

Linda Dada: The Fight Against Female Genital Mutilation in the Maasai Tribe

Project leader: Joy Nina Nampaso (College: Whitman College, Home country: Kenya)

Project location & dates: Kajiado, Kenya (June 15, 2022 - August 1, 2022)

Sponsoring Institutional Partner: MAIPA (Maa Association for Ignorance and Poverty Alleviation)

Background

The Maasai tribe can be found in both Kenya and Tanzania. They are one of the few tribes in East Africa that have held onto their traditional culture and customs. They can be easily identified in their beautiful patterned red and blue *rkarasha* and colorful beads that have become a worldwide attraction. Despite the cultural beauty that this community embodies, a dark shadow of gender inequality looms over them. Female genital mutilation (hereafter, FGM) is a manifestation of gender inequality, as well as a violation of human rights. FGM involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons; it has no health benefits. The short-term risks of the procedure include pain, bleeding, and shock. Long-term effects include, but are not limited to, chronic pain, primary infertility and post-traumatic stress disorder. This practice is very common among the people of my tribe and an important part of their tradition. As the practice is rooted in patriarchal ideals, it is done to increase female marriageability. The injury to female genitalia is done to decrease libido in women so they are not unfaithful to their husbands. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that around four million girls in Kenya have undergone cutting. The WHO also predicts that if global efforts are not significantly scaled up, the number of girls and women undergoing FGM will be higher in 2030 than it is today. More girls are at an even greater risk, particularly due to the pandemic which has disrupted schools and programs that protect them. FGM is illegal in Kenya, and this has relegated FGM to the realm of secrecy and rural areas. Growing up, I was surrounded by family and friends who had undergone FGM. I deeply connect with the pain and trauma that this practice inflicts. Many girls run away from home and girls that refuse to participate are shamed and ostracized.

In the summer of 2020, I conducted preliminary research in the Mailwa area where the majority of the population consists of the Maasai tribe. I spoke to a few locals in the villages who informed me that the practice was still rampant in the area. They narrated to me how girls were being transported at night as a means to avoid local law enforcement. I also got a chance to speak with the regional elder locally known as *chifu* David Ole Ncheenka. He informed me that in just two months they had arrested 15 community members who were caught organizing FGM ceremonies for teenage girls. Chief David agreed to be part of my proposed campaign and his knowledge of the area, and its people will help me execute the project more effectively. At the same time, I was interning at the maternity wing at Karen Hospital in Nairobi, where I worked with Dr. Jason Mugo, who is a specialist in women's health. I talked to him about the project, and he was willing to be part of the team. As a healthcare professional, he will be invaluable to the success of the project. I will also partner with the grassroots organization MAIPA (Maa Association for Ignorance and Poverty Alleviation), who have also agreed to be part of the project. The mission of this organization is to empower the marginalized Maasai community through education. MAIPA has been working in the area for many years and I learned about them when I was in high school during a menstrual hygiene campaign.

Project Summary

Linda dada is a Swahili phrase that translates to "protect the girl". The goal of this project is to organize an awareness campaign to aid in eliminating female genital mutilation in the Maasai tribe. My project will be based in Mailwa Sub-county in Kajiado, which is a marginalized area in the southwest of Kenya. I plan to set up a series of awareness events targeted towards students, parents, and teachers in the area. These events will focus on addressing the harmful effects of FGM, how to assist girls who are at risk, psychosocial support for girls who have undergone FGM, and where the community can access additional resources. I will work hand in hand with the local elder David Ole Ncheenka, Dr. Jason Muga, and the grassroots organization MAIPA to spread awareness and ensure the Maasai girl child is safe and protected.

Methodology

• Parent-Teacher Awareness Events: Week 1 – Week 2

The first two weeks will be focused on organizing six awareness events targeted towards the six churches found in the area. Parents and teachers have weekly meetings that are organized by the local churches and with the assistance of Samuel Saruni, the program manager of MAIPA, we will set up the events. Samuel Saruni has a lot of experience with community outreach and FGM training. Together, we will train the community on how to support girls who have gone through FGM and how to identify girls who are at risk. Dr. Jason Mugo will lead the discussions on the effects of FGM on the health and education of the girl child. Local *chifu* David Ole Ncheenka will also be present to inform the community members about how they can report cases to the local law enforcement. MAIPA will help me distribute branded merchandise like T-shirts, brochures, Maasai-inspired beads and reflective jackets for boda boda riders after the sessions.

• Student Sessions: Week 3 – Week 4

We will visit six schools found in Mailwa Sub-county and train students on how they can support their fellow girls who are at risk of FGM. Students will also be provided with information on where to find resources such as rescue centers for girls who are forced to run from home. Local *chifu* David Ole Ncheenka, Dr. Jason Mugo, and I will lead these sessions. Branded merchandise and brochures will also be distributed in the schools that we visit.

• Soccer Tournament: Week 5

Soccer is one of the activities that brings all the members of my tribe together. This event will allow me to reach a larger, captive audience. With assistance from MAIPA, I will organize a friendly soccer match with the two main soccer teams in the area. We will spread awareness on the importance of eliminating FGM by distributing brochures, T-shirts, and beads during the match. The players, referees, and coaches will also have branded jerseys with the anti-FGM message.

• Media Outreach: Week 6

MAIPA has connections to the local radio stations which are the main media outlets in the area. They have used the stations in their previous campaigns, and I plan to utilize this to spread awareness of my cause through radio talk shows.

Feasibility and Sustainability

My *Linda dada* project is feasible because I have collected information and adequate data regarding the targeted area. I have established a network of direct contacts who I will work with to ensure the success of the project. I will evaluate the success of the project with the help of MAIPA by conducting interview-based surveys targeted towards community members who participated in the events. The surveys will aim to see how people's views have changed as a result of the project's activities and how their views differed before and after. The project is sustainable because it builds on the commitment of MAIPA to empower the community through education. It focuses on community outreach as a means to raise awareness and my aim is to ensure that this project can be continuously carried on by MAIPA. Through *Linda dada*, I hope to inspire more community members to become agents of change, and in turn, reach even more communities.

About Me

I am a junior Biochemistry, Biophysics and Molecular Biology major at Whitman College. I am very passionate about women's health, and I am interested in pursuing a Ph.D. research program on women's healthcare. I am a resident of Mailwa, Kajiado County Kenya and I belong to the Maasai tribe that lives near the border of Kenya and Tanzania. I know the community's traditions and customs very well, having lived in the area my whole life. My knowledge of the *Maasai* language and familiarity with the area will allow me to successfully execute the project.