

## **Communication for Abandonment of Female Genital Cutting: An Approach Based on Human Rights Principles<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction**

UNICEF, with the rest of the development community, has long considered female genital cutting (FGC) a violation of the right of young women to sexual and reproductive health. It has tried several approaches to end the practice, including:

- alternate rights of passage;
- alternate livelihood strategies for circumcisers;
- laws prohibiting FGC; and
- health messages and public awareness campaigns.

These approaches share a common feature: experts from outside the affected communities have initiated the interventions, often with little input or support from community members themselves. In addition, they have not been directed at the primary reason that FGC occurs – to ensure the marriageability of girls. While they have produced awareness in target audiences that FGC has negative health consequences and that other societies do not cut the genitals of young women, they have neither converted this awareness into changed practice nor produced large-scale abandonment of FGC (Mackie, 2000). Consequently, the prevalence of FGC has remained more or less constant in the 28 countries where it is practised. Currently, about 150 million women have undergone FGC and up to two million girls are cut every year (UNICEF, 2003).

If large-scale change is to occur, a new way to communicate with the people who practise FGC is necessary. This paper proposes an approach to communication that is based on community dialogue and the development of shared understanding, rather than on the dominant model of health communication: the design and delivery of messages that direct individuals to preferred behaviours. In the dialogue approach, the role of the communication professional is to a) find ways to include all community groups in the discussion,

especially the women and girls who are directly affected by FGC, b) facilitate discussion within and between the groups in a community so that all perspectives are heard and considered and c) introduce new information into the discussion so that action can be informed by knowledge as well as cultural preference.

Respect for culture, however, is an important aspect of the communication strategy. Discussion that is based on an appreciation of local language and respect for a community's traditions creates trust between insiders and outsiders, making it easier for outsiders to introduce new ideas into the conversation and to build energy for changes in practice. Instead of condemning FGC as a "harmful traditional practice", the dialogue approach to communication starts with an understanding that FGC occurs because parents love their daughters and want the best possible future for them. It does not direct community members to a preferred behaviour through health-education messages. Rather, it uses a non-directive approach that encourages the entire community to discuss health and development issues and reach consensus on the human rights and responsibilities of all members, but especially girls and women, mothers and daughters.

This paper proposes an approach to communication that is based on dialogue and human rights principles. It:

- explains why non-directive communication, based on human rights principles, is essential to the process of abandoning FGC;
- contrasts communication based on human rights principles with the dominant communication strategy currently used in public health programmes: behaviour change communication (BCC);
- summarizes the results of a communication workshop in Nairobi (September, 2003) in which participants developed a strategy for FGC abandonment based on human rights communication;
- describes the monitoring and evaluation challenges associated with communication from a human rights perspective; and
- explains why communication based on human rights principles is an essential component of the most successful approach to FGC abandonment that has been developed to date: the methodology used by *Tostan* in West Africa.

The paper concludes by calling on development agencies and governments in the countries where FGC occurs to support communication strategies based on human rights principles by a) providing adequate funding so that they can be delivered at scale, b) developing capacity in the participatory tools and methodologies required to deliver them; and c) supporting them through policy and legal frameworks that recognize community discussion and consensus-building as the key to FGC abandonment.