

Strengthening the competence of religious leaders in promoting the abandonment of female genital mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM) in Mauritania

Female genital mutilation, whether the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia, is still commonly practiced in Mauritania. Three quarters of women aged 15 to 49 years are circumcised. In the south and south east of the country FGM is most commonly performed on girls aged less than 5 years. Older women often execute the procedure by using scissors, razor blades or broken glass. FGM is part of harmful traditional practices that violate the rights of children and women and entail serious consequences for their physical and mental health.

GIZ and the promotion of abandonment of FGM in Mauritania

Since 1999 the supra-regional project “Ending Female Genital Mutilation” of GIZ has been active in several African countries. In Mauritania it has worked with the “Good Governance Program”, also of GIZ, which since 2005 has been supporting the Mauritanian government and civil society to promote women’s rights. The supra-regional project supported the Good Governance Program and its partners at national level and in two regions of Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimakha where FGM is still widely practiced.

Why engage religious leaders in promoting the abandonment of FGM?

Mauritania is an Islamic republic. Islam plays a very important role in the daily lives of Mauritanian families. Imams and Ulama (Islamic scholars) are recognized as religious and social authorities, both in villages and in urban areas. Many Mauritanians, including religious leaders, are erroneously convinced that FGM is a religious obligation. As religion helps define social norms and establish customs that are maintained across generations, it is essential to convince religious leaders to sensitize their communities about FGM and ask them to abandon this harmful traditional practice.

Strengthening the competence of religious leaders step by step

Since 2005 GIZ has included religious leaders in campaigns on political participation and the civil rights of women. Initially, even some reformist Ulama were reluctant to address the issue of FGM in public.





Imams are sensitized about FGM and the position of Islam which does not justify it

“I cooperated with GIZ in the campaign on the civil rights of women. But when the GIZ advisor asked me to address the issue of FGM, I refused. I did not wish to hear about it. I thought that FGM was a problem for Westerners, but not for us. She asked me to think about the question. I returned home and I asked my wife what she thought. She told me that one of my daughters had nearly died after being circumcised. I studied the issue and focused on religious texts. Islam is not hostile to change. I listened to and analyzed the arguments of other experts. I revised my point of view. I agreed to hold a conference on harmful customs for women. It is difficult for a man to speak publicly about female cutting. It is a taboo that I could only gradually overcome.”

Cheikh Ould Zein, Secretary General of the Forum of Islamic Thought and Dialogue of Cultures (FPIDC)

In 2007 the FPIDC, supported by GIZ, organized the first national conference on harmful practices for women, the role of tradition, and the position of Islam. With the participation of Imams and Ulama from the capital and several regions of Mauritania, this conference aimed to encourage participants to reflect on female circumcision, on its religious and social foundations, and on its negative consequences on health. It helped to start a debate among religious leaders on the legitimacy of existing religious customs.

In 2008 and 2009, GIZ supported further FGM trainings for Imams and Ulama in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimakha. These trainings were conducted by FPIDC in cooperation with regional religious leaders. At the same time, GIZ included Imams and Ulama from these two regions in advocacy activities on the rights of women and harmful practices.

In 2010 the FPIDC, supported by GIZ, brought together religious leaders from different parts of the country in a national conference to develop and adopt a fatwa against FGM. Signed by 33 scholars, the fatwa stated that the current custom of female cutting was prohibited due to the serious harm it causes. In order to popularize and disseminate this fatwa, GIZ – in cooperation with regional religious leaders – organized several awareness workshops in Guidimakha and Hodh El Gharbi. On the initiative of FPIDC, an international conference to validate the fatwa also took place in Mauritania in 2011, with the participation of Ulama from Egypt, Sudan, and several West African countries. It was supported by UNICEF, UNFPA, and GIZ. Subsequently the FPIDC organized several interregional symposia in Mauritania to increase knowledge about and adherence to the fatwa.

The fatwa was the first tool that religious leaders could use to educate both their colleagues and the public. However, it turned out that it was not enough to give Imams the necessary arguments to convince their audience. For that reason, GIZ not only gave support to regional religious leaders but also to the FPIDC for developing appropriate tools. In 2011 a model sermon was developed by regional religious leaders from Guidimakha and Hodh El-Gharbi. This sermon was preached by Imams at Friday prayers in the capital cities of 44 of the 45 municipalities in these two regions.

At the national level FPIDC prepared a “compendium of sources on female genital cutting” which resembled the reference texts of Islamic law as well as the most important contemporary fatwas issued by clerics in Mauritania and other Muslim countries. On the basis of this rationale, a sermon guide and a model sermon were developed by Ulama from Mauritania and other West African countries in a workshop organized by GIZ in Dakar in 2012.

Excerpts from this model sermon:

We have heard the arguments of Islamic jurisprudence, the point of view of Fuqaha from both past and present.

Muslim and non-Muslim doctors all agreed upon the present and future dangers of FGM on girls' lives, as it causes serious damage to the body and psyche.

This is a tradition with well-known negative and harmful consequences. It should be abandoned forever.

Success and success factors

In Mauritania the dialogue with and between religious leaders on harmful traditional practices added a new dimension to the promotion of abandonment of FGM. On the one hand, it has helped religious leaders and men to overcome the taboo of talking about female circumcision in public. On the other hand, it has opened a debate among Ulama and Imams on religious legitimization of FGM.

The commitment of Imams and Ulama is always based upon their individual convictions.

“To abandon FGM was inconceivable to us because we thought it was a religious obligation. After several workshops, seminars, and research by Ulama scholars and physicians we started to change our perception of the custom and accepted that it was subject to debate. We were cautious. We really wanted to know if female circumcision was a religious obligation. It was then confirmed that FGM was harmful to women, since it entailed very negative consequences on health, and that it was not at all obligatory in Islam. Finally there's been a fatwa by distinguished scholars in whom we have full confidence. Thereupon we are committed to disseminate it among the people.”

Imams and Ulama scholars from various regions of Mauritania

The fatwa, the compendium, the sermon guide, and the model sermon are important tools for the Ulama scholars to persuade the religious community to abandon FGM.

“A large part of the population links the custom of FGM to religion. The fatwa was very important to educate imams. They have a lot of influence here. In the Friday prayers women take part behind a curtain. I know an Imam from a village in our region who spoke in his sermons about circumcision. He said that problems during childbirth are linked to female cutting.”

Person of rank from the Guidimakha region

At national level, the FPIDC played a catalytic role. A group of religious leaders that has been trained by them now acts as a driving force for change. For these religious leaders it was crucial to link the religious argument to the medical discourse which proved the harmful effects of FGM on the health of girls and women. Cooperation with health professionals (physicians and midwives) in Mauritania who are also committed to criticizing the custom of FGM has facilitated their task. The approach developed by the FPIDC, with the support of GIZ, is now being replicated by partners such as UNICEF and applied to other harmful practices such as early marriage.

In Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimakha it was very important for both GIZ and FPIDC to cooperate with religious leaders who are credible and recognized by the local population.

“When people are convinced that you are credible and competent, they will listen to you. Each community has its own reference points. We must convince those people who act as sources of reference. If unknown Ulama arrive, nobody will believe them.”

Sheikh of a traditional religious school in the Hodh El-Gharbi region



Regional workshop of religious leaders elaborating appropriate tools for attitude change:

Left: group work on a sermon guide

Right: Cheikh Ould Zein of FPIDC (in the middle)



Mauritanian women benefit from the commitment of religious leaders against FGM

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Challenges

Islam in Mauritania embraces several trends. Apart from the reformist trend represented by the FPIDC there exists a large conservative trend, which is not always open to an interpretation of Islamic law adapted to the realities of Mauritanian society. As a result, some influential scholars have not yet adopted the fatwa. However, none of these religious leaders has ever spoken out publicly against the fatwa.

Like other countries, Mauritania is now facing a fundamentalist trend which on the one side rejects a tolerant vision of Islam and on the other side questions the credibility of the traditional Ulama scholars among the population. In this context, there is always a risk of politicizing a debate on harmful traditional practices and on FGM.

However, the biggest challenge is that both the sensitization of Imams and the propagation of the fatwa have not yet reached many remote rural villages, where a majority of Imams remain convinced that FGM is a religious obligation.

“There are still many villages and Imams that have not been sensitized yet. They maintain their ancient traditions.”

Ulama from the Hodh El-Gharbi region

“In the villages, many Imams do not have the intellectual ability to analyze the custom of FGM. And nobody of them talks about it.”

Ulama from the Assaba region

Summary

In a society where Islam legitimates practices such as FGM, it is important to strengthen the capacity of religious leaders so that they can commit themselves to promoting the abandonment of FGM. Along with other actors from civil society they can play an important role in awareness raising and advocacy. To this end, they need to be supported in developing tools that are adapted to their context. It is essential to give them the necessary time to conduct an open debate on the custom of FGM and to question their own beliefs. The experience shows that in Mauritania gradual social change in an Islamic context is possible.

The commitment of a growing number of Ulama and Imams is not a magic wand that will encourage the population to abandon the custom overnight. Nonetheless in synergy with other approaches, such as awareness raising in the health or education sector or the exchange of ideas within and between communities, it has notably contributed to induce behavior change in Mauritanian society.



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