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# GIRLS AS ACTIVE AGENTS OF CHANGE

Evidence from Project NAWEZA

A girl-Led and girl-centred project by Msichana Empowerment Kuria



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# Project NAWEZA



## Acknowledgements

The NAWEZA project was a collaboration between the Adolescent Girls Research Team and the Msichana Empowerment Kuria Team, with significant contributions from Florence Andesia(13), Lydia Chacha(15), Maureen Bhoke(15) Elizabeth Bhoke(14), Fridah Chacha, Mary Nchagwa(15), and Caroline Mwita(14). The programme was led by Natalie Tingo, with support from Magdaline Majuma, Cynthia Akomo, Joyce Kanini, Cecilia Ndegwa, and 10 young women champions. Special thanks to FRIDA, the Young Feminist Fund, for their financial and technical support.

## Executive Summary

The NAWEZA project, a five-year initiative (2017-2021) funded by FRIDA, the Young Feminist Fund, and implemented by Msichana Empowerment Kuria, highlights the transformative impact of girl-centred design in ending Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage in Kuria, Kenya. NAWEZA, meaning "I can" in Swahili, involved girls aged 8-18 in all aspects of the program, empowering them to become agents of social change in their communities. This white paper summarises the project's successes, challenges, and lessons learned, and provides recommendations for similar initiatives.

## Introduction

The NAWEZA project is based on the principle that girls should be at the center of programming at all stages, from research and policy development to implementation and evaluation. By leveraging girls' lived experiences and empowering them through advocacy and self-affirmation skills, NAWEZA aimed to shift social norms around FGM and child marriage in Kuria. The project's design recognized the critical role of girls in leading social change and sought to create a safe and empowering space for them to advocate for their rights.





## Methodology

The NAWEZA project employed a girl-centred methodology involving participatory action research methods, such as body mapping, safety scans, focus group discussions, and one-on-one interviews. Girls participated in 16-week skills learning sessions and girl-led advocacy campaigns, contributing to the programme's design, implementation, and evaluation.

The project followed a girl-centred methodology based on four principles:



### Girls safety & safeguarding

Establishing safety and safeguarding measures and practices for girls engaging in the project and research

### Finding Her

Identifying the most vulnerable girls and understanding their environment.

### Listening to Her

Facilitating meaningful consultations with girls & building her assets.

### Designing with Her

Engaging girls as powerful agents of change

# Theoretical Frameworks

- **Agency Theory:** Focuses on girls' ability to make decisions and control resources that affect their lives.
- **Social Norms Theory:** Addresses how collective behaviours and beliefs in a community can be shifted.

## Limitations of the NAWEZA project model

- **Backlash and Targeted Attacks:** Girls and advocates faced backlash and targeted attacks.
- **Inconsistent Participation:** Participation was inconsistent due to cultural and social barriers.
- **Pushback on Girls' Movements:** There was significant resistance to the girls' advocacy efforts.

## Adaptations

- **Community Engagement and Education:** the NAWEZA project intensified its community engagement efforts. Regular workshops and dialogues with parents, community leaders, and local authorities were conducted to educate them about the harms of FGM and child marriage. These sessions were designed to foster understanding and build alliances, emphasizing the health risks and human rights violations associated with these forms of violence.
- **Safety Measures:** Careful selection of the project name, established a girls' centre and other village safe spaces where girls could meet without fear of harassment. Additionally, partnerships with local law enforcement were strengthened to ensure the protection of participants and to respond promptly to any threats.
- **Flexible Scheduling:** To accommodate the inconsistent participation of girls, the NAWEZA project adopted a more flexible scheduling approach. Sessions were held at different times, including weekends and after-school hours, to better fit the girls' varying schedules.
- **Peer Support Networks:** The program reinforced its peer support networks to counter the removal of girls from the program. Girls who remained in the program were trained to provide emotional and practical support to their peers.
- **Strengthening Alliances:** To mitigate pushback against the girls' movements, the project worked on strengthening alliances with progressive community leaders and organizations.
- **Adaptive Learning Modules:** The learning modules were continuously adapted based on feedback from the participants. This iterative approach ensured that the content remained relevant and engaging, addressing the evolving needs and challenges faced by the girls.

## Results

IMPACT AREAS	KEY OUTCOMES
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION	The project achieved a 70% reduction in FGM and child marriage cases across the 10 villages where it was implemented. A safe house was established, rescuing 200 girls at risk.
GIRLS EDUCATION	The project significantly improved girls' access to education, with 95% retention and transition rates. Over 600 girls graduated from primary school and pursued secondary education without undergoing FGM or child marriage.
PERIOD POVERTY	Improved access to menstrual health care for 5,000 girls addressing period poverty, increased school attendance and autonomy over their bodies.

## Lesson learned

- **Girls' Voices Matter:** Girls have the power to advocate for themselves and are ready to lead.
- **Adaptability and Contextualisation:** Girls' leadership ensured the program was adaptable and contextualised.
- **Support from Feminist Funders:** Feminist funders like FRIDA, who are willing to listen and adapt, provide multi-year funding to support better programming.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Girl-centred multi-stakeholder collaboration supported linkage and access to services.



## Recommendations for Action or Further research

1. **Sustainability:** Ensure continued support and resources for girl-centred programmes to maintain momentum and impact.
2. **Scalability:** Adapt and replicate the Naweza model in other communities facing similar challenges.
3. **Policy Advocacy:** Strengthen girl-centred advocacy efforts to influence policy changes at local and national levels.
4. **Further Research:** Conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of girl-centred programmes on ending FGM and child marriage.

## Conclusion

The Naweza project demonstrates that girl-centred design can effectively shift social norms and empower girls to lead change in their communities. By placing girls at the centre of programming, the project created a safe and supportive environment for them to advocate against FGM and child marriage. The lessons learned from Naweza provide valuable insights for similar initiatives across Africa and beyond.





# Contact us for further inquiries

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