

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

Project Location: Kajiado, Kenya

Nominating Institution: Whitman College

Project Leader: Joy Nina Nampaso, Kenya, Whitman College

Summary

Linda Dada is an awareness campaign based in Mailwa, Kajiado County, Kenya. The aims of this campaign were to educate the community on the harmful effects of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), provide psychosocial support for girls who have undergone FGM, and share with community members ways in which they can access resources necessary to eliminate this practice.

How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project?

I decided to tackle this issue because I am a daughter of this community. Growing up, I had a front row seat to the effects that female genital mutilation had on my community and particularly, on girls. Friends I grew up with were either married off at a young age or sustained health complications. Awareness of FGM was an important strategy for me with this project, because the Maasai tribe is one of the most marginalized tribes in Kenya. Access to education in all forms is greatly lacking in the region. I knew that educating the community would be a powerful way to initiate change. I was deeply motivated after researching and reviewing data from the World Health Organization (WHO). According to WHO, FGM is still prevalent and more effort is required to combat it. I knew that my project would not only address a local issue, but a global one.

Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project?

I chose Mailwa because of my familiarity with the region as well as the valuable connections I have with local leaders and organizations. Maa Association for Ignorance and Poverty Alleviation (MAIPA) is a local grassroots organization that has been working in the area for several years. I had interacted with them in the past and knew it would be a great idea to bring them on board. The location is also very significant because FGM is rampant in the area, making it an ideal target for action. While planning for the soccer tournament, I leaned on local leaders, who helped bring the teams together, find professional soccer staff, and ensure that everything went smoothly throughout the tournament. Members from MAIPA graced our community meetings and brought with them knowledgeable speakers who imparted much wisdom from their work experience. Through these connections, we were also honored to have the Kenyan Ambassador to Brazil, Mr. Ole Kaando, attend one of our meetings. Local women came to every event and made sure everyone had something to eat. It was definitely a team effort and I could not have done it without the support I received from these community members.

What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why?

Throughout the project implementation, I was able to stay on course with the plan I had created. However, one aspect of the project I was not able to achieve was engagement with the local media. It was difficult to find stations that were willing to cover the events of our project. Since it was election season in Kenya, with that came a whirlwind of election-focused programming. I decided to focus instead on ensuring that I captured high quality content that could be used to create a website—a project on which I am now working.

Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

I received non-monetary support from Amref Health Africa, which is the largest health development non-governmental international organization based in Africa. Through professional connections with MAIPA, they attended one of our community events and brought female hygiene and menstrual products. We distributed these products to the community members who were present. They also brought qualified health professionals who spoke to community members about the negative health impacts of FGM, both physically and mentally.

Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue? If so, please describe.

I am excited about the future of what I have started. While speaking with the community members, I was able to identify new areas that need to be addressed. I spoke with the local school headteacher and he informed me of the difficulties the students were having with electricity. Young girls who were mothers were struggling to balance motherhood, being students, and having a lack of electricity. I had discussions with the Kenyan Ambassador and he is willing to support any initiative that we might bring forth. I am looking forward to addressing and successfully following up on this.

How do you define peace?

Peace is both a physical state and mental state. Peace is also a fragile equilibrium that can exist and not exist for people in the same physical location. Girls who go through FGM experience pain and health complications as well as the mental trauma that this kind of experience inflicts. In the same society, men are accorded much privilege and status. Thus, peace is existing and not existing for two groups living in the same society. I call it fragile because the oppression of one group of people can only go on for so long. It is important to address these societal problems as quickly and as effectively as possible, to prevent the birth of even worse societal issues that would make achieving peace even harder.

In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term?

My project contributed to peace by giving a voice to women through men. I was specific about having male speakers at the events we planned because I believe it was important to address the community's inherent power dynamics. Having men who were educated talking to other men about FGM allowed women to feel valued and respected. This is an important step toward enabling healing in the community. It is rare to have multiple events dedicated to women, when, for so long, men have been running the show, especially in fields such as sports. These events allowed the barrier between men and women to be broken down, and allowed open dialogue to take place.

What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issues or utilized approaches/strategies?

One of the challenges that has for a long time derailed the fight against FGM is the political state of the country. It is difficult to drive change when the leaders of the country are themselves at the forefront of misogyny and gender inequality. It is my hope that my generation will create a better political and economic foundation for the people of Kenya.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you?

My project reinforced to me the importance of community work. It reminded me that every day, millions of people are in need of assistance and inspiration. For those of us who are lucky enough to have access to higher education and other forms of privilege, it is our duty to humanity to do our best within our capabilities to stretch out a hand to others. Community work will be a part of my life for the foreseeable future and I am so excited about the impact I will make.

A brief statement, suitable for use as a quotation, addressing the value of this project and what you have learned. Indicate the student's name (yours or your teammates') for quote attribution.

No one in this world chooses the circumstances into which they are born, and in most cases they also don't have the freedom to determine how their lives end up. Those lucky enough to be in positions of power have a great responsibility to the world. – **Joy Nina Nampaso**