

Female Genital Mutilation

August 2003

The silence that surrounds many forms of abuse and discrimination against women and girls is slowly lifting in a number of societies. Subjects long considered sensitive, or beyond debate are being objectively and critically assessed. Among these subjects is female genital mutilation (FGM) sometimes called female circumcision.

Girls commonly undergo genital mutilation between the ages of four and eight, but the mutilation may be carried out on infants only a few days old, on girls during adolescence, or after the birth of a young woman's first child. The practice inflicts severe pain and trauma, causes medical complications that can be fatal, permanently damages the genital organs and normal body functions, and restricts the ability of girls and women to play an equal role in society.

Millions suffer

More than 2 million girls are believed to undergo genital mutilation each year. An estimated 130 million women and girls have been subjected to the practice. Every day, some 6,000 girls are at risk of FGM.

While there are several varieties of mutilation, FGM procedures involve the excision (cutting away) of all or part of the external female genital organs. FGM is practiced in more than 25 countries in Africa and in a few countries in the Middle East and Asia. In Europe, Canada and the United States, some immigrant families subject their daughters to genital mutilation.

Serious health risks

Female genital mutilation is a serious health problem for girls and women. This is not only because of the immediate medical risks and complications of an operation often performed in unhygienic conditions. There can also be long-term physical and emotional complications.

Factors perpetuating the practice

Female genital mutilation is perpetuated because it is rooted in traditional beliefs about the social status and role of women, and because it is part of the initiation of girls into their communities.

The discrimination girls and women face knows no national boundaries. It changes as cultures change and as progress

is made, varying in severity and degree. Genital mutilation is one aspect of the abuse suffered by girls and women that developing nations are struggling to remedy. However, it is entirely preventable and can be ended through education and strong leadership.

A violation of the rights of the child

FGM is a violation of inherent human rights and is condemned in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Exposing and ending female genital mutilation

Women and health professionals in countries affected are increasingly speaking out against female genital mutilation. Because the practice is no longer viewed only as a cultural problem and a health hazard, but also as a violation of the human rights of girls and women, some countries now have laws concerning the practice which make it an illegal act.

FGM and the law

In the UK, the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985 is the only piece of legislation forbidding FGM. However, there have been no prosecutions under the law despite more and more women presenting themselves to health care professionals and specialist clinics treating FGM related complications.

The UK Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act 1985 will soon be replaced by the Female Genital Mutilation Bill as introduced in the House of Commons on 11 December 2002. The Bill repeals and re-enacts the provisions of the 1985 Act and gives them extra-territorial effect as was recommended by an all Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health reporting in 2000. It also increases the maximum penalty, on conviction on indictment, for FGM from 5 to 14 years' imprisonment.

UNICEF policy and strategies

UNICEF supports international and national efforts to end female genital mutilation.

UNICEF programmes aim to end FGM by raising awareness about the risks of the practice among children, adolescents, teachers and health workers and providing support to local organisations committed to ending this harmful practice.

- In Niger, UNICEF has worked in partnership with the Niger Committee to Eliminate Harmful Traditional Practices to address the problem of FGM. UNICEF-supported awareness campaigns, training workshops, radio broadcasts and video presentations have reached a wide range of Niger

citizens including government officials and midwives.

- In Nigeria, the safe motherhood programme includes training for health workers and traditional birth attendants on the risks of female genital mutilation.
- In Burkina Faso, UNICEF is supporting monitoring activities through the local media and facilitating NGO networks and meetings.
- In Sudan, over 70 per cent of women are affected by the most severe forms of FGM known as infibulation. The procedure is primarily performed on Muslim girls between the ages of five and nine years. In Sudan, UNICEF supports the Student's Association of Kordofan University for the Eradication of Harmful Traditional Practices. Members travel to small villages to educate and mobilise people against FGM.

In Kassala state, eastern Sudan, where 99% of women are circumcised, UNICEF is supporting the state government, the Federal Government and local organisations in their efforts to end FGM through regular production and airing of radio and television programmes and community theatre for life drama sessions.

- In Somalia, 97 per cent of women are subject to FGM, and UNICEF has been advocating for its total eradication. UNICEF has been reaching out to community leaders including Sheikhs, elders, women and youth to achieve consensus on how best to address the problem. Working groups have been

established in each region. They visit communities and villages to create awareness and identify circumcisers. UNICEF is also training young people in puppetry, as a creative method to disseminate messages on FGM.

UNICEF supports the production of educational materials on female genital mutilation and assists in workshops for policy makers, religious leaders, women's groups, and youth organisations.

- In Djibouti, UNICEF is a major partner of the National Union of Djiboutian Women in many projects, including one focusing on elimination of harmful traditional practices.

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