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### INNOCENTI INSIGHT

#### *The Dynamics of Social Change: Towards the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Five African Countries*

### **New report offers breakthrough to ending female genital mutilation**

FLORENCE, Italy 18 November 2010 – A new report provides evidence on how communities across Africa are ending female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), despite strong countervailing social pressures.

*The Dynamics of Social Change: Towards the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Five African Countries* – from UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre – provides solutions and examples of communities ending the practice. The report examines what conditions are necessary for a consensus to abandon FGM/C and identifies strategies for sustainable abandonment.

See a short documentary at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Msde15JkbEo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Msde15JkbEo)

The report is also a reminder that changing behavioural practices (social norms) - which may have endured for centuries - is a complex process that takes time. *The Dynamics of Social Change* finds that the most effective abandonment initiatives frame the discussion surrounding FGM/C in a non-threatening way; reinforce the positive aspects of local culture; and build community trust by implementing development projects that address local needs. This demonstrates that new ideas come with good intentions and with the goal of improving their lives. Successful abandonment programmes involve respected community members, including religious and local leaders, and engage social networks and institutions. They use legislative reform, national policies and the media to enable and support the process.

"A family's decision to practice or abandon FGM/C is influenced by powerful social rewards and sanctions," said Gordon Alexander, Director a.i. of the Innocenti Research Centre. "Understanding the diverse social dynamics that perpetuate FGM/C is changing the way in which abandonment is approached. There is no one answer, no one way, and no quick fix. But there is progress. These efforts need to be scaled up to bring change in the lives of girls, now."

The Innocenti Research Centre report (with data at the foot of this PR) examines a number of promising strategies that are supporting communities in Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal and the Sudan to abandon FGM/C.

Millions of girls worldwide are cut or mutilated each year. The practice, a serious violation of their human rights, can cause severe, lifelong health problems including bleeding, problems urinating, childbirth complications and newborn deaths.

And yet, in communities where it is practised, FGM/C is not viewed as a harmful act but as a necessary step to raise a girl and, in many cases, to make her eligible for marriage. Failure to

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carry out or undergo FGM/C can lead to social exclusion and disapproval not only of the girl but of the entire family.

Religion, tradition and culture are also often cited by families as reasons for cutting their daughters. Many communities, for example, believe that FGM/C is mandated by religious doctrine, despite the fact that no major religion requires it. The report reveals that one of the key factors that motivate parents' decision to have their girls cut – 'to do what is best for their daughters' – may also spur a decision to stop the practice, once social norms evolve and social expectations change.

"The report is an important contribution to our collective understanding of how widespread and sustainable change can be made in communities," said Mr. Alexander. "It also has enormous implications for how we address both FGM/C and other harmful practices and forms of violence against girls and women, such as forced and child marriage that are influenced by similar social dynamics."

Despite the progress that has been made in intervention communities – particularly in Senegal – national FGM/C prevalence rates still remain high in Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sudan. There has, however, been a significant change in attitudes about FGM/C in all three countries, indicating that individuals are questioning the merits of these practices and would prefer, circumstances permitting, not to have their daughters, wives, sisters and cousins undergo FGM/C.

Estimates on how many girls and women worldwide have been cut vary from 70 million to 140 million. In Africa, an estimated three million girls and women are at risk for FGM/C each year. The practice is also found in some countries Asia and the Middle East, and to a lesser extent within some immigrant communities in Europe, and in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America.

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*Some figures: FGM/C prevalence and attitudes\**

Indicator	EGYPT	ETHIOPIA	KENYA	SENEGAL	SUDAN
FGM/C national prevalence among women aged 15-49	91% (2008) 74% for girls aged 15-17 (2008)	74% (2005)	27% (2008-2009)	28% (2005)	89% (2006)
Change in percentage of women aged 15-49 who think that the practice should continue	From 82% (1995) to 63% (2008) <i>Data for ever-married women</i>	From 60% (2000) to 31% (2005)	From 20% (1998) to 9% (2008-2009)	18% (2005) Data for later years not available	From 79% (1989-1990) to 51% (2006)

\* Data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) in Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal. Data for Sudan from the Sudan 1989-90 DHS and 2006 Sudan Household Health Survey.

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