

DECLARATION: on the Terminology FGM; 6th IAC General Assembly, 4 - 7 April, Bamako



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The sixth General Assembly of the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices (IAC) was held in Bamako, Mali from the 4th to the 7th of April 2005.

The meeting's focus was to review the progress, the constraints and to identify opportunities for strengthening the campaign against harmful traditional practices particularly female genital mutilation. National committees of the IAC from more than 28 African countries in the African region as well as IAC group sections, affiliates, partners, human rights organizations, donors and

representatives from the UN specialized agencies and the Economic Commission for Africa attended the meeting.

The issue of terminology came up as an issue of concern in the 6th General Assembly. It was observed that there have been attempts to dilute the terminology Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and replace it with the following: "Female Circumcision", "Female Genital Alteration", "Female Genital Excision", "Female Genital Surgery", and more recently "Female Genital Cutting" (FGC).

The term Female Genital Cutting (FGC) does not reflect the accurate extent of harm and mutilation caused by all types of FGM. This terminology has been adopted by some UN specialized agencies and bi-lateral donors who have been influenced by specific lobby groups largely based in western countries.

We note that these changes trivialize the nature of female genital mutilation and the suffering of African women and girls. We also note that these changes have been made without consultation and override the consensus reached by African women in the front line of the campaign as well as the voices of millions of African girls and women who suffer in silence.

We want the world to know that in 1990 African women directly at the forefront of the campaign adopted the term FGM at the IAC General Assembly in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. They took this brave step to confront the issue head on with their practicing communities. Because:

1. Other terms created confusion in the minds of the people on the nature and gravity of the practice.
2. They recognized that the campaign would be a long-term struggle and the process of changing the mentality and behaviours of African people would be extremely painful.
3. However, they recognized that this pain would be integral to the social change required to free girls and women from this traditional ritual in order to change the mentality of women and empower them to address FGM, which is part of the control of women's sexuality and reproductive rights.
4. They are aware that that African women and men should confront the true nature of FGM. Experience indicates that long-term change only occurs when change agents help communities to go through this painful process. Not to confront the issue is to assist communities to remain in denial of the gravity of FGM, thus resulting in mere transient changes.

We recognize that while it may be less threatening for non-Africans to adopt other

less confrontational terminology in order to enter into dialogue with communities, it is imperative that the term FGM is retained.

The term FGM is not judgmental. It is instead a medical term that reflects what is done to the genitalia of girls and women. It is a cultural reality. Mutilation is the removal of healthy tissue. The fact that the term makes some people uneasy is no justification for its abandonment.

We would highlight that the terminology FGM was adopted through a process of consultation and consensus between the different African perspectives and opinions on the practice expressed by the African experts that attended the first technical working group meeting held in Geneva in 1995 and gained widespread world-wide currency and acceptance. The Beijing conference also adopted and used the terminology female genital mutilation. The term FGM has been adopted and endorsed by the European Union, the African Union and is currently utilized in all their documentation including the most recent Additional Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, on the Rights of Women.

While we appreciate the efforts made in response to FGM on the continent and the Diaspora, it is patronizing and belittling to African women and girls to have outsiders define their oppression. Indeed what gives anyone but Africans the right to change a term agreed upon by the largest group of African activists on this issue in the world? This is at best paternalism and is a sad reflection of how after many years of African women working against FGM, at the time when FGM was a taboo, the campaign has been high-jacked by others who were not involved at the beginning and do not appreciate the nature of the struggle.

1. We, the participants at the 6th IAC General Assembly demand a halt to this drift towards trivializing the traditional practice by adopting a subtle terminology.
2. We demand that all organizations and international bodies revert to the terminology adopted by the IAC in 1990, and reinforced in 2002.
3. We demand that international agencies recognize the right of NGO's working in the field to continue to use the terminology FGM and not to be denied funding because of this.
4. We demand that the voices of African women be heard and that their call to action against FGM is heeded.

Dated: Thursday April 7, 2005 at Bamako, Mali
IAC 6th General Assembly

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