

Speech by Delegation of Egypt
To
The African Conference on Combating FGM
Ouaga Dougo
November 2009
Egypt abandoning FGM
Egypt's Efforts to Abandon FGM

Allow me First To express our thanks and appreciation for the Government of Burkina Faso for hosting such an important event. Allow me also to congratulate H.E. the First Lady Madame Chantelle Compaore on her commitment to the fight against FGM. Madame Comapore has given a great model for the role of first ladies in the fight against all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child. It gives me great honor to convey the greetings and best wishes of H.E. Mrs. Susanne Mubarak to Mrs. Compaori as well as her best wishes for the success of this conference.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is with a deep sense of pride that I share with you today Egypt's struggle to eliminate a very harmful practice that some of our girls have endured for many years; FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), one of the long lived practices that violates fundamental human rights of young girls for many decades. On 7 June 2008 The Egyptian Parliament passed a law criminalizing FGM and any form of cutting of the female organs. This action by the representatives of the people crowns diligent efforts by a wide range of partners. I am happy to share with you a success story that demonstrated a concerted and coordinated effort to empower the local communities. Our primary objective has been respecting the right of such communities to make free choices based on informed judgment. The success of our national anti-FGM program fulfills the dreams of diligent advocates who fought for many decades to free the girl of such harmful practice.

Let me remind you of our meeting in June 2003, when Egypt hosted the Afro-Arab Conference on FGM and Legal Tools. 28 African and Arab countries who suffer from the practice participated actively in this event that marked a turning point in our struggle. Participants unanimously called for legal prohibition and criminalization of the practice. Advocacy and awareness efforts were also flagged to ensure law enforcement. Egypt has placed FGM as a priority on the political and social agenda. In 2003 the National Council for Childhood and motherhood launched the national program for combating FGM. Through a rights based approach; the program focused on responding to the public's fears and inquires in a holistic manner rather than hitting solely on the health detriments. The program's success is attributed to the fact that several interventions were made on the central and decision making level yet decisions were built on the real and sincere information of the public while working simultaneously at the grassroots level. The key program interventions focused on:

Civil Society Partnership & Community Initiatives

The NCCM has partnered extensively with the civil society (NGOs) to assure that anti FGM efforts are not carried top-down yet there is a concrete movement on the ground at governorate level thus assessing real change of attitude towards the practice at the grassroots level. Furthermore, the program has targeted families with girls at risk through different community initiatives that concentrated on improving health and education services thus to ensure the fact that the FGM program is really about introducing a comprehensive package that is keen to improve the overall quality of life for primarily young girls and families.

Breaking the Media Taboo and Targeting Egyptian Families through Media

Previous efforts to combat FGM relied on targeting elite intellectuals or a small scale of beneficiaries in selected geographic regions in Egypt since advocates at the time did not have access to media channels especially TV in order to expand the movement against FGM. In 2003 NCCM started launched its first anti-FGM TV campaign (El Bent Masria) in March 2003 through a series of info-mercials which sent a clear and concise message "No.. To FGM". The campaign provoked the eagerness and concern of media personnel thus enabling them to address FGM in the different talk shows that address social topics. Furthermore, as media persons and artists realized that FGM is rising on the national agenda, the issue has also been incorporated in drama, radio programs. As for the press the program has inflicted a transition in the quantity and quality of the articles that address FGM as journalists became more concerned with the humanistic aspects of the practice and the negative impacts that it has on families. The program supported also the instigation of the national debate on popular websites.

A Public Opinion Supporting the Legal Frame

The National Program mobilized a social movement through debate forums among legal persons and parliamentarians in order to support the introduction of a law that criminalizes FGM. Primarily the legal community just like other groups did not envision the dire need of introducing FGM within a legal context since it may be applied within existing laws in the criminal code. As the hype raised on FGM increased and more victims spoke out the legal community realized that now is the time to criminalize FGM per say.

A Positive Anti – FGM Religious Dialogue

The Grand Mufti of Egypt issued in July 2007 a Fatwa which was based on long research and consultation exercises with renowned Islamic Scholars. The core of the Fatwa confirmed that FGM is a clear violation of Islamic teachings since Islam condemns any practice that inflicts harm on the human body or soul. Furthermore, the Coptic Church has also denounced the practice and incorporated anti-FGM messages within the discourse of Coptic preaching sessions.

Youth as Agents of Change

This program demonstrates that youth are strong agents for change despite their variant social or educational backgrounds. Youth earn a highly respected status in the rural communities of Egypt especially if they received adequate education, thus they are able to inflict the change required on more elderly people in the communities that are still tied to culturally embedded habits or practices. The FGM program relies intensively on youth when advocating among young people in schools, universities or other outlets thus introducing a "peer to peer" approach that enables young people to speak up without fears or barriers.

Today Egypt is gaining the fruits after years of hard work and sincere commitment and we arrive to key impacts that ensure that major transitions among the public are underway. The key impacts of the national program can be summarized to the following:

Indicators that FGM Practice is Shrinking among new generations

- The latest Ministry of Health Survey conducted in 2007 reflects a sharp decrease in the practice among girls in school age 10-18 years to 50.3% (nation wide). In urban schools 43% were circumcised while in the rural 62.7%. In private schools the percentage of circumcised girls was 9.2%.
- The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood also conducted a youth aspiration survey on different social issues in collaboration with Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies and more than 60% of the young people in the survey confirmed that FGM is a harmful practice.

Media Silence on FGM Broken

Today the media dialogue on FGM has become concrete, unified and credible. The media today plays a conscious role in touching the emotional side of the issue from a child rights perspective and families with girls at risk depend extensively on accessing their information regarding FGM from the TV, radio or press. The massive impact of the media role is assessed through the child helpline 16000 where thousands of calls are received from families that request further counseling on FGM yet their core information are accessed through the different TV or radio programs and sometimes press or websites. The transition in media messages reflects the social change that occurred in the past few years.

Village Communities saying "No.. To FGM"

Today communities on the ground are coming out with their own will and are declaring their brave stance against FGM, not only among themselves but in front of media channels and other neighboring villages. Villages have created their own manifesto by signing their own public declarations against FGM prior to the introduction of the legal frame. Such declarations have provoked the feelings of other surrounding communities and made them come out and feel that they should also express their full commitment to the rights of young girls' in their communities.

An Enlightened Religious Dialogue that addresses the Rights of the Girl Child

The fatwa of the Grand Mufti and the statement of the Coptic Church have opened the door for religious leaders to address FGM from a rights perspective which is the core finding of all holy religions. Today very few people can say "we do FGM for God" because the religious discourse is clear and ensures that God is fair and that young girls deserve care and protection as opposed to being mutilated.

A Youth Anti- FGM social Movement

We are most proud of the active voluntary efforts of youth (males and females) within the education institutions (schools and universities etc.) in order introduce a whole new concept of child rights for peer youth, thus ensuring that FGM is completely resented among the new generation.

Distinguished First Ladies

Egypt has irreversibly abandoned FGM and this achievement is attributed to the support and understanding of the local communities. The law today does not solely condemn FGM yet it creates a new culture that will look at FGM as a crime, while one day FGM was considered a proper and fair practice that was tied to the well-being of the girl child.

After the law the story is not over yet, we will continue to intensify the momentum against FGM in order to ensure that people continue to report FGM cases.

Furthermore, anti-FGM messages are being incorporated in educational curriculums in order to have generations that naturally denounce FGM. With these key follow up recommendations after the law we can ensure that Egypt will totally abandon FGM .