



# WORKING GROUP

On Population, Sustainable Development and Reproductive Health

## International Women's Day 8<sup>th</sup> March 2001

### FGM: The Impact on Women's Health

#### Background

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), often also referred to as female circumcision, comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs. It is part of a ritualistic practice deeply rooted in culture and tradition. There are different types of genital mutilation practised today with different levels of severity.

FGM is often carried out in unsanitary conditions, without anaesthesia, using crude and unsterilised instruments such as razor blades, pieces of glass, or knives. These instruments are used repeatedly on numerous girls increasing the risk of transmission of the Human Immune deficiency Virus (HIV). It is mostly prevalent in Africa where it is practised in at least 28 different countries. It also occurs in several Middle Eastern countries including the two Yemens, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Syria and in Asia.

Today the number of girls and women who have been subjected to FGM is estimated at over 130 million individuals worldwide, and a further 2 million girls annually are at risk of this practice (source:WHO). The procedure is an ancient practice, not linked to any religion, but which is carried out simply because it is customary. FGM is commonly performed on girls between the ages of four and twelve as a rite of passage to womanhood. In some cultures however it is practised as early as a few days after birth and as late as after the first pregnancy.

Although the reasons for carrying out the mutilations vary there is a clear common factor which is the control of a woman's body and sexuality in order to ensure a woman's virginity before marriage and chastity thereafter. FGM is generally performed by a traditional practitioner, who is normally an older woman.

#### The Risk to Women's Health

The immediate and long-term health consequences of FGM vary according to the type and severity of the procedure performed. Immediate complications include severe pain, shock, haemorrhage, urine retention and ulceration of the genital region. Haemorrhage and infection can cause death.

The reported long-term complications of FGM include cysts, abscesses, scar formation, incontinence, painful sexual intercourse and sexual dysfunction. The practice also contributes to levels of maternal morbidity and its consequences are particularly harmful during childbirth, causing an entire range of obstetric complications. The infibulated woman must be defibulated which increases the risk of bleeding and wound infection also exposing the foetus to a range of infections, thus increasing the risk of maternal and infant mortality.

#### Women's Rights are Human Rights

***The ICPD Programme of Action describes FGM as a violation of basic human rights and a major lifelong risk to women's health, and urges governments to prohibit FGM***

International organisations and conferences, including the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna 1993); the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo 1994) and the fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995), have expressed strong positions on the dangers of FGM and their support to eradicate the practice. A series of human rights instruments dating from 1948, which are legally binding on States Parties, contain language concerning the rights to health, non-discrimination on the basis of

sex or gender, and physical and mental integrity. Female genital mutilation violates each of these precepts. More recently language in international conference declarations has directly addressed harmful traditional practices in general and, in some cases, female genital mutilation specifically. This has resulted in the recognition of FGM as a fundamental violation of women's and girl's rights.

The practice is specifically mentioned in the Children's rights convention, which has been ratified by all the African countries. In 1990, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) released a general recommendation pertaining specifically to FGM. The 1993 United Nations Declaration on the elimination of violence against women explicitly included FGM within its definition of the phrase "violence against women".

The arguments against FGM are based on universally recognised human rights, including the rights to integrity of the person and the highest attainable level of mental and physical health. FGM reinforces the inequity suffered by girls and women in the communities where it is practised and must be addressed if their health, social and economic development needs are to be met.



MEPs visiting Kenyan Women's NGO

## The Role of the EU

The EU provides support to reproductive health interventions through various financial instruments such as

- Budget line B7-6312 (Aid for Population and Reproductive Health Care in Developing Countries, including the Fight Against HIV/AIDS)
- NGO co-financing line B7-6000.

The European Commission has funded projects aimed at combating FGM. Such projects were implemented in Ethiopia by an NGO under the co-financing line, in collaboration with the National Committee on Traditional Practices (NCTPE) of Ethiopia. These were aimed at testing innovative methodologies to counteract the myths surrounding the practice, involving key actors such as political and religious leaders, teachers, women's organisations, and medical and paramedical staff.

Technical assistance and training were provided to NCTPE aimed at carrying out research and development of appropriate country-specific training and information materials and to carry out specific initiatives in the country to curtail the practice.

The Cotonou Agreement also includes specific reference to the need to integrate 'population issues into development strategies in order to improve reproductive health, primary health care, family planning; and the prevention of female genital mutilation' (Article 25).

In November 2000 the European Parliament issued a Motion for Resolution on FGM calling on the Council, the Commission and the Member States to step up efforts to combat FGM and to support NGOs and other agencies in this respect.

If you would like further information or if you would like to join the Working Group on Population Sustainable Development and Reproductive Health at the European Parliament please contact:

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