

THE SAMBURU GIRL CHILD



The Killing Silence



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Samburu Women Trust:
The untold stories of women and girls in Samburu community

Silence has played an immense role in entrenching the beading culture among the indigenous Samburu community who occupy Laikipia, Samburu, Marsabit and Isiolo counties.

For many years, beading has been viewed as a normal occurrence in the region even as young naïve girls continue to be subjected to sexual exploitation and forced abortions.

The Killing Silence



Several girls who have escaped from forced marriage and sought refuge at the parish office. But I am yet to meet a girl who has run away from what you people are telling me is sexual slavery

Safe for the locals, many outsiders posted to Ol Donyiro division of Isiolo County to work are not aware that tens of girls are enslaved sexually to the community warriors who have no intention of marrying them.

Interview with priests and teachers reveal that they are ignorant of the beading culture but are well aware of the prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation and early forced marriages.

For instance, Fr James Mureithi has been at the Kipsing Parish for three years now but has no information that girls, some as young as ten are given beads by the warriors. The priest has close interaction with the locals in his pastoral duties.

"I know of several girls who have escaped from forced marriage and sought refuge at the parish office. But I am yet to meet a girl who has run away from what you people are telling me is sexual slavery," said the priest in a recent interview.

The admission by Fr Mureithi about his ignorance on beading only give credence to existence of something akin to an oath of silence despite the harm this practice has been doing to young girls.

To the majority Samburu, the existing silence may not be intentional but having grown up with the practice in their midst, it is viewed as a tradition and nothing worth talking about.

Owing to the fact that the morans sneak at night to have sex with the girls, only the two knows what

transpires in the hut (singira) and until pregnancy occurs, the girl's family keeps away.

Another factor is that beads are part of Samburu beauty and hence one cannot easily pick a girl who has received a bead from a warrior since all adorn the coloured necklaces.

A recent research conducted by Samburu Women Trust (SWT) established that majority of indigenous Samburus are not aware that beading for the purpose of sexual pleasure is an act of human right violation leave alone being against the laws of Kenya.

Within the Samburu heartland of Kipsing and Ol Donyiro areas of Isiolo County which were picked for the pilot project by SWT, it emerged that only a small percentage of the population has attained basic formal education.

But those few enlightened ones have over the years opted to maintain a studious silence making the victims believe that it is part of a culture that ought to be followed without anyone raising a finger.

Beading roots too deep?



Beading is a practice that started slightly over two centuries ago following a fight between elders and the warriors (morans) over women.

Since the adoption of this practice, the indigenous Samburu community believes it has succeeded in taming the energetic warriors from having sexual relationship with married women.

So valued is this practice that community elders who are custodians of culture are not willing to denounce it though they appreciate it has several demerits.

"I better not be around when beading practice is denounced," said a senior elder during the elder's dialogue meeting organized by SWT at Lengurma.

Fear abound among the elders that whoever leads in denouncing beading culture that was dutifully practiced by their forefathers might face a curse.

Their immediate concern is that any elder who denounces this practice automatically loses some privileges like performing some important ceremonies and rituals in the community. This also affects

members of his immediate family in that his boma (homestead) has to be moved to a less privileged location in the Manyatta.

Losing these privileges is painful to the elders given that they would not be accorded any role during importance ceremonies which occur after every age-set groups. These rites of passage are of paramount importance to every Samburu family.

Ironically, elders are not directly involved in the beading process but that does not mean they are not aware when their daughters are beaded by the morans.

Immediately after a girl is presented with the beads by a warrior, her mother moves on to construct the hut called singira where the moran will be making occasional night visits.

Going by their comments, elders are not likely to condemn the beading culture in the near future. The easy route to discourage this practice then remains targeting those directly affected-the girls and the morans.

Engaging a girl as easy as...

To bead a girl, a warrior simply needs to identify a girl probably in the grazing fields or during the evening dance 'ilkuruto'. From that point, he will approach the girl's mother and state his intentions. In case the girl's brothers are morans, they are also informed.

Once the mother and the brothers give a nod, the warrior proceeds to purchase the necklaces which

he hands over to the girl's mother to give to her daughter. The beads are then put around the girl's neck to make that big statement - she now belongs to someone and other men should keep off! The girl's mother is normally rewarded with sugar, tea leaves and later on will be getting backbone meat every time there is a big ceremony called Lmuget where the warrior has to slaughter a bull.

Should the moran decide to end the relationship for reasons like she is found entertaining other warriors, the process is still the same as in beading. The mother is normally involved in the whole process because she is the one who will do the actual beading on the girl and will also build a small Singira (lodging) for the girl next to her house.

Spotting the difference

Regardless of the consequences that await the girls whether knowingly or unknowingly, beaded girls take pride in receiving beads from the warriors. Naturally, every woman is happy when her beauty is noticed especially by the opposite gender. This factor plus the community's appreciation of beautiful beads only makes the girls long to be noticed by the morans. The girls confess that there is nothing wrong with accepting the beads from the morans, after all the community warriors are highly regarded.

While a good number of those interviewed felt there was no major difference between a beaded girl and one who has not been engaged by a moran, there was a general consensus that a beaded girl is perceived to be more beautiful and is accorded more respect in the community.

Women who are opposed to their girls being turned into sexual slaves purchase the beads for them and this underscores the statement that beads uplifts the social status of the youngsters their source notwithstanding. Parents who are unable to purchase the expensive beads for their daughter can only pray silently that a moran comes along.



Breeding grounds for conflict

Once a warrior beads a girl, he is always uneasy and very protective to ward off other. Anytime the moran encounters "his girl" talking to another warrior, chances of a fight erupting are very high. At other times it could just be a rumour which is likely to trigger a fight between the two moran families. As a result, hostility may arise out of two neighbouring families for a simple reason.

As much as the warriors derive sexual pleasures from the girls, many of them confess that they dread her conceiving though they do not use any form of contraceptives.

They are well aware that any child conceived out of this relationship is an outcast and chances of it dying prior or after birth are real. Where women decide to terminate the pregnancy, the girl's father is kept in the dark and will only be informed in case of life-threatening complications.

Morans interviewed said they hate a scenario where a pregnancy occurs and do not support killing of the child but since culture dictates so, they argue there is little they can do.

Beading a girl from one's clan which rules out marriage between the "couple" is something the morans say they are not happy about at personal level. For one, the warrior knows the girl is free to get a suitor for marriage no matter how much he has invested in her.

These investments and support comes in form of clothes, soaps, and any other essential needs. Beads have to be added continuously as the girl grows bigger and taller.

When a beaded girl gets a suitor, the warrior is obliged to buy the Lkaria (red oxide normally applied on the head by the Samburu warriors and on the beads by the Samburu girls). This is another expense which has no benefit to the warrior.

Currently, the maximum number of girls a warrior can bead as per their generation is two whereas in the past generations warriors could bead as many as eight girls at once.



Traumatizing Experience

It is no doubt that girls who are forced to undergo crude abortion or throw away their newborns are traumatized. The girl is never informed beforehand of what awaits her but women sit down and pass the verdict. A day is set when the women pounces on the girl on her way to the river and proceeds to terminate the pregnancy by physically pressing the foetus out of the womb.

The affected girl is caught unawares and endures both psychological and physical pain. For those who are allowed to carry the pregnancy, they must undergo female genital mutilation because the community believes it is unacceptable for an uncircumcised woman to give birth.



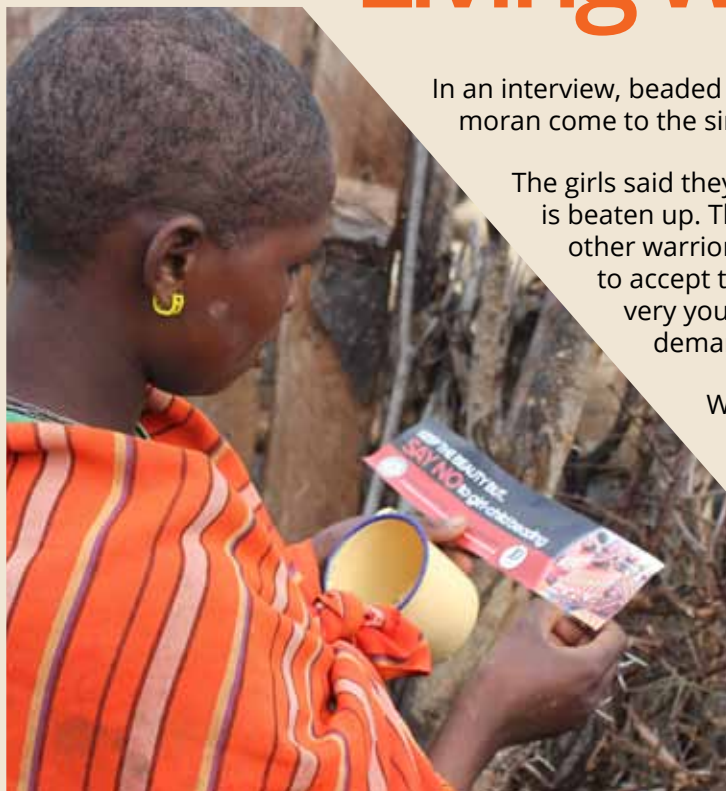
It is not announced to the girl when and if FGM would be carried out and lives in the dark not knowing her fate.

Once the pregnancy has been terminated or the child given out, that issue is concluded and the community is not concerned about healing the physical or psychological pain the minors undergo.

When asked how the community deals with the psychological effects and trauma associated to the killing and giving away of infants who are conceived as a result of girl beading, 15.2 % of those interviewed reported that there was no mechanism put in place by the community to deal with the trauma.

A few of those interviewed said some of the girls are counselled by the women but they could have been talking about the mere explanation given to the girl after losing her baby.

Living with the scars



In an interview, beaded girls stated that they dreaded the moment the moran come to the singira especially for the first time.

The girls said they are forced to have sex and anyone who dare resist is beaten up. They are also battered on suspicion of entertaining other warriors. One girl explained how her mother forced her to accept the beads from the moran and although she is still very young for sex, she knows that day when the warrior will demand for his "right" is coming soon.

While the young girls may get something closer to counselling after a bad experience, the morans caught on the wrong foot by their colleagues live with physical scars on their bodies.

When a moran is suspected of moving with a beaded girl, his colleagues gang up and discipline him in the forest where he is thoroughly beaten and left for dead. Death cases have been reported but those who are lucky to survive never forget the painful experience in their entire lifetime.

Controlling promiscuity

Beading might be a two people affair but its effect is still felt by the community. Cattle raid is a culture that has refused to fade away among the Samburu. They occasionally raid neighbouring communities to steal cattle.

The morans are the ones who plan and execute the raids which at times result to death on both sides. Beading has been known to encourage cattle raids in that after a successful raid, the girls sing praise songs for the brave warriors.

Beaded girls pick out their "husbands" for praise sending a sense of pride to them and jealous to those who have not yet beaded.

Warriors reward the girls through the acquired wealth (cattle) by meeting their needs and adorning

them with bought attires to look more beautiful. The issue of girls praising morans after successful raids was discussed in 1984 and elders expressed displeasure.

However, it still exists to date and morans look forward to a successful raid since it brings about pride and recognition.

Government security agents are known to harass the community as they pursue stolen cattle. During such incidents, the entire community living in a particular area is affected as they sometimes impound cattle denying them economic livelihood.

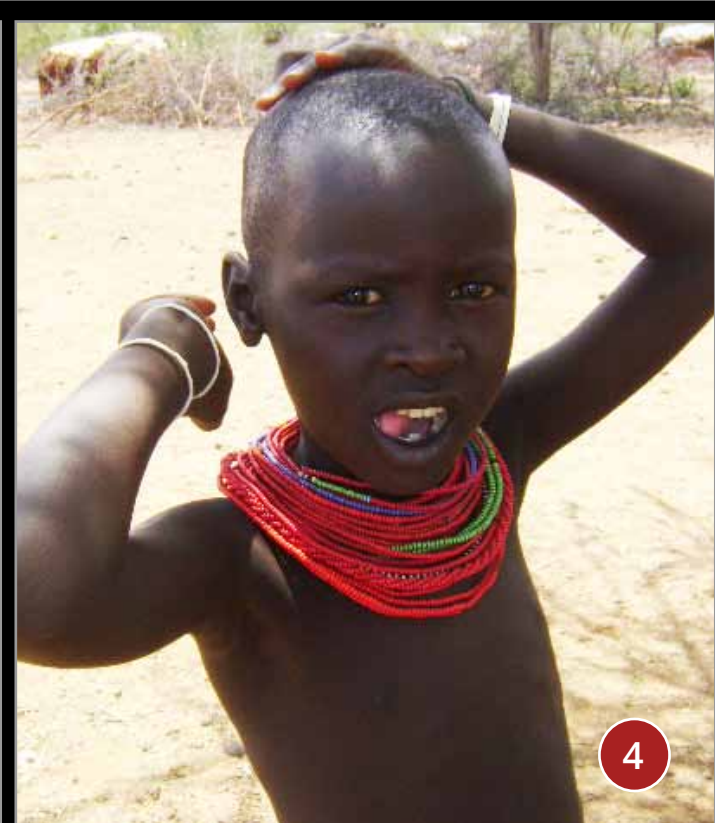
But according to some of the elders, beading has for the last two centuries proved to be very effective in controlling promiscuity among the warriors.

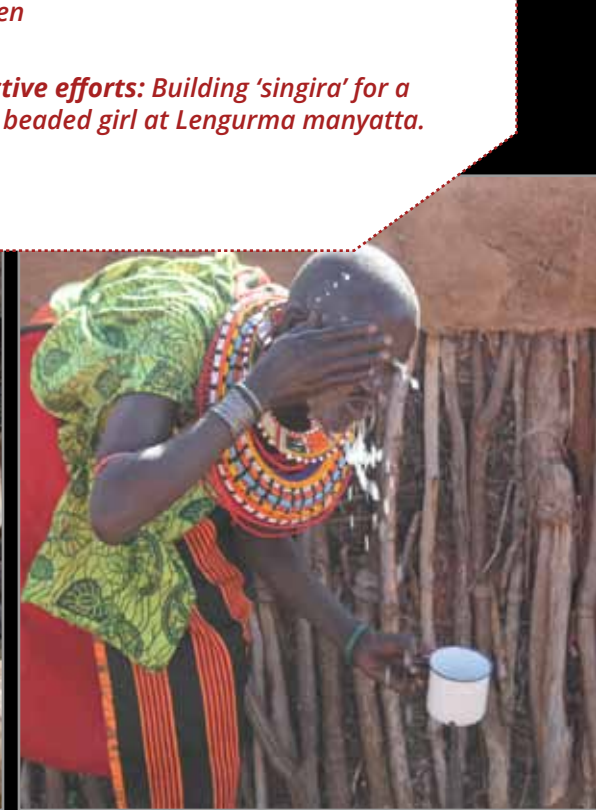
The elders also believe that young girls are warriors' wives and therefore this gives them the reason to allow warriors to bead them as a way of taming their sexual desires.

Beading makes warriors stable and prevents them from getting intimate with elders' wives.

The community believe it is an orientation towards preparation for marriage, a way to discourage girls from having multiple relationships or boyfriends before marriage and a sign of protection from acquiring bad name in the society.







- 1 *A beaded girl holds a colleague*
- 2 *A Samburu woman attends to her daily chores*
- 3 *Raising voices against beading practice*
- 4 *Not sure of what the future holds for her*
- 5 *Solace for beaded girls: Education and protection*
- 6 *Getting the bottom of beading culture at Mokorri village*
- 7 *Margaret Lootaba: rescued two "outcast" children*
- 8 *Collective efforts: Building 'singira' for a newly beaded girl at Lengurma manyatta.*



Reaping from the Mistake

In a beading relationship, a girl is not supposed to get pregnant though there are no contraceptives used. The “couple” is supposed to use natural methods to prevent conception. But this does not always work and the result has been abortion, discarding of newborns and giving out babies to non Samburus.

Some “outcast” babies have found warm welcome in the hands of the Turkana community who live amongst Samburu. For years now, Turkana women have been the sole beneficiaries of the discarded babies who they adopt without following any legal procedure.

Turkana believe that the Samburu is a superior ethnic group and some Turkana families do not mind bringing up the kids as their own. Some who have adopted the children are either barren while others have their own children.

In recent years, some barren Samburu women have adopted these children but they have been segregated by their own community which believes it is a taboo and hence a curse would befall them.

Adopting the Outcasts

Margaret Lotaaba is a physically challenged woman from the Turkana community and has adopted a boy and a girl from different mothers.

“I have only one child of my own and I happened to know when the biological mothers of my adopted children were pregnant. I requested the family not to throw away the newborns but to give me,” says the woman who resides near Ol Donyiro shopping centre.

Though she can pass as a beneficiary of the beading culture, she condemns the practice saying life is precious and no one has the right to take it away except God.

The adopted girl is now a grown up and has children of her own. She calls Lotaaba “mum” and she is not aware of the circumstances that saw her end up in this homestead. Her biological mother could be living in the same village but that does not and probably will never be her concern even if she comes to know the truth.

It is not only women who pick the discarded children. Gabriel Lote has lived at Ol Donyiro for over three decades now. During this time he has personally

assisted over a dozen “outcast” children which he has handed over to family members to bring up.

Mr Lote, a charcoal burner in the area explains that his community rescues the children because they regard a Samburu child highly.

“A Samburu child has chances of becoming wealthy later in life by acquiring many cattle just as it is common with Samburu men.” He adds that his kind gesture towards these unfortunate children is driven by his Christian upbringing.

Majority of the Samburu do not go to church and offer traditional prayers to God. The 15 children he has rescued have all gone to school with some studying up to university level.

The local Catholic mission has also been supporting the rescued children by offering food, clothing and even sponsoring them to get education. Members of the Turkana community get the babies after they are thrown into the forest and other times makes a request to the mother of a beaded girl once the daughter gets pregnant.



Councillor Peter Lekurtut



Councillor Orietta Lemungesi



Councillor Moses Lerosion

Community leaders say...

Three councillors from Ol Donyiro division have become vocal in condemning the beading culture arguing that it is retrogressive and should be discarded.

The civic leaders among them a woman have not shied away and state their opposition in open forums without fear of losing their political seats during election for going against the grain.

Kipsing ward councilor Peter Lekurtut is a former primary school teacher and has been urging the community to enroll both boys and girls in school.

He believes like many others that educating the morans and girls will go a long way in fighting early forced marriages, FGM and beading. Cllr Lekurtut has also

been telling the elders to stop encouraging the warriors to bead young girls and then expect praise songs from the youngsters.

On its part, the Catholic Church has played a role in supporting young girls with those who escape from early forced marriage seeking refuge at the parish offices.

Fr James Mureithi of Kipsing Parish has only a vague idea of what beading involves. He is however aware that young girls with beads are referred to as "girls of the morans".

The priest reveal that a good number of girls have escaped from forced marriage and ended up at Kipsing Academy which is run jointly by the church and the government.

He is happy that girls are slowly learning their rights and defying the community's wishes and gives an example of a eight year girl who sneaked into his pick-up vehicle.

Apparently the girl was herding goats but wanted to go to school and escape from being forced into a suitor at an early age. The Girl is now in school plus others who have been rescued by community based organization like Samburu Women Trust.

The priest says the parish runs a programme which promotes education and the same message is delivered during sermons but language barrier still remains an obstacle.

Education affected



investment but allocating herding duties to boys and girls increase wealth. A girl is ripe for marriage at the age of 12 and the pride prize is several heads of cattle.

With girls out of school, they become easy targets for the morans and once beaded, chances of ever going to school are slim.

Morans do not go to school either and they live in the forest with their main preoccupation being

herding livestock and performing dances at night.

According to the headteacher of Kipsing Primary School Mr. Maina Kiboi, six of his students had been beaded but they escaped. While at the school challenge comes in because their parents refuse to pay

for their upkeep at the boarding school. Unless they are lucky to get sponsors, the girls may soon find themselves back in the villages where they will be well received by the morans who beaded them. At the school, the population of girls is half that of boys, an indication of the high drop out rate for girls.

On a positive note, Mr Kiboi observes that recently he received three morans who enrolled at the school. He attributes this to an awareness campaign being championed by CBOs to enlighten the community on the importance of education.

Child beading institutionalize female illiteracy that erodes women's self esteem. Less than 50 percent of children go to school and many of those, particularly girls drop out after a few years either to herd animals for their parents or to get married. Schools are also far flung with some children walking 18 kilometres every day to the nearest school.

Illiteracy level is high in Ol Donyiro division where livestock is regarded not only as the source of wealth but also livelihood. Children are taught how to take care of goats, sheep and cattle from early age.

To majority of parents, taking a child to school is not a worthy

Ignorant of the Law

Relevant legislations have been put in place to protect the child. They include the Child Act, law on sexual offences, FGM act and compulsory free primary education. But in Ol Donyiro division, the locals are either ignorant or they choose to ignore the law. Here culture and traditions has to be adhered to.

During a recent research on child beading, it emerged that 73 percent of the sampled respondents were not aware of any legislation that protect the child rights while 26 percent of the respondents had some basic knowledge on laws that protect child rights like the right to education and the law against female genital mutilation.

Terrain of the region is an impediment to enforcement of the law with the police stations located about 100 kilometres apart. Children officials based in Isiolo Town are aware of acts of child right violation but distance and unreliable means of transport hinders them from monitoring the situation.

According to an assistant chief at Kipsing Henry Lesokoyo, there have been a number of convictions especially on parents who abet FGM and



Assistant chief Henry Lesokoyo

early forced marriages. However, this has not stopped the deep-rooted culture since they have resorted to doing it silently. Government officials agree there is

need to change the approach if the war against beading, early forced marriage and FGM is to be won.

"I now prefer applying civic education to jailing the offenders so as not to encourage defiance," says the administrator.

Mr Lesokoyo notes that poverty also contributes to beading where the family prefers a girl being adorned by the beads from the warrior instead of her staying with few beads given by her mother.

The chief terms beading as an act of child prostitution which has to be fought from all fronts.

Mr Lesokoyo's views are echoed by OI Donyiro assistant chief Lekula who argues that beading cannot be stopped by firm application of the country's laws but through sustained civic education especially to those living deep in the interior. He is also on the opinion that night classes ought to be established in the area so that herders can attend after work.

Councillor Moses Lerosion is angered by the killing of newborns saying women who force the girls to procure abortion should be treated as murders.

To fight illiteracy and create awareness of the country's laws, the civic leader supported calls to put up schools where those who are busy looking after cattle during the day can attend (Lchokuti Schools).



FRIENDLY APPROACH

The UN Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC), one of the most widely signed and ratified international conventions, grants all children their rights in relation to education, health, survival and development and protection from sexual and other forms of exploitation.

This Convention requires that the best interests of the child should be promoted at all times. The continuous practice of girl beadings undermines a number of the clauses of this convention including the following:

- To take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children (Article 24/3)
- To respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, color, sex, language (Article 2/1)
- The right to education (Article 28)
- To ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child (Article 6/2)
- To take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and education measures to protect the

child from all forms of physical or mental violence (Art 19) and from all forms of sexual exploitation (Article 34)

Samburu Women Trust (SWT) notes that nearly all the above children rights have been violated through entrenched beading practice despite the country being signatory to the convention. The country has also put in place several legislation all aimed at protecting the girl child.

However, SWT believes that a homegrown solution will go a long way in addressing the problem rather than jailing the offenders.

The trust has been engaging the community in dialogue in an effort to encourage it recommends ways of ending girl child beading. In this regard, it has held meetings with community elders, warriors, beaded girls, and women, political and religious leaders as well as held talks with surviving victims of abortion and those who adopt the discarded children.

The various groups have given their views and how they feel about this practice and if it is likely to end soon.

After talking to the various groups and conducting a research, it emerged that the community is not likely to call a meeting one day and declare this practice dead. The only route is to let it die naturally through awareness campaign and promotion of formal education for both the boy and the girl child. It has been observed that moranism is a practice held close to the heart by the community but it has also been noted that educated morans do not bead the girls and neither would they like their daughters to be beaded.

One of the major breakthroughs in the SWT anti girl-beading campaign is that a culture of openness has developed. The community now talks about the subject candidly including the "proud morans".

Awareness campaign is to be carried through all form of mass media including screening documentaries on beading deep in the interior. The documentaries will have a voiceover in Samburu language so that everyone can understand.

Other Initiatives



Life skills Development Centre

Here the girls will be taught entrepreneurship skills which may include making necklaces, bracelets and tailoring. Other skills to be explored include milk processing techniques where such products like cheese and ghee can be made. These skills will help them to be self reliance and would be a major step towards empowering women economically. Presently, women have no voice and men control all the family wealth.

Beads Trust Fund

Beauty of the beads is something that the Samburu community will continue to appreciate for many years to come. It then means that girls will continue to wear these ornaments whether they are from their parents or the morans.

Setting up a trust fund to purchase the beads to give to the girls will fill a gap normally exploited by the community warriors.

Shelter Home

Currently, there is no place where pregnant girls can run to even if they are aware they would be subjected to crude abortion. Setting up a home where affected girls can seek shelter will ensure that the "unwanted children" grow up and lead a normal life with their real mothers.

The shelter home would also offer formal education to the girls. It would also encourage social change since the community will see the "outcast children" and their mothers grow normally without getting affected by the curse.

Resource/ Documentation Centre

At this centre, all information regarding Samburu culture would be documented. Information on beading would also be stored and availed to researchers on request at a fee. Equipping the centre with computers would turn into an Information and Communication Technology hub. Locals will have a chance to learn computer skills and keep in touch with the world through use of the Internet.

Heroes & Heroines



Mama Riziki

For many years, the culture of beading has been going on among the indigenous Samburu community. The distinctive thing about it is that nobody have dared to raise a voice against it including the community elite until **Samburu Women Trust** stepped in. Now locals and community leaders are coming out to give their honest feelings.

One of the breaks through made during this campaign is that women who were forced to abort are coming out to share their painful experience with the world. Without their confession, many may doubt that such incidents happen under the cover of darkness. We salute **Mrs. Mepukori Lekula** for her courage to tell the world how the crude abortion is carried out on those unlucky to fall pregnant after being beaded.

There are also those Samburu women who have defied the odds and adopted the rejected children without fear of the dreaded curse. They have been branded outcast as villagers whisper that it is a matter of days before something bad happens to them. But as the community continues to wait, these women continue to bring up the children unperturbed of their community's opinion, **Ms Hellen**

Leisono popularly called **Mama Riziki** deserves a part on the back.

Still in the same community there are those who have despised beading and have come forward to demonstrate this through action. One of those women is **Ms. Mamsaar Lemeriwias**. She hated the practice since childhood and was never beaded. However, she appreciates the

beauty of the beads and to adorn her daughters she sells her own goats and cows and buys beads for her girls so that they cannot be beaded by warriors.

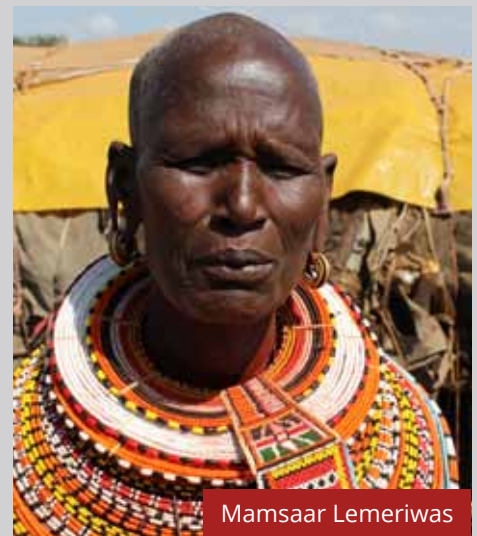
Elected leaders are always cautious when voicing their concern on something held dear by their community for fear of losing their seats. But three councilors from the region have been in the forefront advocating against the beading culture. Government officials on the ground- chiefs and their assistance have equally been supportive.

The support given by the elders and the hand of cooperation extended by the community warriors through giving honest views on beading deserve appreciation.

Finally, our gratitude goes to the development partners for their support to this worthy project aimed at transforming lives of the indigenous Samburu community. It is envisaged that in a few years to come, noticeable change will have occurred and the Samburu girl child will have been liberated and empowered and this will mark a milestone in giving women a voice to speak openly on issues that affect them.



Mepukori Lekula



Mamsaar Lemeriwias



Noonkuta Leruso

IF YOU SHARE OUR CONCERN ABOUT THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF GIRLS AND WOMEN AMONG THE SAMBURU COMMUNITY, HELP US GIVE A VOICE TO THOSE WHO CANNOT SPEAK OUT FOR THEMSELVES.



If you share our concern about the health and well-being of girls and women among the samburu community, help us give a voice to those who cannot speak out for themselves.

SGC

The Samburu Girl Child Magazine

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MAY - NOV 2012 | ISSUE 02



EDITORIAL CONSULTANT - MWANGI NDIRANGU, +254 (0) 722 148 028 | **DESIGN** - Pictomax Media Services