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AFRICAN COMMITTEE - COMITÉ INTER-AFRICAIN

DECLARATION: on the Terminology FGM; 6th IAC General Assembly, 4 - 7 April, 2005, Bamako/Mali

Wednesday, 06 April 2005



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.

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 UN specialized agencies and the Economic Commission for Africa [met to review progress, assess constraints and identify opportunities for strengthening campaigns against harmful traditional practices particularly female genital mutilation.]

... An issue of concern at the 6th General Assembly ... 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). ...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 ... influenced by specific lobby groups largely based in western countries.

...These changes trivialize the nature of female genital mutilation and the suffering of African women and girls ...[and] ... made without consultation, [they]

override the consensus reached by African women in the front line of the campaign as well as the ... millions of African girls and women who suffer in silence. We want the world to know that in 1990 African women [activists] 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. [Why? To avoid confusion, to emphasize] the nature and gravity of the practice; to recognize that [only] a [continuing and painful] struggle [can alter] the mentality and behaviours of African people, [yet to insist] that this pain [is] integral to [empower] girls and women ... to address FGM [and to take] control of their sexuality and reproductive rights. ... Experience indicates that long-term change occurs [only] when change agents help communities to go through this painful process. Not to confront the issue is to [promote] denial of the gravity of FGM, thus resulting in mere transient change... .

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 [be] 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 ... FGM was adopted [by] consultation and consensus [among ...] African experts [at] the first technical working group meeting held in Geneva in 1995 and gained ... world-wide currency and acceptance. The Beijing conference also adopted and used ... female genital mutilation. ... FGM has been adopted and endorsed by the European Union [and] the African Union; [it] 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 [Maputo].

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 ... when FGM was a taboo, the campaign has been high-jacked by others ... not involved at the beginning and who do not appreciate the nature of the struggle.

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.

We demand that all organizations and international bodies revert to the terminology adopted by the IAC in 1990, and reinforced in 2002.

We demand that international agencies recognize the right of NGO's in the field to continue to use FGM and not to be denied funding because of this.

We demand that the voices of African women be heard and that their call to action against FGM [be] heeded.

Dated: Thursday April 7, 2005 at Bamako, Mali