

HIGH FIVE CLUB

changing lives in Africa, £5 at a time

Maasai Girls Refuge, Kenya



Background

Many children in Kenya enjoy freedom and education opportunities, but many Maasai children continue to face the wrath of poverty and the oppression of certain aspects of Maasai culture and traditions. High Five Club's Founder, Dr Cheryl Mvula, has worked extensively for many years within the Maasai community in Kenya's Masai Mara, advocating for their rights and partnering with the community to reduce poverty. Some of these traditions, witnessed by Cheryl at first hand, are the genital mutilation (FGM) and early forced marriage of Maasai girls.

The practice of female circumcision is widespread in Kenya, with 50% of Kenyan women being circumcised. In some areas, including the Masai Mara, this percentage is much higher at 95%, with the majority of those circumcised being young girls aged between 10 and 15 years.

FGM is carried out for a variety of reasons. In some places, it is the belief that girls must be cut to control their libido. In others, it is the perception that intact girls are dirty or ugly, or that cutting is a prerequisite for marriage. Despite many arguing that it is a cultural rite of passage, it is a violation of human rights that both physically and psychologically damages females and causes reproductive health issues, acute urinary tract infections, complications in childbirth and even death.

HIGH FIVE CLUB

changing lives in Africa, £5 at a time

Despite the majority of Kenyans agreeing that female circumcision is no longer a necessity, it is still a cultural practice that some communities are not ready to abandon. In the traditional Maasai culture, the value of a girl is dowry and it is only by undergoing FGM that girls are released into the 'marriage market'. In the end, it is usually the suitor with the highest number of goats and cows, regardless of their age, who gets the girl.

The danger of female circumcision becomes more acute around Christmas, which is a time for initiation rituals in the Maasai community. In Kenya, these holidays last from early November to the end of December — 64 days in total. These two months are something of a "cutting season" for many girls around Maasailand, when the break from school means they have time to undergo and recover



from FGM without the school being able to intervene. Hundreds of Maasai schoolgirls fear leaving their boarding school and going home over the holidays. Instead, some of them spend their school holidays in hiding, afraid that if they go home, they might be forced to take part in a coming-of-age ceremony.

To advocate for the rights of Maasai girls and protect them from genital mutilation and early forced marriages, we have partnered with the Maasai Evangelistic Association (MEA) based in Narok town. MEA was set up and is run by an inspiring Maasai activist and pastor called Rev. David Ole Kereto. Cheryl visited the projects they run and spent time with David last year on a work trip to Kenya, including spending time at MEA's **Maasai Girls Refuge Centre**. This is a refuge for Maasai girls who are afraid to go home in the school holidays. The Centre provides accommodation, food, clothing, personal items, along with pastoral care and discipleship during school holidays for up to 36 girls escaping FGM and child marriage. MEA intercedes for the girls with their families, working towards getting the girls home when their families agree not to cut their daughters. This of course requires careful monitoring and much follow up.

HIGH FIVE CLUB

changing lives in Africa, £5 at a time



Ruth, aged 11, one of the Maasai girls at the refuge, was told by her parents “We need you married off so that we can get cows to educate your younger brothers”. Another girl, Mary aged 13, was threatened by her parents saying “You cannot rebel against us. Forget about education, that is no business for girls.”

Fortunately, Mary, Ruth and a host of other girls have now found a safe environment where they now call home at the Centre. In order to secure a better future for herself Mary resolved to escape the cycle of FGM. During the night, unaware of the dangers of attack by wildlife or being caught she took off. She ran for two days, evading capture by pretending she had been sent to a relative in a different village. She finally arrived at Rev. Kereto’s house and was immediately given refuge at the Centre.

HIGH FIVE CLUB

changing lives in Africa, £5 at a time

Just like most of the rescued girls she wants to succeed in life and someday go back to the village to advocate for other girls at risk of the oppressive culture of FGM. “I want to succeed so that I can help those I left behind, by advocating for their education” she explained to Cheryl.

High Five Club Support: We have joined hands to equip the Maasai Girls Refuge Centre with essential items to place a safe environment for 36 girls. This includes mattresses, blankets, bed sheets, curtains, towels, face cloths, wash basins, buckets, dining utensils, food storage buckets, dining tables and chairs, toilet bowls and a range of other items to make the girls feel home at the Centre. To equip the refuge in this way High Five Club members have supplied £1,872 to MEA.



For more information contact Cheryl@highfiveclub.co.uk