

HIGH FIVE CLUB

changing lives in Africa, £5 at a time

Poverty, FGM & Early Child Marriage - Kenya



Background

Many children in Kenya enjoy freedom and education opportunities, but many Maasai children continue to face the hardships of acute 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 are the genital mutilation (FGM) and early forced marriage of Maasai girls. On top of this many Maasai girls do not get the opportunity to go to school because of poverty.

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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.

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 (bride price) 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.

High Five Club members have previously supported the equipping of the **Maasai Girls Refuge Centre** in Narok with essential furniture and other items to provide a safe environment for girls escaping FGM and early child marriage.



This refuge, run by the Maasai Evangelistic Association (MEA), provides safe shelter for 36 Maasai girls who are afraid to go home in the school holidays because of the very real threat to them of FGM and early child marriage. MEA also sponsors these girls through school, along with other girls in the Maasai community who because of poverty cannot go to school.

High Five Club Support: We have joined hands with MEA to contribute towards the school fees of some of the Maasai girls in the MEA school sponsorship programme. Education is key to ending the cycle of poverty these girls are born into, and with an education these girls are able to stand up for their right not to be forced into early child marriage or undergo FGM. High Five Club members provided £530 to MEA towards their school sponsorship programme in 2021. This support has helped girls like Kanoi, Florence, Soila, Nanshipae and Esther whose stories follow.

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Kanoi (age 15)

Kanoi is one of thirty children born to her father and his four wives. Kanoi's parents are illiterate and unemployed, and the family relies entirely on the income one mother earns selling firewood. Though one of Kanoi's sisters enrolled in Grade 1, three of her older sisters never had the chance to go to school. Instead, they were married off between the ages of 13 and 15. As the only breadwinner in the family, Kanoi's mother struggled to pay her school fees whilst raising children and caring for her husband, who is chronically ill. However, with an MEA sponsorship, Kanoi has avoided the fate of her older sisters and been guaranteed an education—an education that will help her take control of her life and improve the lives of her family members and avoid her parents needing to 'sell' her off for early marriage.



Florence (age 16)

Florence comes from a polygamist family. Her father has 5 wives and 35 children. Florence is the youngest of her mother's 10 children. She did well in Primary School and was accepted to Secondary School along with two of her step sisters. Her father favoured the other two sisters and refused to pay her school fees. He told her to wait her turn, when his situation allows him to pay her school fees. Then the drought came and he lost a lot of cattle and decided to have her undergo FGM and early marriage. Local Chief Caro (a female chief from Ilbissil area) arrived during the negotiation of marriage, just in time to rescue Florence. Chief Caro decided to take her to MEA who accepted her into the sponsorship programme.

Soila (age 12)

Soila has three brothers and one sister. Her mother is the main provider of the family doing laundry work around the town. Soila's father has become a burden to the family with alcoholism and leaves the task to his wife to feed the family. Soila has been in and out of school, as her mother struggled to pay her school fees and has often been sent home from school for lack of school fees. Her mother knows that her children must be educated in order to stop the cycle of poverty in their family. Very determined, she came to the MEA office in Narok, many miles from where they live, at least twice a month for almost a year, to see if there was any opening in MEA's sponsorship programme for Soila. MEA was finally able to accept



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Soila into the MEA family and she is so happy to be able to go back to school.

Nashipae (age 14)

Nashipae comes from a large polygamous family living in extreme poverty. Both her mother and father are illiterate. Her father has four wives and 23 children. He is opposed to education in general, but especially for girls, believing that the sole purpose of a daughter is to bring wealth to her family through a dowry. Two of her sisters were married off in Grade 4. Nashipae was to be married at age 10, but she was rescued by women activists and brought to the MEA Girls Rescue Center. Her sister, Namunyak, was married off at the age of nine, but she was rescued by the same activist group eight months later. Now both sisters are together in school under MEA's sponsorship program and protected from the threat of child marriage.



Esther (age 13)



Esther comes from a very large family. Her father has four wives and Esther has 28 siblings. The family was doing well for many years, but during the long drought they lost all of their livestock and are now unable to put food on the table. Esther's mother started to go to a nearby neighbour asking for food. The neighbour obliged, but eventually had to say she could not continue to feed them. The mother then brought Esther to the girl's boarding school, where her neighbour teaches, and said that she could not take the girl back home because she fears she will starve to death, and could they keep her as a house maid. Esther is a very bright girl, so the teacher she spoke to convinced the school to accept her until she could find a sponsor for her. The teacher came to MEA and Esther was provided with a sponsorship by MEA.

For more information and to sponsor a Maasai girl child to school contact
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