The Donors Working Group on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting

Protecting Girls from Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting:
a Matter of Gender Equality

Toward a Common Framework
for the Abandonment of FGM/C

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New knowledge

Until two years ago, it was commonly believed that some 2 million girls were subjected to the practice of female genital mutilation/cutting every year. Recent analysis reveals that the number is much higher: some three million girls are cut each year on the African continent (Sub-Saharan Africa, Egypt and Sudan).

It has been known for decades that FGM/C causes severe pain and can result in prolonged bleeding, infection, infertility and even death. Today, it is scientifically proven that it is harmful to women and to their babies. A 2006 landmark WHO study found that complications in deliveries are significantly more likely among women with FGM/C. It also found that FGM/C leads to an extra one to two perinatal deaths per 100 deliveries.

FGM/C is not only a reproductive health issue. It affects the physical and mental health of girls in many ways. It can contribute to the spread of HIV. It is a human rights issue, and more specifically a girl’s rights issue. It is a development and gender issue. It is a governance issue. Accordingly, ending all forms of FGM/C is crucial to the success of the Millennium Development Goals and especially for gender equality, maternal health and reduced child mortality.

As we begin 2007 we know what needs to be done to support the abandonment of FGM/C. The multi-dimensional understanding of the practice is shared by major national and international actors including governments, UN agencies, development cooperation agencies, national and international NGOs and private foundations. Based on this understanding, a common approach to ending the practice now exists.

The Donors Working Group on FGM/C abandonment

The Donors Working Group on FGM/C brings together key actors at the international level. The Group encourages partnership and is expanding every year. The focus and mandates of participants differ, yet their individual policies and programmes already reflect elements of the common approach. The Group is presently refining a common framework which is expected to be published in the course of 2007.

The common framework brings together successful programme experiences supported by national NGOs working on the ground, social science theory and a human rights perspective. It is a systemic approach that stimulates and supports large scale social transformation that benefits children and women. Empowering education and participatory communication are at its core.

Thanks to the growing consensus and partnership the basis exists for scaling up abandonment strategies – today. If the necessary resources are mobilized, it is possible to extend support to communities worldwide to enable them to abandon FGM/C within a generation.

International commitments

There are a host of international instruments that reflect the commitments of States to end harmful practices including FGM/C. They include relevant articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The commitments are reiterated in the plans of action from the International Conference on Population and Development, the Fourth World Conference on Women and the UN Special Session on Children. UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/56/128 is fully devoted to traditional or customary practices affecting the health of women and girls.

In the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and in the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, also called the ’Maputo Protocol’ and part of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, African States further commit to take all appropriate measures to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices.
The commitments by States highlight that FGM/C is a violation of the human rights of girls and women and has grave consequences on them. They also reflect an understanding that FGM/C is a manifestation of the discrimination against girls and women and of the need for the empowerment of girls and women.

The call to further increase commitment continues. This year Secretary-General’s Report on “The elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child” proposes that the Commission on the Status of Women consider recommending action to end harmful traditional practices.

The way forward – elements of the common framework

In every society in which it is practiced, FGM/C is a manifestation of gender inequality that is deeply entrenched in social, economic and political structures. Experiences that have led to abandonment of the practice on a significant scale have been based on major efforts toward overcoming gender roles and stereotypes and empowering women and girls.

Mothers and other family members organize the cutting of their daughters even though they may be aware that it can bring physical and psychological harm to their daughters. They consider it part of what they must do to raise a girl properly and to prepare her for adulthood and marriage. From their perspective, not conforming to this obligation would bring greater harm, expressed by shame and social exclusion. They behave in line to what social scientists refer to as a self-enforcing social convention.

Changing a self-enforcing social convention requires that a significant number of families within a community make a collective and coordinated choice to abandon the practice so that no single girl or family is disadvantaged by the decision.

Community empowerment activities are therefore essential for the large scale abandonment of FGM/C. They include non-formal education that provides new knowledge and skills. They also include non-directive dialogue which may be organized among women, with men or across generations. These activities are most effective when they promote human rights principles. They encourage communities to raise problems and define solutions themselves on a variety of concerns, including sensitive ones such as FGM/C, without feeling coerced or judged. They thus stimulate a process of positive social change.

The process of social change must go beyond individual communities, to national scale and across national boundaries. Activities need to engage traditional, religious and government leaders, such as parliamentarians. Through local and national media and in partnership with strategic allies in government and in civil society, activities need to stimulate and support dialogue at national level. They need to include the review and reform of policies and legislation. They also need to develop child protection frameworks that bring together legislative, welfare and social services, police and justice systems and basic service providers with local leaders and civil society, to provide a holistic mechanism of protection.

Programme experience and social science theory both suggest that a relatively small but strategic investment can yield major results. If a “critical mass” of individuals manifests public support for the abandonment of FGM/C there are social pressures in motion that lead additional individuals and families to adopt the new norm: change can be spontaneous and natural. On this basis, UNICEF has estimated that community-oriented programmes costing some US $24 million per year over 10 years could lead to major reductions of the prevalence of FGM/C in 16 sub-Saharan African countries which currently have high or medium prevalence.

2007 holds the opportunity for the awareness, knowledge, partnership and resources to come together and make a major difference for girls and women world-wide.
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