



HIVOS AND WADI CALL FOR ACTION ON FGM/C IN THE MIDDLE EAST / WEST ASIA

Violence against women is widespread in the Middle East. Not only does it constitute a human rights violation, but it also hampers the development of the whole region. Violence against women has considerable negative effects on education, productivity and well-being of all people. Among the grave forms of gender-based violence (e.g. domestic violence, child and forced marriage and honour killings), FGM/C is most neglected issue. FGM is recognized internationally as a grave human rights violation, and was mainly regarded as an “African problem”, but growing evidence indicates that it is also a common problem in some communities in the Middle East and a number of Asian states like Indonesia and Malaysia.

Only a short decade ago, it was “unimaginable” that FGM/C might be widespread in some communities in the Middle East.

The first Arab nations where existence of FGM/C has been officially recognized were countries which also belong to the African continent like Sudan and Egypt. Now, its existence is recognized also in Yemen, Iraqi-Kurdistan and just recently in Iraq. Even the MOH of Oman recognized in 2000 that this practice exists throughout the country.

As the practice of FGM/C in the Middle East was neglected for such a long time, the lack of data, research and statistics is severe. It is a very sensitive issue, which touches the core of cultural, religious and traditional aspects of societies and communities across the Middle East. For a long time, the topic was a taboo, and it was unacceptable to speak about it. Slowly, it seems this veil of silence is being lifted, and the issue is being openly discussed by a number of religious leaders in the region. This open discussion is a positive development, and it helped bringing about further positive signs for example, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Ali Gomaa, issued a fatwa against FGM in 2006. In Egypt and northern Iraq there are now laws banning FGM/C; in Yemen there are also legal restrictions, though their effect remains questionable.

There are no laws criminalizing the practice in the rest of the Middle East. Egypt, Yemen and Iraqi- Kurdistan are the exception. Furthermore, while legislation is an important aspect of the struggle against FGM and gender based violence, gender equality is not simply a matter of laws and policies. In the end, the commitment to ban such practices has to grow from within communities themselves. Thus, collecting existing material about FGM/C in the Middle East, for the purpose of systematic and reliable documentation, and identifying the regional and local initiatives dealing with this in a regional context is a first essential step to break the silence that still surrounds the practice, and from there to start addressing it effectively.



FOCUSED COUNTRIES:

Hivos aims to have a program in the region covering Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Yemen and Oman. The recent work of WADI – Association for Development Cooperation in Iraqi-Kurdistan and Iraq, which has already made noteworthy progress in the struggle against FGM/C, provides solid experience on fighting FGM/C. Hivos wants also to include Indonesia in the program, a country which has been recently on the spot light after the UN called them to stop allowing doctors, nurses and health workers to carry on FGM/C and the Medicalization of the practice; an approach which undermines the global effort to stop FGM/C. Hivos aims to learn from the struggle against FGM/C in Africa, and work in cooperation with those who have seen success there.

APPROACH:

Hivos recognizes that Gender-based violence (including domestic violence, FGM/C, force and early marriage and honor killings) is at the core of the marginalization and oppression of women in the Middle East and North Africa region/ The MENA, which has long been recognized as a major obstacle to human development in the region. To address FGM, we are committed to a holistic, rights based approach that regards the work against FGM as an element of general human, social and economic development in the Middle East. Our interventions are built on our understanding that FGM is a cultural and social practice. They aim to facilitate community empowerment and create ownership by the targeted community to end FGM.

OPPORTUNITY

The Middle East and North Africa have seen waves of political activism over the past two years since the Arab Spring. It is an opportune moment to support those activists across the region that attempt to raise question publicly in their countries. A recent high profile international conference about women's rights asked for its plenary session "The Arab Spring: Window of opportunity or disaster for women? When it comes to the struggle against FGM it is no doubt a window of opportunity: an opportunity to speak up and break a taboo that enabled FGM to be practiced behind a wall of silence. The problem of FGM/C in the Middle East is starting to be recognized at the national and international levels. At the year's event to mark the Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Cutting, hosted by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the Middle Eastern context was included as a part of the global agenda.

The issue is started to be openly discussed in a number of countries in the region including among religious leaders and politicians.



HIVOS AND WADI ADDRESSING THE FGM/C:

Hivos supports initiatives in the Middle East to combat FGM in Iraq and Iran since 2004 and has a history of addressing the practice in Africa and Indonesia. WADI started to work on the issue of FGM/C in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2004 and is present in the region since 1993. Due to the work of Hivos and WADI on FGM in the Middle East and its public recognition in the region, a number of organizations and individuals with information about the practice contacted us, from different countries in the region. As a consequence, both Hivos and WADI feel the need to build local and regional cooperation and capacity for local actors combating it. Following initial data collection in 2010 and 2011, a regional workshop to exchange knowledge and information was held in January 2012 in Beirut, Lebanon. It became clear in the meeting that there is an urgent need across the region for credible data and statistics, as well as new approaches and tools. Hivos and WADI started a desk study to collect scattered documentation and research and information on several initiatives taking place in the region. In summer 2012 both organizations started the StopFGM Mideast campaign, see

www.stopfgmmideast.org

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TO FOLLOW THE DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAQI-KURDISTAN SEE ARTICLES AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON:

Wadi two research's about the prevalence of FGM in Iraqi-Kurdistan (http://stopfgmkurdistan.org/html/english/fgm_study.htm) and Kirkuk-Governorate (http://stopfgmkurdistan.org/html/english/fgm_study2.htm) in Northern Iraq. In 2010 Human Rights Watch presented a publication. (<http://www.hrw.org/de/reports/2010/06/16/they-took-me-and-told-me-nothing-0>)

With assistance of various organizations and donors including; the Swiss Caritas, the US-State Department and Hivos, Wadi is operating several Mobile Teams in the region who do awareness campaigns in villages and rural areas (http://en.wadi-online.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=71&Itemid=19)

In 2005 WADI produced a first Film called "A Handful of Ash" together with the Kurdish filmmaker Nabaz Ahmed (<http://stopfgmkurdistan.org/html/english/resources.htm>). Now a second film is under production, which will be aired by BBC World and BBC Arabic in winter 2013.

In 2011 WADI started a successful Free FGM Village campaign, now seven villages in Northern Iraq are FGM Free. (See: <http://www.unspecial.org/2013/02/the-long-road-to-the-first-%C2%AB-fgm-free-villages-%C2%BB-in-iraq/> and <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/17/us-iraq-mutilation-idUSBRE89G10920121017>)

As a result of Stop FGM Kurdistan campaign the Iraqi-Kurdish parliament included a ban of FGM in their new law dealing with domestic violence. (<http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/07/25/iraqi-kurdistan-law-banning-fgm-positive-step>) Since then WADI with the support of HIVOS and the German Foreign Ministry conducts several activities to help implementing this law.

Since 2012 WADI and HIVOS are trying to extend this work to central and southern Iraq as well as other Middle Eastern countries. The fight against FGM in Iraqi-Kurdistan got a lot of international as well as regional media attention and coverage and helped to raise this issue. (See: <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3137/campaign-against-fgm>, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/fighting-against-female-genital-mutilation-in-iraq-8640121.html>)

The launch of our campaign: <http://www.hivos.org/news/hivos-and-partner-wadi-launch-website-against-fgm-middle-east>

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