



**EXPANDING
SOCIAL
PROTECTION**

The Senior Citizens Grant contributed to Rebecca Lotukumoi's abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation





Lotukumoi and some of her grandchildren in front of her house.

Back in the day, Rebecca Chepasanyak Lotukumoi was highly respected and regarded in her community. She received gifts and money for her work. “I was a surgeon with such gifted hands,” she says. “In the high season, I could work on up to 20 girls a day.”

Lotukumoi is a former, and now reformed “surgeon.” She was known in her village in Loburin, Kamkon in Amudat Town council, as one of the best “surgeons.” She says she was famous because girls who she circumcised, never got post-surgery complications. Besides, they married soon after healing- an attribute culturally considered a blessing from Lotukumoi’s hands.

For this reason, during the peak circumcision season, many parents brought their daughters to Lotukumoi for “cutting.” Her fame brought clients from as far as Losam in West Pokot in neighbouring Kenya. From her trade she earned up to Ushs 360,000 (about US\$ 100) each season. Every time a girl she circumcised got married and dowry was paid (circumcised girls in this community attracted higher bride price, in the past up to 60 heads of cattle), she would be given gifts, for her circumcision skill and blessings.

Lotukumoi comes from the Pokot group of people who live in Amudat district in Eastern Uganda. The tribe straddles across the border between Uganda and Kenya. Among this community, female circumcision (female genital mutilation (FGM)) has been a strong part of their culture. The practice is

a passage ritual in this community. Every girl who completes FGM is deemed to have graduated into full womanhood; the logic being that if she can bear the pains associated with FGM, then she can go through all pains- including child birth.

The age for FGM is between 5-11 years. Girls who are about 12 years or older are deemed too old to circumcise. As such when girls of say 10 years went under the knife, they were considered to have matured into women, and were therefore married off, early. Necessarily in this community, FGM came with its twin problem of early child marriages.

On the other hand, girls and women who didn’t go through FGM were despised and ostracised in the community as cowards, and called “girls” (even if they are advanced in age). They were generally looked down upon, called names and maligned in different ways.

Ironically, FGM practice is weaved around dignity and respect for the woman, where those who undergo it are ostensibly given recognition and a high status in society, while those who didn’t receive a low status.

For this reason, girls are coerced (sometimes psychologically) to undergo the practice with devastating consequences. The practice confines women’s sexual and child-bearing functions to pain, for life. Experience shows that girls who have gone through FGM face serious problems at child birth, and many times they lose their and/or their children’s lives while giving birth. Women also

report that after FGM, sexual intercourse becomes unbearably painful. Polygamy is a common practice in this community, and most times the women ask the men to take on another/other women, if only that can relieve and reduce their encounters with their husbands.

In 2012, Lotukumoi was enrolled on the Senior Citizens Grant, a social protection Programme implemented by the Government of Uganda, under the Ministry of Gender, Labour & Social Development, with support from Irish Aid and UKAid. Under this Programme older persons receive a monthly social grant of UShs 25,000 (about US\$8).

"Before I started receiving that money, I used to move from place to place; I didn't even have a house," the 67 year old says. She attributes her abandonment of practising FGM to three factors. Firstly, her friend, Chenakoi, herself a victim of FGM gone bad, which led her to childlessness until much later in life. Chenakoi is a member of the local community initiative, Community Based Action Teams (COMBAT) against FGM, formed by the National Women's Association of Uganda (NAWOU), with financial support from the Government of Ireland.

The second and related reason is her going to church and listening to religious leaders preaching against FGM. The third factor she says, is the Senior Citizens Grant. "This money for old people provided me alternative income, so it was easy for me to leave the practice. If this money was not there, probably it would have been difficult for me

to completely leave the practice," she says.

With the Senior Citizens Grants, she says, she has learnt to plan how to use her money. She has built a semi-permanent house, compared to her fellow villagers who live in mud and wattle huts. She also uses it to hire labour to work on her farm which has improved her agricultural productivity. From her savings from the grants, she has bought two goats. She is also able to look after five children still under her care, 4 of whom are her grandchildren from her deceased daughter, and one her own last born.

My last daughter has benefited from this conversion. "I refused her to be cut and I have sent her to school. That's why she is not staying here with me. Because if she stays here, her brothers will force to marry. I want her to stay and continue at school. Her future is in education, not in circumcision and getting married. If I educate her she will be of better help to me in future," Lotukumoi says.

Through the Senior Citizens Grant, along with other social interventions like local level initiatives by NAWOU, religious institutions, the anti-FGM law, Lotukumoi has not only stopped mutilating other people's daughters, her own has not only survived the dangerous practice and a possible early marriage, she has also got opportunity to go to school, which hopefully will open her to a world of life opportunities.

Compiled by Simon E. Omoding from interviews with Rebecca Lotukumoi and other community members, with translations by Merab Alosikin



Lotukumoi (R) and some of her grandchildren with her friend Chenakoi (L).

Note: COMBATs is a village level initiative of community mobilisers to fight against FGM in the Karamoja region in eastern Uganda. COMBATs was initiated by the National Association of Women Organisations of Uganda (NAWOU)- a women NGO network, with funding from the Government of Ireland.

The Senior Citizens Grants is a social grant programme implemented by Uganda's Ministry of Gender, Labour & Social Development under its Expanding Social Protection Programme. Under this scheme, older persons receive a monthly grant of US\$ 25,000 (US\$8). The social protection programme is funded by the Government of Uganda, Irish Aid and UKAid.



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