

PRESS RELEASE

AFRICAN PARLIAMENTARIANS AND THE ABANDONMENT OF EXCISION:

Presenting legislation to the populations in their own languages

Dakar, Dec. 05, 2005. The African Parliamentary Conference on the role of national parliaments in the abandonment of excision ended on Monday December 5th, 2005, with a declaration that recommended several new measures. Parliamentarians have committed to have all the relevant documents translated into national languages and sent out to the largest number of people. With a view to tackling the very roots of the perpetuation of excision, parliamentarians have committed, through the Dakar Declaration, to be more active in overseeing governmental action in favor of women, in respecting national and international commitments, but mostly, in ensuring the granting of adequate funds for actions aimed at women in poverty reduction programs and initiatives for the promotion of girls education.

During the two-day proceedings, parliamentarians expressed a strong desire to share individual experiences, namely on supporting the passing of laws against excision in countries where this process has not yet taken place. The proceedings were organized as two separate workshops. The first one discussed community actions. Participants discussed various approaches to change mentalities, the role of the media and public opinion, and the role of traditional chiefs, religious guides and community leaders. The workshop also examined collaborative mechanisms with the civil society and community-based organizations. The second workshop focused on institutional mechanisms: national mechanisms, national strategies and action plans, the budgets allocated to the abandonment of excision, the role of international organizations and the strengthening of cooperation with the countries that attract immigration.

After these in-depth debates, two presentations were made in the last session before the end of the conference. Marta Pais Dos Santos, Head of UNICEF's Innocenti Research Center, spoke on Abandoning excision: A human rights-based Approach, which is contained in the Digest Innocenti. Then Dr Moussa Cissokho, member of the African Union InterAfrican Committee of Experts on Children's Rights and Welfare, presented the UN Secretary General Report on Violence against Children.

During the closing session, M. Abdou Fall, Minister of Health and Medical Prevention, praised the courage shown by Senegalese parliamentarians who passed a law banning excision on January 31st, 1999, a time when this practice was still a sensitive issue and the context was not favorable to a measure of this kind. As pointed out by the Minister of Health and Medical Prevention, this was the first official law for the protection of girls and women who were likely to be mutilated. Prior to this presentation, Madame Aida Mbodj, Minister for Family, Gender and Social Development, confirmed the commitment of the Government of Senegal in support of the efforts of parliamentarians for the abandonment of excision. According to her, no one is in a better position than Members of Parliament to "carry forth this resolution both upstream and downstream of this blight". Madame Mbodj announced that Senegal had drawn up a national plan for the abandonment of this practice and was confident that excision would be fully abandoned by 2015.

For the sake of their own fulfillment, African girls and women should have the right to their body's integrity, said Mory Kanté, a musician from Guinea and FAO goodwill ambassador, who was a special guest at the conference. M. Kanté asked parliamentarians not to ignore musicians in their efforts in favor of women, because it is they who carry culture forward to the populations and who know how to reach into people's hearts. Furthermore, he added, there is always music in Africa, even when there are no newspapers, radios or television. According to Mory Kanté, culture is the cradle of beliefs, including religious beliefs, and it is those beliefs that shape behavior.

Throughout the proceedings, several participants spoke in favor of this law, which currently exists in 15 African countries.

The Algerian Parliament representative moved the audience with his testimony as a practicing gynecologist. He insisted on the adverse health consequences of excision and added that women should no longer be seen as the fair sex. Indeed, they have extra qualities compared with men. They carry babies for nine months, and then often give life at the price of their own. Sometimes, the baby dies after so much suffering for the mother.

M. Peter Crowley, Head of Partnership at UNICEF, thanked the African Parliamentary Union, Senegal's National Assembly, the Interparliamentary Union and all the participants, and then reaffirmed his organization's commitment to support the efforts of parliamentarians. M. Anders B. Johnsson, Secretary General of the Interparliamentary Union, replied by praising the quality of cooperation between UNICEF and his organization.

Before leaving Dakar, parliamentarians promised to meet in two years at the latest in order to assess the outcomes of the conference. Undeniably, support in favor of the abandonment of excision has taken a new dimension.

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