From a man's world

By Bob G. Kisiki

IT'S a man's world. Sad! I have heard that allegation, and I don't repeat it in support, but utter disagreement. Whether you want to safely sneak out of it by saying man here means humanity, you still are grossly wrong.

The reasons are many, but this lunacy of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) just takes the argument to an unprecedented level. I recently got to understand the gory details of the abominable ritual, it's all I could do not to throw up, right there!

Let us look at FGM from the 'Man's World' and by man here, I mean an adult male human creature. One lady I was discussing FGM with said men had no right to talk about FGM, because it is done for them. I hope this is not true, because if it is, those men who benefit from such brutality, and claim to love their wives, are not worth their masculinity.

If it is true that Sebei men actually condone, for the sake of personal benefit, the banal ritual of FGM, 500 shames upon each one of them. If not, then let them answer this next question: FGM is predominantly done by women. The pictures we see show old women (who should really know better), looking remorseless, ready with carved knives, about to scoop out the young girls' genitalia. So where are the men?

Where have the men been all these years of women cutting clitorises out of each other; generation after generation? If the men do not benefit from it; and would rather they had wives, sisters and girlfriends who are truly women, with complete womanhood... where have they been?

Surely, it cannot be a man's world, when all around you women are busy disfiguring every girl who blooms, and the man is just waiting to have that girl brought to him, like a jackfruit for cutting and eating, itself having no fun from the experience! Man's world indeed!

This female friend I was discussing the matter with then said you see, this is a cultural issue, and culture runs deep. Let's tackle culture here.

What, and for whom is culture meant? Why culture? Who is the custodian of culture? Do I feel the 'Man's World' slogan return here? Do men want to show us a door — however small — through which they will escape to exonerate themselves from this responsibility?

If the women cut the poor girls for the men; and the men are impotent in the matter, in that they can't fight culture, just who is culture? Is someone in Sebei-land ready to answer these questions?

Why would a practice like FGM go on unabated, if really nobody is behind it, and the men, especially, are not personally benefiting from it? To echo Jesus when He talked about the Sabbath, I will say: Culture was made for man, not man for culture. A culture that promotes the dehumanisation (and, we can say, de-womanisation) of young girls should go out of the window immediately.

I am not Sebei, but I trust that most elders and other cultural bigwigs in the area are male.

When Jane Frances Kuka shouted out against FGM some years ago, she was dumped into political limbo. Politics in Uganda is, undeniably, male-dominated. Even where a Woman MP has to be elected, the main players are usually men. I would like to think that the men in areas that practice FGM are, by and large, not innocent in this case. Let's face it: No man can fail to stop something he does not believe in, if he set his mind to it. No man can claim to love someone he has deformed, directly or indirectly. No man should even say he is a man, if he hides behind culture, or women's desires, to condone a base practice like FGM.

Besides saying 'it is our culture', I challenge the men (especially) and women in Sebei to tell the world the advantages of Female Genital Cutting, even if we are to call it by a 'cleansed' name. If they cannot, I challenge the men who run this country, the East African Community, the African Union and the United Nations to rise to the occasion and save the remaining womanhood of those innocent girls.

WILL THE PROPOSED BILL CURB THE PRACTICE?

By Irene Nabusoba

JACKLINE Chelimo, 23, shunned the cultural rite of female circumcision after learning about its dangers at Gamatui Girls' School.

However, after dropping out in S3 because of financial hardships, Chelimo, who was married by then, experienced problems because of her decision.

"Whenever my husband returned from drinking, he would threaten to leave me if I did not get circumcised. He argued that his fellow men ridiculed him because of me. My mother-in-law made it worse. She said her son had made a mistake in marrying a learned girl who did not respect her culture. I had to do it," she says.

Fighting FGM is hard. The traditional practice where a girl's external genitalia are partially or wholly cut off, is used to initiate her from childhood to adulthood, according to Sabiny customs.

Female circumcision is prevalent in the eastern districts of Kapchorwa, Bukwo and Nakapiripirit (among the Pokot). However, recent studies indicate that the practice is also going on in Kamuli, Kamwenge, Insingiro and Masindi.

Reports show that FGM is particularly on the rise in Nakapiripirit, among the Pokot living near the Kenya border, where thousands of girls aged 10 to 15 are circumcised and then forcefully married off. In places like Kapchorwa, where there have been intensive campaigns against the practice, the community is slowly shunning FGM.

However, there are indications that FGM is on the rise again. During the 2008 Christmas holiday, over 500 girls in Sebei region (Kapchorwa and Bukwo) faced the knife, an increase of 90% according to the local leaders. While some girls may be coerced into FGM, others undergo it 'willingly', citing difficulties in their marriages, like the case of Chelimo.

Dr. Chris Baryomunsi, the vice chairperson of Parliament's HIV/AIDS Committee and an activist against FGM, however, says most of the girls are forced.

"Societal pressure coerces them into female circumcision even when they know the problems associated with the procedure," he says, adding: "It is the reason we are coming up with the FGM bill in which one is liable to imprisonment of up to 14 years for abetting the practice.

"This applies to mentors, surgeons, parents and whoever has knowledge of the acts and fails to respond. Even those who participate or accept to have it done on them should also be prosecuted for consenting and assisting the process," Baryomunsi says.

Global health research shows that FGM threatens the health of women and girls by increasing their vulnerability to HIV. It also raises the risk of maternal and infant mortality, harming women's psychological, sexual and reproductive health.

Baryomunsi and other women and human rights activists drafted the Prohibition of Female Genital Cutting draft bill. It will be presented to Parliament early this year as a private members bill to accelerate its approval.

The bill, which does not consider belief, custom, tradition, or ritual a valid defence, states that whoever has knowledge of the practice and fails to report it may be fined sh1m while if the procedure results in death, the perpetuator is guilty of felony and liable to imprisonment for 10-14 years. If the guilty party is a member of the medical or paramedical field, the court may suspend their license for up to five years.

An elderly woman cuts teenage girls in Bukwa district in December 2008. The practice could become criminal with the proposed bill

FGM raises risk of maternal and infant mortality and harms women's psychological, sexual and reproductive health'

However, Baryomunsi says there are challenges, especially with porous border districts where the local 'surgeons' may lay down their tools only for their colleagues to cross over and provide the service."The girls may also cross to neighbouring countries particularly Kenya, get circumcised and return," he says.

The bill, drafted by Dorah Byamukama, the director of Law and Advocacy for Women in Uganda also provides for restraining orders to protect harassed girls and calls for protection of minors under the family and child protection courts.

In Kapchorwa district, cases of FGM have reduced because of the recent introduction of a by-law, outlawing the practice and sensitisation programmes conducted by the Reproductive, Educative and Community Health (REACH) project.

In the past, girls used to dance in the open for days. But since the campaigns against the practice, they dance at night, one day before the circumcision.

"That is a good start. This way, it can eventually die away. Apparently the girls are cut as early as 5:00am and taken to a secret location to heal before the authorities realise. The law can catch up with them," Baryomunsi says.

However, the by-law may not be effective because district councils are restricted and cannot impose serious punishment for criminal offences. They cannot, for example, impose a jail term exceeding six months.

"A national law must be enacted to deal with the perpetrators of this inhuman, degrading and primitive practice and this is what we are seeking," Baryomunsi says.

The deputy speaker of Parliament, Rebecca Kadaga, an activist against FGM, hailed the move; saying it was a step in the right direction.

"Nobody was taking it seriously. If we were serious, FGM would now be history. Many are not bothered claiming it is not their culture. There is nothing cultural about it. We should not equate male circumcision to FGM. FGM is abuse of human rights."

Kadaga also regrets that the community pressures the girls to undergo FGM, despite advocacy programmes. Kadaga says the law may not wipe out the custom overnight, but "it is a positive step in supplementing other efforts," she says. She calls for sensitisation of communities."

Baryomunsi says they are also considering partnering with NGOs to set up income-generating activities to boost the incomes of the 'surgeons' and mentors who do the cutting for financial gain.

"We are setting up heifer and poultry projects so that they have something to fall back to. But it is possible to eliminate the practice. This proposed bill is one turn in the right direction," he says.

ACTIVISTS, POLITICIAN'S SAY

Between December 1 and 20, last year over 500 girls underwent FGM in Sebei region. During this cultural ptactice, a girl's clitoris or the entire genitalia is cut off, according to sabiny culture, to initiate the girl into womanhood. Politicians and women actvists say they are championing the rights of women, so what are they doing about the practice, which many view as a violation of women's rights? **Frederick Womakuyu** talked to some of them?

Rebecca Kadaga, the deputy speaker of Parliament

I am dedicating this year to the elimination of FGM. President Yoweri Museveni is the patron against FGM. I plan to go with him to Sebei to look at FGM. We shall also sensitise people about the dangers of FGM. I also want him to direct the health ministry to put in place a budget for FGM so that the Reproductive Educative and Community Health (REACH) project continues sensitising the community. I have also written to the Attorney General to speed up the passing of the law on FGM so that the Kapchorwa by-law, that is effectively functioning to punish the perpetrators of FGM, can be strengthened.

Sheila Kawamara, executive director, Uganda Women's Network

We are strongly against any form of violence or culture that degrades a woman's dignity. We congratulate Kapchorwa on having passed a by-law against FGM and we shall support them by pushing the Government to speed up the passing of the proposed law criminalising FGM. As we wait for the law, we shall go to the grassroots, sensitise and educate people on the dangers of FGM. Since FGM is on the increase, we shall make it a priority this year.

Rukia Nakadama, state minister for gender and cultural affairs

REACH is educating people about the dangers of FGM. We work with them by providing the funds to carry out sensitisation programmes. Sometimes we undertake such programmes ourselves, but, people believe FGM is their culture and they end up practising it whenever we leave. We are also working with community leaders to sensitise masses that FGM is a violation of women's rights and is harmful to women's health. Women who are circumcised never make it back to school because the traditional practice initiates them into women to get married. Women also suffer complications during childbirth. They also get chronic infections and excessive bleeding.

Rukia Chikamondo, Woman MP Kapchorwa

I do not know anything about FGM. I have been out of the country and we have not met as Sebei members of Parliament to issue any statement on FGM. I will not say anything about FGM. I have not been on the ground so I cannot talk without facts. I am not even sure whether FGM is going on in the region. Wait until I get the information.

Beatrice Chelangat, the coordinator of REACH

Right now we have no programme due to lack of funds. I wrote to the gender ministry to fund us so that we can carry out sensitisation, but they said they had no money. We could, therefore, not do anything. However, since the cases of FGM have soared this season, I have sent my officers to the field on a voluntary basis to collect data for the month of December 2008. We shall get their names, locality and the number, but the challenge remains lack of funds. If the ministry can give us the money, we shall go to the field and continue sensitising the community. Unlike in Bukwo, the cases of FGM have reduced drastically in Kapchorwa due to the mass sensitisation programme we carried out.

Tete Chelangat, Woman MP Bukwo

We are sensitising people, using local leaders and teachers. The practice is widespread in the remote parts of Bukwo because most of the girls are uneducated. FGM comes about as a result of poverty. These girls are married off because their parents want to get brideprice. One of the conditions for such a girl to get a suitor is that she has to be circumcised. We are, therefore, discouraging early marriages and encouraging girls to go to school.

I am currently sponsoring the education of 10 girls and I urge the Government and donors to come up and sponsor the education of the girls in the region. We are also lobbying Parliament to pass the law against FGM as soon as Parliament comes back from recess.

Johnson Toskin, MP Kongasis County, Bukwo district

Coming up with a law is useless. FGM is a cultural fulfilment and nobody forces these women to undergo circumcision. The media and the so-called activists have been claiming that FGM causes infection, excessive bleeding and death, but there is no documented evidence to support their allegations. Nobody in Sebei has died as a result of FGM – in fact the region has the highest fertility rate in Uganda, at almost nine children per woman and the population is increasing. One thing is that FGM is a demand by the women. When they get married, they experience difficulties in their marriages and opt to undergo FGM. The law will not work, but what we are doing is to educate and sensitise people that this culture may be outdated.

Herbert Sabila, MP Tingey County, Kapchorwa district

My constituency has come up with an ordinance against FGM. It was adopted from the recently passed by-law against FGM in Kapchorwa district. In fact, FGM has reduced drastically in my constituency – but we are also carrying out advocacy and sensitisation programmes. We have found out that FGM is common among uneducated girls. I, therefore, call upon the Government to carry out affirmative action, especially for the girls. If they can sponsor the education of girls, FGM will be history. As Parliament, we have drafted a law that is yet to be passed. When Parliament resumes, we, the MPs from Sebei, will spearhead the campaign to have this law passed. But FGM cannot be eradicated with the law alone.