

INNOCENTI DIGEST CHANGING A HARMFUL SOCIAL CONVENTION: FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING

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1. I am very pleased to present to you the most recent study prepared by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre – the Innocenti Digest on Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting. The study was carried out in close partnership with a wide number of international and national organizations. It is framed by human rights and bridges field experience with academic knowledge. It was developed thanks to the support of the governments of Italy and Japan and benefited from the engagement of many others who remain committed to promoting the abandonment of this harmful practice – many of whom are holding national launches and debates to raise public awareness and support to put an end to FGM/C.

It is an auspicious coincidence that the study is launched as the Maputo Protocol enters into force. Moreover, the launch of the Innocenti Digest takes place at a very timely occasion - as we commemorate the **International Day to Eliminate Violence against Women** and as we celebrate the **16th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the General Assembly of the United Nations** and. The Convention provides a strong foundation for the Innocenti studies. It is the most widely ratified human rights treaty, but more importantly, its process of implementation has moved children into the national political agenda; it has helped promote remarkable changes in law, policy and practice and, by the same token, it has helped to mobilize action to overcome persistent challenges that compromise the realization of children's rights.

- The study we are launching today is a meaningful illustration of this process. It addresses a harmful practice that perpetuates gender inequality and discrimination and compromises the right of women and girls to health and, in the worst cases, their right to life. A practice that provokes trauma and pain and further leads to school absenteeism and drop-outs.

- The Digest recalls important steps undertaken over the last few years to promote the elimination of FGM/C - including strong international standards, political commitments, national legislation, awareness raising campaigns and community based interventions.
- But the Digest makes us also **realize the social dynamics behind this deeply entrenched tradition, and invites us to address them as a key factor to achieve lasting change**. If these dimensions are duly taken into consideration, and a supportive environment is ensured, we can look ahead with confidence and **achieve abandonment of FGM/C within a single generation**.

2. The Innocenti study presents the most recent data available on prevalence of FGM/C and portrays a reality of serious concern.

- In the world today, between 100 and 140 million women and girls have undergone FGM/C.
- Every year three million girls are cut on the African continent.
- As a result of migration, war, civil unrest and drought, the practice has become increasingly visible amongst migrant communities in industrialized countries – in Switzerland, a recent study by the UNICEF National Committee estimates that close to 7000 girls and women living in the country have undergone this procedure.
- The average age at which a girl is subjected to cutting is decreasing including as way of escaping enforcement of national legislation prohibiting this practice.
- Medicalisation of FGM/C is increasing in spite of the unequivocal condemnation of this practice by the medical profession and WHO (*61% in Egypt and 34% in Kenya are performed in hospital*). It is true that medicalisation reveals a growing concern to limit the risk of infection for victims, but it also underlines a failure to address the underlying causes behind this practice.
- National legislation has been enacted in a number of countries to prohibit and criminalize this practice, including in 13 African Nations, in some cases at constitutional level, as well as and several Western countries; yet law enforcement has remained weak and is rarely supported by information

campaigns and capacity building activities, thus compromising any attempt to encourage behaviour change.

What these trends reveal is that FGM/C is a deeply entrenched social convention. In spite of ratification of strong human rights standards which will need to be steadily implemented, no matter how successful and creative individual policy decisions and interventions may be, unless we vigorously address the social dynamics leading to the perpetuation of this human rights violation, we will fail to achieve the goal of **universal and lasting abandonment of this harmful practice**.

3. Beyond governments' commitment and political actions, beyond civil society's awareness and communities support, social pressure makes it difficult for families, as well as individual women and girls, to abandon FGM/C.

In fact, in communities where it is practiced, FGM/C is an important dimension of women's and girls cultural and gender identity. Mothers may recognize that FGM/C brings physical and psychological harm to their daughters; yet, they feel powerless to escape tradition. FGM/C is perceived as a social, ethnic and physical mark of distinction, it assigns status and value to the girl, and honour to the family; girls who have undergone this practice are recognized as members of the community and prepared for marriage. Not conforming to the practice generates isolation, stigmatization and shame.

As one mother, quoted in the Digest, explains, "If I don't cut my daughter, there won't be anyone to marry her. I wish I didn't have girls, because I am so worried about them!"

Community dialogue is essential to abandoning FGM/C. It creates appropriate spaces for non-judgemental public discussions and encourages a collective choice to abandon this practice while promoting the safeguard of human rights. Guided by these principles and by successful community experiences and academic work, the Innocenti Digest presents a set of important recommendations to encourage behaviour change and achieve a mass abandonment of this practice:

- a) communities need to **recognise the harm** caused by FGM/C, promote human rights and empower women to take initiative for change.
- b) **a collective choice and a public commitment** towards abandonment is required to avoid stigma and exclusion for those who choose to break with tradition
- c) this **process of change needs to be supported** by legislative and policy reforms framed by international standards, provided with adequate resources, and enhanced through culturally sensitive advocacy and the meaningful involvement of civil society representatives – including community and religious leaders.
- d) finally, **to achieve lasting change**, it is critical to promote an inter-generational dialogue and meaningfully involve adolescents and young people; their understanding of the risks of this practice, their engagement in the safeguard of their rights and their commitment to promote abandonment are essential dimensions of success.

Conclusion

Never before has there been such a unique opportunity to make a difference in this struggle! An impressive process of change has been set in motion. Relevant international treaties have been ratified, strong political commitments have been made; and a wide and strong alliance is increasing, including through the work of parliamentarians, national institutions, civil society organizations, the media, and community and religious leaders.

The time is right to catalyze a global movement and build a growing momentum to end FGM/C. Basic knowledge of how best to support communities to end FGM/C exists today. With global support we are confident this practice can be abandoned within a single generation.