



## **United in Support for Zero Tolerance to FGM/C**

by Melanne Verwee, Ambassador-at-Large, Global Women's Issues, February 6, 2012

On February 6, the U.S. government stands in solidarity with people around the world and here in the Netherlands who are observing the ninth annual International Zero Tolerance Day to eradicate Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C). FGM/C refers to a procedure involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia. It is estimated that 100 to 140 million women around the world have undergone this procedure and three million girls are at risk every year. The practice is often performed by untrained practitioners, employing no anesthesia and often using such instruments as broken glass, tin lids, scissors, or unsterilized razors. In addition to causing intense pain and psychological trauma, the procedure carries with it severe short and long-term health risks, including hemorrhaging, infection including increased risk of HIV transmission, birth complications, and even death.

FGM/C is a practice rooted in beliefs about the "dangers" of women's sexuality, and involves a rite of passage into adulthood that has extremely negative consequences on the health and overall mental well-being of women and girls around the world. It is a practice that hinders women's access to equality and violates the rights and dignity of women and girls. Some people still defend this practice as part of a cultural or religious tradition. But as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has reiterated, violence toward women and girls isn't cultural. It is criminal. As with slavery, what was once justified as sanctioned by God is now properly reviled as an unconscionable violation of human rights.

FGM/C is a practice that occurs across cultures and religions, although in fact no religion mandates the procedure. This practice is performed on girls in many countries in Africa as well as in Asia and the Middle East. In the United States, the procedure also takes place among some immigrant communities and we have worked with practitioners in the health and legal communities to sensitize them about the negative consequences of FGM/C.

Around the world, community-based approaches involving women and men, girls and boys, religious leaders, and all members of society are proving to be the only lasting solutions. In fact, community advocates have found that when men come to understand the physical and psychological trauma of FGM/C, they often become the most effective activists for eradication, including fathers who unequivocally refuse to allow their daughters to be subjected to the procedure. Communities must act collectively to abandon the practice, so that girls and their families who opt out do not become social outcasts. Communities working together to abandon FGM/C can ensure stronger, healthier futures for girls, young women, and their families.

The U.S. government is proud to support women and men around the world who denounce this egregious practice and seek to abolish it. It is exciting to see groups here in the Netherlands and around the world standing up together against FGM/C to overturn deeply entrenched social norms that are not only harmful to women and girls, but to our communities and societies.