



LA RÉPUBLIQUE  
DE DJIBOUTI



NO PEACE  
WITHOUT JUSTICE

## CONFERENCE SOUS-REGIONALE SUR L'ELIMINATION DES MUTILATIONS GENITALES FEMININES

*Pour un consensus politique et religieux sur l'abandon  
des Mutilations Génitales Féminines*

**Palais du Peuple DJIBOUTI** 2-3 février/February 2005

### **A platform for action**

### **The Innocenti Digest on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting**

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#### *1. Introduction*

We are currently witnessing a surge of activity aimed at ending the practice of female genital mutilation or cutting. UNICEF's commitment in this area is reflected

- in specific projects at country level,
- in the development of a strategy to support communities to abandon the practice of FGM/C at an organizational level, and
- in the production of a UNICEF Innocenti Digest publication to provide a platform for action. This Digest, which will be available by June of this year, provides up-to-date statistics on FGM/C, makes a critical examination of existing experiences and disseminates knowledge on the strategies that have best promoted positive change for women and girls.

#### *2. A strategic moment for change*

Despite ongoing efforts to end FGM/C, data from Demographic Health Surveys indicate that across Africa there has been little or no decrease in the prevalence of this practice over the last decade. There has been a wide diversity of strategies employed to date, with varying degrees of success. Recently, however, some initiatives have demonstrated measurable progress and, in turn, have helped generate awareness of the elements that promote the abandonment of the practice. One of these initiatives, in Senegal, has successfully reached a population of 700,000 since 1997 and continues to expand.

At the same time, national and international commitment to end the practice is growing, and this conference here in Djibouti together with the recent International Conference hosted by the Government of Kenya testify to this fact.

(Furthermore, a number of international initiatives offer an important context in which to address FGM/C, including the UN Study on Violence against Children requested by the General Assembly in 2001, the goal established in a World Fit for Children - the outcome Document of the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children - to eliminate FGM/C by 2010 and the

Millennium Development Goals, particularly those relating to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, and the improvement of maternal health.)

This is, therefore, a timely opportunity to evaluate our experiences thus far, to state clearly what has been shown to work and what does not, and to clarify how to best to advance our efforts in this area. Commitment and action is sure to develop further with greater clarity on how the abandonment of the practice can be achieved within a single generation.

### 3. *What are the aims of the Innocenti Digest on FGM/C?*

The principal objectives of this forthcoming UNICEF publication:

- provides succinct and accessible information on, and analysis of FGM/C;
- distills *concrete* lessons learned from field experience;
- accelerates positive action to end the practice of FGM/C; and
- consolidates partnerships on this issue among key actors. In developing this publication we are working together with, among others, committed governments, civil society organizations and NGOs – including AIDOS, whose experience in the field is widely recognized - academic institutions and UNICEF’s own country and regional offices.

### 4. *The Digest offers:*

In addition to comprehensive background information on the theme, the Digest offers new material relating to efforts to end FGM/C including:

- A selection of the most current disaggregated data on FGM/C, derived from Demographic and Health Surveys and UNICEF’s own Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys
- Standardized indicators for situation analysis and for monitoring progress which were defined during the UNICEF Global Consultation on Indicators in November 2003.
- Key elements for successful action. This is a distillation of field experience and research theory that identifies the essential elements of successful projects to end FGM/C, elements that can guide programmatic action in a wide range of settings where FGM/C is practiced.

### 5. *Key elements for action*

The most successful initiatives to end FGM/C generally have the following elements:

- A national government which is committed to the promotion of the human rights of women and children and which is prepared to support abandonment through advocacy, the provision of social support, and the introduction of appropriate legislation;
- While interventions at national and international levels can promote a change in a population’s attitude as regards FGM/C, what we are finding is that, in order to transform this attitudinal change into behavioural change, strategic actions at the local level are critical. And experience increasingly shows that these actions are most effective when they translate and build upon an appreciation of the human rights of women and girls and promote a holistic, inclusive approach when working directly with communities. For example, the full potential of initiatives to retrain traditional practitioners or exciseuses is fully realized when communities recognize that FGM/C is a violation of the rights of women and children and therefore no longer generate a demand for these services.

- Approaches which criticize those who carry out FGM/C – including parents themselves - risk promoting resentment and resistance among communities, while initiatives which overemphasise the health risks associated with FGM/C have been found to contribute to the medicalisation of the practice, whereby cutting is carried out by qualified doctors or health workers. This is one of the clearest trends in recent years in countries such as Egypt and Guinea.

Increasingly, experience from the field indicates that practicing communities are most responsive to non-judgemental approaches and that the discussion of other human rights issues of immediate concern, including health, education and environment can provide a ‘point of entry’ which will eventually lead communities to discuss the more sensitive issue of FGM/C.

- Experience also indicates that while the continuing practice of FGM/C is driven by socio-cultural, psycho-sexual, religious and aesthetic/hygienic arguments, almost all of these are linked to the idea that FGM/C ensures that a girl can enter into marriage. This being the case, it is extremely difficult for a single family to abandon the practice, since this effectively removes for their daughter any possibility of finding a husband. In order not to disadvantage individual girls, the choice to abandon FGM/C must be a collective one on the part of intra-marrying communities.
- This collective choice to abandon FGM/C is most likely to endure when it is marked by a collective and explicit declaration of intent. This may take the form of a public declaration or a written statement of adherence. Whatever the form, an open and collective statement is a crucial signal of a community’s commitment to abandon this practice. To return to the UNICEF supported project in Senegal, since 1997, 1367 village communities have publicly declared their decision to end the practice of FGM/C.

Building on these principles, the UNICEF Digest is intended to be a practical tool to support real and lasting change. Easy to read and use, and effective in its message.

The launch will take place in the coming months, and the official launch date will be announced shortly

The publication will initially be made available in Arabic, English and French, with local language versions to follow

It will be distributed in printed format. It will also be available in an electronic version from UNICEF’s website. UNICEF supplies copies of the Digest free of charge.

### *7. End FGM/C in a single generation*

The forthcoming UNICEF Innocenti Digest on FGM/C is only one small element of a growing movement to end a practice that violates the human rights of millions of girls and women around the world. Despite the persistence of the practice and the number of girls and women affected by it, there is good reason to be optimistic that by employing the most effective strategies and adopting a coherent approach, the practice can virtually be ended within a single generation. It is thanks to the support of a number of committed actors – among which the Government of Djibouti and No Peace Without Justice, as well as the Governments of Italy and Japan – that we are able to make such an optimistic statement today. If this commitment is maintained, it will be possible within the foreseeable future, to state with confidence that FGM/C and the suffering it brings is a thing of the past.