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EMBRACING PARTNERSHIP FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE REALIZATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS: A PATHWAY TO ENDING FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION, MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP, AND OTHER HARMFUL PRACTICES AMONGST THE ABAGUSII OF KENYA

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Abstract

Utilizing the Abagusii community of Southwestern Kenya as a case study, the author explores how patriarchy, a social system that is embedded in a domination social configuration (Eisler, 2007), is fertile ground for several practices which violate girls' and women's human rights. These practices range from female genital mutilation to the marginalization of women from participating in more meaningful political leadership and decision-making processes. The author argues that cultural transformation, one of the foundational concepts of her dissertation's research-based, transformative change leadership development framework "Bold Leadership for Humanity in Practice (BLHP)" (Abuya, 2017), can be an antidote to the prevalent culture of domination in Gusiiland, a culture which perpetuates several practices that violate girls' and women's human rights. The author concludes that social change agents and leaders can help foster a culture of partnership, by facilitating a shift in deeply-held cultural assumptions through transformative learning, subsequent transformative change, and cultural transformation for the realization of women's human rights in Gusiiland.

Keywords: Transformative Change; Transformative Change Leadership; Leading Change; Cultural Transformation; Transformative Learning; Eisler; Systems of Partnership; Systems of Domination; Patriarchy; Women's Human Rights; Social Transformation; Social Change; Bold Leadership for Humanity in Practice; Female Genital Mutilation; Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting; Female Circumcision; Women's Political Leadership; *Ubuntu*; *Utu*; *Obomwanyabanto*; *Uongozi Wa Utu*; *Oborai Bwo Obomwanyabanto*; Gusiiland; Gusii; Kisii; Abagusii; Kenya

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INTRODUCTION

This article is based on my personal experiences, observations, formal and informal conversations with various people, study reports, and excerpts from my doctoral dissertation (Abuya, 2017). It might help to provide a gentle, noteworthy lead-in at this juncture about some aspects of my chosen writing style. Denzin (in Stringer, 2007) cites the “need to formulate more evocative accounts that provide understanding of events and experiences. . . . [N]ew ways of writing, however, often are confined by traditional formats that structure reports in ways marginally compatible with the intent of the writer . . . It is still possible to find ways to fulfill the needs of institutional and bureaucratic audiences while remaining true to the intent of the writer of community-based action research” (p. 172). My intent is to find a balance by weaving in the voices of different people who have informed this work in one way or another. This includes confidential sources whose identity I have protected for safety reasons.

In the spirit of partnership, claiming creative liberties and recognizing the politics of information access and sharing, as a qualitative, community-based, and emancipatory Participatory Action Researcher (PAR), I have elaborately cited several sources in this report. I have therefore, rather generously offered readers the opportunity to ‘hear’ the voices of authors, scholars, theorists, practitioners, human rights activists, and others, whose research findings, ideas, and words, have contributed to this work. In a sense, taking this position contravenes widely accepted standards of conventional academic writing. My need to create room for other voices to be heard a little more extensively through this work does not mean that I value their work over mine. It presents an opportunity to reflect on whether rigidity in enforcing certain forms of academic writing, where the author’s voice must always dominate - even if it means paraphrasing other people’s words to meet this goal - could be considered a form of

domination model. I have chosen to enable the reader to experience these words as they were originally written or shared by their respective authors. I am especially reluctant to the idea of readers hearing these authors' voices through me because the gravity of the content these authors bring to this conversation warrants a more direct, inclusive, and transparent communing of their words in what I hope will provide greater epistemological impact. I am grateful for their contributions.

BACKGROUND

My dissertation research was a qualitative, participatory action research inquiry which was conducted in 2016 in Tabaka Ward, Kisii County, Kenya. The study was titled "Developing leaders for transformative change: A participatory action inquiry for the advancement of women's rights in Kenya" (Abuya, 2017). As a member of the Gusii (also known as Kisii or Gusiiland) community by birth, recognizing my positionality as an indigenous and insider PAR researcher, I sought to develop or enhance women's capacity to lead change by moving beyond prevalent social change leadership strategies that are solely based on creating community awareness, and that also utilize command and control-based tactics such as threats of arrest and prosecution, shaming, fear, and intimidation. Clearly, these approaches to leading social change have not been successful in eradicating nor reducing the prevalence of practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), which violate women's human rights in Gusiiland.

For instance, the 2008 and 2009 Kenyan Demographic and Health Survey found that FGM was practiced at a prevalence rate of 96% in Kisii but their 2014 report, published in 2015, reflects a decline to 84% (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2015, p. 334) for women between 15-49 years. However, it is important to note that community members' views in Kisii have been validated by reports such as Shell-Duncan, Naik, and Feldman-Jacobs' (2016) study which indicated that parents are now subjecting their daughters to FGM at a younger age, which is not reflected in these figures, meaning the prevalence rate could be higher:

Notably, age at cutting tends to vary across different ethnic groups within countries. In Kenya, [female genital mutilation/cutting] FGM/C is performed, on average, between ages 9 to 16. One reason that FGM/C is performed on girls at young ages is that it can be done more discretely (sic), a particular advantage in areas where anti-FGM/C campaigns or legal restrictions are prominent. Other reported reasons are that younger girls heal more quickly and are less resistant. (Shell-Duncan et al, p. 8)

Confidential conversations with some women before, during, and after my doctoral research - including as recently as early 2020 - indicate that girls as young as 2 years old are now being subjected to FGM in Gusiland. It is deeply concerning to learn from these conversations that in some instances, people purporting to be medical professionals are doing the cutting, after injecting a chemical substance into the child's developing clitoris to make it swell - so that there is some form of flesh in this area to clutch between the cutter's thumb and index fingers and enable a cut.

A recent study confirms the long-recorded shift to medicalization of FGM; the Abagusii (Kisii) and Somali communities lead in this practice in Kenya. Kimani, Kabiru, Muteshi, and Guyo (2020) reported that the “notable shifts were cutting girls at a younger age, less severe cutting and medicalized cutting” with the highest prevalence being “among the Abagusii and Somali communities” (p. 8-9). They further noted:

FGM/C was increasingly performed by health care providers (doctors, nurse-midwives and clinical officers) at home or in a health facility. The performance of FGM/C at home was more common in rural areas as one nurse from Kisii county explained how parents picked her up to go perform the cutting on their daughters at home. ‘Both educated and non-educated like teachers, come with a vehicle to pick me to go cut their daughters. Both the rich and poor come for my services.’ (Kimani et al, p. 8-9).

This paper explores how patriarchy, a social system that is grounded in a domination societal configuration (Eisler, 2007), creates conditions that enable practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), defilement, rape, domestic violence, and others, which violate girls' and women's human rights and dignity. Utilizing a case study of the Abagusii people of Kenya, the author also explores how leaders and change agents can embrace the values, principles, and practices of partnership to enable transformative change and subsequent cultural transformation for the realization of women's human rights in Gusiiland.

Patriarchy as a Social System

Before exploring patriarchy as a social system, I will define a social system. Banathy (1992) defined a social system as a human activity system, "an assembly of people and other resources organized into a whole in order to accomplish a purpose. The people in the system are affected by the system and by their participation in the system they affect the system" (p. 14). He explained that the "people in the system select and carry out their activities individually and collectively that will enable them to attain the collectively identified purpose" (p. 14).

Whereas Banathy (1992) identified several characteristics of human activity systems, for the purposes of this article I focus on one characteristic in relation to the system of patriarchy. He noted that human activity systems maintain "sets of relationships sustained through time among those in the system.... [M]aintenance of these relations is of primary importance and the process by which these relationships are maintained is the system's regulation of the rules-of-the-game" (p. 14). In order to understand some aspects of the system of patriarchy as a social system, Johnson's (2005) insights might be helpful. He explained,

A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male dominated, male identified, and male centered. It is also organized around

an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women. (Johnson, p. 5)

The African Feminist Forum, hosted by the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) in Accra, Ghana in 2006, developed the *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists* and defined patriarchy as:

A system of male authority which legitimizes the oppression of women through political, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious and military institutions. Men's access to and control over resources and rewards within the private and public sphere derives its legitimacy from the patriarchal ideology of male dominance. Patriarchy varies in time and space, meaning that it changes over time and varies according to class, race, ethnic, religious and global-imperial relationships and structures. (The African Feminist Forum, 2006, p. 5)

The African Feminist Forum (2006) further noted that to “challenge patriarchy effectively also requires challenging other systems of oppression and exploitation, which frequently mutually support each other” (p. 5). Patriarchy serves as fertile breeding ground for women's human rights violations, through its “rules-of-the-game” (Banathy, 1992, p. 14) that regulate and maintain relationships between men and women in the system. The African Feminist Forum (2006) noted that:

Our understanding of Patriarchy is crucial because it provides for us as feminists, a framework within which to express the totality of oppressive and exploitative relations which affect African women. Patriarchal ideology enables and legitimizes the structuring of every aspect of our lives by establishing the framework within which society defines and views men and women and constructs male supremacy. (The African Feminist Forum, p. 4)

With this basic understanding of the nature of the system of patriarchy, let us explore how such a system presents in an African context with specific application to the Abagusii people of Southwestern Kenya.

Patriarchy and Women's Human Rights in Gusiiland

Before delving into the Abagusii people's context, I suggest we explore Halim's (1994) broader assertion that "African women have always taken pride in their culture. Deeply rooted traditions are an important part of that culture and the core of life" (p. 21). Halim (1994) noted that from a cultural standpoint, "dependency on the male and need for his support is felt even when it is not needed; or it cannot be obtained even when it is needed" (p. 22). She explained that this "dependency has become the source of and the reason for the submission by women who treat their subordination as a matter of survival and a mark of respectability" (Halim, 1994, p. 22). A reality she explained shapes the lives of some African women "around tradition and/or religion, depending on which one more easily achieves male dominance" (Halim, 1994, p. 22).

Male Superiority, Entitlement, Power, and Control of Wealth and Resources

Based on her anthropological studies in Gusiiland, Silberschmidt (1999) concluded that in "an ideology based on male superiority and male entitlement to control all essential resources, including those derived from the labour of their wives, women are certainly in a dependent situation" (p. 111). Although she acknowledged some dualities, ambiguities, multiplicities, and complexity that emerged through her study due to changes in social and economic structures showing that women are not the only victims of antagonistic gender relations, Silberschmidt (1999) revealed some deeply patriarchal social structures and systems of the Abagusii people. She highlighted the strong need for perhaps most Abagusii men to control Abagusii women: "Men had (at least ideally) a very important role as owner and ruler of the household and its members, and men had power and authority" (p. 35). Levine and Levine (as cited in Silberschmidt) showed that "the male head of the household was its decision maker and controller of wealth i.e. land, cattle, money, labour, including that of women...moreover men had

unchallenged control of political and legal relations and institutions” (p. 37). Silberschmidt (1999) explained:

The traditional ideal of a woman was of one who knew her place as a female, to “be her age” and be less “strong-minded” than the average man. A woman was also respected when, apart from her childbearing capabilities, she was strong, capable, energetic, entrepreneurial and a good manager of her household (Levine, R. and B., 1966/77). Despite the so called subordination to men, women traditionally had essential, semi-autonomous roles as producers and distributors of goods (1966/77). While men were in control of women, they were also dependent on women for their personal wealth (wives, children, cattle and land); respect, honour and esteem from others; and (by marriage) for peaceful relations with potential enemies from other clans...women represented a threat to men and male control over women was therefore essential. (Silberschmidt, p. 38)

Thirty years later, a recent study by Echo Network Africa (2019) corroborates Silberschmidt’s study findings on men’s control of women and dependence on women for their personal wealth (1999). The Echo Network Africa study reveals:

Although women were quite prominent in business, they were facing a kind of economic disempowerment. As explained by one of our key informants who is a banker, women do not own land or other economic assets. This informant further explained, ‘So even where a woman business person is applying for a loan, the loan is actually taken by the man, who is her husband as he owns the collateral. [I]n Kisii, they have some of the highest default rates amongst women debtors unlike other counties because in Kisii, it is a man taking the loan on the back of a woman. (Echo Network Africa, 2019, p.3).

Control of Women’s Bodies, Sexuality and Female Genital Mutilation

It is therefore clear that the Abagusii culture is embedded in a patriarchal order that largely relies on male dominance, male privilege, and male centeredness for its survival; a condition that enables domination and is fertile ground for the violation of Abagusii women’s human rights. It must be noted that the patriarchal need to control extends to control over women’s bodies and their sexuality, a phenomenon many women and men within the Abagusii community have come to accept as normal. One of the ways this system manifests among the Abagusii is through the pervasive cultural practice of FGM. Despite a wide range of interventions to encourage the abandonment of this practice, Oloo et al. (2011) reported that the Kisii (Abagusii) ethnic group “numbers just over 1 million individuals, according to the 2009 Kenya national census and FGM is nearly universal among the Kisii—96% of the women interviewed from this community during the 2008/2009 demographic and health survey had been circumcised” (Oloo et al., 2011, p. 24). Oloo et al.’s study revealed that upholding culture and tradition is the most significant reason the Abagusii continue to practice FGM. They found that female circumcision is considered an integral part of the Kisii peoples’ way of life and culture.

Hadi (2006) reinforced the idea that FGM is a system embedded in the dynamics of patriarchy, noting,

FC/FGM (female circumcision) is a social practice that aims to control women’s sexuality and subjugate them. Their bodies are surgically altered to keep them in line with patriarchal norms and ideologies” . . . [U]nless FGM is addressed from a gender and human rights perspective, we will be missing the point. (Hadi, p. 123).

Referring to patriarchy, The African Feminist Forum (2006) noted that our “ideological task as feminists is to understand this system and our political task is to end it. Our focus is fighting against patriarchy as a system rather than fighting individual men or

women” (p. 6). The cultural belief and subsequent need to control Abagusii women’s sexuality was reiterated in an International Rescue Committee (IRC) study report: “FGM is also widely practiced in Kisii County with the aim of controlling female sexuality . . . even though it is illegal and punishable by law in Kenya” (IRC, 2014, p. 12).

ATTITUDES, BELIEFS, AND OTHER PRACTICES WHICH VIOLATE WOMEN’S HUMAN RIGHTS IN GUSIILAND

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, Child Marriage, and Early Pregnancies

An IRC (2014) study on gender-based violence (GBV) in Kisii County reported:

The survey established that sexual violence against the girl child is common in Kisii, with records from the Ogembo Law Courts indicating three to four defilement cases per week. Incest, child marriage, teenage pregnancies, rape and child trafficking are also common. People living with disabilities, children, widows, orphans, and the elderly are particularly vulnerable to violence. “Child purchase” is practiced by mostly barren women and those who are looking for particular sex, mostly male children since the boy child is valued among the Gusii. Sexual assault is common and forms about 60 per cent of all GBV patients attending Nduru Level 4 Hospital and Kisii Level 5 Hospital. Most GBV survivors do not report their cases to the police making it difficult to prosecute the perpetrators. (IRC, p. 12)

The IRC (2014) report noted that sexual violence, particularly defilement, was the most common form of GBV in Kisii county. Since 2014, I have been involved in a case by helping to seek justice and create community awareness on the necessity to end sexual and other forms of violence. This case came about as a result of the rape and subsequent murder of 4-year old Anita Osebe Moi of Iringa village in Tabaka Ward, Kisii County (NTV News Broadcast, November 2014). There have also been several cases of

girls and women with disabilities and elderly women who have been raped, gang-raped, and harmed by young men from the community - some of them, their grandsons. This information was disclosed in 2014 by confidential sources in my presence, during a meeting with the Tabaka Ward Representative. These examples and the IRC (2014) study findings are reflective of the prevalent human rights violations girls and women experience in Gusiiland.

Pervasive male dominance and privilege in Gusii, supported by strong patriarchal underpinnings, perpetuates values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices that continue to devalue girls and women. True to what Eisler (2007) refers to as a domination societal configuration, this dynamic ranks girls and women below boys and men in a socially-constructed hierarchical order. In this order, girls and women are typically perceived as a cluster of weaker or lesser humans, who must submit to and serve boys and men in an existential dynamic which often objectifies, sexualizes, and consequently subjects them to various forms of violence. Silberschmidt's (1999) anthropological study findings in Kisii-Gusii revealed a prevalence of violence and sexual antagonism:

Forty years later, during my field work - also in Kisii - Gusii had the reputation of being "extremely violent"; "husbands kill their wives, and wives kill their husbands"; "Gusii men are terribly jealous and possessive"; "the worst offence of a married Gusii woman is to show that she can make it on her own"; Gusii men are "proud and terribly self conscious"; "they ego-trip a lot"; "they are highly emotional"; "they get upset very quickly"; "they overact and explode." Robert and Barbara Le Vine identified four general patterns of behavior: authoritarianism, emotional restraint, interpersonal hostility and last but not least sex antagonism (LeVine, R and B., 1966/77:184). In the relationship between women and men there was one with a strong association between sex and aggression. Coitus is an act in which a man overcomes the resistance of a woman and causes her pain. This is not limited to the wedding night but

continues to be important in marital relations (1966/77:54). (Silberschmidt, 1999, pp. 10-11)

The IRC (2014) study in Kisii found that “while drug and alcohol abuse, poverty and declining moral values are blamed for rampant gender based violence (GBV) in Kisii County, cultural beliefs and traditional practices were found to be significant contributors” (p. 12). The history of sexual aggression has also been documented as part of some versions of the traditional Gusii marriage ceremony. Nyang’era (1999), a Gusii customary law expert, described a version of the traditional Gusii marriage and honeymoon period giving an account of what he called the “deflowering” or *okobutia* of the bride as follows:

The bride was now at the home of her husband (the bridegroom) after she was captured and carried on the shoulders or led to the home of the husband. She might resist, kick or bite the men but to no avail for the men were determined to catch, drag or carry her by force. It was therefore the duty of the men to make sure that the deflowering was effected immediately or as soon as the bride reached that home. This action was done at the thoral bed in the presence of the age mates of the husband. If there was any resistance from the side of the bride the age mates had to assist the groom by holding the bride firmly thereby opening the legs apart in order for him to find it easy to deflower the bride. Men were rewarded by a slaughter and enjoyed the relish of a hen, cock or even a goat for the work of having captured the girl and for having brought her to the groom and for having been present for the ceremony of ending the virginity of the bride. (Nyang’era, p. 46)

D. Marube (personal communication, 2014) confirmed this to be an accurate account of how marriage and sexual relations were traditionally conducted in some communities within Gusii, citing his grandmother as an example of a woman who was married through this practice. Silberschmidt’s (1999) study report confirmed some aspects of

Nyang'era's (1999) account on *okobutia*, and as noted earlier and worth reiterating, she outlined that Levine and Levine found a historical and strong association between sex and aggression in Gusii, noting, "Coitus is an act in which a man overcomes the resistance of a woman and causes her pain. This is not limited to the wedding night but continues to be important in marital relations (Levine & Levine, 1966/77:54)" (Silberschmidt, p. 11).

A number of Abagusii women across socio-economic strata in rural areas, urban areas, and the Diaspora, have shared with me that they have experienced sexual aggression in their intimate relations with their husbands. Some Abagusii men have also shared with me that they were socialized to associate sexual prowess with aggression. Some noted that during their socialization as young men, they were informed by older men that there weren't "real men" if they hadn't caused a woman to scream out in pain during the act of sexual intercourse. This phenomenon also emerged as a theme during conversations with some Abagusii women during my dissertation research.

While there are culturally tolerated practices among the Abagusii which violate girls' and women's human rights, FGM is the only practice explored in my study that today can be irrefutably categorized as a traditional cultural practice. This is the case because of a deeply historical cultural embeddedness, degree, and maturity, of the deeply-rooted universalism of the values, assumptions, symbols, rituals, other cultural artifacts, and socialization processes which define it as a self-sustaining and, until more recently, a largely closed social system. This is to say that I am by no means claiming that rape, incest, witch burning, and other harmful practices mentioned in this article that violate women's rights are cultural practices among the Abagusii.

My study sought to develop women's capacity to lead change by addressing practices—cultural, traditional, or not traditional—that violate women's human rights. I defined culture based on what actually happens within the Gusii community today, but also paid attention to how past practices influence current practices through cultural values,

assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs. Given the history of practices such as *ogokurura* (bride abduction) and *okobutia* (deflowering) which some people may still consider culturally acceptable, it is not surprising that there are many cases of sexual violence such as rape within the Gusii community.

For the most part, *ogokurura* involved a group of men abducting, beating, and forcefully taking a young woman to a particular man's home, where he raped, impregnated, and forcefully detained her, with the hope that she would eventually submit, and become his wife. Some old people claim that some members of the early generation of educated, elite Abagusii men who owned automobiles literally abducted schoolgirls, put them in their cars, and took them to their homes, where many eventually became their wives. I noted with great interest that in 2014, my late grandmothers recounted a traditional marital process among the Abagusii that was quite different from the one Nyang'era described, that did not involve the violence of *ogokurura* and *okobutia*. The marital process they told me about included scenarios in which the groom welcomed and protected his willing bride from being harassed by women who were her contemporaries, when she arrived in his village with an entourage of female friends from her home village. This indicates that while sexual aggression is prevalent in Gusii, it is not a traditional cultural practice of the Abagusii people but a form of gender-based violence which, like FGM, violates girls' and women's human rights to bodily integrity, security of person, and protection from torture and cruel and inhuman treatment.

Domestic Violence and Wife Beating

Domestic violence is another form of violence in Gusiiland that affects both men and women, although women are predominantly the targets. Nyang'era (1999) noted that while Abagusii customary law prohibits "excessive beatings" of either men or women within marriage, it was "not unusual for couples to occasionally fight each other for reasons known to themselves...If these fights were repeatedly and excessively carried out, the beating was termed a cause for divorce" (p. 62). However, based on various

reports by community members, there continue to be numerous accounts of wife battering among the Abagusii (Silberschmidt, 1999). I know some Abagusii women who were physically and emotionally brutalized by their husbands as recently as 2016.

Silberschmidt (1999) also pointed out that the “punishment for women who did not fulfill their obligations was beating. Wife beating was a common and socially accepted practice and form of chastisement” (p. 77). This was and still is a way some Abagusii men assert their authority over their wives and others in their household. It is common knowledge in Gusii that some Abagusii women perceive beatings from their husbands as a show of love and affection. A young woman in her twenties who was being beaten by her husband informed me in 2014 that she didn’t think there was any issue when a man beats his wife. Her very concerned mother had requested me to accompany her when she went to speak to her daughter about her safety and wellbeing. The young woman shared that she always thought that beatings were the means by which men expressed love for their wives. She said she had learned this from other women.

Widow Disinheritance and Witch Burning

The IRC (2014) report also linked the practice of witch burning to cultural beliefs held by some people in Gusii, noting that “Witch-hunting and witch burning which is widely practiced after labeling someone a witch, seldom portrays men as wizards, hence women are the main victims” (p. 12). The report further noted that in “February 2014 for instance, seven women who were labeled as witches were burnt near Nyamaiya Town” (IRC, 2014, p. 12). This extremely disturbing trend in Gusiiland continues to subject widowed—especially elderly—women to harassment, violence through mob justice, and even death by being burned alive or hacked to death by community members who often accuse them of practicing witchcraft.

Kenya’s *Standard Digital* news reported that a 95-year-old woman and her 53-year-old daughter were burnt alive on January 14, 2017 by a mob of villagers in Nyamira County,

Gusiiland (“Two Women Lynched,” 2017). The report indicated that eight other homes in the same area were burned down by the mob amid allegations that the homeowners were witches. This and other media reports noted that Kisii and Nyamira counties are notorious for burning people alive over claims of practicing witchcraft while the underlying issue is land ownership.

The IRC (2014) report further outlined other forms of violence against women, particularly widows and elderly women, who are often accused of being witches, noting that “widows are often disinherited of their property by their in-laws. This is usually accompanied by violence meant to chase them away from their matrimonial homes” (p. 12). The report further outlined, “Burning suspected witches, who are mainly women in a calculated scheme to disinherit them has become a deeply entrenched practice” (p. 12). I was called upon on two different occasions, in 2014 and 2015, respectively, to help intervene when 2 widows were being harassed and had been chased away from their homes, violently. The two cases were reported to the local authorities and law enforcement. Fearing for their and their children’s safety and lives, the two women decided to stay away permanently from the homes and farms they had built and shared with their deceased husbands.

Other practices which violate women’s rights in Gusiiland include denying girls and women access to basic human rights such as education, adequate food, and health care, in cases in which women are afraid to make decisions about their health care if their husbands have not endorsed the decision.

Discrimination in Nutrition and Education, Child Marriage, and Early Pregnancies

Based on my observations over the years as a member of the Abagusii community, some community members’, healthcare providers’, and my research participants’ accounts, the belief and practice of enforcing male privilege inspires some families to give more food or certain foods to boys over girls. This practice often compromises girls’ health and wellbeing because it deprives them of essential nutrients they need to develop physically and emotionally.

The IRC (2014) report detailed that in Kisii, a “highly patriarchal society, males are main beneficiaries in the allocation of resources and access to education. Denying education to the girl child leads to child marriage which in turn leads to early pregnancy, widow abuse, rape, defilement and incest perpetrated through coercion by an older male relative” (IRC, 2014, p. 12). In some parts of Gusiiland, it is common to find homes in which only boys have been given the chance or priority to go to school, whereas the girls stay at home to do domestic work like fetching water, gathering firewood, cooking, and taking care of younger children and their families’ herds. This practice violates girls’ human right to basic education and, in the long term, condemns them to lives trapped in a cycle of poverty.

Based on my observations as well as what my dissertation co-researchers/participants shared about their personal experiences and observations, many girls in Gusiiland drop out of school after or while in primary school. My co-researchers/participants indicated that some girls drop out of primary school after they undergo FGM, believing that they have become women who are fit to get married, have sex, and run a home. In some cases, parents stop paying their daughters’ school fees, giving priority to their sons and, as a result, some girls get married while underage. Obwoye, Ngundo, and Kyule (2018), corroborate these observations:

The impact to the affected is that most women feel mature and honoured once they have undergone FGM. Once a girl has undergone FGM she is free to decide to get married or continue with her education. Most of them opt to get married early resulting in drop out from school. (Obwoye, et al, p. 34)

Similarly, exploring the powerlessness and vulnerability that some Abagusii girls and women experience as a result of undergoing FGM, Fontes (2019) quoted Grace Mose Okong’o, Ph.D., founder and director of the Hope Foundation for African Women (HFAW), which works to end FGM and other forms of violence against women and children. She stated:

Mose Okong'o writes about how FGM is a central part of a socialization process that teaches Kisii women to accept the reality they face including the biases against them and the limitations placed on them. For example, families often decline to invest in girls' school fees and pull girls out of school early; and a woman cannot own land in her own name. (Fontes, 2019, para. 10)

The Girls Not Brides (n.d.) website notes that child marriage is a serious human rights violation affecting children's and women's rights to health, education, equality, and non-discrimination and to live free from violence and exploitation. Connecting the practice of FGM with child marriage, girls' and women's social value, and the economic benefit for families when girls undergo FGM and get married, Mokaya (2012) noted:

Every woman was supposed to undergo the process before marriage. After circumcision girls got married, had sex and started procreation. Any woman who did not get circumcised or spoiled any circumcision ritual was perceived to be offending the spirits of the ancestors and Abagusii community. An offender was to be punished or got married far away and treated in a very derogatory manner; lower amounts of dowry paid for her. She would be married off to an old person, to someone with a disability, in general to a person of low community standing. It was also believed that uncircumcised women would have stillbirths or their children would die before maturing, or would not get an admirable suitor or the clitoris could grow long and have many branches that would not allow sexual intercourse. Such beliefs were so scary that no woman would have liked to become victim. They had to undergo circumcision. Shedding of blood during the circumcision is also supposedly meant to connect the circumcised to the ancestors. (Mokaya, p. 21)

It is encouraging that the Kenyan government criminalized the practice of FGM in 2011 and that as of January 2020, the Ministry of Education started a national door-to-door

campaign to ensure that all students who complete primary school enroll in secondary schools. This campaign could help ensure that girls, who are often discriminated against after completing their primary school education, get a chance to go to secondary school. While the 2011 law that criminalized FGM in Kenya is critical to efforts to eradicate this practice, as I have written elsewhere (Abuya, 2015, 2017), creating awareness of the negative effects of FGM, using threats of arrest and prosecution, shaming, instilling fear, and intimidating community members as the predominant strategies for implementing the law to enable social change continues to keep the once elaborate community-wide ceremony underground through medicalization, thus violating the dignity and endangering the lives of girls and women in Gusiiland, discreetly. Based on my dissertation research findings, transformative, humanizing, and cultural change leadership-based interventions, such as the Bold Leadership for Humanity in Practice framework (Abuya, 2017), hold greater promise for a long-term and sustainable solution to ending FGM in Gusiiland.

Control of Women's Health-care Decisions

P. Kenya (personal communication, 2014), who was the Matron in Charge at Tabaka Mission Hospital in Tabaka Ward at the time of this conversation, informed me that for cultural reasons, several women refused to sign medical forms for consent for C-section during childbirth unless their husbands were present to sign—even when their husbands were hundreds of miles away and their lives and the babies' lives were in danger. Kenya indicated that some of the women refused to sign medical intervention consent forms fearing that their husbands will “kill them” if they sign the forms. This shows a form of control over women by some men, on matters pertaining to their wives' health, health-care choices, and decisions.

Marginalization of Women in Political Leadership and Decision Making

The marginalization of women from meaningful participation in political leadership and decision-making processes is yet another way patriarchy continues to create conditions

for the violation of women's human rights in Gusiiland. A recent study by Echo Network Africa (2019) reported:

... [i]t emerged that the people of both Kisii and Nyamira counties, have knowledge that it is important to have both men and women in political leadership... within the Abagusii culture, which is ...deeply patriarchal, men assume a dominant position irrespective of their status in society... and ... the Abagusii community believes that a man must always be 'on top of a woman', a statement that was said over and over again during interviews. The extent to which patriarchy is entrenched, was illustrated by one very deep quote by one of the leading scholars from the county - 'Patriarchy is so deeply ingrained and culturally accepted, that women are only female biologically, but they are male socially'. In other words, women were acting as instruments of propagating male dominance alongside the men" ... It is a society where culturally men are considered superior to women. The cultural name for wife for example, is 'kitchen' implying that the woman's principal role is in the kitchen. The common view is that a woman who ascends into political leadership would not have any respect for her husband... a political woman, is synonymous to a morally loose woman (Echo Network Africa, p. 2, 2019).

While I am not aware of the exact term this report refers to, as a member of the Abagusii community, I can confirm that one of the cultural names for wife in Ekegusii is "*omorugi*", which translates to 'the one who cooks' or 'cook'. Patriarchal cultural values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that inform and perpetuate the marginalization of women from participation in political leadership and decision-making processes explain why the Abagusii people have never elected a woman to serve in non-affirmative action national political leadership positions such as a Member of Parliament, since Kenya gained independence in the 1960s.

However, during former President the late H.E. Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi's administration in the early 1990s, Hon. Catherine Moraa Nyamato became the first Omogusii woman to serve in a national political leadership position, as a nominated Member of Parliament. Based on my conversations with Hon. Nyamato in March 2020, as a pioneering female political leader in Gusiiland she experienced significant hostility and stigmatization from some men and women, because, as noted in the Echo Network Africa (2019) report, Abagusii women politicians are typically stereotyped, frowned upon, and even ostracized in certain circles. During her 1992-1997 leadership tenure and subsequent attempts to run for national political leadership positions as a Member of Parliament, Nyamato (personal communication, March 2020) faced significant challenges that included hostility, in which many Abagusii men and women said, "*intoraisanera kogamberwa no omokungu*", meaning; "We cannot be governed by a woman" - with an underlying derogatory connotation that it would be culturally retrogressive for the Abagusii people to be governed by a woman. Nyamato indicated that the fact that she also used her leadership platform to openly speak out against the harmful practice of FGM in Gusiiland made her a target for constant ridicule and stigmatization by men and women, who said that she was out to destroy the Abagusii people's cherished culture and was therefore not fit to lead. Male candidates vying for the same political leadership position used this as a successful campaigning tool against her candidacy. This is an excellent example of how, owing to deeply-rooted patriarchal cultural values, beliefs, and practices, Abagusii women are punished by the community for vying for political leadership positions and for standing up for girls' and women's human rights - especially when they speak out against the cultural practice of FGM. This is one reason some Abagusii political leaders, men and women alike, refuse to speak out against the practice of FGM - it can cost them an election.

Consistent with this trend, neither Kisii nor Nyamira County have elected a woman as Governor or Senator since the 2013 advent of the devolved system of government. However, in 2013, Hon. Janet Ong'era was nominated as a Senator in Kisii County. While a lot of work needs to be done to get women elected in non-affirmative action political

leadership positions in Gusiiland, there is a ray of hope in Machoge Basi, Kisii County, that could inspire the other wards in Kisii and Nyamira Counties to elect women:

Machoge Basi Ward, is a unique ward. This Ward, is a ward of many gender equality champion stories. It is the single ward that has elected a woman as an MCA in 2 subsequent election. In 2013, they elected Hon. Catherine Maanzi and in 2017, they replaced her with Hon. Rosa Orondo. Hon. Catherine Maanzi is currently a nominated MCA. This same ward, has a woman chief; and out of the 20 nominated village elders 8 are women. Machoge Basi looks forward to producing the first Governor of Kisii County, one day in the future! (Echo Network Africa, p. 2, 2019)

The following section explores how a shift from a patriarchal, domination-driven cultural orientation to a partnership orientation offers hope for social transformation in Gusii, a process that promises to create conditions in which more people could start perceiving girls and women as equal to boys and men in human value and dignity and, therefore, deserving to live lives free from violence and discrimination in all spheres of their lives - public and private.

Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory: A Leader's Framework for Cultivating Cultures of Partnership

Eisler's Cultural Transformation Theory is based on her research which revealed two societal cultural orientations which she referred to as the "partnership or mutual respect system and the domination, or top-down control, system" (Eisler, 2007, Kindle Loc. 191). She posited:

Most theories of cultural evolution have described a linear progression from "primitive" to "civilized." Cultural transformation theory offers a conceptual

framework that is not unilinear but rather multilinear. Specifically, it proposes that the partnership model and the domination model are two basic attractors for social systems; that movement from one to the other does *not* follow a linear progression; and that times of disequilibrium—such as ours—offer the opportunity for fundamental cultural transformation. (Eisler, 2013, p. 281)

Eisler (2007) lamented that earlier analytical lenses for social categories such as “right versus left, religious versus secular, Eastern versus Western, industrial versus pre- or postindustrial, focus on particular aspects of social systems, such as technological development, location, or ideology” (Kindle, Loc. 575). By contrast, Eisler’s partnership system and domination system social categories enable a more systemic analysis of social systems because they “describe the totality of a society’s beliefs and institutions from family to education, and religion to politics and economics” (Eisler, 2007, Kindle Loc. 575).

Eisler (2007) posited that these two social configurations “produce different life experiences and support different kinds of relationships,” in which the “domination system supports relations based on rigid rankings of domination ultimately backed up by fear and force,” while the “partnership system supports relationships based on mutual respect, mutual accountability, and mutual benefit” (Eisler, 2007, Kindle, Loc 1600-1606). She further stated,

No society orients completely to either the domination model or the partnership model ...and... [T]he degree to which a society or time period orients to one or the other of these systems profoundly affects which of our large repertoire of human traits and behaviors is culturally reinforced or inhibited. (Eisler, 2007, Loc. 1594).

She explained that the “partnership system brings out our capabilities for consciousness, caring, and creativity... while... [T]he domination system tends to inhibit

these capabilities.... and brings out ...[I]nsensitivity, cruelty, and destructiveness” (Eisler, 2007, Kindle, Loc. 1594-1600).

Eisler (2007) described four core components of the system of domination: “a social structure of rigid top down rankings, a high level of abuse and violence, a male-superior/female-inferior model of our species, and beliefs that justify domination and violence as inevitable and moral” (Kindle Loc. 1632). Cultures that are based on systems of domination foster socialization processes which perpetuate and reinforce dominance, creating a cultural fabric that is inequitable, abusive, violent, inhumane, and unjust. These cultures are fertile ground for human rights violations; the “dominated” are denied their human rights, women are subjugated, and things stereotypically associated with femininity are devalued. In this space, boys and men are valued over girls and women.

On the other hand, according to Eisler (2007), the four core components of the partnership system are:

a democratic and egalitarian family and social structure, a low level of abuse and violence, equal partnership between male and female halves o (sic) humanity, beliefs and stories that support relations based on mutual benefit, accountability, and caring ...which in turn... [S]hape all the social institutions and relations, including economic ones. (Eisler, Kindle, Loc. 1757-1763).

Cultures based on systems of partnership foster cultural thinking and practices that reinforce partnership; recognize all people regardless of gender as equals in human value, dignity, and rights; and invest in care and caregiving. In order to co-create a more humane society in which all people’s human rights are recognized, respected, and honored, a strong cultural fabric which values all human beings and seeks to meet the authentic needs of all people regardless of age, gender, or socio-economic standing is

needed. Eisler's (2013) research findings make a strong case for enabling cultural transformation toward a partnership social configuration. She noted:

Change is of course a constant in the living world. But there is a big difference between change within the parameters of a particular social system and transformative change. The first kind of change does not alter a social system's basic identity or configuration. The second kind of change shifts the system from one basic identity or configuration to another. It is this *transformative* change that is the focus of cultural transformation theory (Eisler, 2013, p. 282).

Eisler (2007) noted that what is needed for cultural transformation to occur is a shift from systems of domination to systems of partnership. Cultural transformation calls for the co-creation of new or enhanced organizational and societal cultures that orient toward the partnership model to replace existing cultural frameworks that support domination. These existing cultural frameworks are the bedrock of assumptions which continue to be the source of immense human suffering, particularly for girls and women in patriarchal societies such as Gusii. Leaders at all levels have a great responsibility and are strategically positioned to facilitate and enable cultural transformation within their respective areas of influence.

Schein (2010) stated that leaders have the ability to influence cultural changes within their organizations or communities, noting, "Culture is ultimately created, embedded, evolved, and ultimately manipulated by leaders...and...[I]f elements of a given culture become dysfunctional leaders have to surmount their own culture and speed up the normal evolution processes with forced managed culture change programs" (p. 3). He further asserted, "These dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership and make you realize that leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin" (p. 3).

Abagusii leaders can therefore play a critical role in analyzing their existing organizational or community culture by paying close attention to the gaps between the values that are espoused and those that are enacted, and use the results of these analyses to help their organizations and communities embrace a new set of values and cultural assumptions that are supportive of a partnership social configuration or cultural orientation that embraces compassion and upholds our collective human dignity.

CONCLUSION

Abagusii leaders - women and men alike - have a responsibility to educate themselves about human rights so that they can access the perspectives and values embedded in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* which enables leadership that upholds human dignity. South Africa's Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (1999) frequently quotes a Zulu proverb or wise saying, *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*, which translates to "A person is a person through other persons." Tutu (1999) explained:

Ubuntu [...] speaks of the very essence of being human. [We] say [...] "Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu." Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons" (p. 31).

The African philosophy of *Ubuntu* and values-based leadership - grounded in humanistic values - are foundational concepts of my Bold Leadership for Humanity in Practice (BLHP), transformative change leadership development framework. In Kiswahili, the BLHP framework translates to *Uongozi Wa Utu na Ujasiri Kwa Maadili na Vitendo*, and can be abbreviated as *Uongozi Wa Utu*. In Ekegusii (the language spoken by the Abagusii people), the BLHP framework translates to *Oborai Bwo Oboremu No Obomwanyabanto Ase Chimbua Ne Ebikora*, and can be abbreviated as *Oborai Bwo Obomwanyabanto*. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* is reflected in the cultural ethos of many African ethnic communities. For example, as it is in the spirit of *Ubuntu*, the concepts of *Utu* in

Kiswahili and *Obomwanyabanto* in Ekegusii translate to being human and humane. These concepts also inspire and evoke a collective consciousness of the interconnected nature of our being, as humans.

Embracing human rights and upholding human dignity for all people is a critical leadership imperative in the 21st century. Having Abagusii men and women working together in partnership would require unlearning assumptions like “women are enemies” or as reflected in the Gusii saying, “*bakungu imbanga bana*” which translates to “women are like children”. These assumptions create mistrust that is played out in many spheres of life, and place women at a juvenile level in which they, along with children, must be dominated and controlled - including through violence. This need to dominate women and children is reflected in the beliefs and practices of wife beating to assert authority and demand compliance, and beating children in the name of discipline. A coming together in partnership through embracing the compassionate and humanistic values of *Obomwanyabanto* more authentically would mean really ‘seeing’ one another—men and women—as human beings, equal in human value and dignity, all belonging and entitled to equal rights and opportunity by virtue of our shared humanity.

Through this process, leaders, change agents, and community members would unlearn beliefs and attitudes embedded in a patriarchal domination social configuration and learn, practice, and institutionalize new concepts and practices grounded in a partnership social configuration (Eisler, 2007), through interventions such as those explored in my dissertation inquiry that enable transformative learning for transformative change. Eisler’s (2007) Cultural Transformation Theory is one of the foundational concepts of my Bold Leadership for Humanity in Practice (BLHP), humanistic values-driven change leadership development framework. The BLHP’s foundational practices and interventions include dialogue, organizing, and Public Narrative (Ganz, 2011), which are great vehicles for enabling transformative learning and subsequent transformative change.

Through the transformative learning, transformative change, and cultural transformation processes, perhaps more people - men and women - in Gusiiland will realize the harmfulness of enforcing patriarchal values and practices, and this realization will mitigate the need for people to individually or collectively enforce the domination of girls and women. These learning and change processes carry the possibility of ultimately eliminating the desire to control girls' and women's sexuality by subjecting them to FGM and/or by enabling, perpetuating, unleashing, or tolerating sexual and other forms of violence which dehumanize girls and women.

Cultivating a partnership social and cultural orientation would put the Abagusii people on a pathway to abandoning the subjugation, discrimination, and marginalization of women from participating in political and other forms of leadership and decision-making processes - a pathway to possibilities for leaders and change agents to help facilitate transformative social change through cultural transformation, and enable lives worthy of human dignity for all people in Gusiiland, regardless of age and gender. A more humane and equitable world and lived experiences are possible for everyone, if we work together in the spirit of partnership, grounded and guided by humanistic values of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, *Utu*, and *Obomwanyabanto*.

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Abuya: Embracing Partnership for Social Transformation

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