analyse their own situation. With the upcoming generation, a creative workshop was organised to analyse the situation and draw recommendations for themselves, addressing both their community and the NGOs.

Two tools are proposed to develop the project further: The mental map of FGC (See annex 2) can indeed be used as a tool to identify the attitudes of the community. It can also be a point of departure to draw a contextualized map of the reasons for FGC in order to assess whether all the reasons are addressed. The Lewin's force field analysis matrix can also be a tool to map the forces of change and permanence toward the practice. Mapping the forces and their hierarchy in a matrix (See annex 3) could help to understand the particular equilibrium of the attitudes towards FGC and identify ways forward in the development of a project to tackle FGC.

Today, the researcher is involved in the development of a project to fight FGC in south Ethiopia and will use recommendations formulated here (see annex 4).

In this paper, the term FGC is used while GCN chose to use the term FGM –Female Genital Mutilation. In Kimaasai, the term employed is 'Muratara' which means 'graduation to adulthood but is always translated by circumcision.



## **2- It is changing. The complexity of challenging FGC**

*This part is developed from field research findings: observation, focus-groups and interviews conducted in 2007 in Ensonorua with the community, with GCN and its partners.*

### **Coherence of GCN FGC project with regards to its particular context**

In Kenya, the Children Act (2001) and the Sexual Offences Act (2006) condemn harmful traditional practices including FGC (Ogodo, 2005). If the first outlaws the practice on children under 18, the second only condemns the people who engage in or carry out 'forced female circumcision' (Sexual Offences bill, 2006: 35); FGC is not against the law. Following the Sexual Offences Act, a project called the National focal Point on FGM was supposed to be developed and hosted by the Ministry of Gender: this project is meant to bring together organisations and government towards FGC eradication, but doesn't seem to be active (GCN programme manager, 2007, Nairobi). There is also a clear lack of politic goodwill to enforce the laws on FGC. Moreover, according to the Kenyan Constitution, customs and traditions can override laws: culture is often stronger (Africa Legalbrief, 2004). There is a real contradiction between the constitution and the law.

In Ensonorua, several projects had already been conducted in the area to tackle FGC without making obvious changes. The Maasai society is a deeply patriarchal one: men are the last-decision makers. Men and women undergo circumcision as a rite of passage into adulthood; it is also a compulsory condition for marriageability. Circumcision is called 'Muratarā' (graduation to adulthood) for both sexes: girls undergo FGC between the ages of 9 and 13 (type II of FGC). The prevalence of the practice is 100%. Indeed, the community enforcement mechanisms are very strong and tend to stop girls from refusing to undergo FGC. As reported, 'The trauma of rejection is more than the pain of one minute.' (GCN, 2004:13)

The major consequences of FGC identified, are early marriage and dropping out of school. In Ensonorua, the ratio of girls in school drops drastically in the higher grade. There are only 2 girls aged 14 and 15 in the school which has around 200 students; in the higher primary school grade (the equivalent to UK secondary school); only one girl is still studying.

The destiny of Maasai schoolgirls is known from the public opinion and it is not uncommon to read articles in newspapers that illustrate this state of affairs. It is in this particularly complex context that GCN decided to develop its 'show case' by actively enhancing its activities against FGC.

Through GCN learning process, three particular tools were identified as appropriate to the Ensonorua situation. The Alternative Rite of Passage initiative (ARP) is seen as a long-term aim for replacing the actual ritual (STC Canada, 1998). The Positive Deviance model is a way to popularise people who are actually against FGC (Positive Deviance, 2007). And finally, the Women Empowerment Community Consensus framework (WECC) aims to empower women and make them take part in the decision-making process (Rainbo, 2004). Above all, education was highlighted as the strategy to follow through enhancing girls' participation in school and therefore delaying the ritual (GCN, 2004). GCN wants to avoid the common past

mistake of directly applying these tools to the community: the community must decide on the path to follow for itself and the next generation should be the participants of change (GCN director, Nairobi, 2007). GCN wants to fight FGC by enhancing girls' participation in school and delaying the ritual, while at the same time, women would be empowered economically and in knowing their rights. The long-term vision is an Alternative ritual of Passage chosen by the community itself. The approach should endeavour to address everybody in the community, to aim for an abandonment of the practice. In the meantime, the girls refusing to undergo the practice are identified so they can be supported and encouraged.

### *GCN perception of the project*

GCN understands and respects the attachment of the community to its culture. What the NGO wants is for the community to evolve towards an understanding of Human rights which will make them reflect on their local norms. (GCN FGM project officer, Nairobi, 2007) If GCN is confident that the upcoming generation will choose to abandon FGC, the process must start now. However, staff members are cautious of the community: in 75% of the interviews with the organisations' staff members, community members are defined as hard to figure out, afraid of the law and secretive in the continuation of their traditions.

50% of GCN staff members interviewed agreed with the CBO members that medicalisation is a change for the better; somebody who chooses to bring her daughter to the hospital to undergo FGC is somebody who is already thinking and therefore able to talk to. Then for the remaining 50%, medicalisation is a factor of permanence of FGC. Whatever the position, all staff recognises, it is going to take time before they see the results of their intervention.

Reasons for change are differently assessed according to gender and age groups within the community. Men don't know anything about FGC harmful effects. Their priority is economic empowerment, and welfare improvement. Women's priority is the general welfare of their families and community. Then, they are the custodian of the practice: having an unmarried girl is a source of shame and a burden. They would be happy to see an improvement in their status and be able to have access to education, to work and to have their own property.

Girls' priority is education. They want to have a job later and to have a better status than their mother in the community. Boys know a lot about FGC and are aware of the harmful consequences of it. As 'consumers' and decision-makers, they would refuse to circumcise their daughters or even to marry circumcised women.

GCN staff members define their efficiency by all the small changes in people's attitudes: more people become educated, more girls are going to school, women's self-help groups are growing and prospering, even more people are open to talk about FGC. All these facts are milestones on the way towards abandonment of FGC.

### *What impact on the community?*

In general, community members have difficulties pointing out what are the different activities conducted by GCN. On the subject of the FGC project, people usually agree on the fact that GCN presents its position about the practice when they present themselves. Then, none of the interviewees from the community expressed the idea that GCN was implementing a holistic project in order to fight FGC. The fact that GCN concentrates most of

its activities around education results in a lack of coverage in the community: families who have no children going to school have absolutely no knowledge about GCN.

If the community stays mistrustful towards GCN's activities, the interviewees from the community agree on the fact that since GCN's involvement, more girls are going to school (Teacher, Ensonorua, 2007). 80% of the community interviewees see girls' education as a positive change. With regards to teaching about FGC, the general feeling of the children is embarrassment: 90% of the children interviewed feel bad or confused about hearing negative things on FGC as it conflicts with what their parents tell them. The women's feelings are divided: they are keen to support their daughters and agree that children must have rights, but then, they don't understand why NGOs are so virulent against FGC as it is a good thing for the Maasai community and they don't agree with the discourse of GCN staff members on the negative consequences of FGC. Men are stronger in their analysis: it is ok for GCN to encourage girls to go to school, but they mustn't talk about FGC as having negative consequences. They are particularly virulent when it comes to girls who are running away: they are encouraged to betray their community and culture because of NGOs who encourage them in becoming rebels. In that regard, the approach needs change according to the community members: 'Instead of saying bad things, NGOs should change their approach. You can't come and tell me that I should stop to pleat my hair as it is bad for it. I am pleating my hair since a long time and I am not seeing any effect on myself. They come and say it [FGC] is bad and women don't give birth and it is harder than when you are not circumcised. But women here have big children in good health and they themselves are ok. NGOs should not do that, people can't understand (Research assistant, Ensonorua, 2007).'

#### *Few steps forward: positive impact of the project and factors of change*

Consciously or not, through being exposed to NGOs' programmes, people are changing and the change is everywhere to be seen. While observing and listening to the community, it seems that GCN activities are more efficient than expected by the NGO itself. Already, people show more openness on the topic of FGC: a good step beyond. People feel very free to talk about FGC issues amongst their peer groups; they are able to exchange ideas and arguments and sometimes show real insight on the question. When members of the patriarchal system are opposed to any compromise regarding traditions, the upcoming male generation is going to follow their parents' advice and marry a circumcised girl. Then they are not going to make their daughters undergo FGC. If female and children interviewees from the community define the status of the Maasai woman as that of a slave in her house, they see an improvement in this status: it is not rare now to see men taking part in the household activities: looking after the cattle or even bringing the children to school. Concerning the women's' self-help groups, if at first, attitudes were distrustful and not comprehensive, men quickly saw the difference in the wealth level of their household. An increasing number of women self-help groups are demanding support. A lot of hope emerges from this trend of women gaining financial power: carrying a new weight in the household, women will be able to influence decision-making.

As said, the number of supporters of girls' education is increasing. Free and compulsory primary-schools and the fact that education adds value to a woman play a big role in fathers choosing to send their daughters to school. Consciously or not, the idea of delaying FGC to have girls staying longer in school is more and more accepted.

Children in school are greatly sensitised on the right to education: both girls and boys agree that it is good for a girl to study, have a job, and be able to avoid the traditional Maasai

woman's status. However, they are divided on the questions of FGC. They all agree on the facts that the consequences of the practice can be terrible for a woman. The girls who have not undergone the practice fear consequences that are sometimes exaggerated. As parents are the final decision-makers, there are chances that the current generation will undergo FGC. Nevertheless a few role models can already be identified in the present generation: one family in Ensonorua actually stands up against FGC for their daughters.

### *Other steps backward: factors of permanence and resistance phenomena*

In an isolated community, tradition makes law and is sometimes viewed as universal: people can't imagine that in other places other traditions are followed (GCN partner programme manager, Meru, 2007). The ones who refuse to comply are rejected. Indeed, fear is the major factor of permanence: fear to not fit in, fear of being rejected from the community, fear to not please your parents and being called disrespectful, fear of being a burden on your family, fear of not finding a husband, fear that your children will be outcasts. The pressure on the people who refuse FGC is a heavy burden that can put the most resistant at stake. The fact is that these factors of permanence add to the resistance phenomena. The majority of the community members are still prone to defend FGC practices and perpetuate them even in underground ways and always for the same motives.

As long as all the reasons for FGC remain unanswered, the community will continue to see female genitalia as a problem (WHO, 1999). Assessing whether all the reasons for FGC are really answered by GCN through its holistic approach is essential in the continuation of intervention. For sure, GCN wants its project to be holistic. But issues of myths, fears for example, are not tackled at the moment; a lot of issues stay unanswered.

Culture is always stronger. It is true that traditions always seem to find a way to counteract any intervention against them. In Ensonorua, GCN is confronting the resistance phenomena from previous interventions against FGC that are still ongoing. Because of the criminalisation of the practice and previous NGOs' activities, FGC practices went deeper underground: no more ostentation, shift in the ritual dates and ages. These changes are a different kind of resistance phenomena that oppose anti- FGC interventions.

GCN's strategy to tackle FGC through education had been carefully thought through, as the first consequence of FGC is dropping out of school. But then, GCN's activities to retain girls in school contributed to the emergence of a new role model: a girl who is circumcised and then sent back to school. The fear of the law played a role in the emergence of this role model: not the fear of the law on FGC, the fear of the law on education. Then, girls are more and more willing to stay in school even when circumcised, while in the past, being circumcised made you a woman, who does not stay in school. If at first glance it could appear to be a success, as the number of girls in the higher grade of school will increase, a closer look will unmask what seems to be a permanence comportment.

It has been highlighted that the majority of the community is not addressed by GCN. As the NGO tackles children going to school and their parents, an unknown proportion of people are not involved in the project.

It is interesting to note that these children who are not going to school are the ones that are keeping the cattle. These children are the ones privileged by their father: educated in the traditional way, they learn how to take care of the cattle they will later inherit. While children in school are prone to change, the children out of school will be the future guardians of the traditions and the future decision makers of the community, as they will inherit power in decision-making at the same time as they inherit the cattle.

## Relevance of the project

### *Why the community doesn't understand the need to tackle FGC*

The Maasai society doesn't recognise the rights of children and women. While there is a lack of exposure, people don't imagine that there are other norms in the world. They don't understand why these other norms, Human rights or laws, should prevail over their own organisational system. If a girl refuses to undergo FGC, she is influencing the whole community system: she will not be considered as a woman, her parents will not be considered as 'full' elders, her children will never be part of the community. From this perspective, stopping FGC means that boys will continue to become men, while girls will stay girls. Maasai say that NGOs cannot come and say that one of their traditions is wrong and NGOs agree to that. Laws are just rules from a faraway government, usually unknown; people can fear them but they are secondary.

Maasai are proud of their current traditions. When asked 'why did you let go of some traditions and not circumcision?' the answer was that they are proud to have ended traditions which were bad; if they don't let go of FGC, it is because it is good for the community. There is a different understanding of what is bad and what is good between the NGO and the community. There is a need to aim first for comprehension before tackling sensitive and subjective issues.

As underlined while discussing the perceived impact of GCN's activities by the community, community members don't always believe, and consequently don't understand, the negative consequences of FGC when they are exposed by the NGOs. New paths could be explored to better contextualise the ways of tackling the issue of FGC. For example, what is called FGC is called by Maasai 'Graduation to adulthood'. Condemning the ritual called girls' 'Muratara' or 'graduation to adulthood' can perhaps pose problems of understanding for the Maasai community.

### *The community's priorities*

50% of the interviewees in the community developed the idea that NGOs don't need to fight FGC; exposure (to other communities, to other ways of life) is designed as the major reason for people to change. During later focus groups, a more creative way was used to help the children express their feelings toward FGC. The children used drama to illustrate the community's situation on the question of FGC. The first important thing that stands out from the children's plays is that they are primarily focused on the consequences of FGC on the life of girls rather than on the practice in itself. In their drama, girls chose to put the emphasis on the benefits of having a girl educated. A girl who has got a job will bring more money than one given for a dowry when she is 12. Through their story, they underlined the importance of advocating the benefits of girl's education. The boys chose to depict the actual situation of girls in their community. Through the destiny of their characters, they show the educational problems linked to FGC and how hard it is to oppose the traditions. They also highlighted the bad reputation of the actual structures in place for the girls who want to refuse the tradition.

The elders complain as well about the fact that girls don't trust them to sort out their problems; NGOs are stepping on their jurisdiction when they should support the existing

system of power. Girls confirm that they have nobody to go to talk to within the community, teachers and health workers who could be good referents to address FGC issues complain about their lack of training.

What the children want from the NGOs is parents' education on FGC; for even if they themselves have the knowledge, they are not the decision-makers for their own life. One of the major claims of the children, but also of the adults who are against the practice, is the right of the girls to choose when they come of age.

The first important thing to underline is that the fight against FGC is not considered as a priority by the community; neither by the adults nor the children, even the ones opposing the practice. For the community, the important thing is economic empowerment; even if it means women's empowerment and sending children to school. Indeed, half of the interviewees realise that an educated girl is more valuable in the long term than one given away for dowry when she is still a teenager.

As the children expressed in their plays, what is important, what is their priority, is education. All the girls interviewed love school and desire nothing more than having a good job later. If Health workers are asking for more support and training to be able to make their community change its attitude towards FGC, they agree with the rest of the adult population interviewed that they have more important needs in terms of primary health care, water and sanitation but later, 'Things are going to evolve.' (Community member, Ensonorua, 2007). Children and women agree that GCN's work is important as it is good for the girls to have Rights and perhaps have the choice to undergo FGC or not. But then, in all the focus group discussions in Ensonorua, people saw a future where girls in the village are going to undergo FGC, nothing is going to change. As for the ones who refuse to undergo the practice, they don't see their future in the community and think of going away, leaving the village and its tradition behind. GCN wants to tackle FGC through education and women's empowerment. Then the change should come from within. Thus it seemed hard sometimes for the staff members to talk objectively about the practice and the future evolution of their project. On such a sensitive issue, involvement is often partly personal and emotional and this comprehensible. However, it appears that people often involve a lot of subjectivity in their actions. One of the comments often heard was that girls should have the possibility to make the informed choice not to be cut; an objective comment would propose that girls should have the opportunity to make an informed choice to be or not to be cut.

The fact is that if GCN aims for FGC abandonment, the community is not aware of this objective. It is particularly obvious when discussing the future of FGC practices: while GCN aims for an ARP coming from the community, none of the community interviewees expressed the idea that ARP could be a way forward against FGC.

The community members prioritise other issues before FGC and aim for education and women's empowerment. The changes that will take place with regards to FGC will perhaps be different to those expected by the NGO.

### **3- Analysis of GCN experience**

#### **Can we challenge local norms? The sustainability issue in FGC projects**

No interventions seem to have eradicated FGC. As developed above, the vast majority of interventions are assessed as failures. However, the impact can't be reduced to quantitative data when talking about a project related to cultural norms. The absence of baseline survey has a part to play in it. When looking more closely, the way in which data are interpreted and on what criteria, has a lot to do with how an unsuccessful project has is defined.

The donor issue is of great importance when assessing results. If FGC projects need time and flexibility, donors don't seem ready to allow for any; consequently, a lot of FGC projects stopped because of lack of funding (GCN director, Nairobi, 2007). As interventions were often not achieved, it is hard to talk of success or failure. Results should be seen in a qualitative light.

Even if strategies to tackle FGC seem efficient and sustainable, resistance phenomena appear to be a common problem. Backfire against the interventions is the major barrier against sustainability in projects tackling local norms.

Projects conducted against FGC seem to have an initially successful period when the interventions seem to have an effect: a lot of girls came to participate in the ARP sessions, a lot of girls come to school, and there is no more celebration of the ritual (GCN partner programme manager, Meru, 2007). But after a time, the organizations conducting the projects realised that these changes were due to a shift in the tradition: girls coming to the ARP have already been circumcised, as are the girls coming to school, and by fear of the law, parents don't celebrate their daughter's circumcison any more (Ibid).

Men are often pointed out as the biggest hindrance in the permanence of the practice (IRIN, 2005). Ultimately, the whole community should be tackled to avoid permanence and resistance.

Unlike common belief, culture is not static. When traditions are submitted to diverse influences like NGO programmes, they adapt consciously or unconsciously, to counteract interventions. Indeed, community enforcement mechanisms are the hardest to address: bad omens, social pressures on the uncircumcised girls no one wants to marry, and above all, superstitions attached to the uncircumcised girl. An approach would be holistic if these are tackled as well (See Annexe 2).

It seems also that resurgence is always to be feared: 'We have a new problem now with HIV/AIDS, a lot of people who stopped female circumcison still believe that uncut girls are going after boys; so they sometimes decide to have them circumcised. If they are less hot, they will have less sexual intercourse and will catch less diseases.' (GCN partner programme manager, Meru, 2007). NGOs can make things worse for FGC. Interventions create phenomena such as a shift the age of circumcison: girls who were undergoing FGC as teenagers are now circumcised when they are very young. This is partly the consequence of NGOs' projects empowering girls to refuse to undergo FGC. The accumulation of different interventions pushes the practice of FGC underground modifying it in a way that makes the practice harder and harder to tackle.

## **Is there a need to challenge local norms? 'Raison d'être' of FGC interventions.**

The community doesn't recognise NGOs' actions as motives for change; exposure is the reason for people to embrace different norms. In this case, the impact of anti-FGC interventions could be questioned compare to the impact of education-empowerment interventions. But in an isolated community, how can you be exposed to change? Indeed, some community members are travelling, but they are predominantly men, the first tenants of traditions.

When people choose to abandon FGC, it is educated people and often as a result of a personal exposure or experience. NGOs could take a role in the facilitation of the process towards an abandonment of FGC by encouraging and supporting education activities and exposure to information and other ways of life.

Before tackling socio-cultural issues, a community has other needs that are different from the ones recognised by the NGO. None of the community members interviewed expressed that FGC was a priority. But all agreed on the fact that FGC is a cause of girls dropping out of school. When parents and children express the needs of the girl child, it is always regarding girls' need to have educational support. Consequently, the path followed by the community could be counterproductive for an NGO: indeed if girls begin to be circumcised while continuing their studies, enhancing girls' participation in school will no longer address the issue of FGC. However, it will still be serving what the community identified as a priority.

An educated and empowered community would assure a long term development. A developed community would have access to public facilities and information; it would be exposed to other ideas. As often said during the research: 'I believe that in the near future, FGC will die naturally.' (Ministry of Gender staff member, Nairobi, 2007).

This would play into the emergence of new attitudes toward FGC (Boyle, 2002). Would there still be a need for a strong FGC abandonment project?

## **Should we challenge local norms? : The relativism issue**

What is a mutilation? What is a harmful traditional practice? Rao and Walton (2004) raised the question of subjectivity in deciding what an offensive practice is. The Maasai consider FGC as a good practice, a tradition that deserves to be protected and kept.

Customs must be respected by the government. For people outside the community it is an unnecessary bad tradition which must be stopped: girls are forced to undergo a mutilation that is against their right to physical integrity and their right to choose. Assessing the value of a local norm is often soiled by people's subjectivity (Parker, 1999). Human Rights are considered by the Maasai as harmful norms for their community and cultural integrity.



### *Rights, freedoms and choices*

Latest research has shown that when the ritual is postponed, girls nevertheless undergo FGC sooner or later: 'We realised that ARP for example don't stop but delay the practice. When the girls finish secondary school they often undergo the practice.' (Ethiopia Population council programme manager, Nairobi, 2007). Stigmatisation and pressures on uncircumcised girls are hard to handle, as girls need to fit in with their community (PLAN, 1999). The fact that girls and women are empowered in their Rights is essential for them to make an informed choice. However, in a community where FGC is still the norm, women have to take in account the particular context of the pressures they will have to handle: even if women have the right to choose, it is hard to say that they are free to do so.

What happens to an educated and empowered girl, who chooses to get circumcised, is that she has decided that the social consequences of not undergoing the rite of passage are heavier than the ones of the practice in itself. She prioritised her right to fit in with her community above her right not to be cut. Indeed, the Maasai community seems to agree on the need to improve the general welfare of their community and it is the only reason why Maasai men agree to empower women and not the other way around.

Development as a way to expand freedom (Sen, 1999) would be a better solution making the community actors and decision-makers of their own development. In the current context, by trying to enhance the freedoms of girls, GCN is seen by the community as changing girls into rebels: for the context is not ready to welcome them.

### *NGO's mandate and position toward local norms*

As an organisation fighting FGC, the first issue would be to decide whether you have fulfilled your mandate by delaying the ritual and having women deciding by themselves. For a child-centred organisation, the dilemma goes further: if girls decide to be circumcised at 18, would you have succeeded? Indeed your target population doesn't undergo the practice but then, FGC is still practised.

Kenyan law prohibits FGC in the case where force is used against the women (Ndungu, 2006); constrained by force, women are disempowered from their rights and are not free to choose by themselves. Is a woman under social pressure considered to be constrained by force? There is an issue for an organisation working on empowering women in their Rights and freedoms.

GCN is trapped in a rights-approach strategy while dealing with a clashing tradition. The NGO is aware of this conflict between Human Rights and local norms; however, it has tackled the practice of FGC instead of first trying to find solutions to alleviate the conflict. The dilemma should perhaps be eased before GCN deciding whether to tackle FGC or not (PLAN, 2005). Should local norms be challenged or tolerated? In any case, the dilemma should be brought to the table before any intervention takes place.

Education and economic empowerment are the keys to long-term development as they will help bridge the gap between the organisation and the community. The solution would perhaps be to revise the NGO's principles (Bell, 2004) by putting the Rights approach in brackets for a time and concentrating on creating an environment where the community and the organisation would understand each other.

#### 4- Conclusion

Through education and women's empowerment, GCN wants to tackle FGC. Indeed, a precise and rich situation analysis previously conducted by the organisation, helped to highlight education as the first casualty in the practice of FGC. As for women's rights enhancement, the path of economic empowerment was chosen to give more power to women.

The intervention conducted by GCN is a holistic and community centred one; the NGO expects to have the community decide by itself to abandon FGC. As the project started in 2005, impact was already palpable in 2007, as people talk a lot about the issue and role models can be identified.

However, the project encounters resistance phenomena; instead of stopping FGC by limiting dropping out of school, the project seems to encourage circumcised girls to stay in school. With regards to GCN's mandate to fight FGC, this is counterproductive and even doing more harm, as it is putting the practice deeper underground.

The findings of this research are not unique to the Maasai community and GCN: they can be related to all the other researches that underlined permanence and resistance in the practice during and after interventions.

Local norms are challengeable but then, you must expect backfire: NGOs can easily make things worse than they were before the intervention. You have to expect people to hold their traditions against what they consider as clashing: Human Rights.

The fact is that to solve the conflict between Human Rights and local norms, there is a need to bridge the gap between two mindsets; between the organization and its target population. Education and economic empowerment are the keys to long-term development. Developed communities are open to other norms and ideas and can be more easily addressed.

At first, organisations should perhaps put their Human Rights principles between brackets in order to concentrate their work on building bridges with the community to reach a point where the organisation and its target population would be able to debate. Above all, the NGO's aim should be to empower people in their right of making informed choices according to their particular context. This path would be to empower people as actors of their own destiny by ensuring that they can debate about their problems themselves.

## **5- Toward better interactions between NGOs and their target communities**

### *Recommendations*

#### **Best practices to enforce**

##### *Situation awareness*

The need for contextualisation is a recurrent remark. GCN is often criticised for its lack of personnel, facilitator on the ground. Everything should be in place to enable a clear understanding and continuous updates on the context around the practice of FGC. This means conducting a baseline survey and constantly monitoring traditions that may change. Community facilitators are important assets in this context.

The lack of coherence at the country level is an issue: too many NGOs are working on the same issue, influencing communities without sharing their findings and conclusions.

This makes it harder to assess the complexity of the different situations and their evolution through time. The government is the one that has the resources to sustain programmes.

For some NGOs, improvement can be a switch to medicalisation (IRIN, 2005), is that one of the concessions we are ready to make?

In terms of resources, are we able to handle a project further than the traditional project life time (5 to 10 years), can we make our FGC project sustainable?

FGC is a topic that has always been debated with lots of emotions and subjectivity (Parker, 1999). For an organisation, stepping back and aiming for objectivity is necessary to make space for other interpretations and the community's views. It will permit to re-evaluate interventions against conflicting norms like FGC and make it more adapted to the needs of the target population.

##### *Flexibility and transparency*

Flexibility is needed. Even if 'Unfortunately, NGOs don't have time for this kind of things [time and flexibility in the project's activities], they have to be ambitious and they need to give numbers, facts to their donors [...] It is not easy when you are touching something linked with people and their culture; you have to postpone results and build enough rocks to stand for what you want first. Impatience and needs for results is what drives most NGOs to fail. [...] you may not even be there to see the results of your intervention.' (GCN partner programme manager, Meru, 2007).

Before GCN's intervention, once girls were circumcised, they were married away. During GCN's intervention, girls began to get circumcised and were sent back to school. If FGC is still considered by the NGO as a priority, a shift in the approach, a modification in the strategy is required to address the 'new' motives for FGC as marriageability and graduation into adulthood seem to be less relevant.

Time is needed. Perhaps NGOs will not be there to see their impact. The generational issue is important when you expect the next generation to spread a new comportment. To be sustainable through time, it is necessary to monitor long after the intervention, to assess if there is an enduring impact: Are the girls who refused to undergo circumcision still fighting

against the practice? Did the children who said that they will not circumcise their children maintain their position? This point underlines once again the importance of having NGO facilitators in the community.

While the best way to conduct a project is to forget about time and traditional rigid formats, there is indeed an issue in terms of funding. Donors want numbers, facts, and quantitative results; assuring a continuity of resources is a key to sustain long-term activities. In terms of resources, it means building long-term commitments with founders to get started with the project and also to look for more independent sources of income to make it durable.

In order to gain the confidence of the people, NGOs often choose to tackle FGC as a secondary part of their intervention. However, organisations should still be transparent.

Being clear on what it is here for is something tricky for an NGO tackling socio-cultural norms: is the aim of the project abandonment of FGC (hard to make acceptable as it can easily create suspicion from the community)?, is it education for girls (simplistic)? Is it women empowerment? This issue should be solved within the organisation before the implementation.

If GCN wants to keep some of their objectives to themselves, their mandate and opinions should be transparent. Besides, NGOs and communities should walk in the same direction: milestones and specific objectives should be clear. Economic empowerment and education are clearly the priorities expressed by the community and by GCN. But FGC is seen as a problem only by GCN's staff members. A consensus should be reached.

### *Enhancing the holistic approach*

A girl who decides to stand up against FGC but is rejected by the whole community has two choices: run away or abide to local norms. There is a need to create a safe environment within the community for these girls; indeed, if they all run away or undergo FGC, the change will be difficult to institutionalise from within the community. Education and exposure (to other ways of thinking) are good steps to alleviate the pressure on the girls and help them make informed choices; NGOs have a role to play in this.

The whole community and its social capital should be tackled in order to relieve the pressure on these role models, as forgetting aspects of the socio-psycho-cultural reasons could lead to backfiring (IRIN, 2005). Even if you have role models showing a new way and demonstrating the irrelevancy of superstitious beliefs, different community strata don't change at the same pace (WHO, 1999); they should be addressed adequately in order to avoid enforcement mechanisms resurfacing. GCN's project is in its initial phases, concentrating on education, women's empowerment and awareness-rising. Still, the whole range of motives for FGC should be identified and there should be continuous reflection on ways to address them all.

Anthropologists and researchers could be an asset in identifying and measuring the motives. Community enforcement mechanisms are the hardest to address; there is a need to demystify some motives in order to tackle the more unreasonable ones. Once again, there is a need for strong monitoring.

Creativity could be more involved in awareness-campaigns (Lightfoot-Klein, 1971; Stepping stones, 2007). As the community (particularly children) is willing to participate in the process of creating awareness, they should be encouraged in this. Creativity could be a great mean to communicate, inform and bring debate and reflection while dealing with clashing beliefs (Stepping Stones, 2007).

Furthermore, creativity could be involved in situation analysis and evaluation through Participative Rapid Appraisal (PRA). Exploring with the community the motives for change towards FGC, or mapping the forces in play are a few exercises to assess the complexity of the situation with accuracy and build a relationship with the community. It would also involve the community in the analysis of their context and permit a better design of the project. Building a project with the community brings change from within (See Annexes 2 & 3).

## **Following the same path**

### *Work with the community*

Answering the needs expressed by the community is a way to build confidence within the community and create strong links between the organisation and its target population.

‘Making education a culture’ in the community will encourage people to be driven by reason rather than by superstition (GCN FGM project officer, 2007). It will also help to reach a level of communication where exchanging ideas between the organisation and its target population would be possible.

Once again, answer the demand from people in the community to be empowered in order to answer their needs: Health workers, teachers, etc. These are the people who often demonstrate a wish to see the community move away from FGC. Health workers are willing to have the tools to debate about FGC within their community, which is not attentive to them. Teachers are willing to be trained in order to answer questions and problems of the girls who want support for education or for refusing the practice. They are a precious asset for developing change from within the community.

However, they need to be trained in order to also understand the particular challenges of resistance so that they are able to challenge their own norms in a soft manner. GCN needs to have a constant facilitator on the ground that can assess the needs for empowerment.

To enhance development and aim towards change, it is necessary to assess where the community stands on the path of change (WHO, 1999). Afterwards a new equilibrium between forces of change and permanence can be sought. Restraining forces of FGC like superstitions and clashing beliefs should be answered and softened, while driving forces of change like role models should be encouraged (See Annexe 3). Enhancing the level of participation in the community is important to assure an accurate analysis of the current situation in order to aim for total change.

### *Is the path followed reaching our goal?*

GCN is aware that it is impossible to come and tell people that what they are doing is wrong; they know that the Maasai are not ready to hear anything wrong about their traditions.

GCN’s educational and empowerment project is already a success and a milestone towards development. Later, the community will perhaps choose by itself to tackle FGC. NGOs should be ready for ‘unintended’ consequences of their actions (Sen, 1999). Development and education will have their own influences on the culture. People are going to make their own choices concerning their local norms; a pre-determined long-term vision will perhaps not match what the community will come out with. What if they just let FGC go without replacing it by an ARP?

## *Now*

Instead of having a specific FGC project, having the issue mainstreamed into all the organisation's activities can be a positive alternative: paralegal, capacity-building, education, research. In the field, GCN should empower people in monitoring, child protection, and education.

Training capacities in the field will permit to institutionalise the issue within the community, making the intervention sustainable. It will also allow the strategy to overcome the issue of time in terms of its resources.

Partnership is essential in policy-making, intervention design and advocacy (WHO, 1999). It is within GCN's mandate and skills to enhance partnerships coordinate and centralise the FGC activities of its partners in order to avoid duplication and that is where GCN can make its difference.

## **Going further**

### *Research opportunities*

During the 2007 research on the tensions between the rights-approach and local norms, new questions arose. Three questions in particular would be good to debate with the community: If 'Muratará' is an equal ritual undergone by both sexes, would it be possible for one part of the population to get rid of it or modify it? Would it be possible for boys to continue becoming men and for girls to stay girls? Or should it be possible for girls to become women by following another path than the men? In more developed Maasai communities where people have access to education and information, what is the prevalence of FGC and the motives for it? Would it be possible for FGC to die naturally through development?

If reasons for the practice seem to shift (reasons for FGC like marriageability and graduation into adulthood appear to be no longer so important), what are the underlying reasons and motives that make FGC so resistant?

Indeed, the communities are the ones who can answer such questions. Gaining in-depth knowledge on the complex cultural situation would help in the design of a relevant intervention.

Today, the researcher is involved in the development of a project aiming (amongst other objectives) to fight FGC in south-Ethiopia (see annex 4). Following up the development and impact of this project will be of interest to validate recommendations made in this research.

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## ANNEXES

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Annex 1 corresponds to maps of the area of research.

Annexes 2 and 3 correspond to the recommendations' chapter. In these, tools uses are suggested in order to research in-depth the reasons for FGC and the factors of change and permanence around the practice. Above all, these tools can bring valuable insights during appraisal conducted with the community in order to gain a rich and coherent knowledge of a very complex cultural situation. These tools would be useful in order to design a relevant project. The annexes 2 and 3 are therefore demonstrations on how to use the tools proposed. They are not exhaustive.

The fourth annex corresponds to the leads for field application followed by the researcher today in south-Ethiopia, 4 years after the research developed above.

**ANNEX 1: Maps of Kenya and Kenyan districts**



Source: Geographics.org (2007)



Source: Organisation for Social Science research in East and South Africa (2007)

## ANNEX 2: Using the mental map of FGC to gauge a holistic approach

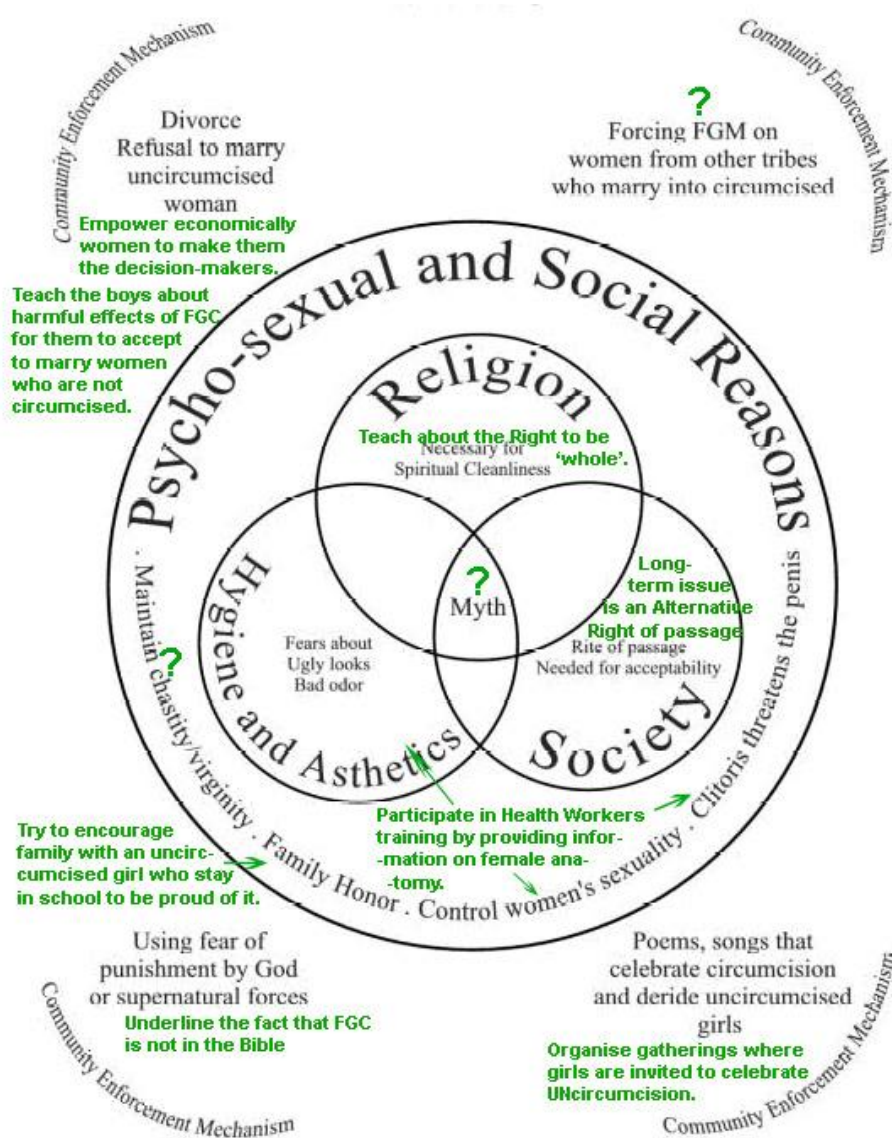
The Mental map for FGC (WHO, 1998) is a great tool to assess all the motives for the continuation of the practice. However, in order to assure a perfect coherence of the map to a particular context, a good initiative would be to assess the reality of all the motives mapped.

*The mental map as answered by GCN FGC project in Ensonorua (Demonstration)*

In order to assess the particular approach of GCN towards FGC; I chose to use the mental map of FGC. Indeed, by considering how the NGO address each reason for FGC, it is easy to evaluate if the strengths and the weakness of the project.

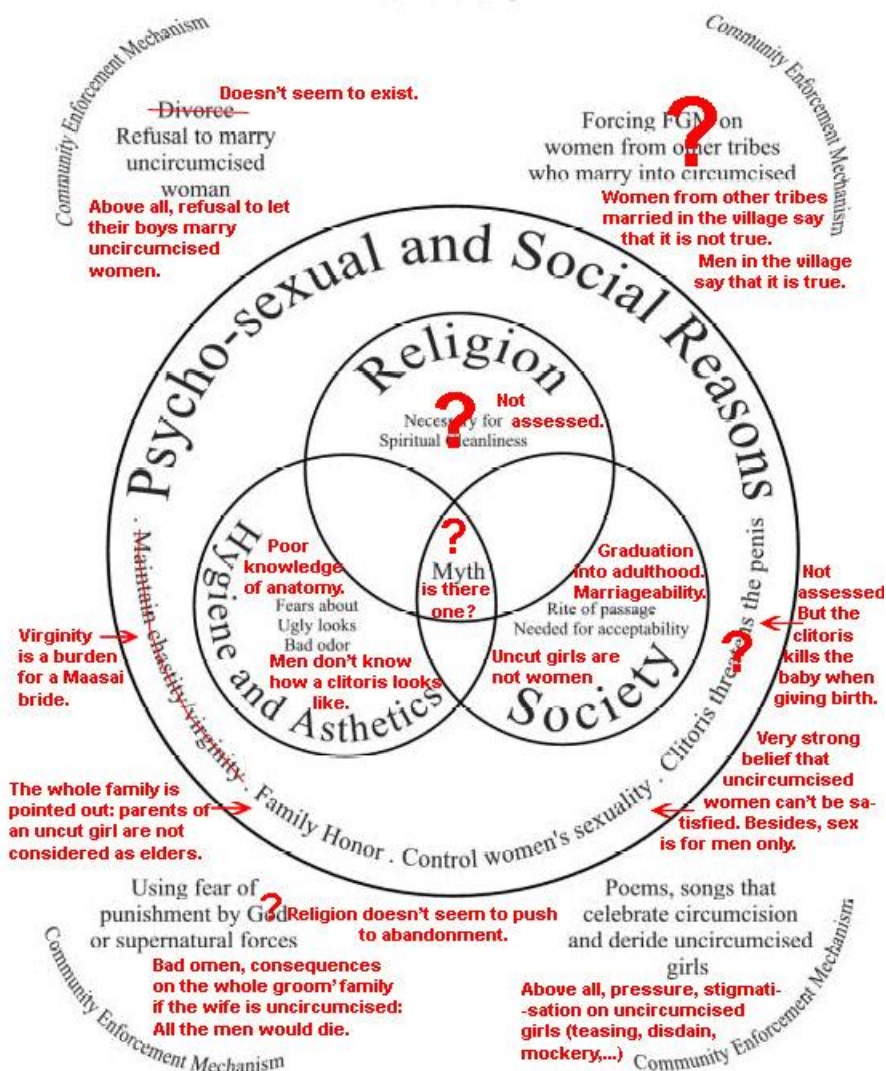
In green on the map below, I wrote the way NGO tackle particular motives. The question marks correspond of the unanswered motives for FGC.

The fact that some reasons stay unanswered put in question the reality of the holistic approach conducted by GCN.



*The corrected mental map of FGC for Ensonorua (Demonstration)*

In red on the map (map below) are written some corrections and additions for the motives of FGC in Ensonorua. During this process, few questions arose: Are all the motives mapped relevant for Ensonorua context? Apparently not: the virginity is not an issue in Ensonorua for example.



Do we know about other motives that are not on the actual map? The fact that parents in Ensonorua are the last decision-makers for their children is a strong enforcement mechanism in the community: the parents decide for their sons, even if they refuse to marry a circumcised woman, they would.

Do we need to research on motives that we don't know about but who seems relevant? Indeed people don't talk about the origin of FGC in Ensonorua, but as the tradition is very old and attached to numerous superstitions, there is a real need to research on the myths around the practice.

The best would be to complete the map and draw a contextualised one with the community through participatory exercises. The more consistent would be the map, the more coherent would be the design of a project to deal with FGC.

### **ANNEX 3: Estimate the strengths of the forces for change and permanence around FGC**

After having identified the particular motives for FGC in Ensonorua, I would propose to map these motives and the different factors of change or permanence for FGC on a force field matrix (Accel-team, 2007).

#### *Driving and restraining forces of FGC in Ensonorua (Demonstration; not exhaustive)*

The respective strengths of the forces had been estimated to give more accuracy to the matrix, before being mapped in red (matrix below).

Once again, the matrix would gain in accuracy if the community was participating to the mapping of the forces.

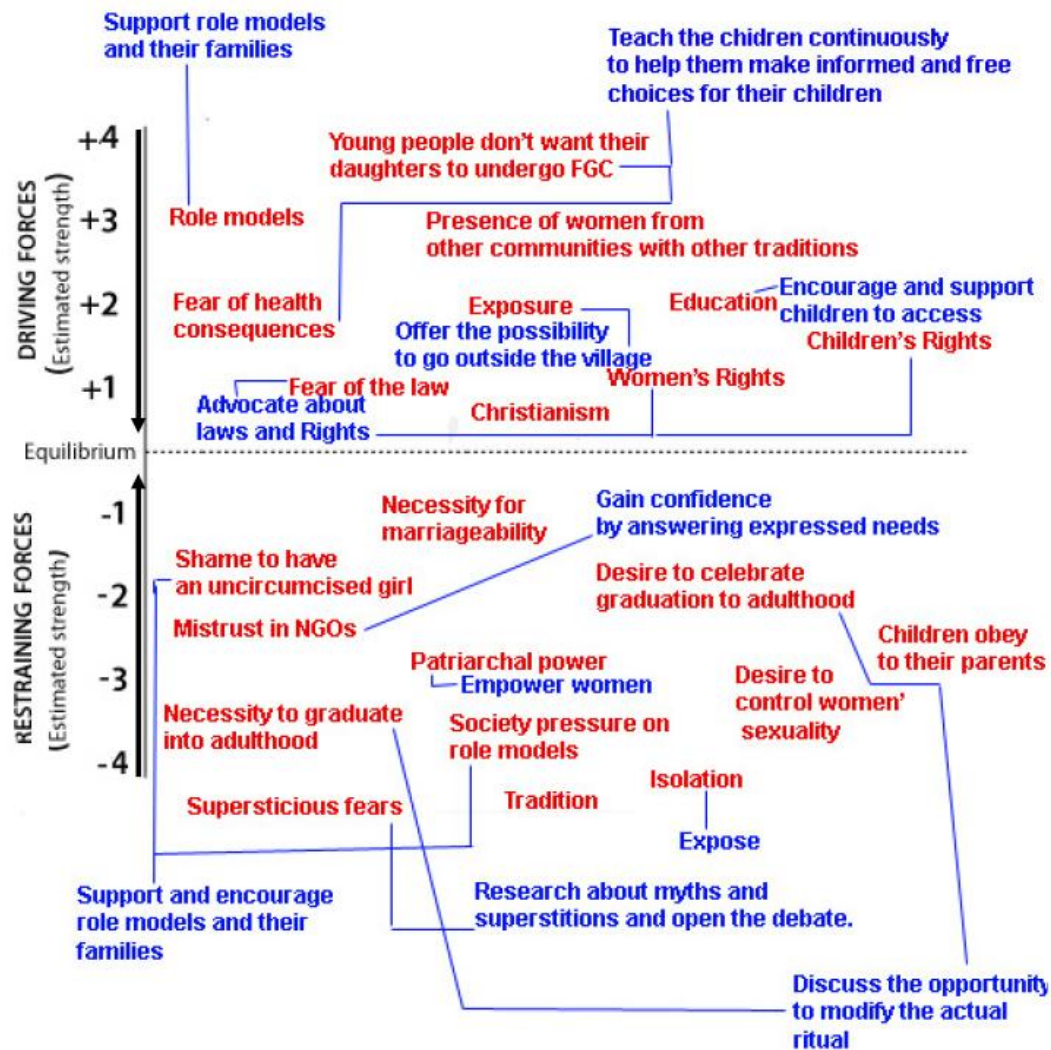


Inspired from: Accel-team (2007)

*Encouraging the driving forces of FGC and tackling the restraining ones in Ensonorua (Demonstration; not exhaustive)*

Following this appraisal, the organisation would be able to evaluate the major driving forces to be encouraged, the biggest restraining forces to address urgently and the ones that can be more easily softened.

In blue on the map (next page), are some ideas to answer some of the identified forces in order to modify the current equilibrium and aim for change.



## **ANNEX 4: Field application**

The researcher is involved since November 2010 in the design and implementation of a reproductive health programme in rural districts of South Ethiopia with the French NGO InterAide.

The programme focuses particularly on gender and women empowerment with strong attention on FGC. Indeed in the area of intervention, the prevalence of FGC seems to be above 90%. As in the context of the research ran in Kenya in 2007, in South Ethiopia numerous initiatives had been conducted and laws are formulated against FGC (including law enforcements and governmental information campaigns). However the impact remains low: *'I have never seen a woman who was not excised'* (Midwife in Kindo Koysa, 2011).

The approach will be to start from recommendations and tools used in this research in order to build an efficient strategy to firstly, understand the reasons for permanence of FGC and the needs of the communities in this area. While conducting focus-groups (and open questions) on community needs, women and girls often requested more information and activities on harmful traditional practices (requested in 90% of the time over 6 focus-groups and 5 interviews conducted in Damot Gale zone in May 2011).

However, as in the 2007 research, when the topic is discussed, the first reaction of people is to declare that they are against FGC and that FGC shall be eradicated. Therefore, the first step will be about re-opening the dialogue in order to have people freely expressing themselves.

From recommendations made in the research, the issue of FGC will be studied and answered through the following steps:

- A KAP (knowledge Attitudes and Practices) survey on the status of women will be conducted in November 2011 in places of interventions of InterAide as well than in places where InterAide will intervene later on. The survey objective will be to evaluate how women according to their education, access to health services (particularly family-planning), family situation, etc apprehend amongst others, the issues of harmful traditional practices and women empowerment. From the survey analysis it will be possible to assess particularly the prevalence of FGC according to certain trends in terms of education, access to information, decision-power within the family, etc.
- Focus-groups discussions and interviews will allow discussing further the particular conditions that make some women more empowered to refuse FGC for themselves and/or their children, and the conditions that make others choose to continue the practice for themselves and/or their children. Role models and positive-deviant attitudes may be identified. Tools such as the mental map of FGC and the Lewin's Force Field analysis will be used (see annexes 3 & 4).
- Finally, activities will be developed in order to aim for the accompaniment of role-models and the support to women who would like to refuse FGC. As said, one of the first steps will be to rebuild trust in the communities in order for the topic to be debated freely: to have people starting saying that they are for the continuation of FGC during focus-group discussions will be an improvement in that regard.

Development and results of this project will be available upon demand to the researcher.