

Sierra Leone's secret FGM societies spread silent fear and sleepless nights

Traditional practitioners of female genital mutilation have established deep roots in Sierra Leonean culture and politics, creating a culture of fear among young women and posing a major obstacle to opponents of the custom



'Mariatu', 16, seen here facing two soweis, has bravely refused to undergo female genital mutilation. Photograph: Michael Duff

[Lisa O'Carroll](#) in Makeni

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When 16-year-old Mariatu* goes to bed at night she is scared of going to sleep. She fears members of powerful, all-female secret societies are going to break into her room with the consent of her parents and kidnap her.

Mariatu has good reason to be afraid. She has already fled her village in northern [Sierra Leone](#) to avoid female genital mutilation (FGM) and expects to go on the run again to avoid being cut.

"I am not safe in this house. I'm not safe in this community," she said. "I am afraid, when I lie down to sleep, that one day they will grab me, tie me up and take me to that place." She is referring to the "Bondo" bush, an area of secluded forest where FGM takes place.

Living in fear of FGM in Sierra Leone: 'I'm not safe in this community' – video
Mariatu's story goes to the heart of the challenges for anti-FGM campaigners in Sierra Leone, touching on the silent power of the secret societies, who carry out the cutting as an initiation into the group. It also speaks of the cultural and political

significance of the country's ancient structures.

In an unprecedented step, soweis, the women who hold the most senior rank in the societies, agreed to speak to the Guardian.

The soweis are unhappy with attempts to force them to abandon the practice, seeing it as an attack on their culture, which is rooted in ancient rituals designed to protect the community against evil spirits and regulate the passage of adolescents to womanhood.

The societies exist in every village and town across Sierra Leone and are a vital communications link between politicians and rural communities. This gives them the power to tell women how to vote.

Abolishing the societies and ending FGM – known as Bondo – is taboo for the political elite.

“This is our tradition, when someone has matured they must go through Bondo before they can be respected,” said Baromie Kamara, a senior soweï granted permission to speak by the village chief.

After the cutting, girls are traditionally kept in a Bondo house in the forest for days, weeks or sometimes months to heal and receive lessons on adulthood.

“We teach the girls that when you marry you need to do the laundry, sweep and cook. You must get on with the new mother-in-law and the father in-law; all the small brothers, you need to treat them properly. So that is why we put them in Bondo,” said Kamara.



Baromie Kamara, deputy head soweï in her chiefdom, is unhappy the village chief has banned cutting ceremonies. Photograph: Michael Duff
For the teaching, the soweï is paid in cash or with food.

“If the girls come back into town and can’t do these things it will cause the soweï problems. They will always curse us,” explained Kamara.

A silver lining to the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone was a temporary ban on FGM. Before the Ebola outbreak, it is estimated that 88% of Sierra Leonean girls were cut, the seventh highest rate of the [28 countries in Africa](#) where FGM is practised. The [World Health Organisation defines FGM](#) as “all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons”.

The country recently ratified the Maputo protocol, an African charter of women’s rights agreed in 2003 that calls for the elimination of harmful practices including FGM. As a result, the social welfare minister indicated in July that the cabinet had discussed outlawing FGM for under 18s. A draft strategy paper has been compiled by the Sierra Leonean academic Owolabi Bjälkander, with input from district

soweis, the family planning unit of the police, and the minister.

Attempts to outlaw FGM in the past have foundered on political interests. Journalist Umaru Fofana tells how the paramount chiefs, who represent all 149 chiefdoms, insisted that a ban on FGM be removed from the [Child Rights Act](#) in 2007.

Such is the power of the societies that in July, when a rumour circulated that the government was going to ban them – and by inference their FGM ceremonies – [women in the public gallery threatened to walk out of parliament](#)

Hostility towards opponents of the practice was underlined in 2009, when [four female journalists in the city of Kenema](#) were forced to strip before being frogmarched through the streets because “they spoke unfavourably on radio against FGM”.

Anti-FGM campaigners are divided on whether an under-18 ban will have any impact. Some believe it is a small step in the right direction, others say it will matter little as traditionally a parent makes the decision for a daughter, irrespective of age.

“As long as your parents are alive, you are a child. Even if you are 40, your mother can slap you. The child has to give respect to her mother, so even at that age your parents can force you to have Bondo,” says local activist Ann-Marie Caulker, of the National Movement for Emancipation and Progress, a coalition campaigning against harmful practices.

In Mariatu’s village, FGM has not been banned, but the chief supports anyone who does not want it done. In a neighbouring village, however, chief Abubakar Kabia banned the practice – which he believes holds back development in the community – five years ago. If the soweis had replacement incomes or were taught how to farm the surrounding land, much of which is uncultivated, Kabia is convinced they would drop the knife.



A group of soweis, the most senior women in the Bondo secret societies. The chiefdom’s head soweï, seen here wearing a pink dress, is Jeanette Bangura. In the centre, wearing a yellow and blue dress, is Ann-Marie Caulker, an anti-FGM campaigner. Photograph: Michael Duff

This is disputed by the Forum against Harmful Traditional Practices, a coalition of

16 women's groups fighting FGM, who said the strategy did not work when tested in villages three years ago. "They said: 'We will take the money and stop the initiation when we are ready'," said the forum's head, Rugiatsu Turay.

The more successful agent of change has been education, said Turay: "There are people in some rural areas where they have accepted change. They have said they want to replace Bondo with school."

Mariatu has missed two years of school as punishment for refusing to be cut. "I feel lonely," she says. "They [her family] say I am the one who brought shame to the family.

"Anyone who doesn't join the society they say is dirty, they make me feel ashamed.

"Older married women they tell me, I want to snatch their husbands. The outsiders they will all come and sing songs to provoke me, to shame me."



Bondo bush, the area of forest in Makeni, northern Sierra Leone, where the cutting is performed. Photograph: Michael Duff

With 10 soweis in her extended family, she knows she is at risk of being forcibly cut.

“She is very brave, there are other girls who have not been initiated but they don’t speak out. She is unusual,” said Aminata Sheriff, project coordinator of the NGO Plan International. Mariatu said she almost lost her resolve not to be cut but, when she heard about the NGO in the village, determined: “Well, I won’t join.”

Plan has been working in 20 communities around Makeni to help girls escape Bondo. Taking advantage of the Ebola ban, the NGO has increased its awareness-raising programmes in the past year.

“It’s not cultural, it’s power. When politicians want to talk to communities, they call for the soweis,” said Sheriff.

One senior parliamentarian is said to have gone further and sponsored the circumcision of several dozen initiates in the south-eastern cities of Bo and Kailahun in return for votes.

“We need to distract people from thinking it is a vote-gainer,” said Turay. “The moment we do that, it loses its value.”

Sheriff added: “She [Mariatu] will come under pressure, but we are praying that she will not be taken and that she will be safe.”