



Maasai in Kenya

The Free Girls of Enosaen

Tourists admire the Maasai as the noble indigenous people of East Africa. However, the ethnic group maintains misogynistic traditions such as genital mutilation and child marriages. A Maasai woman has now freed her village from these practices.

Before Kakenya Ntaiya was led into the hut, she had negotiated a deal with her father: she would be cut in return for being allowed to finish school. Unlike many of her friends, who were quickly married. In a Zoom conversation, she tells how she fainted after her clitoris was cut off. The pain and bleeding were too much. She was twelve years old.

Today, 34 years later, she has a doctorate and lives in the USA. Her Ted Talks have millions of views on YouTube. "I was the first woman from my village to make it to university," she says proudly. Back then, she swore that she would completely change her home village of Ensoo. "I want other girls to be able to experience the childhood that I never had."

Ntaiya founded a nonprofit organization and called it "Kakenya's Dream." She collected donations, opened schools and now also a health center in her village. But above all, she wants to finally put an end to the misogynistic practice of female genital mutilation.



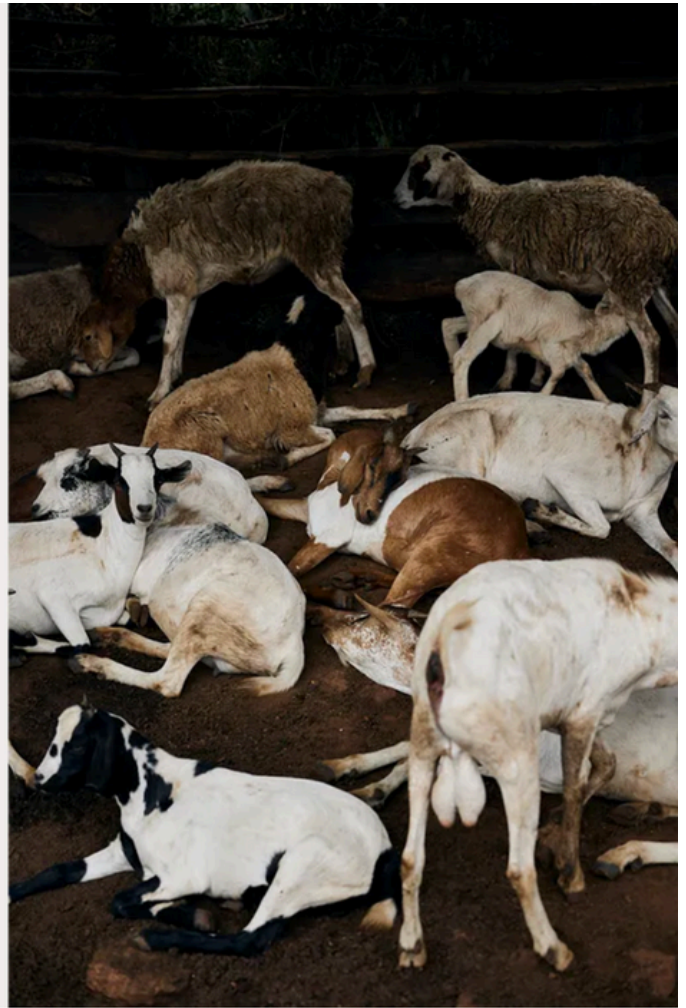
Role model for many: Kakenya Ntaiya has changed her village Photo: Lee-Ann Olwage

A recent report by the UN Children's Fund states that 230 million girls worldwide have undergone this procedure. The practice is banned in Kenya, but is still widespread among the country's approximately one million Maasai. For them, the procedure marks the ritual entry into adulthood. But it is also intended to reduce the woman's desire so that she does not have sex before marriage and does not cheat later. Ntaiya's father, a policeman, also insisted on the procedure because he believed that this was the only way his daughter would be respected in the community. How can such ways of thinking be changed? And what does it do to a village when the old traditions disappear?

Ntaiya's home town of Enosaen can only be reached via an unpaved road. The town is surrounded by green hills, and the same plant grows everywhere in the valleys and on the slopes: sugar cane. Tractors with trailers drive along the field tracks every minute, fully loaded with the harvested stalks. The village is grouped around a huge sugar factory, whose chimney emits black smoke. Almost everyone in Enosaen lives directly or indirectly from the plant. The town is on the edge of the famous Masai Mara nature reserve and has several hundred inhabitants, but no one knows for sure.



Lifeline of the village: Almost everyone derives their income from sugar cane Photo: Lee-Ann Olwage / DER SPIEGEL



Cultural change: The Maasai used to be nomads and lived from goats and cattle breeding Photos: Lee-Ann Olwage / DER SPIEGEL



Meeting in the church: Here the Maasai men sit together Photo: Lee-Ann Olwage / DER SPIEGEL

Several hundred meters from the factory, two dozen Maasai men are sitting in a church. Some are wearing traditional red-checked blankets around their shoulders. Most are carrying long wooden sticks, a relic from a time when their ancestors lived as nomadic herders. The meeting in the church is about the future of their people - and the new role of women in Enoosaen.

"The girls have no discipline anymore," complains one, and the others clap their hands briefly in confirmation.

"The girls have overtaken us, our boys are lagging behind. We need to do more for the young men," shouts another.

"But we have the smartest girls around here," counters a younger man.

In Enoosaen, women have become powerful. Perhaps too powerful for some men. A kind of culture war is underway.



Campaign against genital mutilation: The moderator explains Photo: Lee-Ann Olwage / DER SPIEGEL

In the mid-2000s, after completing her studies, Ntaiya returned to her hometown to visit her family. She discovered that men were still the only ones in charge. She saw a young girl being led to her wedding. She experienced how only men were allowed to speak at village meetings. Adult women were referred to as "children." "Girls were supposed to end up in the kitchen and milk the cows. Nobody saw any point in investing in their education," says the 46-year-old.

Despite the resistance of many men in the village, she brought the women in the village together and held local councils. In 2009, she launched her first project: a primary school for girls, right next to the sugar factory. School fees are free. The students receive a scholarship. The condition: their parents have to commit that they will neither mutilate their daughters nor force them into marriage. It worked. The words "Kakenya's Dream" are now emblazoned in many places in the village: on a chic secondary school with an attached boarding school. Most recently, on a clinic, which opened a few weeks ago. And the slogan of their organization can also be read on the t-shirts that the Maasai men wear in church.

The meeting is part of a campaign organized by Kakenya's staff in Enoosaen. The moderator talks a lot about the dangers of genital mutilation. He explains the advantages of an un mutilated woman who goes to school, earns a good income and can later take care of her family financially. "Our culture is changing for the better," he says

In fact, Ntaiya's efforts are having an impact: the number of mutilations in the village has dropped rapidly, as the village elders confirm – even if they do not entirely welcome some changes.

One of them is John Kosencha. He has a grey beard, wears flip-flops and a blue baseball cap, and leans on a wooden stick as he walks. The 63-year-old still remembers the time when no sugar cane was grown in the valleys of Enoosaen, when cows still grazed here and a Masai's wealth was measured by the number of cattle he had. "We were proud warriors. Now our traditions are falling apart," he sighs.

He does not want to defend the tradition of genital mutilation, after all it is prohibited by law. But one thing is missing, he says: there has always been a kind of training camp for the girls around the circumcisions. They have learned respect, especially towards their elders. "Now the women even wear trousers. I can't stand that, it's presumptuous," complains Kosencha. Many men in the village share his opinion.

Not all of the region's problems have been solved in Enoosan. During the coronavirus pandemic, almost half of the teenage girls became pregnant in Narok County, where the village is located and where many Maasai live. Now it's just over a quarter. The rate is well above the Kenyan average. "The high number of teenage pregnancies is due to cultural and social norms. Girls are socialized from an early age to see themselves as mothers and wives," says Ntaiya.

At Kakenya Girls' High School (KCE II), located on a hill overlooking the lowlands, the number of teenage pregnancies tends to be lower, but they still occur. Stacey and Lucky are sitting under the shade of a large acacia tree. They don't want to give their real names out of fear of the stigma. The two became pregnant while at school, Stacey at 15, Lucky at 16.





Tradition and modernity: The school uniform is based on the Maasai culture, the rules are not Photos: Lee - Ann Olwage / DER SPIEGEL



Lucky and Stacey became mothers while at school Photo: Lee-Ann Olwage / DER SPIEGEL

School has just started again, the summer holidays are over a few days ago. "It was so great to hold the little one in my arms again and play with her," says Lucky. Her daughter lives with her grandparents so that the young mother can concentrate on her education.

In many Kenyan schools, pregnancy means expulsion. Although this is prohibited by law, it is still widely practiced as a punishment. Things were different for Stacey and Lucky. "The school administration informed our parents, they told them not to judge us, that they had to bring us back to school," Stacey remembers. And they succeeded. After a few weeks, they returned and are now close to graduating, among the best in their class. They have a future, even though they became pregnant as teenagers.

"Kakenya is our role model. If she can do it, then we can do it too. You don't have to come from America to be successful, that's what she taught us," says Lucky.

It was not the large international organizations with their development projects that brought progress here, but the initiative of a local woman who knows the area. "The ideas for the projects often come from the women themselves," says the founder. "And I know how to change the cultural norms, I come from here."



The manifestation of their latest dream, a health center, opened just a few weeks ago. Lynn Maloi is sitting in one of the rooms in her white coat, measuring a patient's blood pressure. The 23-year-old grew up not far from here, "in simple circumstances," as she says. "Normally I would be a wife with three children now." Instead, she received a scholarship to the Kakenya school, and her goals changed. "First I wanted to be president, then a doctor," she laughs. In the end, she studied to be a nurse. She is now back in Enoosaen, working at the new clinic.



Career as a nurse: Lynn Maloi now works at the clinic in Enoosaen, on the right one of her patients, 24-year-old Nancy Kipaki Photos: Lee - Ann Olwage / DER SPIEGEL

Sometimes there are conflicts in her examination room: when men come in and refuse to be examined by a young woman. In such cases, she calls her older colleague. But then mothers sit next to her and ask Maloi to talk to their daughters. "They want them to be like me. That makes me proud."

Nevertheless, Maloi would like to pursue a career abroad, where the pay is much better. She has already found out about opportunities in Germany. The economic situation in Kenya remains one of the biggest problems, including for women and girls. Youth unemployment in the country is almost 70 percent. There are schools for girls in Enoosaen, many young women study after graduating, but they cannot find a job on the open market. Full emancipation often fails due to economic hardship.



Next plan: Kakenya Ntaiya wants to turn young women into entrepreneurs Photo: Lee-Ann Olwage / DER SPIEGEL

"We have empowered the girls and given them access to education. But in the end, that doesn't help if the women have to ask their husbands for money for underwear," admits Kakenya Ntaiya. So she is now working on supporting young women in starting businesses. Her dream for the future: "Perhaps the men will soon work for the women."