

African church leaders oppose female genital mutilation in hospitals

by [Fredrick Nzwili](#) in the [April 1, 2015](#) issue

International rights groups, churches, and activists are escalating campaigns against female genital mutilation now that girls are checking into hospitals to have the procedure.

In what is being referred to as the medicalization of FGM, doctors, nurses, and other health practitioners are secretly performing the procedures at the request of families.

“They are performing FGM for the money in hospitals and other places,” said Richard Nyangoto, a Roman Catholic priest in Kisii County, an area in Kenya’s southwest where FGM is widely practiced.

Health-care providers now perform up to 18 percent of FGM cases, and the trend is growing, according to the World Health Organization.

“Taking it to hospital does not make it right,” Nyangoto said. “It’s evil.”

The move to hospitals is driven by the desire to improve hygiene and avoid infection, said Grace Uwizeye, the FGM Program officer at Equality Now, a global women’s rights organization.

A mix of religious, cultural, and social factors perpetuate the practice. In many communities the partial removal of a woman’s external genitalia is part of the traditional rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood. Consequences include severe pain and bleeding, shock, difficulty passing urine, infection, and even death.

In 2014, an Egyptian father and a doctor were acquitted for the murder of a young girl, Soheir al-Batea, who died on the operating table while undergoing FGM.

In Kenya, at least three deaths were attributed to FGM in 2014. They include 13-year-old Raima Ntagusa and 16-year-old Alivina Noel, who died after giving birth because her body had not healed from the cut.

“Communities claim it’s difficult to stop since the practice is deeply rooted,” said Judith Nyaata, FGM Project coordinator at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya.

Nyaata, who works among the Pokot people of Kenya, said it is treated as part of marriage—women who have undergone the rite can barter for more cows as part of their bridal price. During the FGM process, women go into seclusion and are taught about life as wives and mothers. As it concludes, there is a celebration.

“The festival involves strong teaching about life and is accompanied by a lot of celebration and feasting,” Nyaata said. “This makes it hard for communities to quit it.”

African governments have unveiled new laws that ban FGM; more than 20 African countries have such laws in their constitutions.

But little progress has been achieved since 1997 when the pressure to end it started mounting, according to WHO. Rates in most African countries have stayed stable or fallen only marginally since then. The organization estimates that over 125 million girls and women in 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East have undergone some form of FGM.

“I think we still need more strategies and action to deter this,” said Adama Faye, a Lutheran church leader in Senegal, where FGM is also practiced. —Religion News Service

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