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The campaign to eradicate
female genital MUTILATION
A role for Amnesty International

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is arguably one of the most widespread and systematic violations of the human rights of women and girls, of whom approximately 135 million worldwide are genitally mutilated. The World Health Organization estimates that two million girls a year — some 6,000 a day — undergo genital mutilation.

Since the 1970s, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and a number of intergovernmental and governmental organizations have been active in raising awareness about FGM and developing strategies for its eradication.

Amnesty International (AI) recognizes that in order to identify its own role, it must first take stock of the efforts of those who are already working at a national and international level. Strategies for campaigning on FGM in each country can only be devised when the results of past efforts have been examined and assessed, and obstacles and opportunities for progress identified, both at governmental level and among civil society. AI Sections will be in a better position to identify their role when they have analysed existing governmental and non-governmental initiatives in their country and assessed the position of key sectors of society — such as educators, health workers and religious leaders — with regard to FGM.

FGM was first included in AI's promotional work on human rights at its International Council Meeting in August 1995. The aim of this promotional work is to raise public awareness of FGM as a human rights issue and urge governments to ratify and implement international human rights treaties that are of relevance in eradicating the practice. In doing so, AI aims to work in partnership with other NGOs at a local, national and international level.

AI recognizes that FGM is a practice which is deeply rooted in the traditions of a number of societies. As such, it requires a careful and sensitive approach that situates FGM within the broader context of violence and discrimination against women across cultures, and that respects the primacy of the role of grassroots actors in its eradication. AI is thus proceeding with great care in developing the political will to support the elimination of FGM, mobilizing public opinion through education and using international advocacy and networking. By following this approach, AI feels that it can play a significant role in protecting millions of women and girls from mutilation.

AI does not seek to displace the role of other key actors in this field, but rather to support and complement the activities of other organizations and individuals who are working towards the eventual eradication of FGM. Its central goal is to contribute its expertise and experience in human rights campaigning, advocacy and education, as well as its strength as an international and independent mass-membership organization with an increasingly strong presence in Africa, to the efforts of other organizations working towards eradication.

At an international level, AI lobbies appropriate intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to ensure the development, monitoring and implementation of the international instruments most relevant in combating FGM. Developing partnership links with relevant international NGOs has helped advance this agenda and created opportunities for jointly supporting local FGM-related projects.

At the national level, AI is, in many situations, particularly well-placed to act as a catalyst for coalition building. Joining forces with other key national actors can serve as a stimulus to devise a national plan

of action on which to lobby the relevant authorities, and with which to empower local organizations and influence other crucial sectors of society. Any national plan of action should take into account the government's obligations under international human rights treaties, including its commitments arising from the UN Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995.

Ensuring that such international and national developments have an impact at the grassroots level is a task which AI recognizes it can only accomplish in close collaboration with domestic organizations and other local actors. AI both respects and supports the primacy of their expertise and their role as educators and agents of change among target communities. AI's intention is to ensure that its own lobbying and outreach activities complement and enhance local awareness-raising efforts.

The overall objective of AI's work on FGM is to contribute to the eradication of FGM by:

- * stressing the relevance of a human rights approach to the work against FGM
- * using AI's strength as an international, independent mass-membership human rights organization to lobby governments and mobilize key actors and organizations into taking action against FGM
- * supporting international, regional and local organizations and individuals working to eradicate FGM.