



STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Women leaders join in Mara, Tanzania to call for an end to GBV



Photo courtesy of HPI/Tanzania staff.

Mama Maria Nyerere, former First Lady of Tanzania, called on traditional elders in Tanzania to work within their communities to reduce discrimination against women, particularly GBV.

MARA, Tanzania – Mama Maria Nyerere, the widow of Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere, Tanzania’s founder and first president, spoke out against gender-based violence (GBV) and female genital mutilation (FGM) to open the 3rd Women Leaders Conference on Gender-Based Violence, held 4–6 April 2013 in Mara, Tanzania.

Revered by national and international leaders as “The Mother of the Nation,” Mama Nyerere is a passionate advocate for increased rights for women and girls. She runs support programmes in health and nutrition and for orphans and vulnerable children in her community. Mama Nyerere joined other women leaders and local women at the conference, many of whom have experienced physical and sexual violence, to advocate for an end to GBV and develop action plans to invest further in women and girls. The meeting of 130 participants targeted the Mara region of Tanzania and brought together government leaders and nongovernmental organisations. “Our times were different, there was not much openness, nor were there opportunities like those that exist today, so women must seize the opportunities and move forward,” Mama Nyerere remarked at the conference.

GBV is one of the most pervasive and widespread human rights violations in the world, and stems from persistent gender inequalities. The USAID-funded Health Policy Initiative in Tanzania (HPI/Tanzania), encourages civil society engagement on GBV issues and works with leaders and influential persons like Mama Nyerere to advocate for changes in laws, policies, and regulations for the scaling up of response towards family planning, reproductive health, HIV, and GBV. At the conference, Mama Nyerere explained how cultural practices, such as FGM and child marriage, continue the cycle of discrimination against women and further perpetuate GBV. Mama Nyerere called for “traditional elders to help beseech communities to refrain from practices that discriminate against women.”

The Mara region of Tanzania, the site of the conference and Nyerere’s hometown, has a high prevalence of GBV: 66.4 per cent of women ages 15–49 have experienced physical violence since age 15, and 32.5 per cent have experienced sexual violence.ⁱ Mara also has the highest prevalence of FGM in Tanzania, a traditional practice often celebrated as a rite of passage to womanhood. Forty per cent

The Women Leaders Conference on Gender-Based Violence was organised by HPI/Tanzania in partnership with the Tanzania Rural Women and Children Development Foundation (TARWOC).

The objectives of the conference were to bring together women leaders and girls' representatives to share experiences, empower women leaders by giving them information and knowledge, and forge strategic partnerships to create momentum for change in GBV prevention and resources in Tanzania.

of women ages 15–19 in Mara have undergone FGM, which involves cutting in the genital area and can have serious health consequences, including haemorrhaging, infection, complications during childbirth, and even death.ⁱⁱ Despite legislation that makes it illegal in Tanzania, more than 5,000 girls ages 9–13 underwent FGM in 2012.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mama Magreth Momanyi, a former practitioner of FGM, shared her powerful story with conference participants and spoke of the internal conflict she faced in performing FGM as a traditional birth attendant. Eventually the harm she saw forced her to lay down her tools, despite risking ostracism for her decision. Mama Magreth explained that ending the practice would have to start with the community. She noted that FGM practitioners often command status and respect in their communities, and would need an alternative source of income to support them if they abandon this practice. Conference participants also discussed poverty as an incentive for FGM practitioners to secure a source of income and as a factor contributing to child marriage. Thus, Mama Magreth argued that empowering women to be financially independent and gathering a collective voice is an important step in changing these harmful traditions.

At the conference, Mama Magreth connected with local women leaders and helped develop action plans for six districts to support women's rights and self-sustainability. Leaders at the conference also focused on improving education opportunities for girls and sensitising communities on the effects of harmful traditional practices such as FGM. Mama Magreth echoed Mama Nyerere's statement that "The subjugation of women is the underlying cause for all these rites." Her story highlights the need for a combined approach to empowering women and girls. Mama Magreth noted that more and more people in her community have stopped taking their children for FGM, and that traditional and political leaders are beginning to understand and join forces against the practice. She said, "We still have a long way to go, but at least we are doing something."

ⁱNational Bureau of Statistics (NBS) [Tanzania] and ICF Macro. 2011. "Tanzania Demographic and Health Survey 2010." Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: NBS and ICF Macro. Retrieved from [http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FR243/FR243\[24\]June2011.pdf](http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FR243/FR243[24]June2011.pdf).

ⁱⁱIbid.

ⁱⁱⁱ*Citizen*, 10 January 2013. The *Citizen* is a newspaper published by Mwananchi Communications.