



## Innocenti Digest No. 13

# Changing a Harmful Social Convention Female Genital Mutilation / Cutting

(working title)

The practice of female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) has violated the human rights of an estimated 130 million girls. Concerted advocacy work over recent decades has generated widespread commitment to end the practice. Despite this, success in achieving the abandonment of FGM/C has been limited - with some significant exceptions. Meanwhile, global population movements have made FGM/C a growing concern beyond the countries in which it is traditionally practiced.

This *Innocenti Digest* meets a pressing need to take stock of progress to date, identify what works and what does not, and provide direction as regards the most successful strategies to end FGM/C. The *Digest*:

- discusses how FGM/C is addressed under international human rights law and identifies the responsibilities of states as regards the provision of support for its abandonment;
- illustrates the geographic distribution of FGM/C and outlines key trends on the basis of the most current disaggregated data derived from Demographic and Health Surveys and UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys using standardized indicators;
- identifies the principal ways in which FGM/C violates a girl's or woman's human rights - including the serious physical, psycho-sexual and social implications of the practice - and examines the justifications employed by communities for its perpetuation;
- outlines effective and complementary action at the community, national and international level to support the abandonment of FGM/C.

Combining concrete field experience with tested academic theory, the *Digest* provides a practical tool to bring about positive change for girls and women. There is good reason to be optimistic that, with the appropriate support, FGM/C can be ended in many practicing communities within a single generation.

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# Changing a Harmful Social Convention

The continuing practice of FGM/C is driven by socio-cultural, psycho-sexual, religious and aesthetic or hygienic arguments. Almost all of these are linked to girls' social status and marriageability. Social convention theory demonstrates that if a single family alone chooses to abandon the practice, it effectively deprives the daughter from becoming a full and recognized member of her community. The choice to abandon FGM/C must therefore be collective.

In the light of this theory, a critical examination of action to date helps identify the key elements of successful approaches at the community level:

- A non-coercive and non-judgmental approach where the primary objective is the fulfilment of human rights and the empowerment of girls and women. When increasing awareness of human rights and helping to address those of immediate concern such as health and education, the issue of FGM/C tends to be raised by communities themselves;
- The decision to abandon the practice as a collective choice of a group that intramarries or is closely connected in other ways;
- An explicit affirmation on the part of communities of their commitment to abandon FGM/C. This may take various forms including a public declaration or a written statement of adherence.

Building on local success requires a strategy of organized diffusion to ensure that the process of abandonment continues. Experience suggests that when a critical mass of communities is reached in a given area, remaining communities have no incentive to perpetuate the practice and spontaneous and rapid abandonment occurs.

Success is also dependent on commitment on the part of national governments to create a protective environment for women and children and to promote abandonment of FGM/C through the provision of social support and the introduction of appropriate legislation. In addition, advocacy and awareness-raising activities involving media and opinion leaders are of critical value in increasing local, national and international level commitment to work towards the abandonment of the practice. This approach has already made a meaningful difference to the lives of girls and women.

This *Innocenti Digest* will be available in Arabic, English, French and Italian. Local language versions may be produced based on demand. The *Digest* will be distributed in printed format and will also be available in electronic format from the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre website.

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