



**Female genital mutilation in Mauritania: Strengthening the
competence of religious leaders to bring the practice to an end**

Summary of experiences

**GIZ report on the supra-regional project
“Ending female genital mutilation”**

Abbreviations

FGM	Female genital mutilation
FPIDC	Forum of Islamic Thought and Dialogue of Cultures
GGP	Good Governance Programme
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus / Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
MAIEO	Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Original Education
MASEF	Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood and Family
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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1. Introduction

GIZ's supra-regional project "Ending Female Genital Mutilation" has been running in several African countries since 1999, and will phase out in 2014. The project's objective is to build the capacity of officials and civil society so that they can advocate for the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) to be brought to an end. A key feature of the project is the development and dissemination of successful approaches adopted by stakeholders in the German development co-operation and in regional and international networks.

The GIZ "Good Governance Programme" (GGP) has supported the Mauritanian government and civil society since 2005 in its efforts to promote women's rights and gender mainstreaming. This supra-regional project operates under the gender component of GGP and uses its structures to promote the abandonment of FGM in Mauritania. It has supported the GGP and its partners at national level and in the two regions Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka, where circumcision is still widely practised. Islam and its representatives play a key role in Mauritanian society and consequently in any development perspective. Thus, one of the project's main methods has been co-operation with religious leaders and strengthening their ability to campaign to bring FGM to an end.

This paper summarises the best practices adopted in promoting action against FGM, and documents the development of a successful partnership with religious leaders, who constitute an essential component of Mauritanian civil society: What are the key factors to be taken into account in this dialogue and co-operation? What are the challenges to consider? How was the capacity of these actors strengthened, so that they could initiate and support a positive dynamic for change in their society by themselves?

This document outlines the processes that led religious leaders to promote the abandonment of harmful practices against women and children and thereby contribute to the development of their society: What role did they play? How did they get involved? What reservations did they overcome? What tools have helped? What skills have they acquired?

This report is mainly based on a fact-finding mission led by a national and an international consultant in January 2013, which aimed to:

- Facilitate a common understanding of the experiences of the project
- Document the process and the main stages of the project
- Analyse the challenges and the successes
- Reflect on the acquired skills and attitude changes
- Identify and disseminate the lessons learned.

A workshop was held with 19 participants, mostly religious leaders from the capital city Nouakchott and the regions Hodh El Gharbi, Guidimaka, Assaba, Gorgol and Trarza. Regional group discussions and individual interviews also took place. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of GIZ, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood and Family (Ministère des Affaires Sociales, de l'Enfance et de la Famille, MASEF), the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Original Education (Ministère des Affaires Islamiques et de l'Enseignement Originel, MAIEO), civil society organisations, and other technical and financial partners (UNICEF, UNFPA, LWF). The consultants also analysed the documents produced to promote the abandonment of FGM in Mauritania, and shared their overall findings in a further workshop at the end of their mission.

2. Background

Islam in Mauritania

Mauritania is an Islamic Republic and according to its constitution, Islam is the state religion. All social and legal reforms must be legitimised by Islam, which means they must obtain the support of religious leaders and Islamic institutions. Religious leaders are recognised as religious and social authorities in their communities. Islam plays a very important role in the daily lives of Mauritania, the majority of whom are Maliki Sunni Muslims. However, Islam, as it is practised in Mauritania, is also influenced by social hierarchies, ethnic group and local customs and traditions.

The term “religious leader” includes the following actors:

- The ulemas, scholars in theology and Islamic law, who can interpret the Koran and the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet) due to their training.
- The sheikhs who run traditional religious schools (madrasas). There are thousands of madrasas in Mauritania, from small Koranic schools in villages to large schools of theology and Islamic law.
- The sheikhs of Sufi brotherhoods that guide their followers in their spiritual journey. In Mauritania there are many Sufi brotherhoods, the most important being the “Qadiriya” and the “Tijaniyya”.
- The imams, who preach the Friday prayer. Many district and village imams play an important social role, even though they may not have received theological training. In some parts of Mauritania the title is inherited.

“Our community listens to the arguments of the imam. But the social hierarchy is also very important. To become imam one must often belong to a certain family.”

Group discussion / Guidimaka

“The imam is a social authority. He meets all members of society, whether at home, at the mosque, the market or any other occasion. Everyone refers to the imams.”

Group discussion / Central regions of Mauritania

There is no religious authority recognised by all Muslims in Mauritania, but several different authorities exist. Key development issues such as the rights of women and children, protection of the environment, and the fight against poverty are still subject to debate among religious actors.

Briefly, the following trends in Mauritanian Islam can be identified within the debate on development and social progress:

- A reformist movement for whom Islam is a modernising force, and which argues that religious texts and Islamic law should be adapted to contemporary realities.
- A conservative movement that perceives itself as a guardian of traditions and is not generally willing to question certain practices or beliefs rooted for generations in Mauritanian society.
- A fundamentalist movement inspired by the Wahhabi rite practised in Saudi Arabia which has expanded in Mauritania over the past two decades. This movement supports a large number of mosques and madrasas in the country. Although this movement is far from being hostile to all aspects of modernity, it often equates social reform projects with harmful Western colonial influences. Violent extremist movements such as “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM) in Algeria, have not yet taken root in Mauritania, where the government has tried to engage ulemas and imams in a campaign for tolerance and against terrorism.

GIZ has a long tradition of dialogue and partnership with religious leaders of the reformist movement in Mauritania. In some spheres, such as environmental protection or health, these religious leaders have participated in drafting new laws (for example the pastoral code adopted in 2000) or in HIV/AIDS campaigns. However, one challenge has always remained: How to convince the majority of conservative imams and scholars to engage in promoting reforms in their community and in society?

FGM in Mauritania

FGM, whether the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia, is still commonly practised in Mauritania. Three-quarters of women aged 15 to 49 years have been circumcised. In the south and south-east of the country, FGM is most commonly performed on girls under five. Older women often carry out the procedure using scissors, razor blades or broken glass. FGM is part of harmful traditional practices that violate the rights of girls and women and entail serious consequences for their physical and mental health.

Circumcision is a very old custom of pre-Islamic origin. The Koran does not contain any text referring to this practice. There are some hadiths mentioning that circumcision is a commendable act, but their authenticity is disputed. No religious text certifies the mandatory nature of the practice.

However, religion and social norm compliance are the most frequently raised arguments by Mauritanian women and men in order to justify the practice. Many Mauritians, including religious leaders, are convinced that circumcision is a religious obligation.

As religion helps define social norms and establish customs that are handed down from generation to generation, it is essential to convince religious leaders to educate their communities about FGM and to ask them to abandon this harmful traditional practice.



Mauritanian women benefit from the commitment of religious leaders against FGM

3. Process

In 2001 the Mauritanian government promulgated a Code of Personal Status, aimed at improving the status of women in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. A criminal law code of protection for children was subsequently adopted in 2005, prohibiting “*the act of harming or attempting to harm the genitalia of a female child by infibulation, desensitisation or by any other means [...] if it results in damage thereof*” (Article 12). In the same year a quota system was introduced in parliamentary elections, enabling Mauritanian women to occupy 30 % of seats in local authorities and 18 % in the National Assembly. These reforms have been accompanied by several campaigns, supported by GIZ and other technical and financial partners.

Since 2005 the GGP has included religious leaders in awareness campaigns on political participation and civil rights of women. The co-operation between these religious leaders and GIZ was already based on mutual respect. The dialogue on FGM has therefore complemented other activities promoted by the GGP gender component. At that time some ulemas had already spoken out publicly against female circumcision, but even within the reformist movement, many were still reluctant to address the issue publicly.

The Forum of Islamic Thought and Dialogue of Cultures (FPIDC) was established in 2005 by a small group of reformist ulemas, under the chairmanship of Sheikh Hamden Ould Tah, who has co-operated with GIZ in several areas for over 20 years. FPIDC’s objective is to open a debate on contemporary issues in Islam in Mauritania and to create dialogue between Islam and other religions and organisations. After a process of reflection and ongoing communication with GIZ, Sheikh Ould Zein agreed that FPIDC would campaign against FGM.

In 2007 FPIDC, supported by GIZ, organised the first national conference on harmful practises for women, the role of tradition, and the position of Islam. With the participation of many scholars and imams 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 for women’s health. It helped to start a debate among religious leaders on the religious legitimacy of the practice.

“I co-operated 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 want to hear about it. I thought that FGM was a problem raised by Westerners, but not one for us. She asked me to think about the question. I returned home, 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 analysed the arguments of other experts. I revised my point of view. I agreed to organise a conference on harmful customs for women. It is difficult for a man to speak publicly about female circumcision. 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

FPIDC subsequently became a catalyst for further dialogue between ulemas, sheikhs, madrasas and/or imams at both national and regional levels in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka. Many of the participants were not members of FPIDC, and/or were conservative, and had not previously addressed the issue of female circumcision. As a result they themselves first had to be convinced before they were able to sensitise their followers.

In 2008 and 2009 GIZ supported further training on FGM for imams and ulemas in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka. These training sessions were conducted by FPIDC in co-operation with regional religious leaders. At the same time, GIZ included imams and ulemas from these regions in advocacy activities on women's rights and harmful practices.

In 2010 FPIDC, supported by GIZ, brought together religious leaders from different parts of the country in a national conference to develop and adopt a fatwa on FGM. Signed by 33 ulemas, the fatwa stated that the current custom of female circumcision was prohibited due to the serious harm it causes. In order to popularise and disseminate this fatwa, GIZ – in co-operation with regional religious leaders – organised several awareness workshops in Guidimaka and Hodh El Gharbi. In five other regions with a high prevalence of FGM, UNICEF and UNFPA supported the dissemination of the fatwa.

On the initiative of FPIDC, an international conference to validate the fatwa also took place in Mauritania in 2011, with the participation of ulemas from Egypt, Sudan and several West African countries. It was supported by UNICEF, UNFPA and GIZ. Subsequently FPIDC organised several inter-regional symposia in Mauritania to increase knowledge about and adherence to the fatwa.

The fatwa was the first tool that religious leaders could use to sensitise both their colleagues and the public. However, it turned out that it was not enough to give imams the necessary arguments to convince their followers. For that reason, GIZ supported both regional religious leaders and FPIDC in developing other appropriate tools. In 2011 a model sermon was developed by regional religious leaders from Guidimaka and Hodh El Gharbi. This sermon was preached by imams at Friday prayers in the capital cities of 44 of the 45 municipalities of these two regions.

At national level FPIDC prepared a “compendium of sources on female circumcision”, which referred to Islamic law texts as well as the most important contemporary fatwas issued by clerics in Mauritania and other Muslim countries. Based on these, a further guide to preaching and a model sermon were developed by ulemas from Mauritania and other West African countries in a workshop organised by GIZ in Dakar in 2012.

In 2012, GIZ supported the production of a radio show in Mauritania on Islam and FGM in three national languages (Arabic, Polar, and Soninke). This programme covered topics such as the negative impact on health, psycho-social consequences, and the position of Islam in relation to the practice of FGM. The guests were a health expert, a sociologist and a religious leader. The programme was broadcast three times on national radio.

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



Table: Milestones of the process supported by GIZ

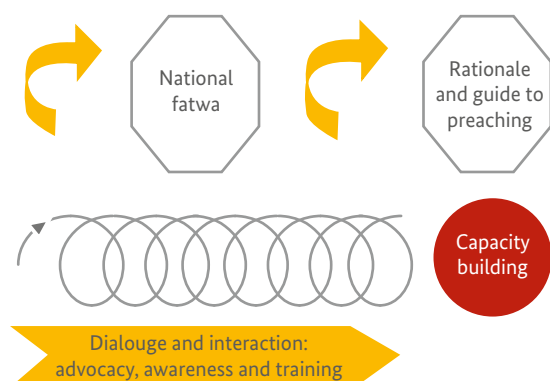
Period	National Level	Regional Level	International Level
2005 – 2007	In 2007 first National Symposium on harmful practices for women, the role of tradition, and the position of Islam, organised by FPIDC for 88 participants (imams and ulemas, lawyers, doctors and professors).	Campaigns on female candidacy and advocacy on women's civil rights . Symposia in Hodh El Gharbi, with the participation of 72 religious leaders, among others.	
2008 – 2009		Six training workshops for imams on harmful practices for women organised by FPIDC in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka (one workshop for each administrative region) with a total of 229 participants. The imams participated with other disseminators in awareness sessions on women's rights and harmful practices in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka.	
2010	Islamic Conference for a national fatwa on FGM organised by FPIDC with 38 participants, mostly important religious leaders. Development and adoption of a fatwa by 33 ulemas and imams.	Dissemination of the national fatwa: awareness workshops on the content of the fatwa in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka, with a total of 328 participants. Publication of the fatwa in public institutions in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka.	
2011		Workshops to develop a model sermon in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka with a total of 90 participants (one imam and one person of rank from each commune). Sermon preached at Friday prayers in the capitals of 44 of the 45 municipalities in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka.	International Conference to validate the fatwa with 34 ulemas from Mauritania and 18 ulemas from West Africa, Egypt, and Sudan, organised by FPIDC with the support of UNICEF, UNFPA, and GIZ.
2012	Development of a rationale by FPIDC (4 persons) in Mauritania and validation by 20 Mauritanian ulemas.	Two inter-regional symposia to increase knowledge about and adherence to the fatwa (one for the south-eastern regions and one for the central and southern regions), organised by FPIDC for 87 participants.	Regional workshop for West Africa with 18 participants, including 14 religious leaders, on the development of a guide to preaching with a model sermon based on the rationale developed in Mauritania.
	Production of a radio show on Islam and FGM in three national languages (Arabic, Polar and Soninke). Broadcast on national radio.		

4. Results

Tools and their function

The main tools produced during the process are the national fatwa, the rationale, and the guide to preaching.

Process and main tools



The **fatwa** announced by 33 Mauritanian religious leaders in 2010 was preceded by other fatwas and declarations by clerics in Egypt and West Africa. For example, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the leading figures of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, declared in 1994 that circumcision was a practice prohibited by sharia law. In 1996, the sheikh of al-Azhar University in Egypt issued a fatwa stating that circumcision was not mandatory in Islam.

A fatwa constitutes a legal opinion issued by one or more ulemas on a specific issue. By implication a fatwa on FGM in Mauritania is an important statement of consensus amongst the country's ulemas.

Extract from the Mauritanian fatwa 2010

The Islamic scholars (ulemas) took note of reports submitted by doctors and sociologists from the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. After a lengthy debate, the participants noted [...] that the way it is practised in our country causes grave harm in the short or long term. [...] Bearing in mind the aforesaid, the practice is prohibited in its customary form.

The fatwa itself is however not legally binding, even if it increases the legitimacy of religious laws and regulations. Consequently, in 2007 GIZ helped to draft a law which was explicitly designed to prohibit all forms of FGM, in accordance with the existing code of criminal child protection which prohibits circumcision unless there are specific medical reasons for carrying it out. The draft law was subsequently revised to broaden its scope to include other forms of violence against women, but so far this draft law has not yet been enacted.

Religious leaders have mixed opinions about a new criminal law prohibiting female circumcision.

"We are not for or against the law. It can be a tool but also a handicap. Will the law and the sanctions be applied? The law may reinforce the idea that this is a debate about a Western idea."

Cheikh Ould Zein, Secretary General of FPIDC

Generally most actors agree that education about FGM is more important and will have a greater impact on behaviour change than legislation and criminal sanctions. In this context they regard the fatwa as an educational tool.

For many religious leaders the fatwa constitutes a turning point in their personal convictions and commitment.

"Formerly I thought it was recommended by the Prophet. I saw that everyone practised circumcision. After I saw the fatwa, signed by respected imams, I understood. It gave me confidence."

Imam from Hodh El Gharbi

For some religious leaders, however, the fatwa was not enough, since they said it represented the point of view of only a small group of ulemas. They wanted further evidence and religious references.

“We were told. You issued the fatwa. But what would other ulemas say? We wanted to bring together all the religious teachings of Islam on this subject.”

Cheikh Ould Zein, one of the authors
of the Rationale

The **rationale** thus brings together the hadiths (teachings) of the Prophet mentioning circumcision, interpretations of Islamic law, and the main contemporary fatwas.

The majority of imams preaching in village mosques and Mauritanian communities needed a simple tool that could help them deliver sermons on the subject. The **guide to preaching** developed in 2012 offers a framework for the development of a sermon and serves as model sermon to inspire imams. Its purpose is to invite imams to take action and to advocate that the practice should be abandoned. The framework and the model sermon are designed in a way that they can be used in other West and North African countries, as well as in Mauritania.

Excerpt from the model sermon

“We have heard the arguments of Islamic jurisprudence, the point of view of the fuqaha of the past and of the present.

The doctors all agree, Muslims and non-Muslims, about the serious consequences that female circumcisions has on the lives of girls, both immediately and for the future. It causes serious damage to the body and to the mind.

We are left solely with the knowledge that it is a tradition whose harmful consequences are obvious. We must abandon this practice, and turn away from it forever.”

Acquired skills

The dialogue with and between religious leaders allowed for the first time an open debate on FGM, calling into question an ancient custom.

“A practice that is repeated becomes habitual. We do not ask whether it is a religious obligation. We do not even talk about the practice itself. Now that we have started talking about it, we question the practice from a religious perspective.”

Group discussion / Central regions of Mauritania

Female circumcision is practised by women in Mauritania. The religious leaders, who are male, therefore first had to overcome their reluctance to address an issue that at first sight did not seem to affect them. The debate confronted them explicitly with this custom and allowed them to talk openly about female circumcision in public.

“We were in front of a wall of insurmountable values. The man was not interested in what the woman did at home. When a man married he often thought that his wife was born like that. Women hid before men what they did to the girls. But they knew that sometimes the girls died. Now, there has been a surge of awareness, and the issue has clicked.”

Group discussion / Guidimaka

Before they can be actively engaged in the campaign against FGM, imams and ulemas need to be personally convinced.

“We thought it was inconceivable to abandon FGM because we thought it was a religious obligation. After several workshops, seminars and research by religious leaders and doctors 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 for their health, and that it is not at all obligatory in Islam. Finally there's been a fatwa by distinguished scholars in whom we have full confidence. As a result, we are now committed to disseminating [the message] among the people.”

Interview with a group of imams and ulemas from central Mauritania

Religious leaders are now better equipped to advise their followers about female circumcision.

“Most people link the custom [of female circumcision] to religion. The fatwa was very important in making the imams more aware. 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 circumcision.”

Person of rank from Guidimaka

“Today it is much easier to convince other ulemas.

I always come to conferences with a group of ulemas who have the same ideas as me. We speak as a group.”

Cheikh Ould Zein, FPIDC Secretary General

Spreading the message

Although hundreds of religious leaders participated in activities supported by GIZ, the number is still small compared to the thousands of imams in Mauritania. The exact number is not known, since they are not all recognised or registered by MAIEO.

At the national level, FPIDC played a catalytic role in meeting the needs and expectations of the partners from the regions and local communities. To ensure the campaign's success, FPIDC and GIZ secured the support of well-known religious leaders in the regions. A group of religious leaders has been formed which today act as disseminators and agents of change.

Regional workshop of religious leaders elaborating appropriate tools for attitude change: Cheikh Ould Zein of FPIDC (in the middle)



How can the trained ulemas and imams fulfil their role as disseminators and agents of change? On the one hand, the message about FGM can reach more people through formal channels such as the “Union of Imams” or “Association of Mauritanian Ulemas”. In Guidimaka, for example, 621 imams are recognised by the state and about 80 imams who preach Friday prayers regularly consult MAIEO for information and model sermon texts. On the other hand, the anti-FGM message can also be spread by informal networks such as social relationships and affiliations through geographical or educational establishments such as madrasas.

“Eleven imams, who finished training in my madrasa, work in Nouakchott. They are not paid by the state. When they have a problem or a question, they come to me.”

Sheikh of a large madrasa

At communal and village level, the mosque and the Friday prayers serve as a channel for raising awareness about FGM. Some imams have also started to spread the message during wedding ceremonies or educational sessions.

At national level, the approach developed by FPIDC, with the support of the GIZ is now being replicated by other partners such as UNICEF and applied to other harmful customs such as early marriage.

At the international level, the dialogue and co-operation between Mauritania’s religious leaders and others in West and North Africa has helped to spread the Mauritanian fatwa, to share Mauritania’s experiences, and to jointly develop more generic tools such as the guide to preaching and the model sermon.

At the 57th session of the “Commission on the Status of Women” held in March 2013 in New York, the experience in Mauritania was presented by FPIDC and GIZ in a parallel event, in co-operation with the organisation WiLDAF (Women in Law and Development in Africa).

Impact and contribution to behaviour change

The prevalence of FGM remains high in Mauritania, particularly in Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka. According to a recent study, more than half of women in Guidimaka and more than three quarters of women in Hodh El Gharbi believe that FGM is a practice that should be continued. In both regions, two-thirds of girls aged 0–14 years had been mutilated in 2011. Since there are no data from previous years for the same age group, it is not possible to know whether the practice of FGM has declined in recent years.

Religious leaders themselves say that there is some qualitative evidence that behavioural changes have taken place in communities where imams have been actively involved against FGM.

“If men decide that circumcision should no longer be practised, women will no longer do it. An indicator of social change is that fathers are beginning to increasingly look after their daughters and to ask their wives questions.”

Person of rank from Guidimaka

One way of measuring the impact of these changes more systematically would be to try to assess the strength of a local religious leader’s influence within the community, and how men and women receive the messages of religious leaders.

The commitment of a growing number of ulemas and imams is not a magic wand that will encourage the population to abandon the custom overnight. Nevertheless, in conjunction with other approaches, such as awareness-raising in the health and education sectors or the exchange of ideas within and between communities, it may contribute to a change of behaviour in Mauritanian society.

5. Lessons learned

Key elements and success factors

Choosing the right gateways: GIZ's supra-regional project used the gender component of the GGP as a gateway to promote the ending of FGM. Religious leaders were already participating in programmes to raise awareness of women's rights before efforts were made to strengthen their ability to campaign against FGM. GIZ Mauritania had a long tradition of trusted co-operation with reformist clerics. FPIDC regards this partnership as a peer-to-peer dialogue, and GIZ does not impose a *prima facie* opinion. This certainly facilitated the dialogue on FGM and illustrates the importance of continuity of dialogue with religious leaders in a country where Islam plays a central role. Within the GIZ the continued presence of a national consultant, a practising Muslim, committed to ending FGM, has greatly facilitated this co-operation. Finally, the support of the GGP for this supra-regional project has repeatedly permitted the correction and clarification of the strategy in order to allow greater dissemination of the approach in Mauritania and other West African countries.

Developing appropriate tools step-by-step: The experience in Mauritania shows that gradual social change in an Islamic context is possible. FPIDC and GIZ gave religious leaders the necessary time to conduct an open debate on the custom of FGM, and gradually they were persuaded to start questioning their own beliefs. The fatwa, the rationale and the guide to preaching were important tools for convincing religious leaders that FGM is not a mandatory practice in Islam and strengthening their ability to raise awareness about FGM amongst their followers.

Bridging the gap between Islam and human rights: FGM is a violation of the rights of women and children, as recognised in international conventions ratified by the vast majority of UN member states, including Mauritania. However, there is always tension between the universality of human rights and certain religious or cultural values. The experience in Mauritania shows that religious leaders can challenge harmful practices such as FGM, without denying the norms and values of Islam. On the contrary, they have argued that FGM should be abandoned because of Islamic principles, such as the obligation to avoid harm and to preserve the dignity of a human being.

Co-operation with health professionals: To persuade religious leaders that female circumcision is a harmful custom, religious arguments have been linked to the medical evidence about the harmful consequences of FGM for the health of girls and women.

"We have always invited a gynaecologist to awareness sessions. He convinced us that problems during childbirth are also related to female circumcision. Islam and the prophet say we should believe those who have scientific and medical expertise."

Group discussion / Guidimaka



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

The credibility of actors: In Mauritania, the credibility of religious leaders are just as, if not more, important as the content of the message and the transmitted ideas. In Hodh El Gharbi and Guidimaka GIZ and FPIDC therefore co-operated with credible religious leaders, recognised 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 ulemas arrive, nobody will believe them.”

Sheikh of a madrasa in Hodh El Gharbi

A favourable national environment: GIZ’s successful strategy of strengthening the ability of religious leaders was subsequently adopted by the government’s national policy framework for FGM. Established in 2008, Mauritania’s national strategy for ending FGM, works with both state and civil society partners. MASEF is mandated to co-ordinate the activities of the partners involved and has supported FPIDC and GIZ conferences and activities. At regional level, MAIEO representatives participated in workshops and used their influence to gain the support of ulemas and imams. This approach was also adopted by UNICEF in the health sector, and in 2008 healthcare professionals issued a statement condemning FGM and actively campaigning for an end to the practice, all of which helped the religious leaders in their task.

Challenges and risks

A field of action with still limited scope: The sensitisation of imams and the propagation of the fatwa have not yet reached many remote rural villages, where most of the imams remain convinced that female circumcision is a religious obligation.

“There are still many villages and imams who have not been sensitised yet. They maintain their ancient traditions.”

Group discussion / Hodh El Gharbi

“Currently, many religious leaders are convinced of the need to abandon the practice of female circumcision, but they remain a minority. This is why the practice is still carried out in the same manner and under the same conditions as in the past, especially on a large scale. In the villages, many imams do not have the intellectual ability to question the custom of FGM. Nobody talks about it.”

Group discussion / Central regions of Mauritania

The medicalisation of FGM: Despite the statement from healthcare professionals calling for an end to FGM and the prohibition of health personnel to practise it, some religious leaders seem to be willing to accept the custom if it takes place under hygienic conditions. The Mauritanian fatwa takes a position on FGM in its traditional form, as it is commonly practised in Mauritania, but avoids condemning it in principle, thus leaving some room for interpretation. It is therefore essential to co-operate with health professionals in order to sensitise imams on the fact that even if practised under hygienic conditions, FGM is a serious attack on the rights and health of women and children.

“We must go step-by-step. That is why we talk about female circumcision in its current practice, which is done at home. But we know that medical staff are prohibited from practising circumcision in health centres.”

Group discussion / Guidimaka

Extending the consensus: FPIDC and the ulema reformist movement have managed to initiate a dynamic debate amongst religious leaders that has convinced many of them to support the fatwa issued in 2010 against FGM. However, there are still some very influential conservative or fundamentalist ulemas who have not adopted the fatwa and are not committed to ending FGM. That said, a fatwa represents the consensual views of the ulemas who have developed it. Any fatwa can therefore also result in conflicting fatwas from religious leaders who advocate a contrary position. However, no important religious leaders have so far openly spoken against the Mauritanian fatwa on FGM.

The politicisation of the debate: Like other countries, Mauritania is now facing a fundamentalist trend which on the one hand regards the West as coloniser and on the other hand questions the authority of the state and the credibility of the traditional religious leaders.

“They say that circumcision is a false problem, imported from the West. This is why the presence of ulemas and imams in the movement for the abandonment of FGM is an important factor. Before, it was easier to say that the problem came from the West.”

Interview with a group of imams and ulemas from Guidimaka

In this context, there is always a risk of politicising a religious debate on harmful traditional practices and on FGM. To avoid this risk, FPIDC, even if it supports the national strategy for the abandonment of FGM, operates as a civil society organisation in order to keep its independence vis-à-vis state institutions such as MASEF or MAIEO and to assert its political neutrality.

Conclusion

In a society where Islam legitimates social practices, it is important to strengthen the capacity of religious leaders so that they can commit themselves to promoting the end of this custom. Along with other civil society partners 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 in Mauritania shows that gradual social change in an Islamic context is possible. Nevertheless, this approach is not a recipe which may be automatically replicated in other countries. To reproduce this approach successfully, the key factors are: the importance of Islam in society, mutual respect between partners, a phased approach which meets the needs of the stakeholders, and especially the active engagement of credible religious leaders.



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

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