

Violence against women, abandoning female genital mutilation: The role of national parliaments

*African parliamentary conference organized in cooperation
with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)
and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
Dakar, Senegal 4–5 December 2005*

Final Declaration

(Adopted unanimously)

We, the Speakers and members of the national parliamentary assemblies of Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Ghana, the Gambia, Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Switzerland, Sudan, Togo and the United Kingdom,

Having met at the invitation of the National Assembly of Senegal on 4 and 5 December 2005 in Dakar in a Conference entitled *Violence against women, abandoning female genital mutilation: The role of national parliaments*, organized by the African Parliamentary Union (APU) with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU),

Pleased with the opportunity this Conference has provided to disseminate information and promote dialogue among the various stakeholders involved in efforts aimed at abandoning female genital mutilation and circumcision (FGM/C),

Convinced that culture is not immutable and that it is subject to perpetual change, adaptations and reforms, and **further convinced** that behaviour changes when the dangers of harmful practices are understood,

Convinced that the abandonment of FGM/C within one generation is an attainable goal,

Noting with concern, however, that FGM/C still today affects 3 million girls every year and that 100 to 140 million women and girls around the world have undergone some form of FGM/C,

Concerned about the harmful, irreversible and sometimes fatal consequences of FGM/C, whether physical, psychological or social,

Acknowledging that FGM/C affects African countries at different levels and also concerns other countries around the world, including some countries of immigration,

Recalling that FGM/C is a universal concern, that it is a violation of women's and children's human rights and of their physical integrity, and that it is an expression of structural inequality between men and women,

Recalling that FGM/C has been perpetuated from generation to generation through a social dynamic whereby decisions made in the family are contingent upon decisions made by others,

Aware of the relationship between levels of development and literacy and the practice of FGM/C,

Noting with satisfaction that the United Nations has designated 6 February as International Zero Tolerance to FGM Day,

Stressing that there is no religious justification for the practice of FGM/C, and that the practice is mainly rooted in ancestral traditions,

Welcoming the increased mobilization among African countries for the abandonment of FGM/C and the numerous regional initiatives aimed at the abandonment of this practice,

Welcoming the entry into force of the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of women, which marks a significant milestone towards the abandonment of FGM/C,

Recalling that the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Programme of Action adopted by the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the Beijing Platform for Action and all other relevant instruments provide an international and regional legal framework for the abandonment of FGM/C,

Acknowledging that the abandonment of FGM/C can be achieved only as a result of a comprehensive movement which involves all public and private stakeholders in society,

Determined to spare no effort to end FGM/C and to achieve the goal of abandoning this practice within a generation,

Hereby adopt the following recommendations and **commit ourselves** to their implementation:

Developing a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach

1. FGM/C strikes at the heart of our societies and involves multiple issues; only through a multidisciplinary approach can efficient progress be achieved in abandoning FGM/C;
2. Parliaments should work in synergy with civil society, traditional chiefs and religious leaders, women's and youth movements and governments to ensure that their actions are complementary and coordinated;
3. Strategies for the abandonment of FGM/C must be developed in a framework of the promotion of human rights, the right to education, health, development and poverty reduction;

International and regional framework for the abandonment of FGM/C

4. Parliaments should oversee the actions of their governments and ensure the national implementation of international and regional commitments undertaken by their countries as States Parties or signatories of various international instruments protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of women and children;
5. Parliaments should ensure that these international and regional instruments are translated into national languages and widely distributed to the population and the judiciary ;

6. Parliaments should also work to obtain the accession of their States to the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of women, which furthers efforts aimed at abandoning FGM/C;

Development and enforcement of legislation for the abandonment of FGM/C

7. With respect to abandoning FGM/C, enacting legislation is an important, highly symbolic and necessary step, which has both a dissuasive and an educational impact; in such a context, it is necessary to promote sustained preventive action. Legislation must also provide assistance for women who have been subjected to FGM/C;

8. Legislation on FGM/C should always be drawn up in consultation with civil society, traditional chiefs and opinion leaders and in the context of a broader strategy aimed at abandoning the practice. It is important that all legislation be disseminated and explained. Communities and, more specifically, women should be informed of the contents of the law and their specific rights through awareness, communication and information campaigns;

9. The regional and international dimension should not be overlooked; it is important to harmonize domestic legislation and coordinate efforts at the regional and international levels to abandon FGM/C in order to prevent the sending of girls to neighbouring or other countries where FGM/C is practiced;

10. Providing training of judicial staff and law enforcement and security personnel should be an integral component of strategies for the implementation and enforcement of the law;

11. Parliaments should work with the medical profession to ensure that medical staff respects the law and to prevent their involvement in the practice. In addition, basic health-care services, especially sexual and reproductive health services, should be enhanced to ensure that women who have undergone FGM/C have access to all the care they may need. The conversion of excisers should also be taken into consideration by parliaments, within the framework of the general fight against poverty;

12. It is important for parliaments to regularly review and assess the enforcement of the law in order to correct for any potential negative effects and adapt the legislation to the evolution of society;

Development of national strategies

13. The drafting of national action plans for the abandonment of FGM/C makes it possible to identify the different roles and responsibilities of the actors involved, to ensure proper coordination and the complementarity of the efforts undertaken. The adoption of clear objectives with specific time frames also facilitates synergy among the various actors;

Adoption of adequate national budgets

14. Parliaments should ensure that national budgets allocate sufficient resources to the implementation of legislation and action plans aimed at abandoning FGM/C;

15. The development of gender sensitive national budgets would also help reduce the practice of FGM/C for example by promoting girls' education, literacy, women's and girls' empowerment and access to health services. Parliaments should systematically analyse their national budgets from the perspective of gender equality with a view to correcting inequalities and discrimination;

Changing mentalities

16. Parliaments should also work on awareness and changing mentalities. Because of the social status incumbent upon their office, members of parliament are in a position to address sensitive issues and have an impact on public opinion and mentalities. In this regard, traditional chiefs are priceless allies. Awareness activities conducted jointly with traditional chiefs, religious leaders and women's and youth groups at the community level have a decisive impact;

17. Cooperation with the media is vital; modern and traditional media need to be involved in all strategies aimed at abandoning the practice, through awareness, communication and information campaigns;

18. It is crucial to ensure that the message sent out regarding abandonment of FGM/C is positive, non-judgemental and consistent. All the actors involved must speak with the same voice. In this context, each parliament is invited to establish a distinction to be awarded to individuals and organizations that make a significant contribution to the abandonment of FGM/C;

19. Education plays a fundamental role in the prevention of FGM/C. With this in mind, it is necessary to review school curricula at all levels, to sensitize teachers, and to keep girls in school up until they reach higher education in order to delay marriage and possibly avoid the genital mutilation that often precedes it;

20. Any action aimed at ensuring the abandonment of FGM/C must be coupled with initiatives for community development, in particular through the improvement of the living conditions of women and children, as part of the fight against poverty;

Strengthening parliament's role and enhancing its operations

21. In every country concerned by the practice, a parliamentary body should be mandated to follow up on the FGM/C issue, in particular on the implementation of national action plans for the abandonment of FGM/C;

22. Regular debates should be held in parliament to focus public attention on the issue and assess the progress achieved and the constraints met on the basis of clear and comparable indicators;

23. The representatives of national commissions on FGM/C should present annual reports on the issue, including to their parliaments;

24. Members of parliament should make use of all the parliamentary mechanisms at their disposal, including written and oral questions to the government;

International and regional cooperation

25. It is important to promote and enhance cooperation among African countries and other countries where FGM/C is practised, as well as countries of immigration. It is vital to promote the regular exchange of information and to coordinate strategies aimed at harmonizing approaches and initiatives;

26. The work of international organizations should be brought to the attention of parliaments on a regular basis in order to keep them abreast of the progress made and issues identified;

27. It is important to ensure national follow-up to the various studies and recommendations issued by international bodies. The UNICEF Innocenti Digest on FGM/C, a soon to be published report of the World Health Organization on the issue and the review of national strategies carried out by the United Nations Population Fund

(UNFPA) should be presented and distributed to parliaments. Lastly, the findings of the studies carried out by the United Nations Secretary-General on violence against children and on violence against women, which will be presented in 2006, should also be the focus of debate and follow-up in each parliament;

28. Parliaments should be associated in the preparation and celebration of International Zero Tolerance to FGM Day;

29. While appreciating the efforts made by the international community, development partners are requested to continue to mobilize sufficient resources and technical assistance to support States and their parliaments in their efforts to secure the abandonment of FGM/C.

Follow-up to the Conference

We hereby undertake to ensure rigorous follow-up to the outcome of the Conference. Accordingly, **we hereby commit ourselves** to ensuring the dissemination of the proceedings of the Dakar Conference within each of our parliaments;

We resolve to strengthen our cooperation with specialized international organizations in this area;

We undertake to report to the APU and the IPU on the progress achieved in the implementation of these recommendations;

We urge the organizers of this Conference to forward this Declaration to the African Union for information purposes and for its further distribution to the Conference of Heads of State and Government, which will meet in Khartoum in January 2006, the AU Executive Council and the Pan-African Parliament, and also to forward it to sub-regional parliamentary structures;

We further urge them to forward it to the competent bodies of the APU, the IPU, UNICEF, United Nations specialized agencies and other partners;

Lastly, we call upon the organizers as soon as possible to put in place an operational mechanism for follow-up on the proceedings of this Conference.

Dakar, 5 December 2005