

**Date**

04/03/2025

Time

3 to 5 p.m. (CET)

With interpretation
in English and
French

“ The intersection of Climate Change and FGM ”

**Speakers:****Sharon Kibor**

Humanitarian
Programme Manager
at Center for Peace
and Democracy
(Somalia)

Everlyne (Eva)**Komba**

Gender Specialist
(Kenya)



The Speakers



Sharon Kibor - Humanitarian Programme Manager at Center for Peace and Democracy (Somalia)



Everlyne (Eva) Komba - Gender Specialist (Kenya)

Introduction

On March 4th, 2025, the Community of Practice FGM (CoP MGF) organized a webinar exploring the intersection of **climate change and female genital mutilation (FGM)**. The objective of the webinar was to deepen the understanding of how climate change influences the persistence of FGM, a connection that is often overlooked. The impact of climate change on gender inequalities is profound. **Women and girls in vulnerable communities face increased risks of gender-based violence, including harmful practices such as FGM.** Economic hardships and extreme weather events often push families to **resort to early marriage as a coping strategy**, with FGM frequently serving as a prerequisite. While organizations like UNICEF and UNFPA have begun addressing this issue, there **remains a critical need for more awareness, research, and concrete interventions.** For this reason, we invited two experts on the topic, **Everlyne (Eva) Komba and Sharon Kibor**, to share insights from their work with us. Their contributions aimed to equip participants with knowledge and tools to address this pressing issue and highlight necessary actions moving forward.

I. Interplay Between Climate Change and FGM – Practitioners' Experience from Northern Kenya

FGM is widely practiced among many pastoralist communities in northern Kenya. While often perceived primarily as a cultural tradition, its persistence is deeply rooted in societal expectations and the belief that a girl must undergo FGM as a rite of passage before marriage. It is considered a sign of chastity, purity, and readiness for marriage, and there is significant pressure on girls to be cut before their first sexual experience. Beyond individual expectations, families also face immense societal pressure—if a girl does not undergo FGM, both she and her family risk social rejection. Additionally, in many pastoralist communities, FGM is seen as a marker of *womanhood* and *respectability*; women who have not undergone FGM are often denied status and respect. In some cases, FGM is even perceived as a religious or moral obligation, further reinforcing its prevalence.

How Climate Change Perpetuates FGM

Climate change has significantly disrupted the livelihoods of pastoralist communities, exacerbating food insecurity, water shortages, and barriers to accessing essential services. In this context, FGM persists due to several interrelated socio-economic and cultural factors that are aggravated by climate shocks and environmental stressors.

1. Reduced Water and Food

The increasingly unpredictable and severe climatic conditions—such as **prolonged droughts, devastating floods, and locust invasions**—have led to the widespread **loss of livestock**, which is the **primary source of wealth and sustenance** for pastoralist communities. Faced with mounting economic hardships, families often turn to early marriage as a coping mechanism, using dowries as a financial lifeline during the crisis, or to recover when the crisis is over. Since FGM is commonly regarded as a prerequisite for marriage, the economic pressures stemming from climate crises indirectly fuel its continuation. In times of desperation, the practice becomes less about tradition and more about survival.

2. Increased Social Tension

Climate-induced hardships have **heightened tensions between communities** but even more at the **household level**, intensifying tensions within families. Historically, men have been seen as the primary providers, but when they lose their livestock and income sources, **women often bear the burden of securing food, water, and other necessities**. This shift in responsibilities can be perceived as a **challenge to male authority**, leading to the reinforcement of patriarchal norms as a means of reasserting control. In this context, FGM is sometimes used as a mechanism to **reinforce gender hierarchies**, ensuring that women remain within predefined roles and limiting their capacity to challenge established power structures.

3. Disruption of Social Services

Climate change also exacerbates barriers to **accessing healthcare, education, and other vital services**. When families are facing strong environmental pressures, girls often are the **first to drop out of school**, increasing their vulnerability to early marriage and FGM. Additionally, limited healthcare access reduces opportunities to educate communities about the harmful consequences of FGM and to support survivors. With less education and less opportunities for employment, **women remain vulnerable** and are frequently excluded from climate adaptation strategies and humanitarian response efforts.

4. Focus on Emergency, Not Long-Term Efforts

The Horn of Africa has experienced a dramatic **rise in the frequency and severity of climate shocks** over the past two decades. Drought cycles that previously occurred every 10 years now take place every five years—or **even annually** in some regions of northern Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia. As **humanitarian efforts prioritize immediate relief over long-term interventions**, addressing the root causes of FGM often takes a backseat to more urgent survival concerns. The frequency and severity of climate crises **diverts resources and attention away from long-term efforts** to eradicate harmful practices like FGM.

5. FGM as a Cultural/Religious Anchor in Displacement Contexts

Climate change has **led to widespread displacement**, forcing many communities into unfamiliar environments where they may not share the same culture, language, or beliefs as their host communities. In such situations, FGM and early marriage are sometimes **viewed as essential markers of cultural identity**, reinforcing the community's sense of belonging in uncertain and unstable conditions. This cultural attachment makes the practice even more difficult to eliminate, as it becomes intertwined with notions of continuity and resilience in the face of displacement.

FGM Impact on Communities Affected by Climate Change

1. Reduced Resilience for Women and Girls

Women and girls **disproportionately bear the brunt of climate change's impacts**, yet their ability to adapt and respond is often severely constrained. As men migrate with livestock in search of pasture, women are left to **manage households with limited resources**. The consequences of FGM—such as early marriage, reduced educational attainment, and restricted economic opportunities—leave them with **few options for self-sufficiency**, making them **more vulnerable** to the cascading effects of climate change. In contrast, men have greater mobility and access to employment opportunities, enabling them to adapt more effectively to changing environmental conditions.

2. Trauma and Stress

FGM has severe health implications, including mental health consequences such as **trauma and stress**. The psychological toll of FGM, coupled with societal expectations and the trauma of giving birth in traditional settings, further exacerbates the suffering of women and girls. Although healthcare improvements have reduced maternal mortality rates, many communities still favor home births with traditional birth attendants, perpetuating health risks and limiting access to medical support.

3. Lost Opportunities for Women and Girls

The consequences of FGM extend beyond physical and psychological harm, **severely limiting girls' access to education and employment**. Once subjected to the practice, many girls are forced into early marriage, cutting short their academic and professional aspirations. This exclusion reduces their ability to contribute to household incomes and creates reliance on climate sensitive livelihoods (e.g. livestock and rainfed agriculture). It therefore **reinforces cycles of poverty and gender inequality**, preventing women from playing active roles in climate adaptation efforts or community decision-making processes.

4. Reduce Women's Voices and Agency

As it was previously discussed, women often remain **voiceless and absent in adaptation or resilience strategies** because of their lack of education and employment. However, climate change **disproportionately affects them**, their exclusion from resilience-building initiatives further weakens community adaptation strategies, leading to an overall decline in collective coping mechanisms.

5. Increased Pressure on Natural Resources

Climate change exacerbates resource scarcity, yet cultural barriers to sexual and reproductive health services contribute to **high birth rates** in FGM-practicing communities. Young girls who marry early often have **multiple children, increasing the strain on already-limited food, water, and healthcare resources**.

6. Food Insecurity and Malnutrition

This cycle of high fertility rates, economic hardship, and environmental stress has significant **implications for the nutrition and health of future generations**. When young girls with little or no education lack knowledge about proper childcare and nutrition, their children are at **higher risk of stunted growth and acute malnutrition** (e.g. marasmus, vitamin deficiencies...). This affects their overall health, development, and ability to reach key milestones, creating a cycle that repeats across generations. Long-term malnutrition also affects physical growth and weakens women's ability to participate in the workforce and provide for their families.

Drivers of FGM

Several factors drive FGM in these communities, many of which we have already discussed:

- **Tradition and Identity:** FGM is deeply rooted in cultural practices and seen as a rite of passage.
- **Gender Roles:** It is considered necessary to uphold traditional female gender roles and norms.
- **Community Pressure:** Strong social pressure compels girls to undergo FGM. Parents seek to ensure their daughters' marriage prospects, peers demand conformity, and families enforce the practice to maintain social acceptance.
- **Economic Factors:** Poverty drives families to practice FGM as a means of securing financial stability. Limited economic opportunities for women further incentivize FGM to improve marriage prospects.
- **Commercialization of FGM:** The practice has become a profitable business, contributing to its persistence.
- **Religious Influence:** In northern Kenya, where communities follow Christianity, Islam, or other traditional religions, religious beliefs play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward FGM. Several factors contribute to this:
 1. **Blurred Lines Between Religion and Tradition:** Religious and cultural practices are often deeply intertwined, making it **difficult for communities to distinguish between the two**. Some religious figures reinforce FGM without recognizing its cultural, rather than religious, origins.
 2. **Misinterpretation of Religious Texts:** In certain regions, particularly northeastern Kenya, FGM is justified through **distorted interpretations of religious texts**. While some scholars oppose this, others continue to advocate for the practice.
 3. **Community Pressure:** Families and peers exert strong pressure on girls to conform to FGM as part of religious or cultural expectations.
 4. **Role of Religious Leaders:** High-ranking religious leaders who endorse FGM contribute to its **perceived legitimacy**, reinforcing its continuation.
 5. **FGM as a Symbol of Purity:** The idea that girls must remain "**pure**" for marriage is a driving force behind FGM. This belief extends to some Christian communities, where purity is emphasized as a prerequisite for marriage.

Challenges to Address FGM

1. Legal and Policy Challenges

Despite legal prohibitions, **enforcement remains weak** due to cultural resistance and limited judicial access.

Traditional justice mechanisms often override legal frameworks, reinforcing patriarchal norms.

Law enforcement officials face backlash from communities when intervening in FGM cases.

2. Social, Religious, and Cultural Barriers

Individuals fear **rejection from their communities** in case they reject the practice, especially because it is supported by many religious leaders and it is a prerequisite for marriage. Political leaders frequently avoid addressing FGM for fear of **losing voters**.

Corruption and reliance on informal dispute resolution systems hinder meaningful progress.

3. Limited Funding and Resources

Preventative action against FGM remains underfunded, particularly in crisis-affected areas where **emergency response efforts take precedence**. There is also a shortage of trained personnel and infrastructure to implement FGM interventions. There are **very few individuals who are either willing or have the capacity to support anti-FGM programs**. In this regard there has been quite an improvement in Kenya but it remains a challenge in many other countries.

Recommendations

- **Integrate FGM prevention into Humanitarian and Emergency Responses:** there are some organisations like UNFPA that have been supporting emergency response.
- **Strengthen Social Protection Programs that Include Anti-FGM Measures.**
- **Promote Research on the Links Between Climate Change and FGM:** Provide services that support anti-FGM prevention in terms of information, community engagement, advocacy or sharing information regarding health.
- **Support Survivor-Led Advocacy and Grassroots Initiatives:** it is important to work with people who have already undergone FGM and are advocating for its end.
- **Establish Strong Reporting and Community-Based Prevention Mechanisms:** that can be accessed by women and children.

II. Case Study: Research on Climate Change and FGM in Kajiado County

A research study conducted in 2019 and published in 2021 by **Tammary Esho, Everlyne Komba, Fabienne Richard and Bettina Shell-Duncan**, examined the intersection of **climate change and FGM in Kajiado County, Kenya**, a semi-arid region predominantly inhabited by the **Maasai community**. The study, which is available as an [open-access paper](#) and as a [summary on the CoP FGM website](#), explored how climate change influences social and gender norms and its impact on FGM practices.

The research framed FGM not only as a global health and human rights issue but also **as a climate change issue**. It argued that changing climatic conditions are placing significant strain on Maasai livelihoods, increasing the vulnerability of women and girls to harmful traditional practices, including FGM and early marriage. The study also found that existing anti-FGM strategies are insufficient in addressing these challenges within the context of climate change.

Motivation for the Research

The study was prompted by a concerning observation in Kajiado County: despite a county initiative providing \$500,000 to support the education of indigenous girls, only **150 out of 1,000 applications** came from girls, with just **40 from indigenous communities**. Investigators sought to understand the barriers preventing girls from accessing education. Field visits revealed that severe droughts had drastically altered community priorities. Local leaders indicated that **families were prioritizing survival over education**, and in some cases, girls were unavailable for schooling because they were being married off.

Methodology

The study employed a **qualitative approach**, conducting interviews and focus group discussions with key informants, including administrators, education officers, community leaders, religious leaders, and youth representatives. It also involved direct engagement with affected families to gather insights into the socio-economic and environmental factors influencing FGM practices.

Findings/Results

- **The changes in the climatic conditions on Maasai livelihoods:** The changing climate forced men and boys to travel further with livestock in search of pasture, leaving women and girls at home with increased responsibilities. Water sources, such as local lakes, were rapidly depleting, exacerbating the struggle for survival.

- **Perpetuation of Child Marriage which links with FGM:** Families resorted to child marriage as a **survival strategy**, exchanging daughters for livestock to restock herds depleted by drought. Since FGM is a prerequisite for marriage, the practice persisted under economic duress.
- **Increasing risk of child marriages across the Kenya-Tanzania border:** The **Maasai community spans the Kenya-Tanzania border**. The drought hit the Kenyan territory but not the Tanzanian one. While Kenya has stricter anti-FGM enforcement, Tanzanian communities often adhere more strongly to traditional practices, increasing the risk of girls undergoing FGM when families migrate for resources or marry them into communities in Tanzania..
- **Loss of girl child education opportunities:** Even when education opportunities existed, **girls who had undergone FGM or were married had little incentive to continue schooling**. Without addressing both climate shocks and harmful cultural practices, educational initiatives remained ineffective.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study underscored the need to **integrate FGM prevention into broader climate change adaptation and humanitarian efforts**. It recommended a multi-sectoral approach involving **legal, social, and economic interventions**, emphasizing cross-border collaboration to ensure consistent enforcement of anti-FGM laws and equal access to resources. **Addressing FGM in isolation from climate change mitigation strategies is insufficient**; a holistic response is necessary to protect girls and women from intersecting vulnerabilities.

III. Q&A

1. How does religion influence the link between climate change and FGM?

Religious beliefs significantly shape how communities perceive and respond to climate change and FGM. In some African communities, particularly among pastoralist groups, **climate predictions are met with skepticism**. Forecasts about droughts or extreme weather are often dismissed because **the future is seen as belonging to God**, making it difficult for adaptation measures to gain acceptance. For example, when advised to sell livestock ahead of a predicted drought to secure financial stability, families often refuse, as they see no immediate crisis and consider their livestock integral to their identity and survival. Additionally, religion plays a role in justifying FGM. Some interpretations of Islamic teachings claim that FGM is a religious obligation, though scholars have challenged this perspective. In times of crisis, **communities may turn to religious and cultural practices they associate with stability and moral order**, making it harder to challenge harmful traditions like FGM. These dynamics illustrate how religion can both hinder climate adaptation efforts and reinforce FGM practices.

2. Is the connection between climate change and FGM observed beyond East Africa?

While most of the current research has focused on East Africa, Eva Komba, thanks to her experience with FEMNET, has **observed similar trends in communities in West Africa**. In countries like Niger, worsening environmental conditions push communities to rely more on cultural traditions for survival. When faced with uncertainty, they **turn to practices that provide a sense of identity, solidarity, and hope**—including FGM.

In some communities, climate shocks are interpreted as **divine punishment for abandoning cultural or religious traditions**. Pro-FGM voices exploit this belief, arguing that hardships such as droughts or floods occur because people have stopped making their daughters undergo FGM. This mindset makes it challenging for governments and civil society organizations to intervene effectively, as rejecting FGM can be seen as a betrayal of cultural or religious principles.

Additionally, Sharon Kibor also underlined how **migration has emerged as a key factor in the persistence of FGM**. Some families living in Western countries, where FGM is illegal, send their daughters back to their countries of origin during school holidays to undergo the procedure. This highlights the need for stronger cross-border coordination to address the issue.

3. What initiatives are being implemented to prevent FGM in the context of climate change?

Eva Komba has pointed out some examples of what she's doing regarding the protection of girls from FGM in the context of climatic shocks. **Research** has played a crucial role in bringing attention to the intersection of climate change and FGM. Findings have been presented to global platforms such as the **G3 FGM Research Group** to influence policy and programming. Efforts have also been made to integrate FGM into national disaster response and resilience strategies.

One approach Eva Komba has particularly underlined is **conditional social protection**, where financial aid could be provided to families on the condition that they do not subject their daughters to FGM. By offering alternative economic support, these programs help break the link between financial hardship and harmful practices. However, for such interventions to be effective, they require **long-term commitment, proper monitoring, and ethical considerations** to ensure they do not lead to unintended consequences.