

Saving girls from the 'cutting season'

By Linda Pressly
BBC, Tanzania
1 April 2015



Girls in parts of Tanzania are often forced to undergo female genital mutilation, even though the practice is illegal. Faced with FGM, many had nowhere to turn - until now. A safe house has opened in the north of the country to offer protection when they need it most.

"My parents said I should be cut because I'd finished primary education and reached maturity. They wanted me to marry. I told them I didn't want to. That infuriated my dad."

Veronica (pictured above) is 14. She speaks rapidly, barely drawing breath.

"My father started beating me, and that's when I decided to run away. He said I should have FGM so I'd get a bigger dowry. Those five cows would be sold to pay for my younger brother's boarding school.

"I said, 'You should allow me to go to secondary school first, then I might be successful and help the rest of the family.' My mother intervened between my father and I, and that made him so angry he lashed out at her with kicks and blows. I was terrified," she says.



Girls as young as 10 have found refuge in the safe house

Veronica is one of 134 girls to find refuge at the safe house in Mugumu during the six-week-long "cutting season", that traditionally occurs every two years in Serengeti District. All of them have stories about the pressure put on them by family to undergo FGM, a traditional pre-requisite to marriage amongst the Kurya people who live in the area.

Find out more

Escaping Tanzania's Cutting Season will be broadcast on Assignment on BBC World Service on Thursday 2 April.

It will also be on Crossing Continents on BBC Radio 4 on the same day at 11:00 BST

Listen online

Veronica learned about FGM at school. She knew it was dangerous and illegal, and threatened to report her father to the police. His response was swift.

"He locked me up for two days while he looked for a circumciser. When they came back, I tricked them - I said I needed to go the toilet. They let me go and I hid in the bush. But there were animals, like hyenas, and it wasn't safe."

A volunteer found out what had happened, and put Veronica on a bus to Mugumu. The safe house relies on a network of these volunteers in the surrounding villages. Often they are men who have seen the pain caused by FGM, the serious health problems that can follow, and in some cases - the most extreme consequence of this bloody rite of passage - death from bleeding or infection.

Rhobi Samwelly is the co-ordinator of the safe house, funded by the Anglican Church and supported by other churches together with the local mosque. She raced against the clock to get everything ready before the arrival of the first teenager.



Rhobi Samwelly whose own experience inspired her to set up the safe house



"It was in the evening. The girl was crying - she didn't have shoes and she didn't have underwear. She had been beaten by her parents. I was so shocked when I saw her like that."

The desperation she sees reminds her of her own powerlessness as a child: at the age of 13 she was pushed into FGM by her parents - she had nowhere to run to. Samwelly very nearly bled to death.

So she knew girls in the district needed a refuge, but did not anticipate how many would arrive - the safe house was designed for just 40, and the girls sleep two or three to a bed. Mattresses on the floor accommodate yet more of them. But no-one seems concerned about the overcrowding because they know they are lucky to have got here.



Sophia Mchonvu discusses FGM with Veronica's parents

Bumping along the stony, unpaved road in the safe house's dilapidated four-wheel drive, Sofia Mchonvu is on her way to the village of Masinki. She is a social worker employed by the safe house to negotiate with the girls' families - warning them of the dangers of FGM, encouraging them to give their daughters educational opportunities rather than marrying them young, and assessing whether it is safe for girls to return home.

She is greeted cordially by Veronica's parents outside their mud-brick house. They are delighted to hear their daughter is well.

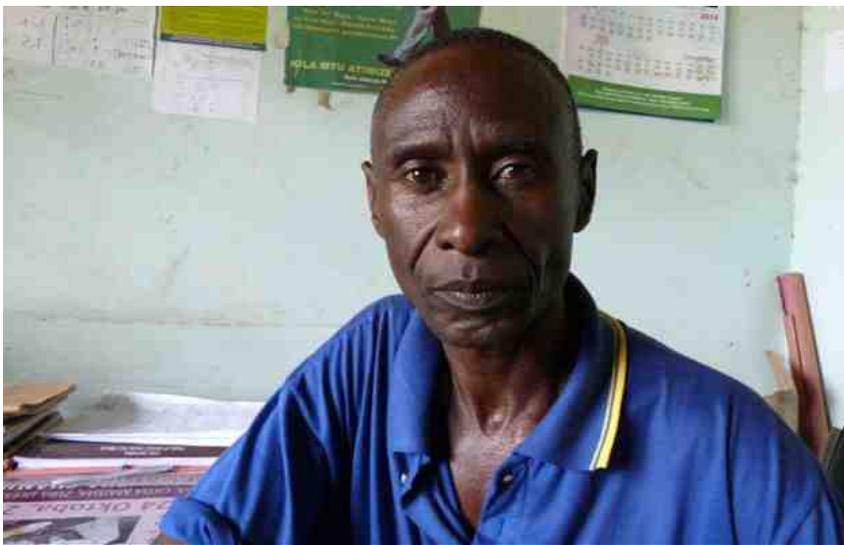
"It's only pressure from the wider family, and our culture," explains Mokiri, Veronica's father, when confronted with Veronica's story.

He says now they are aware of the dangers of FGM. "We will no longer follow those customs and norms. This is a new family now. We will protect her." And he promises not to force Veronica's younger sisters to undergo FGM either. Even so, Mchonvu does not believe the time is yet right for Veronica to go home.

On the way back to Mugumu, she stops to meet another father who brought his 15-year-old daughter, Nyangi, to the safe house because her brothers were trying to bully her into FGM and marriage. In Kurya culture the bride's family receives a dowry of cattle - Nyangi's brothers planned on using those cows to attract wives for themselves.



Nyangi...



...and her father

Nyangi's father, who lives with his second wife, apart from Nyangi and her brothers, tells Mchonvu he has spoken to his sons. He told them FGM is wrong, and that they must not depend on their sister's dowry.

"I don't want Nyangi to get a husband until she is 28 or 30," he says. "I would like her to train to be a nurse."

Samwelly is determined to help protect girls like Nyangi from early marriage.

"FGM and child marriage are illegal in our country. I would be a fool to allow a girl to go home to that. I'm going to work to make sure I save these girls," she says.

The youngest girl staying at the safe house is 10-year-old Boche. She limps around with a large bandage on her leg. Her father cut her with a *panga*, a machete-like knife, because she refused to go for FGM.



"It was very serious, and she wasn't able to walk," says Samwelly. "So when she arrived here with a volunteer, we took her to the hospital, and she was there for two weeks. Now she is healing."

By the final week of the cutting season in Serengeti, girls who have been forced or persuaded to undergo FGM are beginning to emerge from seclusion. Groups of them wander along the roads kicking up dust the colour of ground cinnamon. Now they have come of age, they go from village to village asking for money and treats.

On her trips out to local villages to meet parents and volunteers, Samwelly stops to speak to the girls. She laughs, dances and sings with them. But between the jokes and banter, she also uses the opportunity to educate them about the potential health problems they now face.

None of this is easy for her. "I want them to feel that I'm with them. But of course I feel very bad, because it's too late for these girls."

The practice is illegal but the acting district commissioner for Serengeti during the cutting season, John Henjewe, says there are immense challenges to stopping it. "The problem is that FGM is done secretly. It's difficult for police officers to safeguard every household to find out if it's happening or not."

Which may explain why only five FGM-related cases are on police books as the season comes to an end in Serengeti. There is also reluctance by leaders to advocate against FGM.



"It's true that politicians from this society are also bound by the culture and their elders, making it hard for them to speak out," says Henjewe. He is from southern Tanzania where FGM is not practiced, so doesn't feel these constraints. He supports the safe house in Mugumu, and is proud of the FGM education girls are getting in local schools - education that is enabling them to say "No" to this potentially life-threatening rite. But not every girl who tries to get to the safe house makes it. "We got a call to say there were seven girls hiding in the bush," says Samwelly. All of them had fled the circumciser. "We set out to pick them up in the safe-house car. But our car is old and it broke down. We couldn't get to them in time, and their parents found them. Two managed to escape again and make it to Mugumu, but five of them were forced to undergo FGM. It was very painful for me because I failed to support those girls." Serengeti's cutting season is over now and more than 100 girls have gone home from the safe house - their parents signed a police declaration swearing they will protect their daughters from FGM. Veronica and Nyangi have stayed on with Samwelly though. Veronica is learning skills like tailoring and cooking, and Nyangi is attending secondary school - not compulsory in Tanzania, and something many children dream of. Thirty other girls remain too. Boche is living with her mother - her father was arrested. But it's rumoured that in the six weeks when many of Serengeti's girls were cut, more than 15 died as a result as a result of FGM.