

# RESTORING GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S DIGNITY

In many places around the world, the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women are tenuous at best, and years of progress can be washed away instantly by socio-political changes. As we celebrate International Women's Day, we must remember that preserving—or reclaiming—the dignity of girls and women requires continuous efforts, even when it seems like the battle is already won.

The Africa Coordinating Centre for Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (ACCAF) supports cultural change and relationships and information sharing between professionals and community members, and strengthens the health care sector's capacity to care for women and girls who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in Africa.

Over the last two years, the centre has been working with a Kipsigis community in Kenya. ACCAF became interested in this community when it heard that married women were getting cut. The Kipsigis have a tradition of cutting young teenage girls, but anti-FGM/C campaigns and efforts to increase girl-child education had significantly reduced the prevalence of this practice. When ACCAF members started talking with Kipsigis women, they were astonished to hear that the women being cut were in their twenties, married, and/or pregnant. Many of these women had basic and secondary education, had escaped cutting during their teenage years, and married men who accepted them as they were. Yet pressure from the community and these same husbands were contributing to this resurfacing practice.

Community members explained that a change in perception of men's status led to the reemergence of cutting. After post-election violence hit the region in 2008, the Kipsigis clashed with people from another ethnic background. During the weeks-long civil war, Kipsigis men who wanted the honor of fighting had to fulfill certain requirements, including being married to women who were cut. Men married to uncut women were not considered 'man enough' and were left behind in the village. Although the factions are currently at peace, it is likely that fighting will break out again should differences emerge in future political elections. The Kipsigis are maintaining their army and the community is pressuring women to get cut to elevate their husbands' social status.

In pursuit of its goal of restoring the dignity of girls and women, ACCAF has trained 2,000 Kipsigis community leaders. Training seminars covered aspects of FGM/C including legal; social-cultural; medical, psychological, and sexual complications; and human rights. Deliberate efforts to have gender parity and age variation in these seminars were effective; the youngest participant was 17 and the oldest 60.

After each training, participants developed plans to encourage FGM abandonment in their communities. ACCAF continued to support these leaders with occasional field visits to monitor progress and challenges. One of the male political leaders who attended the first training has been at the forefront of this effort for two years now, and was even recognized as an anti-FGM champion by the county governor.

ACCAF interventions have been sustainable because they use community resources and operate at pre-existing meetings and venues such as administrative chief barazas, political rallies, schools, and churches. Using community leaders as change agents has resulted in easier acceptance that FGM/C is an unnecessary procedure that causes adverse health consequences, and has raised awareness of the laws around FGM/C and the penalties for those who break them. In fact, some have been so successful in changing attitudes that families who wish to cut girls and women travel to neighboring counties to have the cut done there. This shows that efforts to stop FGM/C must expand to reduce the likelihood of cross-county operations. Accordingly, ACCAF has begun similar efforts in neighboring areas to create a critical mass of converts and home-grown activists who will end FGM/C.