

SAFE Maa and the Loita Maasai Declaration of FGM/C Abandonment,

February 6th 2019

When SAFE Maa began their FGM/C abandonment campaign in 2010, 100% of Maasai girls were being cut. Through the use of Maasai traditional song and story, and follow up workshops, SAFE Maa opened a conversation about abandonment within the community. By 2015, 30% of girls were graduating through a new alternative ceremony which involved no cutting. The community was reaching a tipping point and it seemed that the end of FGM/C in Loita was in sight. However, in late 2017, a new development threatened to undo the community's progress; a government legal crackdown on FGM/C was creating resistance to change within the community, as the people saw it as an external threat to their culture. Out of fear of arrest, people were starting to cut their daughters at night and in secret. It was at this point that the team decided to engage the Cultural Leadership. The time was right for the leaders in Loita to step up and support the abandonment campaign. In May 2018 all 42 cultural leaders were brought together by S.A.F.E. – the first time they had been together since 1992. SAFE Maa asked them if they would join S.A.F.E. on World Zero Tolerance to FGM/C day and declare abandonment. SAFE Maa argued that the Alternate Rite of Passage (ARP) was the right way to protect the culture. It involves all the same songs and rituals, the only difference is that at the end, the girl is cleansed with cow's milk instead of being cut. The leaders not only agreed to join the declaration event, but took the opportunity of being together for the first time in over a quarter of a century to also bless the ARP.

Declaration of Abandonment

On the 6th February 2019, the Loita Maasai community were invited to join SAFE Maa to come together and witness the Cultural Leadership declare the abandonment of FGM/C and once again bless the newly named Loita Rite of Passage (LRP) – but this time publically. This was the first event of its kind in a Loita community. The attendees included the Permanent Secretary for Social Services and Gender Affairs, the Government's Anti-FGM Board (who offered great support to SAFE Maa in the run up to the event), local politicians, three County First Ladies, SAFE Maa's main donors J.A.C Trust and Orchid Project, as well as many partners and local health professionals.

By midday, over 3000 of the Loita Maasai community had assembled in the fields outside of the SAFE Maa office in Olmesutie. This small settlement had never seen anything even close to the scale of this event.



Finally, the gates of the SAFE Maa office opened and the procession began. It was led by the Cultural Leaders, the Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs), the SAFE Maa staff, SAFE Moran, SAFE Samburu (who were inspired to start their project through the work of SAFE Maa), and a group of schoolchildren who are part of SAFE Maa's school health clubs. The leaders carried a banner reading *Loita Leads FGM/C Abandonment* and as they proceeded, they sang traditional songs, gathering momentum as more members of the community joined them.

Then came the key moment of the event, the Cultural Leaders public blessing of the alternative to cutting – the Loita Rite of Passage. The procession had formed a circle as the cultural leaders chanted in unison to signify the blessing of the LRP. This blessing means that all women who have gone through the LRP ceremony will now be able to participate in all aspects of Maasai Cultural life. Additionally, anyone who now tries to cut their daughters will be going against the decision of the cultural leaders and therefore against the culture itself.



Following the blessing, representative Cultural Leaders from both Kenya and Tanzania spoke about their dedication to end FGM/C and to bless the LRP. Young girls looked on as the leaders made this historic announcement, changing the future for them and all young girls in Loita.

Next the school health clubs had their opportunity to perform. They sang songs that they had created about their desire to see an end to FGM/C within their community, asking parents and community leaders to put this practice in the past, for the sake of their futures.



SAFE Samburu sang their powerful FGM/C abandonment song. This showed the Loita community that the Samburu tribe were also joining them in calls for abandonment, and that they were not alone in bringing change. Additionally, it gave Loitans pride that a Samburu group had been inspired by the work of SAFE Maa, replicated their programme, and had travelled across Kenya to witness this historic Declaration.



Then SAFE Maa performed the song that opened discussions about FGM/C all over Loita, allowing a proper debate to begin. Their performance, with groups of men and women singing opposing songs in favour and against FGM/C, talks about the different health and cultural issues that surround the argument about cutting.

Finally, adding their compelling voices, SAFE Moran, the warriors, performed. These young men are the guardians of Maasai culture and the future husbands of the young girls who will go through the LRP. Since they began performing in 2017, their announcement that they will support the LRP and marry girls who have been through this ceremony and are not cut, has been hugely powerful.



The feedback from the community and other guests has been overwhelmingly positive. The Chair of the Government anti-FGM Board stated that it was the only declaration she had been to that was truly community led. And the community circumcisers said that it was the day they had been waiting for since joining SAFE Maa's campaign. Individual members of the community reported that they felt enormous pride that Loita were leading the way for FGM/C abandonment within Kenya.

The February 6th Declaration was a massive step forward, but now SAFE Maa need to ensure that the Cultural Leaders message of abandonment is understood and embraced by all Loita's residents. By continuing their programme of educational Maasai song and story, community workshops, and one on one interventions, they will keep on promoting the LRP through the community circumcisers, until the goal of total abandonment is achieved.