

# A century later, little has changed for most females

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Africa may be totally different today than it was a century or so ago but many girls still face cultural practises that affected their great grandmothers. A lot of these traditional practices often favour men, since most African societies today are patriarchal. Subsequently, an African girl, who is supposed to have a formal education and has been exposed to the more positive aspects of the influences of Western culture, often ends up suffering the same societal inequalities that her great grandmother endured during her time.

In Tanzania, a number of these cultural activities continue to be practised, to the detriment of women's health and their general well being. Polygamy, woman-to-woman marriages, wife inheritance, wife exchange and forced early marriage for underage girls are some of the cultural practices among some Tanzanian communities that work against women's empowerment.

The story of Anna Issa from Tarime District in the northern Tanzanian region of Mara, illustrates how woman-to-woman marriages can impact negatively on their health, although the idea behind the practice is often noble. A woman, who fails to bear children is at times permitted to take another woman as her "wife" to get children - often with men chosen by the "husband" - on her behalf.

Issa, 31, got "married" at 15 to an older woman under a practice locally known as "Nyumba Ntobo". "Soon after the marriage, I went to live with my 'husband', and since she was unable to perform conjugal rights by consummating the marriage, the old woman had to search for men to sleep with me," Issa said. "When I got children, they were named after the old woman's family name," Issa said, in a survey conducted by the *Tanzania Media Women Association* (TAMWA).

Issa was one of the hundreds of respondents in the regions of Dodoma, Mara and Manyara in central and northern Tanzania, where 82 percent of women recounted their exposure to harmful cultural practices.

## **Polygamy**

Hamisa Kyamtaka, 32, was married off when she was 11 to a 70-year-old man, the survey indicated. Since Kyamtaka's husband already had several other wives and grandchildren, she could not be guaranteed that she would not get infected with a disease once she became sexually active with her husband.

Most of the women interviewed in the TAMWA survey called on the government to intervene and save them from sexually transmitted diseases, such as the deadly HIV/AIDS, resulting from the practise of wife exchange, polygamy and forced marriages - especially of underage girls. Some of the women interviewed said they were aware of the danger of HIV/AIDS and the fact that sexual relations were a major means of its transmission, but pointed out that poverty and tradition made them engage in high risk cultural practices.

The executive director of TAMWA, Ananilea Nkya, told IRIN in January that she met an elder at Kisima Cha Ndege Village in Dodoma, who explained that his being polygamous was because his first wife had failed to bear him children.

However, Nkya said with the exception of a few areas, women-to-women marriages were now uncommon in Tanzania, unlike in the 1950s and 1960s. She said the practise was still widespread in Tarime District, Mara Region, although such marriage ceremonies were conducted clandestinely. "In our tradition [the Gogo ethnic community], it is unacceptable for a family to live without children," Lawrent Cheliga, 69, said. "I had to get married again in order to have children. I did not marry for the sake of pride."

Another Gogo elder, Yohana Muhemeli, 75, said: "Our customs allow a man to have up to five wives and have as many as 20 children. This gives him more respect in the community - as a real man, father and leader of a big boma [household]." However, Muhemeli, who has been accorded the title Mzee (Kiswahili language for old man) in his village, said things had changed of late, cautioning that it was expensive to maintain a family of even four people. He warned against exposure to HIV/AIDS.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is another cultural practice harmful to women's health. Those who perform FGM - a ritual that often involves the cutting of parts of the female genitalia - often use unsterilised tools such as blades, knives and needles, increasing the risk of infections.

For women forced into marriage, many of those interviewed said poverty drove their parents to marry them off. Nkya said some parents asked their daughters to abandon school so that they could get married and in some communities the dowry is as high as 30 to 50 cows. "In some communities girls are regarded as the source of wealth. Our campaign and recommendation to the government is to punish parents who force their children to get married and abandon school," Nkya said.

In some ethnic communities, a man can inherit "the estate", including property, wife or wives, and children of a deceased brother. "This is a risky tradition because you may easily contract HIV and other STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] because in most cases checking health status of the widow or widows was not done. It is a very risky practice," Nkya said.

### **Coalition Against Female Genital Mutilation**

On 4 February, seven NGOs formed a coalition to fight FGM, a practice still widespread in Tanzania. "Various studies have shown that at least 18 percent of women in Tanzania are victims of FGM," Hellen Kijo-Bisimba, the coalition's co-ordinator, said during the coalition's launch in Dar es Salaam. She said FGM was rampant in central and northeastern Tanzania where, in some communities, up to 100 percent of women undergo the ritual. "The main objective of the coalition is to intensify the campaign against this dangerous and unhealthy cultural practice," she said. "Rallies, public condemnation campaigns and counselling to elders, opinion leaders and school children carried out by various activists appear to be bearing fruit. In some parts of the country, 'Ngaribas' [traditional circumcisers] have stopped the practice."

Kijo-Bisimba said after counselling, at least 300 Ngaribas had surrendered the tools of their trade - knives and blades - to village authorities. Some had even joined the anti-FGM crusade, she added. "There is also increased awareness and goodwill among the clergy and politicians at the grassroots," she said. "But what is most important is the fact that many parents are now against genital mutilation of their daughters, which was not the case in the past. "Some religious leaders now openly condemn the practice in their sermons, while in some villages by-laws against FGM and other repugnant cultures have been enacted," Kijo-Bisimba, who is the managing director of the NGO Legal and Human Rights Centre, said.

She said until a few years ago, uncircumcised women from ethnic communities such as the Maasai and Kuria in the north, as well as the Rangi and Nyaturu in the central parts of the country, were subjected to public ridicule. "They were regarded as uninitiated, outcasts and dirty," Kijo-Bisimba said.

Other NGOs in the coalition are the Tanzania Women Lawyers' Association, Tanzania Media Women Association, Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Network, Women Wake Up, Network Against Female Genital Mutilation, and the Dodoma Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting Health of Women and Children.

The launch of the coalition coincided with the marking of the International Day on Zero Tolerance to FGM in Tanzania's administrative capital, Dodoma. Nkya said the coalition would serve as a forum for advocacy on issues relating to FGM and a centre for exchange of information on the issue. "We want to make FGM a thing of the past in Tanzania," she said.

### **National Family Policy**

The government recently announced that it was finalising the National Family Policy, designed to address strategies for safeguarding and promoting interests of households, including the protection of women's rights. "The major objective behind the policy is to address cultural practices that undermined the welfare and dignity of women such as FGM, polygamy, wife inheritance and wife exchange," Asha-Rose Migiro, the minister for community development, gender and children, told the anti-FGM rally in Dodoma on Sunday. She was officiating at the International Day for Zero Tolerance on FGM.

She said FGM had been outlawed by several acts of legislation in Tanzania, including the Sexual Offences (Special Provisions) Act of 1998, that provides for up to 15 years imprisonment for practitioners of FGM, parents of the victims and other offenders. "Now the challenge is [in] its implementation," Migiro said, urging activists including lawyers to inform the public on the law and their rights. She said parents, Ngaribas and all those engaged in FGM, must be prosecuted