

## Commemoration of International Zero Tolerance Day in the Gambia

The theme for this year's commemoration is, "Building a solid and interactive bridge between Africa and the world to accelerate ending FGM by 2030."

**GAMCOTRAP**



**Protect the girl child**

**# End FGM**

Since 2003, GAMCOTRAP has been observing "Zero tolerance to FGM Day" with communities at grassroots level thus bringing the information to their door steps. After 31 years of advocacy on the eradication of FGM, the practice was banned on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2015 with the above mentioned statement included.

In 2012, the UN General Assembly designated 6 February as the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation. This day is observed to enhance awareness of the issue and to encourage concrete actions against the practice. "Sustainable development demands full human rights for all women and girls. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promises an end to this practice by 2030."

This day is aimed at drawing the attention of international and national communities of efforts needed to accelerate action towards the elimination of FGM. The action by the State was welcomed but where laws have been enacted, there should be political will to implement them effectively. Thus, enhancing cooperation and synergy of action among all key actors, including civil society organisations, this is crucial to boost the efficacy of political and legislative measures aimed at achieving zero tolerance to FGM. This is exactly what the new Gambia is; under the leadership of His Excellence President Adama Barrow is doing.

Furthermore, on 20 December 2012, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution banning female genital mutilation worldwide (A/Res/67/146), which was renewed in December 2014 (A/Res/69/150). This historic step demonstrated the political will at the highest level to bring an end to this human rights violation. Article 4 of the resolution "*Urges States to condemn all harmful practices that affect women and girls, in particular female genital mutilations, whether committed within or outside a medical institution, and to take all necessary measures, including enacting and enforcing legislation, to prohibit female genital mutilations and to protect women and girls from this form of violence, and to end impunity*". Thus, a clear and effective legal framework banning FGM is a cornerstone in the fight against this human rights violation, and essential to its success. GAMCOTRAP, the leading organization on the advocacy to end FGM is appreciating all the efforts made by organizations of different orientation to end FGM in the Gambia. GAMCOTRAP calls on all too engage at all levels to ensure that FGM comes to an end in the Gambia by 2020.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) comprises all procedures that involve altering or injuring the female genitalia for non-medical reasons and is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women.

It reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women and girls. The practice also violates their rights to health, security and physical integrity, their right to be free from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and their right to life when the procedure results in death.

To promote the abandonment of FGM, coordinated and systematic efforts are needed, and they must engage whole communities and focus on human rights and gender equality. These efforts should emphasize societal dialogue and the empowerment of communities to act collectively to end the practice. They must also address the sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls who suffer from its consequences.

It irreparably damages girl's bodies, inflicting excruciating pain. It cause extreme emotional trauma that can last a life time. It increases the risk of deadly complications during pregnancy, labor and childbirth, endangering both mother and child.

It reflects the low status of girls and women and reinforces gender inequality, fueling intergenerational cycles of discrimination and harm. It is female genital mutilation and despite all the progress we have made toward abolishing this violent practice., millions of girls-many of them under the age of 15-will be forced to undergo it this year alone. Sadly, they will join the almost 200 million girls and women around the world who are already affected by its impact.

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals recognized the close connection between FGM, gender inequality, and development-and reignited global action to end FGM by 2030.

It means creating greater access to support services for those at risk of undergoing FGM and those who have survived it. It also means driving greater demand for those services, providing families and communities with information about harm FGM causes-and the benefits to be gained by ending it.

And ultimately, it means families and communities taking action themselves and refusing to permit their girls to endure the violation of FGM. Let us make this the generation that abolishes FGM once and for all-and in doing so, hope create a healthier, better world for all.

As reaffirmed in the Resolutions, States should take all necessary measures, for not only enacting law on FGM but to ensure that such laws are enforced to prohibit female genital mutilations and to protect women and girls from this form of violence.

FGM is a public health concern and can cause both short and long-term health complications, physical and psychological, not only for the women and girls affected, but also their families and friends. With global migration, FGM is no longer confined to certain countries and communities and it is therefore important that teachers, health and social care professionals and other key service providers are ready to offer support.

At the home front, GAMCOTRAP the leading women's rights organization has been engaged in a social mobilization campaign to create awareness about the effects of FGM on the sexual and reproductive health rights of women and children. Social mobilization activities have been an 'uphill task' and GAMCOTRAP took the lead in campaigning against the practice since 1984 when it was

established. As the organization has gained grounds, and in collaboration with grass root communities the organization led the first “Dropping of the Knife” celebration in 2007 at the Bakau Independence stadium where the first group of 18 circumcisers and 63 communities were celebrated. This was at the time that we were not sure if we would witness the banning of FGM in The Gambia during our lifetime. Nevertheless we mustered courage and patience to continue the advocacy despite the challenges we faced across the country. As GAMCOTRAP continued its advocacy with districts chiefs, women leaders and village heads taking the lead, between 2007 and 2015 the organization organized five ‘Dropping of the Knife’ ceremonies celebrating 158 circumcisers who have given up the practice voluntarily and who were supported by their communities in the rural areas.

This is also an explicit and strong signal of support to all activists working from the grass-roots to the policy level and advocating for effective implementation of the law to unequivocally ban FGM in the Gambia. Enacting and enforcing such legislation is critical to legitimize local advocacy and educational efforts, to strengthen those who seek to defy the social pressures of tradition and reject FGM, to protect its victims and to end impunity. Therefore, we hope that the above commitment made by the state will be an incentive to ensure the full compliance of its implementation.

While a lot of gains have been registered there is still more to be done as the fight against the practices that violate human rights especially the human rights of women and girls is a fight that is full of challenges. In addition to the human rights abuse, the human costs related to FGM cannot be measured and are paid by young female children and women sometimes with their lives.

Furthermore, the cost of injuries to the genitalia, the infection and the lifelong health problems such as keloid contribute to making childbirth more hazardous. With more women seeking help from the hospitals, the cost of health care services are growing.

As The Gambia continues to celebrate Zero Tolerance Day, and in the wake of the new law banning FGM, let us strengthen awareness-raising, advocacy activities, and spread information on the content of the law. Wide knowledge about this new law and its implications among the general population is essential to ensure its effective application.

Finally, we must all endeavour non compliance to all forms of FGM not even a prick on the genitalia; we must reject medicalisation of the practice out right and be vigilant to observe and prevent cross border or underground practices. The beautiful rose that begets thee must be protected.

**GAMCOTRAP**