

Combating FGM/C in Eritrea

Written by shabait Administrator

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FGM/C, a form of violence against women, is defined as a practice that involves partial or total removal of female external genital parts and/or injury to the female genital organs for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons.

It is a practice that violates well-established human rights principles. It violates the right to life and it is also a violation of the right to freedom of choice. It is against the CEDAW principles as it would be defined as a gender-based act "that result in physical, sexual and psychological harm".

Combating FGM/C in Eritrea is considered a high development issue and has required and still requires vigorous and continued efforts aimed at raising awareness of its dangers and ultimate elimination.

The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) spearheaded a campaign to eradicate this deep rooted cultural practice since its establishment during the armed struggle (1979). The Union incorporated these activities into its overall sensitization programs and has registered significant results over the years.

At the initial period of post-independence, the Eritrean demographic surveys of 1995 and 2002 indicated that between 95% and 89% of Eritrean girls are subjected to FGM/C. It had become a real threat to the health and lives of many young girls. Hence, well-coordinated and designed strategies for successful implementation became critical.

After independence, NUEW relied on social mobilization as a strategy to empower women and create social solidarity in Eritrea's regions/zobas in fighting against FGM. Cooperation frameworks with different international organizations such as UN agencies, embassies and NGOs were developed. Participants of the movement were the local government, the youth association, religious leaders from Christian and Muslim faiths, representatives from the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labor and Human welfare. Social mobilization was the guiding

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principle of NUEW's anti-FGM/C campaign. The aim was to create sustainable behavioral change in the society.

Steps taken in eradicating FGM/C

“Breaking the silence” – Public discussions through advocacy

NUEW began the process of abandoning and demystifying FGM/C through action, reflection and breaking the silence of the taboo of discussion on FGM/C. Vibrant discussions took place among men and women. During the initial stages, campaigners reached 90% of the total villages in Eritrea. This phase was the most important period of the project life, because it was during this period the struggle for change of attitude and beliefs accelerated. The outcome of this mobilization has brought an increase of attitude towards the steady eradication of circumcision; the rate of decline in this practice was at 38% in 1995, and it increased to 49% in 2000 and later to 82% in 2010 (EPHS 2010).

Establishment of Anti – FGM Committees

Following consciousness-raising a consensus was reached in all zobas to create Anti- FGM/C campaign committees charged with eradicating the practice. All pertinent stakeholders such as the local government, NUEW, Ministry of Health and others were member of the committee. Committee activities included organizing public meetings in numerous villages to raise awareness on FGM/C. IEC materials translated in to local languages were disseminated at these meetings. These meetings provided opportunities for community member both male and female to openly discuss FGM/C and exchange opinions. Additionally, a wide ranged of trainings were offered in order to enhance the knowledge and skill of the members of these committees. Over 2000 adult education teachers were trained on gender based violence and FGM/C. Training topics were; gender, FGM/C and early marriage, advocacy and communication.

Institutional set up of the Zoba level Anti FGM/C Committees

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Anti – FGM/C Committees at the Zoba and sub zoba level were established in all six Zobas in Eritrea. The committees are critical components of the national grassroots campaign to stop FGM/C. They are the driving force at the Zoba level to mobilize and coordinate local communities in implementing the strategies.

The roles and responsibilities of the Zoba level Anti-FGM/C Committees are three fold. First, they plan, implement, and promote the anti- FGM/C strategy in Eritrea. Second, they draft action plans and monitor the progress of village sensitization campaigns. Third, they coordinate with different stakeholders to establish a platform for knowledge sharing regarding accomplishments and barriers encountered in tackling FGM/C in their communities.

These Anti- FGM/C committees also played a significant role in implementation. The local administrator would chair the committees and NUEW would act as secretary while MOH was the technical expert. They would organize various tasks that target the practice and push for the banning of FGM/C and early marriage.

Public Declaration

The second stage was to reach a consensus in communities to stop the practice of FGM/C by public declaration. To achieve this, a mass media campaign was implemented through TV-talk shows, Radio programs, General Knowledge competitions and Drama shows. In addition, campaign leaflets, posters, booklets and bags with Anti-FGM/C messages were disseminated. A video film “Behind the Curtains of Agony,” produced by the Ministry of Health was also presented and had a dramatic effect in villages propagating attitude and behavior change. During this phase of the campaign, a variety of processes occurred beyond consciousness-raising such as collective action and exchange of ideas.

Enactment of FGM Proclamation

Eritrea adopted a law to ban FGM/C in March 2007 joining other African countries with Anti FGM/C related laws and policies. The government of Eritrea enacted proclamation No.158/2007 on the abolition of Female circumcision. Through this proclamation, female genital mutilation (FGM/C) became criminal offence. The proclamation highlights its serious threat on health and life of women. The law also underlined the practice as a violation to human rights through

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depriving of their physical and mental integrity and their right to freedom from violence and discrimination (Proclamation No. 158/2007). In Eritrea the law serves as one component of a multi-sectoral approach to end the practice. Its enforcement has empowered women and community-based initiatives to ban FGM/C.

Enforcement of the Law

The final stage of NUEW's Anti FGM/C campaign is very challenging. The objective is to enforce the law banning practice of FGM/C. This stage requires empowerment at the individual and community levels. In this process widespread training was and continues to be conducted and involves many sectors of the society including the police, legal experts, and influential elders of the communities for effective enforcement of the law.

Compiled by Rigat Tesfamichael