



UN adopts the fight against FGM

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Amidst the complex processes that abound at the UN, in my final week I was heartened to witness the adoption of a draft resolution which I could directly relate to, and acknowledge the importance of, in terms of the work of IBVM on the ground. On 26th November 2012 the Third Committee adopted the first ever resolution on female genital mutilation (FGM), to “intensify global efforts for the elimination” of this customary practice. Presented by Burkino Faso on behalf of the African Group, this resolution is expected to be endorsed by the General Assembly soon. Although not legally binding, such UN resolutions carry considerable moral and political weight.

As many will know, Sr Ephigenia Gachiri ibvm of the Eastern African Province has been working intensely on this issue for many years in Kenya.

The decision to pass a UN resolution on FGM is indicative, I believe, of increased awareness of the extent to which this violent act seriously violates the rights of women and girls, and perhaps more importantly, of the intention of the

international global community to do something about this.

The 44 countries that introduced this resolution included the African Group, Albania, Canada, Ireland, Peru, Spain and Timor-Leste, places where many of us live and work.

Although the adoption of the UN resolution is not an end in itself, the Kenyan delegate observed that it provides an important global framework for dealing with this heinous practice, as well as giving victims a voice.

Amnesty International reports that FGM is commonplace in 28 countries in Africa, as well as Yemen, Iraq, Malaysia, Indonesia and in certain ethnic groups in South America. But it is also an issue of worldwide concern because women and girls in diaspora communities are also at risk.



As further articulated by the Kenyan delegate at the UN, while the resolution rightly recognises that FGM has a human rights dimension, there are also many other dimensions including social, cultural, economic and deep-seated personal dimensions. Therefore while policies and laws can be put in place, such as the FGM

Act in Kenya, which has made it illegal to practice or procure FGM, the real challenge is to change the mindsets and cultural attitudes of opinion shapers, including elders, men and boys, and the women within the community who advocate this practice.

In many ways this is where the work of Sr Ephigenia comes to the fore. For many years she has been creating awareness and conducting workshops, gradually changing the attitudes of influential members of communities where FGM is practised and working tirelessly to safeguard the rights of the girls and young women within these communities.



It may be argued by some that the practice of FGM is part of a traditional rite of passage, believed to bring about a profound change in the girl, thus defining in a decisive way the transition into adulthood. In her work, Sr Ephigenia does not underplay the importance of tradition but offers alternative rites of passage which include the good cultural values in the more traditional rite without violating the girl child in any way. This, together with her ongoing community education, is certainly changing the views of many

traditional leaders within Kenya and is a model which can be replicated elsewhere.

While the adoption of the resolution cannot be attributed directly to Ephigenia's work (although she addressed the UN directly on this topic a few years ago and has contributed to interventions made by our IBVM UN representatives), it certainly bears testimony to all that she has been doing and hopefully will ensure greater support for her work into the future.

As acknowledged by an EU delegate, the adoption of the FGM resolution is an historic step and an significant day for women and girls; furthermore it is an important tool to give momentum to initiatives already in place.

Sr Ephigenia was recently awarded an Honorary Doctorate from DePaul University, Chicago. "Through her work, Sr Gachiri has changed perceptions and secured women's rights, often in the face of great hostility," said Marisa Alicea, Dean of DePaul's School for New Learning. "Her efforts to educate both men and women about the need for cultural change are transforming Kenya into a more just society."

6 February is

[International Day of Zero Tolerance of Female Genital Mutilation](#)

http://www.figo.org/fgm_day

www.endfgm.eu

<http://www.prb.org/Articles/2012/fgm-zero-tolerance-2012.aspx>