

## MEDIA RELEASE

**Launch of the Innocenti Digest  
Changing A Harmful Social Convention: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting  
EMBARGO: 10:00am GMT, 24 NOVEMBER 2005**

### **Three Million Girls Undergo Female Genital Cutting Every Year**

***UNICEF Study: With Global Support, the Practice Can Be Ended Within a  
Single Generation***

GENEVA/FLORENCE/CAIRO, 24 November 2005 – An estimated three million girls in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East undergo genital mutilation/cutting every year, according to a UNICEF report released today.

Yet the study says that with adequate commitment and support, this millennium-long custom could be eliminated within a single generation.

“Real and lasting change is possible,” said Marta Santos Pais, director of UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, which Thursday issued the report, *Changing a Harmful Social Convention: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting*. “Change will happen when communities – including girls, boys, men and women – are empowered by knowledge to make choices towards lasting abandonment of this practice.”

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is a traditional practice believed to enhance a girl’s beauty, honour, marriageability, social status and chastity. Parents encourage cutting in the belief that it will protect the family honour and the girl’s best interests.

In the 28 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East where female genital mutilation/cutting is performed, some 130 million girls and women have been victims of this practice. Previously, estimates suggested that 2 million girls undergo the procedure yearly; the new estimate of 3 million does not reflect an increase, but improved data gathering, UNICEF said.

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The report also looks at some of the most promising strategies that are helping communities to abandon the practice, such as UNICEF-supported initiatives in Egypt which guide communities to engage in non-judgmental public discussions to openly confront the issue, support them in the public commitment to abandon the practice, and spread their message to neighboring communities.

The involvement of opinion leaders, including traditional and religious leaders, can play a decisive role in stimulating public debate. Health personnel, traditional healers, social workers and teachers must be trained and supported to discourage the practice.

FGM/C is a global concern, also affecting women living in immigrant communities in industrialized countries around the world. From country to country, the percentages of the female population that is cut, the types of cutting carried out and the age at which it begins varies widely.

In whatever form, FGM/C causes severe pain and can result in prolonged bleeding, infection, infertility and even death. Many girls and women suffer in silence. Because of the private nature of the infliction, it is impossible to estimate the death toll.

The report takes an in-depth look at the complex social dynamics that make FGM/C one of the most persistent and hidden human rights violations.

“Mothers and fathers have their girls cut so that they will become accepted members of society,” said Rima Salah, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF. “But with long term community-based work the importance of keeping girls intact can override other social status concerns.”

Although there is evidence that in some countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Yemen), prevalence rates are declining, little progress has been made in diminishing the global practice of FGM/C.

Eliminating FGM/C on a large scale will require far greater efforts by governments, civil society and the international community, the report states.

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UNICEF works to influence policies, laws and budgets to promote the abandonment of FGM/C and supports partners working to help communities end this harmful practice.

“We know what is needed to put an end to the pain and suffering deliberately inflicted on millions of girls every year,” Salah said. “We have a much deeper understanding of why this harmful practice exists and how to stop it. There is every reason to believe that through a collective global commitment, the practice can be ended in a single generation.”

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### NOTE TO THE EDITORS

**Embargoed media materials and copies of the Digest in English, French, Arabic, Italian and Spanish are available from the Centre’s Innocenti Newsroom:**  
<http://www.unicef-icdc.org/presscentre/indexNewsroom.html>

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