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Female Genital Mutilation (FGM/C) in Garissa and Isiolo, Kenya: Impacts on Education and Livelihoods in the Context of Cultural Norms and Food Insecurity

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Abstract: This article explores the complex challenges of combating Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in the counties of Garissa and Isiolo (Kenya) amidst environmental stressors, particularly drought and food insecurity. FGM persists as a deeply entrenched form of violence against women and girls (VAWG), profoundly rooted in social and traditional beliefs. This practice is often justified by cultural norms but leads to severe physical, psychological, and social harm, perpetuating cycles of gender inequality. Framing FGM as VAWG prioritises its recognition as a violation of human rights and underscores the need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and rights-based interventions. In addition, this study investigates how these challenges intersect and complicate efforts to address FGM, focusing on two counties in Kenya known for their adherence to this practice. The research methodology employs a longitudinal panel study design, drawing on in-depth narrative interviews with community narrators. A follow-up data collection was planned after six months to monitor changes over time. Furthermore, this research examines the impact of environmental stressors, such as drought and food insecurity, on educational access, resource availability, and community responses to interventions aimed at eradicating FGM. Findings reveal a complex interplay between cultural norms, economic hardships, and the perpetuation of FGM. Drought and food insecurity exacerbate vulnerabilities within communities, diverting attention and resources away from efforts to challenge ingrained practices like FGM. The article underscores the need for holistic approaches that integrate anti-FGM initiatives into broader resilience-building strategies. It emphasises community engagement, culturally sensitive education, and economic empowerment as pivotal elements in addressing FGM within the context of environmental stressors. Recommendations include mobile education units, community-based empowerment programs, and partnerships with local leaders to foster sustainable change. This case study contributes valuable insights into the challenges of combatting FGM in the face of environmental stressors, shedding light on the intricacies that hinder progress. It advocates for a comprehensive, context-specific approach that recognises and navigates the intersecting challenges posed by cultural norms and environmental crises in the fight against FGM.

Keywords: female genital mutilation; drought; cultural norms; food insecurity; cultural practices

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1. Introduction

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a pervasive and harmful form of violence against women and girls with severe health, psychological, and social consequences for women and girls. Globally, over 200 million girls and women have undergone FGM, which is predominantly practiced in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia [1]. In Kenya, despite legal prohibitions, FGM persists, particularly in certain counties like Isiolo and Garissa, where cultural beliefs and social pressures strongly support the practice [2]. Isiolo (66%) and Garissa counties (82.5%) have some of the highest FGM prevalence rates in Kenya according to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) [3]. These rates are driven by gender inequality. Gender inequalities are expressed not just in the practice of FGM itself but in the broader context of women's limited opportunities for education, economic independence, and participation in decision-making. This issue often stems from societal norms that view women and girls as inferior or subordinate to men, with FGM seen as a way to control women's sexuality and maintain patriarchal structures. In both of these counties, as in many parts of Kenya, FGM is intricately tied to gender inequality, with the practice serving to reinforce women's roles as wives and mothers, limiting their autonomy and personal freedom [4]. In addition, there are cultural and social pressures to conform to these community norms. FGM is also deeply linked to the notion of "marriageability," which is a form of gendered economic and social value. Families often see FGM as a necessary step for daughters to gain social standing, securing a marriage and, in some cases, enhancing the family's honour [5].

Efforts to combat FGM in Isiolo and Garissa include educational campaigns, legal enforcement, and community-based interventions aimed at changing attitudes and behaviours towards the practice [6]. These interventions have shown varying degrees of success, highlighting the need for sustained and culturally sensitive approaches.

The impact of cultural, economic, social and climate induced challenges associated with addressing FGM needs to be investigated in order to understand why FGM programs may not reach the desired outcome. This position is supported by Dawson et al. [7], who argue that FGM is a cultural issue that requires a multidimensional approach, similar to how tackling drought impacts involves multiple sectors. Droughts lead to water shortages, affecting hygiene, sanitation, and daily life, necessitating collaboration among governments, NGOs, and communities. Likewise, eradicating FGM demands coordinated efforts to ensure cultural change and protect women's health and rights. Efforts to address these social issues require collaboration among government bodies, NGOs, local communities, and individuals to ensure a sustainable and resilient future despite the challenges posed by drought. In addition, McGavock and Novak [8] argue that the link between FGM and drought might not seem immediately evident. FGM is a harmful practice deeply rooted in cultural, social, and sometimes religious beliefs. It is performed for various reasons, including cultural traditions, social acceptance, or the preservation of virginity and marriageability. However, certain situations, including times of drought or extreme economic hardship, can exacerbate the practice of FGM in certain communities.

This paper involves reviewing studies on resilience strategies, adaptive measures, and interventions implemented to mitigate the effects of drought and food shortages, particularly those aimed at improving food security and livelihoods in Garissa and Isiolo. In addition, the review analyses the effectiveness of current anti-FGM interventions and programs in the context of environmental and socioeconomic challenges. Duguma et al. [9] assert that it is important to examine government policies, international interventions, and governance structures addressing drought-related food insecurity. Examining policies and approaches helps identify strengths and weaknesses in current approaches, ensures coordinated and comprehensive action, and promotes the development of resilient and

sustainable solutions for affected communities. Investigating how climate change impacts agricultural practices and contributes to drought, affecting food production and availability, is also important.

Women and girls experience complications arising from FGM might face greater obstacles in receiving medical attention due to limited resources during drought periods [10]. Drought often results in increased vulnerabilities, especially among marginalized groups. Women and girls who have undergone FGM might face exacerbated health risks due to weakened immune systems and limited access to healthcare during drought-induced crises.

In some communities, FGM can be tied to traditional coping mechanisms, particularly during periods of crises such as drought or economic hardship. This practice, in such contexts, is often seen not only as a cultural norm but as a means to safeguard the economic and social standing of families in difficult times. For example, during times of severe drought, communities face increased poverty, which may make it harder to support all family members. In these situations, the social and economic pressures to ensure a girl's marriageability become even more pronounced, with families sometimes seeing marriage as the only way to ensure the economic security and future of their daughters. FGM becomes a precursor to marriage, as it is often a requirement for a girl to be eligible for marriage within these communities [11].

In communities where traditional practices, including FGM, are strongly tied to cultural identity and survival strategies, a crisis may amplify these practices. In these settings, girls may be married off at younger ages, often to older men, as families seek to reduce the number of dependents they need to care for. The practice of FGM in such contexts becomes a coping mechanism, ensuring that girls are seen as 'marriageable' and hence contributing to the family's survival during tough economic times [12].

An example from Somalia and the broader Horn of Africa region illustrates this phenomenon. In times of drought or famine, families facing food insecurity may prioritise marrying off girls to wealthier families, where dowries are seen as vital economic support. The practice of FGM, as a necessary rite of passage, often accompanies these transactions, reinforcing the deep links between gender inequality, economic pressures, and cultural practices like FGM [13].

The literature consistently highlights the link between crises (such as drought or economic difficulty) and the increased risk of child marriage and FGM. For example, a study by Plan International in the Horn of Africa noted that economic hardship, worsened by climate change and drought, has exacerbated the practice of FGM, as families face pressure to marry off daughters early to ensure survival. This further reinforces the cycle of gender inequality and poverty [14].

While the link between FGM and drought might not be direct or universally applicable across all regions, understanding the broader context and intersecting factors is crucial [15]. The intersection of FGM, drought, and food insecurity reveals complex dynamics that impact vulnerable communities, particularly women and girls, in multifaceted ways. In regions affected by drought and food insecurity, the practice of FGM, according to Esho et al. [16], can exacerbate health risks for women and girls. Limited access to healthcare services due to drought-related challenges can increase the severity of complications arising from FGM. In addition, drought and food insecurity often result in limited access to adequate nutrition [17].

FGM might be deeply embedded in cultural practices within communities facing drought and food insecurity. Understanding these cultural norms and their adaptations in times of crisis is crucial for interventions addressing both FGM- and food-related challenges. Moreover, the practice of FGM is often linked to deeply entrenched gender norms and roles. Drought and food insecurity can exacerbate existing gender disparities, impacting

women's agency and decision-making abilities concerning their health, including FGM-related matters [18].

Addressing these interlinked issues requires holistic interventions that consider the interconnectedness of health, nutrition, gender dynamics, and community resilience. The paper argues that integrated programs that tackle both FGM and food insecurity can be more effective in promoting sustainable development and women's well-being. Understanding the intersection of these issues is essential for designing comprehensive interventions that consider the broader context, cultural sensitivities, and the diverse needs of affected communities. It is worth mentioning that FGM is illegal in Kenya under the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act [19], which criminalizes the practice and imposes severe penalties. Despite this, enforcement remains a challenge in regions with strong cultural adherence [11,20].

The introduction of drought and food insecurity as contextual factors in this study aims to illuminate the complex and intertwined nature of challenges faced by communities striving to end FGM. This research is guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore how drought and food insecurity influence the persistence and prevalence of FGM in these regions;
2. To analyse the effectiveness of current anti-FGM interventions and programs in the context of environmental and socioeconomic challenges.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Design

This article employs qualitative research methods, including interviewing narrators to elucidate the intricate interplay between cultural norms, environmental adversities, and the perpetuation of FGM. Semi-structured interviews were deployed as a data collection tool for this research as they allow interviewees to share personal experiences and insights freely. In addition, interviews are an incredibly valuable methodology for exploring the complexities of navigating cultural norms in the fight against FGM. According to [21], semi structured interviews offer a human-centred approach, enabling a deeper understanding of the cultural complexities surrounding FGM. Integrating these perspectives into this article enriched the discourse and fostered more nuanced solutions in the fight against FGM. The focus was on understanding perspectives rather than imposing preconceived notions.

As this was a longitudinal panel-based data collection, a follow-up study was planned after six months to track the same individuals for changes in attitudes. Longitudinal panel-based data collection involves repeated observations of the same participants over time to analyse changes and long-term trends. Longitudinal panel studies are essential for understanding dynamics over time, establishing causal relationships, informing policy decisions, providing personalized insights, and addressing biases. They offer a comprehensive view of changes and developments within a sample group, contributing significantly to research and decision-making in various fields.

2.2. Ethical Consideration

This research went through a rigorous ethical process by the University of Portsmouth Humanities ethical review process and was approved. Informed consent was sought which ensures that interviewees understand the purpose and potential outcomes of their participation. The data was anonymized so as to safeguard the identities and personal information of interviewees. In addition, the researcher took note of cultural sensitivity as a way of respecting cultural nuances and avoid imposing external judgments. This was done through incorporating local perspectives and respecting cultural nuances. This approach aimed to avoid imposing external judgments, ensuring that interventions were contextually

appropriate and accepted by the communities involved. This method acknowledges the importance of cultural context in developing effective and sustainable solutions.

2.3. Study Sample

2.3.1. Data Collection

Who are the Narrators and how did we select them?

Narrators were selected by ActionAid one of the community implementation partner as part of the intervention/programme. This data was collected as part of a wider programme. These narrators included school age girls and boys, mothers and fathers. The data for the first was collected between June and July 2023, whilst the data for the second round was collected between February and March 2024. There were forty-five community narrators aged between fifteen to thirty-five years selected from Isiolo and Garissa. Twenty-two of these were women whilst twenty-three were men. Twenty-four of the narrators completed primary education, fourteen completed secondary education whilst seven were educated to college level.

The narrators were selected as they provide insight into or are actively involved in anti-FGM campaigns. There was also a diverse pool of narrators representing various perspectives and experiences. Including diverse narrators ensures a representative range of voices and experiences, avoiding the risk of singular or biased perspectives. Bradley [22] asserts that narrators should come from diverse backgrounds, offering a range of perspectives on cultural norms and the complexities of combating FGM. They might include survivors, activists, community leaders, healthcare professionals, or others involved in the fight against FGM, providing a holistic view.

The role of the narrators was to listen and observe and note any events focused on promoting gender equity and ending FGM. They were asked to bring a heightened sense of awareness to normal day to day interactions in order to register if anything has changed e.g., topics of discussion, concerns shared, activities that occurred that seemed to have influenced new thinking and behaviour. These insights were drawn from the narrator's day to day interactions. Narrators were asked not to go out of their normal peer and family network and were told to stop immediately if they felt unsafe.

Interviewing narrators who have direct experience or first-hand knowledge of the issue of FGM is vital for creating a comprehensive and authentic portrayal in an article on navigating cultural norms in the fight against FGM. This includes authenticity and real-life perspectives through insightful testimonies. Narrators, according to Palm et al. [23] provide first-hand narratives, offering authentic and personal insights into the lived experiences related to FGM.

Because narrators understand the context, their stories help contextualise the cultural, social, and emotional dimensions surrounding FGM, allowing a deeper comprehension of the issue. In addition, narrators humanise the issue by sharing personal stories, making it relatable and impactful for readers. Narratives evoke emotions, fostering empathy and understanding, which is crucial for engaging audiences.

The insights of the narrators according to Casteleyn [24] aid in understanding the challenges and strategies required to navigate cultural norms while combating FGM respectfully. These narrators can also be helpful in identifying effective interventions or community-led initiatives that effectively address FGM within cultural contexts. Their experiences often inform practical recommendations and strategies for interventions that respect cultural norms. Gerrig and Mumper [25] asserts that narratives resonate deeply with readers, leaving a lasting impact and potentially motivating action or change. Involving narrators from affected communities can foster community engagement, trust, and collaboration in addressing the issue. Incorporating the voices and experiences of narra-

tors into the article strengthens its credibility, authenticity, and effectiveness in portraying the complexities of navigating cultural norms in the fight against FGM. In addition, the research team comprised experienced qualitative researchers with backgrounds in gender studies, public health, and anthropology. Each team member disclosed their position and potential biases to ensure transparency and these were considered and noted. Researchers established rapport with narrators through community engagement and trust-building activities. Prior to the interviews, researchers explained the study's purpose and their role, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation.

The qualitative researchers (interviewers) were recruited by Action Aid through their networks. Some of the researchers had previously worked with the partner in different projects. They were trained by the monitoring and evaluation team from the lead partner. During the interviews, the researchers used prompt sheets. The prompt sheets were designed for each context and updated for new rounds of narrator meetings. These prompt sheets were created based on the key themes and findings from the last round of analysis. The researchers interviewed the narrators every six months. The narrators were interviewed individually and the transcript translated into English by the researcher.

An interview script was meticulously developed to ensure that the research was culturally sensitive, relevant, and comprehensive. It is worth noting that a semi-structured interview tool, consisting of open-ended questions was used. It aimed to gather nuanced insights into the complex interplay of cultural norms, environmental challenges, and anti-FGM efforts in Garissa and Isiolo counties. This careful preparation helped facilitate meaningful and respectful dialogue with participants, ultimately enriching the research findings.

2.3.2. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was deployed for data analysis and reporting so as to identify recurring themes and patterns across interviews. This was also important as it helped highlight diverse perspectives through showcasing varied viewpoints to provide a comprehensive understanding.

3. Results and Discussion

These themes reflect the complex interplay of economic, social, cultural, and environmental factors influencing the practice of FGM in Garissa and Isiolo counties. The insights drawn from these themes highlight the need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and multi-dimensional strategies to address FGM effectively.

3.1. How Drought and Food Insecurity Influence the Persistence and Prevalence of FGM

The data from Garissa and Isiolo in Kenya reveal the complex impact of drought on communities, emphasizing the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and cultural issues. Participants highlighted how the lack of rain led to migrations and violent conflicts over limited resources, which, in turn disrupted community cohesion and the ability to address social and cultural practices, including FGM.

For instance, a male participant, 26 years, from Isiolo mentioned, "Lack of enough rains led to migrations which denied people enough time to come together to discuss on how to change their views on social and cultural issues in the community". Similarly, a female participant (25 years) from Isiolo noted the violent conflicts over scarce resources: "Due to shortage of rains, there's limited pasture hence people shed a lot of bloods during raids whereby people fight for the few pastures available".

This disruption heavily impacts women and girls, as previous studies have shown. Participants from Garissa echoed these findings. For example, a female participant (25 years

from Garissa) stated, "*Lack of nutrition for elderly, pregnant women, and lactating mothers because they cannot be walking long distances looking for food and water*", and "*Displacement of families in search of safety, water, and pasture forces girls to drop out of school*". This aligns with Walker et al. [26], who argue that climate-related challenges exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, particularly for girls and women, impacting their educational opportunities and access to healthcare.

Interestingly, participants demonstrated an awareness of the environmental causes of their challenges and suggested solutions. For instance, a female participant (28 years) from Isiolo mentioned the negative effects of deforestation: "*Cutting down trees without replacing them has made negative effects which includes the impact on the water cycle, resulting in the flora and fauna being destroyed*". This aligns with Anderegg et al. [27], who discuss the broader impacts of deforestation on global warming and local climates. In times of economic and environmental stress, communities often reinforce traditional practices as a way of maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity.

The impact of climate change on education and social dynamics is profound. Participants from Garissa noted that the death of livestock due to drought leads to poverty, which in turn causes girls to drop out of school and increases the prevalence of early marriages and pregnancies. For example, a female participant (25 years) from Garissa mentioned, "*This causes a lack of education for girls which increased early marriages and early pregnancies and increase in FGM which is seen as a necessary rite of passage for girls before they can be married*".

The findings from Garissa and Isiolo underscore the complex interplay between environmental factors, social dynamics, and cultural practices. Drought and climate change not only disrupt livelihoods and educational opportunities but also influence the resilience and cultural practices of communities. Addressing these multifaceted issues requires a holistic approach that integrates environmental sustainability, economic stability, and social support to create resilient communities capable of tackling VAWG like FGM. Addressing FGM, according to Williams-Breault [28], requires access to education, health services, and community support—resources that are often compromised during periods of climate-related stress. Additionally, the displacement of families can leave girls vulnerable to forced labour and gender-based violence (GBV), further highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and cultural issues.

3.2. The Effectiveness of Current Anti-FGM Interventions and Programs in the Context of Environmental and Socioeconomic Challenges

Some of the data reveal that during periods of economic hardship, families may resort to FGM as a means to secure future marriages for their daughters, further perpetuating the practice. For example, a female (15 years) from Isiolo asserts that, '*there is a perception in the communities that undergoing FGM/C enhances a girl's chances of finding a suitable spouse*'. This finding is corroborated by Johansen et al. [29], who argue that the notion of resorting to FGM as a means to secure future marriages or as a source of income during economic hardship is a distressing reality in some communities. However, it is essential to understand the complexities surrounding this practice in times of economic strain. Drought, for instance, has brought numerous challenges to communities. A male participant (30 years) from Isiolo explains that many people lost their livestock, which was their primary source of income.

Similarly, a male participant (33 years) from Garissa notes that the community's dependence on livestock such as cows, goats, and camels has led to poverty when these animals die due to drought. These economic hardships exacerbate the belief that FGM is necessary for securing suitable marriage prospects for daughters, as families believe that daughters who have undergone FGM are more likely to attract higher bride prices.

Whilst a female participant (20 years) from Garissa illustrates the impact of prolonged drought on families, noting that when livestock die, families struggle to find alternative

means to feed their children, leading to malnutrition. This economic desperation can drive families to adhere more strongly to traditional practices like FGM, hoping to secure financial stability through their daughters' marriages. On the other hand, a male participant (15 years) from Isiolo mentions that the shortage of rains has led to the movement of people. This disruption can hinder collective efforts to address harmful practices like FGM.

Furthermore, a female participant (16 years) from Isiolo explains that the lack of rains leads to migrations, denying people the time to come together to share any concerns that they communities were facing. This disruption of community support systems can fragment efforts to address FGM. Booth [30] adds that limited access to education and resources, exacerbated by environmental stressors like drought, hinders efforts to challenge or change cultural norms surrounding FGM.

3.3. Limitations of the Study

This study focused on Garissa and Isiolo counties, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions in Kenya or other countries with different cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental contexts. The selection of participants from specific communities within these counties may not fully represent the diversity of perspectives on FGM and its related factors. Data were primarily collected through interviews, which rely on self-reporting by participants. This method can introduce bias as participants may provide socially desirable responses or may not accurately recall past events and experiences related to FGM, drought, and food insecurity. Despite efforts to ensure cultural sensitivity, there is a risk of misinterpretation of cultural norms and practices by researchers who are not native to the communities being studied. This limitation can affect the accuracy and depth of the findings. This study was conducted during a period of ongoing drought and food insecurity, which are dynamic conditions. External factors such as humanitarian aid interventions, political changes, or economic fluctuations during the study period may have influenced participants' responses and the overall findings.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, while the direct link between climate change, drought, and FGM might not be straightforward, understanding the broader context and vulnerabilities of communities affected by both can inform more holistic and effective interventions to combat harmful practices. The direct link between climate change, drought, and FGM is not explicitly established in a linear cause-and-effect relationship. However, there are indirect connections and contextual overlaps that can influence the prevalence or perpetuation of FGM in certain circumstances (McGavock & Novak, 2023) [8].

While there is not a direct causal relationship between climate change, drought, and FGM, these factors can create a complex web of circumstances that indirectly influence the prevalence and perpetuation of VAWG such as FGM in vulnerable communities. Understanding these dynamics according to Adewoyin et al. [31] is crucial for implementing effective interventions that address both the immediate needs resulting from climate-related challenges and the underlying socio-cultural factors contributing to FGM. It highlights the importance of holistic approaches that consider intersecting vulnerabilities and contextual nuances to effectively combat harmful practices.

Addressing both issues may require integrated approaches that consider the cultural, health, and socioeconomic dimensions of these complex challenges. This can involve efforts to enhance healthcare access, strengthen community resilience, and engage with cultural sensitivities in promoting women's health and rights, including efforts to abandon the practice of FGM.

Environmental stressors can strain resources available to organizations and agencies working on anti-FGM initiatives. This may result in reduced outreach efforts, awareness campaigns, and educational programs that challenge cultural norms associated with FGM (Johansen et al., 2013) [29]. In times of resource scarcity, communities may become more reliant on traditional practices, including harmful ones like FGM, as a way of preserving cultural identity and adhering to established norms.

The persistence of FGM during crises underscores the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses its underlying drivers. Education, economic empowerment, and community engagement must be prioritized within broader strategies for climate resilience and poverty alleviation. By embedding FGM eradication into existing frameworks and ensuring collaboration across sectors, stakeholders can foster sustainable and culturally sensitive change.

Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers must work collectively to address the multifaceted challenges posed by FGM, ensuring that women and girls' rights and health are protected alongside broader economic and environmental goals. While the path to eliminating FGM is complex, it is achievable through sustained commitment, inclusive dialogue, and targeted, evidence-based interventions.

5. Recommendations

The persistence of FGM in contexts of economic hardship, environmental stress, and cultural traditions highlights the need for multifaceted strategies. This study aligns with existing literature emphasizing the socioeconomic drivers of FGM but adds to the evidence by linking environmental crises, such as drought and food insecurity, to an increased reliance on the practice as a survival strategy. The findings underscore the necessity of addressing these overlapping challenges through a comprehensive, context-sensitive approach.

Economic hardship exacerbates cultural reliance on FGM, often viewed as a means to secure marriage prospects or social standing. Social cohesion and economic stability, especially in resource-scarce settings, are central to communities' willingness to abandon harmful practices. Programs aimed at eradicating FGM must recognize and address these systemic issues, ensuring that interventions tackle both immediate needs and structural inequalities.

FGM is deeply rooted in cultural norms, making community engagement crucial for sustainable change. In areas like Garissa and Isiolo, cultural pressures and environmental stressors compound the economic drivers of FGM. This study highlights the importance of viewing FGM as not just a health issue but also a socio-political and economic challenge and more importantly as a form of VAWG. Engaging traditional leaders, women's groups, and youth in culturally sensitive dialogues about FGM's harms is essential for dismantling long-standing social norms. For example, as observed in Narok County among the Maasai, FGM persists despite sustained campaigns against it, driven by similar sociocultural and economic pressures. Such parallels reinforce the need for tailored, region-specific strategies that resonate with local communities while addressing shared structural barriers.

To effectively combat FGM, efforts should integrate strategies such as a community-centric education and awareness. This will be aimed at addressing a disrupting education inequity. Environmental crises often disrupt formal schooling, which serves as a platform for challenging harmful norms. Community-based education programs can address this gap by incorporating mobile units to deliver general education alongside FGM awareness. These initiatives should frame FGM as a violation of rights and a form of violence against women and girls (VAWG), moving beyond a sole emphasis on health risks.

Targeting youth and potential influencers could be one of the strategies. This would involve engaging young men, who represent future husbands and community leaders, in educational campaigns can challenge demand for FGM. Encouraging attitudinal shifts among young women and men fosters a generational change that erodes the cultural value placed on the practice. In addition, culturally contextualised messaging being a way forward. This would involve partnering with community leaders, religious institutions, and local organizations ensures that messages resonate with cultural values while advocating for the abandonment of FGM.

In terms of addressing the economic challenges, economic empowerment and livelihood support could be implemented though this comes with costs. This could be around economic empowerment initiatives targeting women and families can alleviate financial pressures that drive FGM as an economic survival strategy. Programs should provide access to microfinance, vocational training, and market opportunities for women, particularly in rural areas, enabling them to secure alternative means of livelihood.

The community could also could focus on integrating climate resilience with gender-focused interventions. This could be through policies addressing drought and food insecurity must consider gender dynamics. Programs such as those implemented by Amref, which embed gender awareness into broader initiatives like WASH programming, serve as models for integration.

One way could involve strengthening and enforcing laws. Kenya's Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act [19] offers a strong foundation for legal deterrence. However, effective enforcement requires addressing systemic barriers, such as corruption or cultural resistance, that undermine its impact. This could be followed by embedding FGM in broader humanitarian strategies. Here the County governments could head the integration of FGM prevention and response into humanitarian policies related to drought, migration, and food insecurity. Policymakers must ensure gender-based violence programs prioritize FGM alongside other forms of VAWG.

Culturally sensitive healthcare services could be made available. Healthcare providers must adopt approaches that respect cultural norms while educating communities about FGM's risks. Mobile clinics and community health workers can ensure continuity of services during environmental crises, offering education and care in remote areas. Whilst there ought to be a maternal and reproductive health integration. Screening for FGM during routine maternal and reproductive health care ensures that affected women and at-risk girls receive necessary support. This integration minimizes resource strain while expanding reach.

An all hands on the deck approach which is around engaging communities in dialogue should be key. Sustained, inclusive dialogue involving women, youth, and traditional leaders creates a platform for cultural change. Resilience-building initiatives should empower communities to lead the process of eradicating FGM, fostering ownership and sustainability. At the same time, there is a need for collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, and international organizations ensure a coordinated approach. Advocacy groups can play a pivotal role by linking climate resilience strategies with gender equity and human rights initiatives.

Finally, advocacy groups should leverage findings from studies like this to push for integrated interventions that address both socio-economic and environmental challenges. Linking FGM to broader gender-based vulnerabilities amplifies the urgency of these efforts. In addition, there should be a call for researching intersectional impacts. Targeted research exploring the intersectionality of FGM, climate change, and economic vulnerability can guide future policies and interventions. This includes assessing regional differences in FGM prevalence and response effectiveness to tailor strategies.

6. Implications of the Study

This study adds to the growing evidence on the persistence of VAWG such FGM during environmental crises such as drought and food insecurity. While previous research has identified economic hardship as a driver of FGM, this study uniquely emphasizes the interplay between environmental stressors and socio-cultural survival strategies. The findings highlight the need to view FGM not only as a cultural issue but also as an adaptive mechanism in the face of climate-induced vulnerability. This perspective broadens the theoretical understanding of FGM by linking it to climate adaptation and socio-economic pressures, offering a novel angle for future research.

A key implication of this study is the necessity of integrated policies that simultaneously address climate adaptation, economic empowerment, and FGM eradication. While previous work has called for policy integration, this research highlights the specific need to adapt policies to the socio-environmental realities of communities in Garissa and Isiolo. This could guide policymakers in designing context-specific strategies that are practical and culturally sensitive.

Consistent with existing evidence, this study reinforces the central role of education in shifting cultural norms. However, it also emphasizes the disruption of education during environmental crises as a significant barrier. This study suggests that ensuring continuous access to education during such crises is an urgent priority. The idea of integrating FGM education into broader curricula offers a concrete, actionable recommendation for long-term cultural change, adding to the literature on education-based interventions.

Building on existing frameworks for community-led initiatives, this research emphasizes the importance of resilience-building as a long-term solution. Unlike studies that focus solely on immediate interventions, this work highlights the role of sustained dialogues involving diverse community stakeholders. The emphasis on empowering local communities to lead change is a critical contribution that aligns with but also extends previous findings.

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