

**TITLE: "The indigenous People's Sexuality Issues, Gender Equality, Human Rights and Reproductive Health concerns in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"**

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**Presented by :** Dolphine Achieng Okech  
Executive Director – Kenya female advisory Organization  
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## THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S SEXUALITY ISSUES, GENDER EQUALITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CONCERNS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

This presentation explores the various issues, which promote or affect indigenous people or factors, which promote adverse impacts on indigenous populations health with special reference to the Luo, Kuria, Abagusii and Saboti people of Western Kenya in East Africa. It also examines positive indigenous people's traditional practices, and their foods which should be encouraged and promoted.

The focus of this presentation examines the indigenous populations of reference here above. It then makes specific mention of these indigenous group's practises, myths and how these affect the holistic development of particularly girl child and women and how such beliefs, practices and myths disempower the men. The paper goes further to list down some of the human rights violations including health rights, specifically the reproductive health factors which go with these indigenous beliefs, and emphasis is on HIV/AIDS.

The gender issues and gender mainstreaming in the indigenous populations' practices is also an area, which is highlighted in this paper. Most importantly is the emphasis on the indigenous herbs, plants and traditional medicines which are facing extinction in some areas and which need to be preserved for posterity through documentation of source of knowledge/patent rights of indigenous people's knowledge.

### Indigenous Cultural Beliefs and Practices

This area has been at the core and the fulcrum of debate in many fora and deserves specific reference in this presentation. The most unfortunate thing has been the non-existence documentation complicated by the fact that majority of the indigenous groups are unable to read and write, worst hit are women and girl children who are adversely affected by these beliefs, practices and myths. The non-documentation has posed a major obstacle on what to believe in or not, and how to translate the same beliefs from one generation to another. The unwritten constitutions guaranteeing the dos and don'ts have caused mayhem in certain instances where individuals stick to this or that without authentic justification, the end results are indoctrinated in the minds of the children as they grow, most beliefs are never explained but the ultimatum is usually threats of death, sickness or bad omen for those who fail to follow the norms.

Among the Luo community, beliefs in wife inheritance, wife replacement, polygamies, husband remarriage after the death of wife, bread winner syndrome, dependency syndrome and female inferiority have led to the escalating numbers of HIV infection, huge numbers of AIDS orphans, child headed households and diminishing western education for girls and women with the adverse consequences of abject poverty in most rural homes and rising child mortality as a result of malnourishment and inadequate knowledge in child care and public health matters.

### The Luo, Kuria, the Abagusii, the Saboti and their reproductive health issues

The cultural beliefs, practices and myths among the above groups as concerns reproductive health matters, prohibit discussions on sexuality. Spouses sexual relationship are bedroom affairs, expression as to whether one is being satisfied sexually is not expected and sex is played in darkness, further more a wife is expected not to ask for sex from her husband or to say no to her husband when she is not ready or when she suspects the husband is having extramarital affairs.

These societal expectations have had negative consequences among the believers such like: Increased illicit sex among married couples who look for satisfaction when they miss this in the marital set up. Extra marital affairs particularly among the indigenous men who customarily have all the powers to do what they wish, but which has been a major contribution to the spread of HIV/AIDS among young unmarried male youths and married couples.

The practice among the Kuria, Saboti and the Abagusii of female genital mutilation (FGM) has led to increased risk in child delivery posing problem among the women whose genitals have been cut off. Apart from the child delivery problems, the sexual urge of these women are significantly diminished, a state, which contributes to domestic violence, when their husbands, with no idea that they don't enjoy sex continue to demand for the same.

Much as some of these practices which are positive, should be preserved, others such as these highlighted have violated the human rights of women and girls adversely. Cases have been reported and proved that women who under go FGM need special attention from the midwives during child delivery, many of them have ended up with damaged urethra, leading to continuous flow of urine all their lives and bed wetting and urine smell that prevent

such women from participating in public meetings. Some husbands of such women abandon them and opt to marry women who do not have such problems, this kind of action cause psychological trauma that is incurable as such women live with this bitterness for the rest of their lives.

Concerted efforts are currently being made by organizations such as KEFEADO to stamp out such practices whose values cause untold suffering for the women and to a certain extent even men who have to lead miserable lives fighting almost every night or are obliged to seek for multiple partners at the risk of contracting the deadly HIV/AIDS.

### Gender and Human Rights mainstreaming in the indigenous population practices

The unwritten indigenous population constitutions are gender biased and have a lot of disparities towards women. The men and the male supremacy continue to impact negatively on the rights of women and girl children. It promotes hatred in families where mothers deliver only girl children. Boy child preference makes women's and girl child's self esteem to simply die off. Women and girls are given the second position in terms of development or involvement in important matters of the community. Amongst the Luo, Abagusii, the Saboti and the Kuria, women are treated like neglected children, what they say or do does not matter, they remain invisible in any discussion and they have been intimidated so much so that they don't believe that it is their right to express their feelings.

This paper proposes that while making all efforts to preserve the valuable indigenous populations identities, it is of paramount importance that the human rights of all should be observed and the women and the men given opportunity to participate as partners in modern development. Gender and human rights issues must be seen as a prerequisite to any other belief and that human rights supersedes any other practice or perceived values.

This should encourage the publication of specific indigenous people's constitutions so that new generation of children born have something to refer to, as a step which will remove all the ambiguity that only puts the burden on women and girl children and leave men Scot-free. Like in the Luo community when a husband dies, the community forces her to look for a near lunatic to have sex with her for cleansing, the same does not happen to men. The woman in this case is forced to declare to a group of clan elders if the man actually had sex with her to confirm the cleansing while in the case of a man this does not happen. Apart from such gender insensitive practices that severely intimidate the woman, the HIV/AIDS and other reproductive health diseases are also promoted.

### Indigenous medicinal Plants, Herbs and treatment methods.

The indigenous people I represent have used medicinal plants and herbs to treat a myriad of diseases for centuries. These people have various ways of treatment methods that have been very effective and continue to help their members who live very far from the health centres and hospitals. Some of these herbs and plants have been found to be able to sustain high immunity levels in those infected by HIV/AIDS virus. Such an example is the "Ma arubaine" a plant which is able to cure up to forty diseases. "The Neem tree" has also been adopted by most of the indigenous population in Western Kenya.

It is important to promote indigenous knowledge of treatment doses and high level of hygiene in handling and storage of the mixtures. Researchers need to acknowledge the "patent" rights to the indigenous people whose plants they use and from whom they derive a lot of insights on the functions of the medicinal plants and herbs.

Rampant access to these plants and knowledge acquisition without further reference to its source by researchers and medicine manufacturers is becoming very common. The discouraging statements about those who value such traditional plants may end up bringing them to extinction, which will be sad. More younger people should have knowledge on the value of these plants for posterity otherwise such knowledge will disappear with demise of the elderly women and men who are currently the custodian of the medicinal plants' knowledge.

Apart from these valuable medicinal plants, their usage and increasing interest that the world of herbal medicine has in their preservation, most of these ethnic groups have a lot of ties to witch crafty, a belief which blocks objective reasoning and making even diseases like malaria, HIV/AIDS, stomach disorders, which can be addressed effectively as normal sickness, are instead blamed on bad omen or a bad person who has bewitched the sick person, or something that the sick person did or didn't do in the right way. While all these arguments are going on, treatment is delayed, and very many people die of simple diseases that can be treated either by the herbs or modern medicines.

HIV/AIDS is still believed to be a curse and not a reproductive health problem, most of the dos and don'ts are meant to keep high moral levels, but because nobody explains why some of these beliefs are upheld, they end up alienating the indigenous groups from other people living within the same country, most of whom take these beliefs as primitive just because of communication gaps. Literacy levels are very low as value for modern education is not readily understood and this conflicts with the Universal Declaration of human rights, including the declaration on the rights of the child which takes education as a basic right, and participation as third generation right. Addressing these issues is a slow process as the indigenous populations are very conservative and quite apprehensive about any new way that challenges their status quo.

#### Indigenous food and wild vegetables

Most of the traditional foodstuff needs to be revived and promoted for use by those who might not be aware of their medicinal values. The Luo community where I belong have a class of leaves and vegetables that grow wild but which promote good health, bring about natural immunity and are medicinal on their own right. Traditionally prepared foods among the Luos, Abagusii and Kuria are so popular that those who use such foods have very rare chances of developing diseases such as hypertension or heart diseases, obesity is controlled and their physical well being is quite different from those who focus on western food stuff.

These are areas, which should be taken, seriously as they are can create employment opportunities for this indigenous knowledge as part of the learning curriculum. It is an area, which can be used to reduce poverty, by opening restaurants, which only serve traditional foodstuff and train on indigenous food production, preservation and processing of the traditional dishes. There is rising need for the encouragement of indigenous people to open up and use their knowledge to penetrate the modern world where such original knowledge is lacking. Agricultural institutions and environmental conservation should focus on revitalisation of the diminishing indigenous medicinal plants, vegetables and herbs and to promote their revival in abundance for generations to come, but above all the indigenous population should be encouraged to link up with rest of the people in their communities/countries and put emphasis on preserving only the cultural and traditional practices which have values that benefit both men and women equally and which do not violate the human rights of others in their midst.

*Speech prepared by: Dolphine Achieng Okech*

*The Executive Director*

*Kenya Female advisory Organization,*

*For the second session of the permanent Forum on Indigenous issues.*

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