

Viewpoints
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Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation

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On December 20, 2012, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Resolution “Intensifying global efforts for the elimination of female genital mutilations.” The passage of the resolution is the culmination of a decade of work by activist women around the world with the support of a number of African and Arab NGOs, civil society, and governments. This resolution is a very important step in the history of the women’s movement in the MENA region, especially at a time when women’s role and rights are being marginalized in a number of Arab countries. In Egypt, Moushira Khattab was the principle architect of laws criminalizing the practice of female genital mutilation.

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The adoption by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) of the Resolution “Intensifying global efforts for the elimination of female genital mutilations” marks a historic day in the global fight against violence and discrimination against women and girls. With this resolution, UN Member States reiterate their commitment to protect and promote human rights initiated and enshrined in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Over 140 million women are victims of these heinous crimes, and many more men and children are affected by them. Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) reflects the compromised status of women in society. It is one of the traditional practices that seriously violate the rights of females in addition to depriving them of their physical and mental integrity, as well as their right to freedom from violence and discrimination. December 20, 2012 hails a victory for many women and men who worked diligently to free females of this crime.

The Italian government has strongly supported the national efforts of African and Arab countries afflicted by the practice of FGM. The Egyptian-Italian partnership has been exemplary in empowering women to enjoy their right to be heard. This historic achievement would not have been possible without the sincere and courageous efforts of Senator Emma Bonino, Vice President of the Italian Senate and founder of No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ). Emma has been inspirational and has lent this cause her unwavering support. I was one of the people working with Emma Bonino. For us as a team, this resolution represents the crowning achievement of over more than a decade of hard work. With this resolution, the onus falls on Member States. Instating laws against FGM, coupled with grassroots education on the hazards and myths surrounding FGM, is the way forward to eradicate this crime. The adoption of this resolution is a huge milestone along this path.

International networking has been crucial to the success of these efforts. Over the past years, the members of the BanFGM Coalition¹ have launched several initiatives to raise international awareness about the need for a UNGA resolution, gathering the support of crucial stakeholders throughout Africa, Europe, and the world at large. The campaign has worked toward the recognition that FGM is a violation of human rights and that States must enact and enforce laws that prohibit and criminalize it. The move started at the African level where the problem originated. Through a bold decision by the African Union Assembly in July 2011, the Heads of

¹ [Ban FGM Coalition](#), is composed of No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ), the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC), Euronet-FGM, and the NGOs La Palabre, Manifesto 99 and Equality Now.

State and Governments of the African Union voiced their support of a resolution by UNGA. This set the stage for the African Group at the UN to introduce a decision by the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in its session of March 2012, recommending that the issue of FGM be formally considered by the UNGA under the agenda item “Advancement of Women.” In July 2012, the UN Economic and Social Council adopted the CSW recommendation and requested that FGM be added to the agenda of the 67th General Assembly (GA). The UNGA referred the matter to its Third Committee in charge of Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs. The Committee approved the draft resolution on November 26, 2012 and submitted it to the GA for consideration. Finally, on December 20, 2012, the UNGA adopted the resolution that calls upon States to ban FGM. This progress has been supported by the International Appeal for a worldwide ban on FGM.

It is crucial to note that this momentous achievement would not have been possible on a global scale without the groundbreaking progress achieved at various national levels. The African continent has witnessed a paradigm shift in combatting FGM. Countries were active in criminalizing the practice, while others focused on education and raising awareness. Deriving alternative sources of income for the perpetrators helped reduce FGM in some countries. Religious and traditional leaders were mobilized into abandoning the practice. There have been successes and relapses. Extensive networking and the sharing of accomplishments expedited success. International and European NGOs such as NPWJ, as well as partners in development such as the Italian Cooperation for Development, worked hand in hand with the African countries and with the African immigrants in Europe who did not leave this shameful practice back home. The African Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices and other African NGOs put their hands together to support local communities abandon the practice. Combined efforts by activists, civil society, religious leaders, public health workers, the media, parliamentarians, and governments have been at the forefront of the battle to prevent, prohibit, and criminalize FGM.

Egypt has played a key role in forging the battle cooperating with its African sister countries. In June 2003, the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM), in cooperation with NPWJ, hosted the African expert group on legal tools and banning FGM. It was the first conference that gathered all stakeholders under the banner of FGM. Together, they were empowered to break the taboo and speak openly. At the end of 2008, they met again in Cairo to assess the progress achieved. In five years, laws were passed, victims found their voices, and perpetrators were healed. With them, Egypt celebrated enacting and enforcing law 126/2008 criminalizing FGM. In 2010, they met again in Cairo to declare the beginning of the end of FGM. Through combined efforts of civil society and the government, led by NCCM, Egypt remarkably succeeded in changing what was a socially accepted practice into a crime punishable by law – a success made possible by the role of NCCM as a catalyst for the grassroots movement. They declared their categorical refusal and determination to uproot this harmful practice. It took a great deal of courage to break the walls of silence surrounding the

taboo. Despite this huge success and euphoria, however, the progress is still young and vulnerable. The current political situation in Egypt and other Afro-Arab countries has compromised gains achieved towards equal rights for women. Conservative groups and fundamentalists in power have re-shuffled the national agenda regarding human rights issues. Egypt is not alone.

The UNGA resolution ushers in a new phase of the struggle to eradicate the practice of FGM, and the onus falls on Member States to continue and further this struggle. The road is still long and will not be without obstacles. Instating laws against FGM, coupled with grassroots education on the hazards and myths surrounding FGM, is the way forward to eradicate this crime. BanFGM input is still needed to assist African countries, help them sustain their achievements, and build upon them. Many European countries have a similar problem with their immigrant communities. They are under legal obligation to protect their citizens from a savage crime perpetrated in cold blood against innocent girls. The adoption of this resolution is a huge milestone along this path and one that adds a heightened degree of international recognition to the cause. Together we will make it.



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

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