



Faith in development: Transcript

Season 2: Gender and protection

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Speakers

Sabine Nkusi, Rev Martha Chigozie

Episode 8: FGM/C and stories of survivors

Sabine Nkusi 0:09

Hello and welcome back to season two of the *Faith in development* podcast brought to you by Tearfund. I, Sabine Nkusi, your host for this conversation. Today's episode will feature an incredible woman, the Reverend Martha Chigozie. Martha is based in Sierra Leone, and has been an advocate for women and girls for over 20 years. Her particular focus has been around the issue of female genital mutilation or cutting what we have also known as 'FGM/C'. She also leads an organization called TEDWGA Thorough Empowerment Education and Development for Women and Girls in Africa. In this episode, we talk about her work, some of the challenges she faces and the change she hopes to see for the future of women and girls. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Sabine Nkusi 1:09

Good morning, good morning Martha. How are you doing?

Rev Martha Chigozie 1:14

I'm doing very well. Thank you so much, Sabine, how are you doing?

Sabine Nkusi 1:18

I'm doing really well, thank you. So thank you so much for being available to just have this conversation with me and, you have been such a great ally and friend to us here at Tearfund for the past few years, especially as we started our response to female genital mutilation or cutting. It's a great privilege to be in conversation with you. So as a way of introduction for our audience, please can you tell us a little bit about yourself and background and what you do?

Rev Martha Chigozie 1:56

Okay, I am Reverend Martha Priscilla Banga Chigozie. I am a Sierra Leonian. I am married to a Nigerian, so that's why you hear 'Chigozie' there, a typical Sierra Leonian woman! And I have been involved in a lot of work with women and children, especially when you talk about issues around GBV and domestic violence and of course, leadership and women in economic empowerment. Also, I also work with churches and I do interfaith work for close to 30 years now. Besides, work with Tearfund, of course, there's a lot we've been doing not for a few years but close to over 10 years. It's over 10 years. Yes.

Sabine Nkusi 2:54

But you also lead an organization, right?

Rev Martha Chigozie 2:58

I lead an organization and that organization actually is over 20 years, and also a pastor by His grace in leading the church. Right, I'm a founder by His grace.

Sabine Nkusi 3:13

So as you were saying, so you have been really like an advocate for women and girls for many years. So can you share with us why you have been doing this work and also how you came to be part of that work, how you started this work?

Rev Martha Chigozie 3:30

Maybe I can start with her. Before I go to y and those that I work with the How was like, many, many years ago, I have witness experience myself, as well as I have engaged and mediated between a lot of homes, families, starting from different angle, the force, I told the panel for ministry work and part of us will the women's coalition, and also part of interfaith so there's so much coming in at a very tender age scene within the communities. And do you know one thing I just started thinking when I was a very small little girl growing up I used to defend people I don't know that I'll be doing this now. I used to defend people by making sure that if something is happening, I don't even know them. I still go to the teacher, 'this person is sleeping', or 'this person is sick', or 'this person is crying', 'this person collected this person'. She would say 'thank you very much'. So again, I used to share the little lunch I have you know, to show care. You know these two things are vividly in fact it was my principal who reminded me say from when you are a child I realise you're a great defender, and you're a giver, and you are grown up to be like this. So actually, it was really not it did not click continue now, I'm thinking of how, and then what I saw within our communities, you know, how women and children, you know, are being abused, marginalised, discriminated, talked down upon, you know, use for various things and abandon at the end, I was thinking that wow, so is it? Well, for me, when I was growing up, I was thinking that maybe this is how they appreciate the people by just say, Okay, we finished with you, we were done. We can use it when we're just like a cloth, you know, you use the cloth, and when it is that you throw it into the machine, and then get it clean and use again. And then when I was a teenager, I was not relied upon by some of my elders, in a way that my mother was sick, and she was admitted somewhere, and I need to go, you know, women and their mother, girls. So I said, Okay, teenager, I finished school early. And I was like in an in service call. So I said, Okay, after our training program, I will take three days out to come and went to see my mother, but I did not meet her in the house. She was somewhere somewhere somewhere in one community. And that's why, whereas what you see when you take a person I know it's a hospital, they say, No, this is a special form of sickness, you need to come to me actually, it's not rare that they were taking me to the bush where they do initiation. So I bought medicine, I bought things, I bought provisions to bring to my mother. So I went there. And before I enter that place, everybody that surrounded me and the shaking and dancing, I was always my mother. Before I asked, I was I don't know where I was, after days. I sister, when I got God helped me to get out of that place. I told my mother, I said, I would tell her what she thought I was joking. I said, I will tell you what about what happened to me here. That you people tricked me, brought me here that you were sick, you connect with me, because this is how I am remembering the words Connect. Because before those days, I don't know what was as you use, you have to because I was just using the words I know, you know, to compute the computer to now bring me to this kind of degrading treatment because this is integrated for you in the committee, you think this is a very laudable thing. But for me, what I went through, it was too much. So she thought I was gonna say it, you know, if you say there are some kind of things that will happen this under the law. So because of that, there was somebody who was passing by was trying to encourage us to renew. So me, I was a church person. So I said, Okay, I'll continue to grow. But then I got more committed to church more committed to the things of God, I started learning more. And I said, Okay, one thing I need from God is I need God's protection to start for that. And why is it that because I wanted to make sure I expose this thing, and I told people, and I told my mother, I'm gonna start with my younger sister, half. And the y, actually, is because I really hated what I saw happening to people, whether from the MGM pilot perspective, or go taking people to, to just do what they think they call it cultural costume or tradition, and also the way society takes women takes children, you know, and how they use us. And so all of this was

played in my mind. And I said, 'no', then I need to make sure I do something. That's the 'why' I am into what I am.

Sabine Nkusi 8:49

Wow, thank you so much for sharing that matter. I think as someone who has witnessed you doing the work in the community and your advocacy, I can really see where all that passion came from. The reason why you have been doing what you are doing. If we focus on the issue of female genital mutilation, or cutting, or FGM/C, which is a really contentious and difficult issue to talk about. I mean, we know that this practice happens in over 30 countries worldwide, and there's an estimation of about 200 million women and girls who are between the ages of 15 and 49 today who are living with the consequences of female genital mutilation or cutting. We were exploring, for us, Tearfund, you know, what our response is to such an issue as part of a wider section of gender based violence work. We started in Sierra Leone, and you were quite an ally there in this work, because you have been doing this work for quite some time. Can you tell us a little bit about this issue in the context of Sierra Leone, and maybe explain what initiation is? And just tell us a little bit about what is the context of FGM/C?

Rev. Martha Chigozie 10:25

Thank you very much. For us here in Sierra Leone, it's something complex. It is really, what will I say? It's only grace and mercy that is keeping some of us alive every day. Because I can remember when we had the journalist here they were actually dragged into the bush and they just did what they want to do to her and after she was released, it did not take too long and she died. Some of these things are so complex that even to get 100 or 50% support from the government. In our country, we have not been able to accept where they are trying to say age of consent, which is 0 to 18, that shows how complex the issue is. So that is a strategy from the end, which is for now, the only thing we can lay hands upon to say, we can start with this, but also where I also come in to say, even if the person is 100 years old, if she refuses, she doesn't want to be part, she should not be. You know, so it's so complex that we get, you know, my sister, it's a pity that when we have people who are educated, and both in country or out of country, telling you that is our culture, educated people, elites, well, renowned people in society will tell you that is our culture. And they tried to compare culture across the world, that even in the US, the UK, that this and then they start counting some stuff, that they too, are involved in so many things as their culture. But I tend to tell people culture is something, yes, you look at, and you look at the good, the bad, and the ugly. And I think if something is not helping society, or helping even the people you are trying to push into because there, there is nothing like people are willing to either you're forced to do it. All you people who have asked you to do a job, like what my mother did, that she liked, and tricked me into like, she's sick, and she was admitted somewhere. And at the end, I was trapped, you know? So I got annoyed when I came out. And I said no. So this is so complex in our country, that sometimes again, there are other people that thing as you talk with the Katene and keep the drums that are not that difficult. What will I see it so you cannot be able to keep the drums and you think nothing is happening behind the drums, you know what is keeping the drums. When you get into the bush, they beat the drums, the sink and the shout aloud, meaning that to overpower whatever sound that the victim might be going through that nobody will know and nobody will hear. So keeping that drum and in

that bush is not telling you that that victim is free. So it's a matter of bringing people out completely off such. It's not like anything, we have a lot of traditional things that we can use to do if we want to really, we have clothes, we have songs, we have beats, we have foodstuff, we can do exhibition of all those kinds of stuff that we call traditional custom, we can tell stories of what our great great grandparents used to. So they had their places and things that we can do that can just balance this issue of tradition and culture. Because who are these people trying to talk for the men? Is it to satisfy them? Is it for their own protection and to the disadvantage of the female? When from the time you have been taken into that bush and you've been caught? And then you come out you suffer? You go to your grave? It's complex.

Sabine Nkusi 14:32

Yeah, so if maybe we go back a bit. So first of all, why do people do it? So what are the key drivers in Sierra Leone?

Rev Martha Chigozie 14:42

One thing they used to say, which I don't really want to buy into, maybe it might be their own opinion because everybody have a right to their opinion. It's a word of freedom. You know, the freedom is so much that people now misbehave sometimes, using the name of freedom. They say poverty See, that is one and two, they say it's cultural. And then three, they say it's giving them what he called. For them, it's a way to be known to mean to be known as somebody that is powerful, influential, you know, and that the politicians can go and make use of their service, you know, in the name of saying, oh, we are coming to pay for so much women or girls, you know, to you, and that will give you money into your pocket, but also our power to you, and make sure that we get the people to our site. So these are some of the drivers, you know, and then the reason why they do it, as I will say, is making them to say, Okay, I belong, for the community, I belong, you do not belong. So don't say what you don't know, I belong. So these are the issues I ask that people are sometimes they bubble to just answer me. Sometimes they try to share, which is oh, this is our culture, or you cannot just go and work. We know the entry points, you don't just go in the bush. And then I mean, whether in the provinces or the rural setting, and that's an audience don't kowtow. We have our entry points, we know how the methods, the areas what we do and how we engage people. But when they asking me on the media, you know, because it's not any more secrets anyway. So this is one thing I tell people is no more secrets. So what are you doing, it's been out there, it's just making that people are trying to be desperately wicked. And it's, it's part of the Child Rights Act, that okay, this is telling you that the child will now give consent. But there are other things that the child does, don't be concerned that you will fully forcefully take the child into early marriage, the child does not give you consent for that you take them into it. Teenager, of course, when you got married early, you become teenage mothers or childhoods. And before you know, again, the child has asked you to be circumcised taking into female genital mutilation, you now forced the child to go there? Or because one thing or the other. So that is not a consent, you have not given consent? Did nobody gave consent you did it? Because this is what you believe? And believe what you did was it is something that you have grown up, so you want to pass it on to your generations, you know, and then you have other people who actually are elite, as I told you earlier, did believe that? Yes, it is our culture, and ask them, What have you gained in making sure is it get this isn't a certificate that's good that

we earn your job, when you get this job to tell me because some of you sometimes i i start thinking where it is coming from it's not about me talking about Western culture, or no Western culture. For me as a faith person, God Himself, who made us did not ask anyone to do that anybody. And even in the Quran, or in the Bible, or anywhere I am working with, I work with I work with even rats, the fate of people. Nobody there is nowhere in the Bible in the Quran that says go and do this, from where is it coming from ego, pride, selfishness, greed, and post for.

Sabine Nkusi 18:30

And I guess exactly, and I guess the, you know, the lack of value that we place in the lives of women and girls, and you know, that kind of inequality you can control. I know in some contexts the reasons and the drivers for these practices that we want to prevent. They want to prevent women and girls being promiscuous, because, you know, if we cut that part of the genitalia, then they will not, you know, husbands who said that our wives will not be, you know, unfaithful. So, they want to stop promiscuity. And I also know that for a lot of parents, they do this because it is a social norm, everyone is doing it. And it's a rite of passage. If I don't do this, if my daughter is not cut, she might not be able to serve the elders, she might not be able to get married because being cut means that you're a good girl, you know, all those kinds of social norms that are attached to it. So, you talked about so that's another in other contexts, so you talked about the bush, so for our audiences, they might not necessarily understand what it is, but I know that in, in Sierra Leone, you call it initiation. As a young girl, you get initiated into a secret society and as part of getting into the secret society, a woman would go through the practice of female genital mutilation to kind of initiate you. I think you've touched a bit on it as well, when you say that it's about belonging. Because, you know, as you grow up, it's sisterhood. Women, you'll be able maybe to get even references, you know, it's that kind of thing. But I guess the fundamental thing in what you're talking about is that it's actually detrimental to women's health, I guess, to your own story, so your health, physical health, mental health, you know, your overall well being and the fact that there is lack of political will, or even politicians use it as a way of gaining votes, is really worrying.

Rev. Martha Chigozie 21:50

You've said it all, Sabine. It takes God, and people who actually mean business with God, to say 'no.' It also takes those that are in Parliament, who actually have God in their spirit, to be able to say 'no' to this. Because there are things that people say are good. But is it really good? Why do you continue to do what you're doing? What I mean by in the bush, is that there is a certain place where they take people. It's not in your house, even though I know and I have come to know because when I am trying to do some other global research, you know, I am learning that people are doing things, they are even doing it in the hospitals, you know, going into the clinics, you know, trying to make it, what do you call it?

Sabine Nkusi 21:58

It's medicalisation.

Rev Martha Chigozie 21:59

Medicalisation, yes, thank you. So, in whatever way you do this thing, it's not helping, whether you go us do it in the hospital, what are you doing that in the hospital for, what they're doing in the hospital in some places across the globe, is what I'm talking about, that goes on bush and several other things that they call tradition goes on in the bush, right, not only the cutting, there are several other things, but the coating is the major thing, you know, and followed by several other things, right? So what really, why cutting? Why do you want to cut? Coming back to my faith. As a person of faith, I grew up knowing that this is not correct. When I became more committed to serve God, I searched the Scripture and realised that this (FGM/C) is not correct. I had to stand up to say this and say 'I will be a strong'. Not just a strong advocate, but a very big advocate against this. I will stand against this team and meet my God because it is really degrading and inhumane. It is a human rights issue. Because anybody to cut anybody packs on human rights, human rights, these are all the human rights issues that they have to look into. And also it's a God blessing God blessed with this and you're deprived for the person from that God given blessing to just take a week. You're taking away their their their, their evil arch, they're more they're the everything as a woman a full grown woman so when you're having said it's like you're you are going on another first foot pain so that's why you see a lot of homes breaking this woman does not want to have sex with me and I'll go to another person so again homes are broken because some of these things and it is insane man, I'd say you should go and get caught. You're going to want to feel they want to own you own your whole body or your own your thoughts or your feelings as well. What kind of inhuman treatment degrading treatment is that? It is so, so inhuman that anytime I sit and think, I feel fresh when I start talking about this. I feel as if I have been taken again, because it is really brutal, if I can quote. It's like a real is not correct. And we should not continue to do what is not correct. The laws have to be enacted to prevent women from disaster is not just enacted law to make sure Oh, we have a law that says Public Order Act passed into law or many other laws that are not even helping anybody much, it's about power. So why don't you pass what is beneficial to women and children in Finland? A huge amount of people. So who will have to help us with this, only the politicians who have all their work committee members who have all their people in the ground, when they want to get votes, they are the same, that we have to help to make sure this thing comes to a halt.

community has always been doing, and they know the same thing when it comes to religious beliefs. And they are both intertwined. But what gives me hope, is that there is willingness for instance, where I am currently working. It has been very difficult for us to gain a hearing of women with the opposite sex. Now, what gives me hope is that there is willingness in the community if we manage to identify the resources that we have. And again, there is hope, if we get to identify other deep-rooted concerns or issues that bring about the issues of gender-based violence. Through this, we can see that we are able to come up with a structure, a sustainable structure in the community, that they are able to address issues of gender based violence and empowering women. I know this is very challenging, it looks complicated, but I do believe that it is possible, yes, to get the community to become responsible, we're able to challenge the patriarchal systems, and then through this, eventually, we'll be able to change the existing narratives.

Sabine Nkusi 25:27

So let's maybe shift a little bit. So, you are obviously a female faith leader. You're a pastor. What do you think, are the opportunities to address this issue from a faith perspective? I mean, you've touched a little bit on that, but can you maybe elaborate a bit more?

Rev Martha Chigozie 25:46

Okay so using the faith leaders, both Muslims and the Christians and the Rastafarians and other faiths. Because, you know, we're not all Christians. We all have a faith. They who stand in front of their people, whether they call them congregation, they call them members, you call them, whatever name that they call them in the centres of worship. So when you are able to educate them properly, and they themselves god damn looking, especially for some of them, yes, but not all of them are aware. So we those who have the understanding, will not have to help those. So when they are well aware, and they are able to now say Oh, this is it, I am telling you, it will also help to make sure we minimize, because the thing is the federal leaders, they themselves have a huge platform across on to the last village. You must see a mosque or a church, or something where we are going to pray. So they are aware, and they know the good, the bad and the ugly, they'll be able to also reach out to their, to their conditions, as well as the parents and the husbands and the traditional people, as well as the politicians to say this is no good, we need to stop it. We need to stop it. It's gradual but also it's a constant, conscious effort. The word 'constant conscious effort' is what we have to do. There's a big role to play as state leaders, because people listen to them. They have been respected, they trust them, you know. So when I sit in the national platform, whether it's a national issue that I seek to discuss, the moment is similar. They say 'that woman, we know where she's standing and what she stands for. Women's empowerment is she stands for, for the vulnerable, she speaks on behalf of the voiceless.' When you empower somebody, then the person goes there to stand. And then I tell them that I'm not going to be the only one standing. So what I've been doing over the years, I have been trying to re-produce my kind. Because if we reach a time, you know, when we get old, you know, that's why doing it, we will learn I mean old, you know, you are not able to move faster that you are supposed to let you used to be, you're not able to go to maybe three, or four districts in one day.

Maybe you don't have the strength to go to the scenes. Because when things are going to move, and for example, is I go there, I go to the same, especially the places where I work, that's why we say we multiply ourselves. So that there's a way to network to send the information. And also to inform them about the different kinds of laws and make go there to make it simple for them to understand, and then to cascade it to their own village people. That's one way that the faith leaders can do it, when you multiply because in the mosque or on the churches or other faiths, they have people that they train. So we train them also to say don't just go in to talk about the things that God doesn't like. Of course all of these things are going on. But also be an advocate! Add that to your messages, add them to your preaching and to your Quranic verses that you're giving. Every opportunity, whatever opportunity we have to speak out and say what is not correct, to be able to help the next person. Human security paramount issue. when your brain is not working properly, your mind your spirit, your emotion is not working properly because of what you've gone through. You will not be productive. You will just have as that leaves and that's why you see a lot of in productive work in some offices because they're going through when that thing comes the trauma comes to the head. Do you understand it's like a shock? So they start going back to say oh, so it is good that we tried. What we also do is to do a lot of counselling and trauma healing programs. It is God's job. It's a huge job. Jobs are not something you do without getting resources. Sometimes I do and even what I have in my own pocket.

Sabine Nkusi 30:15

So as a founder of a woman-led organization, what are the challenges that you face in your work?

Rev Martha Chigozie 30:22

So what I will say, and the opportunities are so the human resource, the connections of all the networks, that is our strength, that is willing hearts that are ready across the country to really work, you know, when there's the resources, you know, because doing it, and also people who have the idea, they are already they've been empowered, they know, the good, the bad, and they already have the ID knowledge, that's another strength, don't have to gain go is just like trying to make sure this knowledge have been implemented to other people in other communities. And then the other strength is, we, of course, we have got God is our strength, that is another opportunity, because His Word is keeping us every day, you know, and of course, there's the other people within the other faiths there to believe, of course, they know that, when you try to tell them, This is what God doesn't want. And this is what God wants, definitely, they start to think it and work with it, you know, you leave it is not just to talk about it, but you leave it by tacticalising what you say. And the challenge is, of course, number one, the issues around some of our leaders who are mixed matching things, you know, sometimes complicating something, sometimes they don't know, entry points or to do so when you start gaining things before, you know, they mistakenly do think that now stretch you all over again. You know what it's like setback. But anyway, it's regrouping yourself to retreat, I mean, to make sure you are able to continue. The other is the issue around the political power, we have, that means like, for some of our work we are doing, we really need a stronger law to help address this thing. So that's a huge challenge. But we are trusting God that within we started with the age of

consent, which is good. So we are trusting God that it's not okay, of course, then we need to pass it in Parliament to make it an act, you know, not just going to because there is no much good lawyer that has been addressing that. And then the other issue is the issue around Of course, the resistance from some men and women in communities, when you get the resistance, you know, they resist you as if you are coming from some other place you're not in, you're not necessarily doing that I tell people forget about the last name my name, I have a villager I came I told them. In fact, the other thing is by RIA the language, so what I am doing now, I'm trying to learn, but most of our basic languages around so that when I go I try to let them do I am your sister, I am your friend, I am your answer. I am from the same side. So we are not afraid at any opportunity. I will also want to I mean, the other challenge is this issue of the resources, you know, we will try to empower because what I look at now is when you have potential people in countries, what we do empower them because it will give less burden less resources to be you know, empower them in a way that whether you're there or not, things go on. So what I'm doing is to see how are we empowering our local community women? You know, that's a challenge, how do I empower them, not just with the information, but also with resources, maybe even this little phone that to send me report is an issue. You know, it's an issue. So empowerment of these women is another huge challenge for me, because I'm trusting God, and I'm believing God that we will get there. It's bit by bit. But sometimes it's really difficult because for now that there is a lot of problem in crisis of pricing everything, the team becomes more cumbersome. Even with funding. Before, I'm sure all of you used to get a big basket of funding. This is draining. So if it is dribbling down, then we need to know that we have enough people down that they will be able to hold on the fort, whether they are under rain or shine, we are able so I am appealing. I'm ending this with an appeal. All of you that are listening to me all over the world, wherever this will be the broadcast, kindly see how you support us in certain level and supporting to form to be able to help us that are doing the work on ground complex. And it's a pleasure talking with you today.

Sabine Nkusi 30:47

Thank you. So to just make Yeah, to conclude really our conversation. So as you've you've you've said and you've been working on these issues, especially if GMC for over 20 years. So, what does change look like for you, and are you hopeful that the practice can come to an end?

Rev Martha Chigozie 35:09

First change, awareness, a lot of people have been aware, and they can be talking about it now openly. The second change is we have God's people who say, I will never from families, I will never allow my girl child to go through that is at least some amount of reduced reduction on the population to say this amount of people say they will never change that I see that we are getting more people to come on board, you know, to join us the fight because one man cannot do this, you know, we all working together including all of you, we have global connection, local connection, and the village computers. So that is another change. I think we are see getting more people on board to come and join us to do this work. And maybe the final thing I would love to say, of course, we will we are happy that we get a strategy from the government to say from zero because it was not there

before. So if this is zero to 18, and then the Chiefs for seven villages have agreed since two years or three years back, which has never so it is happening gradually, by the grace of God. So these are some of the changes are many, many more because of time. Thank you so much, Sabine.

Sabine Nkusi 36:25

Wow, Reverend Martha, thank you so much for speaking with me today. And I'm really grateful for this time and we look forward to doing more things together. You know, you are our friend, our ally. And it's just been great to have this conversation. Thank you so much. Thank you for listening. I hope you have enjoyed the conversation. Please join us again next time. And if you want to know more about our work or catch up on the previous episodes of the *Faith in development* podcast, please visit [learned at tearfund.org](http://learned.tearfund.org). See you next time.

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