

PRESS RELEASE

AFRICAN PARLIAMENTARIANS COMMIT TO STOP FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM) IN AFRICA

Dakar December 4, 2005. By far the most affected continent by FGM, Africa has launched a process that could be decisive for eradicating this practice. A meeting of parliamentarians from all the regions of Africa is underway in Dakar on “Violence against Women, abandoning female genital mutilation: the role of national parliaments”. The conference is organized by the National Assembly of Senegal and the African Parliamentary Union, in cooperation with the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UNICEF.

FGM “includes a range of practices involving the complete or partial removal or alteration of the external genitalia for non medical reasons”, according to a study published by UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Center. The countries with the highest prevalence are Egypt, Sudan, Mali and Guinea. The study was introduced to the press during the parliamentary conference. It reveals that between 100 and 140 million of women in the world have been subjected to FGM. Moreover every year an estimated 3 million girls are at risk of undergoing FGM in Sub-Sahara Africa, Egypt and Sudan. Introducing the Report, Ms Marta Santos, Director of the Innocenti Research Center, has particularly insisted on the growing trend towards medicalization in the practice of FGM, especially in Guinea, Mali and Egypt. FGM is done in hospitals and health facilities by medical staff. But Doctor Lalla Touré, UNICEF’s Regional Advisor for Maternal Health, warned that using qualified medical staff does not eliminate health risks for girls and women, on top of the violation of their human rights.

In the host country Senegal, the movement for the abandonment of FGM has made significant progress. The prevalence rate is 28%, compared to 75% and beyond in countries like Guinea, Mali, Sudan or Egypt. For Senegal, the turning point was July 31, 1997, when the village of Malicouda Bambara declared publicly that it was giving up FGM, after intense field work carried out by Tostan, an international NGO. After over a year and a half of media exposure, and advocacy carried out with religious leaders, civil society activists, the National Assembly of Senegal voted to outlaw FGM. Today, some 1628 villages in the country’s 11 regions have committed to abandoning FGM, a hefty 32% of the 5000 villages practicing it.

The Innocenti report describes FGM as a practice that perpetuates gender inequality and discrimination, and violates human rights. It causes trauma and sufferings, as well as school absenteeism and dropouts.

The causes and justifications of FGM are essentially cultural and religious. The cultural aspect was refuted by Mr. Melegue Traore, MP, former president of the National Assembly in Burkina Faso. “As a member of the Senufo ethnical group in Burkina Faso, I’d rather give my daughter a Senufo name to preserve her cultural identity than mutilate her”, he said. And he went further to emphasize that “you don’t renounce any identity or maim any culture by abandoning FGM”. The other cultural aspect is social pressure. It hinders freedom for families, women and girls to abandon FGM. Refusing to be subjected to it brings isolation, stigmatization, and shame. And that brought Marta Dos Santos Pais to say that if we do not take strong action to address “ the social dimension that leads to the perpetuation of this violation of human rights, we will fail to achieve the objective of **the universal abandonment of this harmful practice**”.

Representatives of other UN agencies (WHO, UNFPA) and NGOS attended the opening of the Dakar conference. There were also representatives of the World Bank and the IMF, and experts and Islamic scholars, notably Pr Abdul Aziz Kebe of the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Dr GAMAL Abou El Sorour, Director of International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research, Al Azhar University in Cairo, and Imam Cheikh Hassan Cissé, president of the Islamic Associations of Africa. All three unequivocally declared that there was no mention of FGM anywhere in the Quran. So for Professor Abdul Aziz Kebe, to quote the Quran as a justification of FGM is to alter God's message. Dr El Sorour indicated that FGM started 2000 years before the advent of Islam in Egypt. Imam Cisse, who has a long standing collaboration with UNICEF, confirmed the view that FGM is not a practice recommended by Islam.

Parliamentarians attending the Dakar meeting have observed that laws voted in a lot of countries have not been implemented effectively on the field. The aim then is to go beyond the classical responses by committing parliamentarians to get involved with communities at grassroots level for a better dissemination of the spirit and the content of the laws.

Guilty silence is no longer acceptable that's why "action by parliamentarians is crucial" according to Mr. Pape Diop, President of the National Assembly of Senegal, who chaired the opening ceremony of the conference attended by over 100 delegates from 25 countries. The conference will end with a Declaration this Wednesday, December 5, in the presence of Mory Kante, a musician from Guinea and FAO goodwill ambassador.

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