

## MEDIA RELEASE

EMBARGO: 10:00am GMT, 24 NOVEMBER 2005

### INNOCENTI DIGEST

## CHANGING A HARMFUL SOCIAL CONVENTION: FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING

### KEY MESSAGES

- Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) affects far more women than previously thought. Recent data reveal that an estimated three million girls and women are cut each year on the African continent (Sub-Saharan Africa, Egypt and Sudan). This harmful practice is a fundamental violation of girls' and women's human rights.
- FGM/C is becoming a global problem. Not only is FGM/C practiced among communities in Africa and the Middle East, but with increased population movements and migration, FGM/C is also an issue in immigrant communities throughout the world.
- Real social change is a lengthy and complex process. Still, there is every reason to be optimistic that with global support, FGM/C can be ended within a single generation. This is possible because we understand the elements needed to accelerate the abandonment of the practice within practicing communities.
- Never before has the global community had such a refined understanding of why FGM/C persists. FGM/C ensures a girl's or woman's status, marriageability, chastity, health, beauty and family honour. This deeply entrenched social and cultural tradition is so powerful that even when families are aware of the harm it can bring, they are willing to have their daughters cut.
- A number of promising initiatives are supporting communities to abandon FGM/C in Africa and the Middle East. The most successful guide communities to define the problems and solutions themselves. They encourage people to engage in non-judgemental public discussion. They equip families with knowledge on human rights and responsibilities. They encourage communities who have made the decision to abandon the practice to spread their message to their neighbours
- Communities cannot end FGM/C without support. In order to end FGM/C on a large scale and across countries, communities need to be supported through legislative and policy measures, fora

## MEDIA RELEASE

for public debate, and culturally sensitive media messages. They also need support from religious leaders and other opinion makers.

- Engaging adolescents and young people is critical to promote the abandonment of the practice. Through meaningful participation, adolescents develop the tools they need to make decisions that affect their own lives and to break vicious cycles, including gender discrimination and violence, which are passed down from one generation to the next.

UNICEF is working to influence policies, laws and budgets to promote the abandonment of FGM/C. We provide a wide range of support to our many partners, including to non-governmental organizations, such as Tostan in Senegal, the Centre for Education, Development and Population Activities in Egypt, and Pharos in the Netherlands, who are supporting communities to end this harmful practice.

\* \* \*

### NOTE TO THE EDITORS

**Embargoed media materials and copies of the Digest in English, French, Arabic, Italian and Spanish are available from the Centre's Innocenti Newsroom:**  
<http://www.unicef-icdc.org/presscentre/indexNewsroom.html>

#### **UNICEF Innocenti research Centre, Florence**

Salvador Herencia (+39 055) 20 33 354, [sherencia@unicef.org](mailto:sherencia@unicef.org)

Patrizia Faustini (+39 055) 20 33 253, [pfaustini@unicef.org](mailto:pfaustini@unicef.org)

Marie Mukangendo, (+39 055) 20 33 231, [mmukangendo@unicef.org](mailto:mmukangendo@unicef.org)

#### **UNICEF New York**

Alfred Ironside, (+1 212) 3267261, [aironside@unicef.org](mailto:aironside@unicef.org)

Kate Donovan, (+1 212) 326 7452, [kdonovan@unicef.org](mailto:kdonovan@unicef.org)

#### **UNICEF Geneva**

Damien Personnaz, (+41 22) 909 ) 909 5716, [dpersonnaz@unicef.org](mailto:dpersonnaz@unicef.org)

#### **UNICEF MENA (Amman)**

Anis Salem, (+96 269) 541 1414, [asalem@unicef.org](mailto:asalem@unicef.org)

Wolfgang Friedl, + 9626 5502407, [wfriedl@unicef.org](mailto:wfriedl@unicef.org)

#### **UNICEF Egypt**

Simon Ingram, (+ 202 526) 5083 thru 7, [singram@unicef.org](mailto:singram@unicef.org)