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WHY AND HOW AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
TOOK UP THE ISSUE OF
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Amnesty International (AI) has been concerned with the human rights implications of female genital mutilation (FGM) for over 15 years. The issue was first tabled at the 1981 International Council Meeting, in the wake of the interest aroused worldwide by an international conference organized by the World Health Organization in Khartoum, Sudan, in 1979.

For a decade following AI's first discussions on FGM, the organization's work remained focused on a closely defined range of repressive acts carried out directly by state forces, acts which were in breach of states' legal obligations under international human rights standards. AI campaigned solely against violations by governments because it was they who were considered to be bound by international human rights treaties, treaties that provided a framework and justification for AI to intervene and hold governments accountable.

The early 1990s saw a broadening of AI's focus to include armed political groups as perpetrators of abuses. The laws of armed conflict (international humanitarian law) provided a source of legal obligations to which AI could refer in holding such entities to account. To date, though, AI's mandate has been limited to protecting certain basic rights in the face of grave abuses of political power by governments and armed political groups.

FGM, domestic violence, slavery, and a whole range of other practices, represent equally grave attacks on the rights AI seeks actively to protect (such as the right to physical integrity and to non-discrimination). However, they have only been addressed in AI's campaigning where committed by agents of the state or with their direct complicity.

More recently, AI has explored possibilities for addressing governments' failure to prevent or punish abuses by private individuals as a breach of their international legal obligations. This reflects a significant evolution in the conceptualization of human rights within the international human rights movement in recent decades.

Numerous critiques have sought to demonstrate that traditional interpretations of international standards have created an artificial, hierarchical distinction between violations by state forces in the realm of public political activity and similar abuses in the "private" sphere. One of the results has been that the international legal regime has offered scant protection to women from systematic, grave and gender-based abuses inflicted on them by non-state actors. The public/private distinction overlooks the fact that systematic abuse in the "private" sphere has a public dimension, in so far as it arises from more or less officially sanctioned prejudices, discrimination or intolerance. It precludes these abuses from being considered as a human rights issue.

In 1995 AI decided to include the issue of FGM in its promotional work on human rights, pending further discussion and decision-making on the broader issue of other abuses by non-state actors. In doing so, AI recognized the urgency of taking a position against this widespread form of violence against women prior to the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995. This decision was one of a range of steps taken by AI that year to strengthen its commitment to address violations against women and girls more effectively than in the past.

AI's promotional work has included raising awareness among international public opinion and at governmental level about the human rights implications of FGM; urging governments to ratify and

implement international human rights treaties and to uphold other international human rights standards relevant to the practice; supporting global, national and community-level efforts by other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals, as well as cooperating with them in performing the above tasks.

First steps

AI's first initiative to establish a strategy for awareness-raising on FGM was a meeting, held in Ghana in April 1996, of AI members from western Africa and Ghanaian NGO representatives. The seminar, entitled "Working together for change — stop female genital mutilation", took place in Bolgatanga, the capital of Ghana's Upper East Region, a region where FGM is prevalent. It was co-organized with the Ghanaian Association of Church Development Projects. The meeting addressed means of increasing public understanding of FGM in order to promote a mass campaign against the practice, focusing on a grassroots approach to eliminating FGM. Participants included 50 representatives from a diverse range of NGOs, local traditional leaders, government representatives and AI delegates from western Africa.

The seminar considered the practice of FGM from various perspectives, including gender, human rights, health, religion and the law. Discussions also covered the factors which give rise to FGM and approaches to its prevention. One of the outcomes of the meeting was a commitment to devise a national plan of action to eradicate FGM in Ghana.

The Bolgatanga seminar also discussed the contribution that AI could make to stopping FGM. AI delegates and others identified some key strategic considerations:

- * AI's initiatives should be led by AI branches in countries where FGM is prevalent. They should act in close collaboration with national and local NGOs, and with the community representatives best placed to act as grassroots educators.
- * AI's techniques should be appropriate to the context and should take into account the complex and sensitive nature of the issue. AI's strength lies in its potential for forum-building. Its awareness-raising workshops should serve as catalysts for outreach to key sectors, media work and lobbying of authorities at the local and national level.
- * AI should contribute to the work against FGM primarily from a human rights perspective, while at the same time recognizing the need for multidimensional approaches to the issue and ensuring complementarity of its work and that of other organizations at a local and international level.

An AI Working Group on FGM was formed at the meeting to act as a consultation point for the organization's work on FGM, to coordinate FGM activities within the region with other relevant NGOs and to review AI initiatives. The Working Group has representatives in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Togo.

The seminar attracted widespread media coverage. It was featured as the main news item on Ghanaian television as well as in several newspapers, provoking intense public debate about the practice. The seminar also inspired FGM programs in other countries with AI sections.

AI's first East African seminar on FGM took place in Dodoma, Tanzania, in May 1997. Its theme was "Human rights are women's rights: Eradicate female genital mutilation". There were 52 participants — members of NGOs, women's groups and religious organizations, government and opposition party representatives, legal and medical professionals, and representatives from the press. From the seminar it emerged that FGM is practised in Tanzania in the regions of Dodoma, Singida, Arusha, Kilimanjaro and Mara. There is currently no legislation against the practice in

Tanzania. The seminar concluded that eradication of FGM would only be achieved by governments, religious institutions, international organizations, NGOs and funding agencies joining forces in a vigorous and multidimensional approach to tackling the problem.

At the time of writing, AI's Côte d'Ivoire Section was due to host a human rights awareness workshop on FGM in Korhogo, in the north of the country. Such regional initiatives have been supported by outreach, advocacy and fundraising efforts by the International Secretariat and AI sections in other countries.

Conclusions

AI's first steps on the way to eradication of FGM have been modest but encouraging. Working against FGM is a major challenge for AI. It requires a creative and thoughtful approach to a multifaceted human rights problem which is rooted in cultural traditions and systemic discrimination against women and girls. It demands a rethinking of AI's traditional techniques and a reorientation of its lobbying and awareness-raising efforts towards key sectors of society in addition to its focus on governments. It requires AI to work alongside its partners in the human rights movement to devise joint or complementary strategies.

The steps taken so far by AI's membership in Africa and elsewhere suggest that AI has a valuable role to play in helping to protect millions of women and girls from the risk of mutilation.