

# **External Project Evaluation on NCA/NUEYS Female Genital Mutilation Program at Sawa (2004 – 2007)**

## **Introduction and Background of the Study**

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Although no reliable population census has ever been carried out in Eritrea (as of writing this report), various sources estimate the Eritrean population between 3.2\* and 4.4\*\* million. This relatively young country is home for nine ethnic groups and two religions – namely Christianity and Islam.

### **General Background of the Study**

It is often said that women, as a matter of fact, often constitute roughly half of the demographic composition of any nation-state. Nonetheless they are the most disadvantaged segments of the world's societies. Public health professionals, social epidemiologists, sociologists, anthropologists and many other social and behavioral scientists have, for instance, confirmed that women are by far much disadvantaged than men when it comes to health-related matters. While the reasons for such disparity along gender lines do differ across time, place and socio-cultural settings, they do share certain commonalities particularly among patriarchal communities across the globe.

One of the explanatory factors for the health disparity between males and females would be attributed to latent and manifest gender-based violence (GBV) that is carried out against women who are among many of the human societies throughout the globe. Women are also the number one victims of gender-based prejudices, discrimination, and oppressions that emanate from mythical and ill-informed socio-cultural beliefs, and unfair 'gender stereotypes'. Such socio-cultural stereotypes are so near universal that they are negatively impacting on creating a 'just society' for the following simple reasons:

- The harmful cultural practices (HCPs) component of such stereotype have depressing health implications;
- They negatively influence the socio-economic status of women; and
- They violate women's very fundamental human rights.

FGM/C\*\*\* is one of the most prevalent harmful traditional practices (HTPs) that affect women's health, dignity and self-esteem. It is what social anthropologists would prefer

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\* This figure is put by the Ministry of Local Government's Cartography Unit (MoLG mentioned in EDHS, 2002:2-3).

\*\* This estimation is put forward by some UN agencies and international organizations working in the country. The World Bank's 'Little Green Book', for instance, estimates the figure to be 4.4 million.

to call as *rite de passage*. According to some estimates somewhere between 130 million to 140 million women and girls throughout the world have undergone through this HCP and live with its various ramifications. In the African continent alone, around 2 million girls and women are reportedly circumcised. Yet the prevalence of such cultural rite is more evident among 28 Sub-Saharan African countries that are predominantly from Eastern and Western Africa (NCA/ Eastern Africa Region, 2005).

Likewise, a huge number of women in Eritrea go through the FGM/C rite. A few statistical evidences from various sources do reveal the extent and severity of the practice. According to two Eritrean Demographic and Health Surveys, in 1995 the practice was prevalent among 95% of the overall population, which showed a slight decline (6%) in 2002 putting the figure at 89% (EDHS, 2002:197). NCA's own independent study conducted a year later (i.e., in March 2003) showed the prevalence of FGM to be 97%, making the practice nearly universal (NCA/Eastern Africa, 2005:1). Leaving the accuracy of the exact figure aside, if we are to rely on the EDHS (2002) findings, there are indications that FGM practice in Eritrea is gradually, but slowly, changing. Yet the decline of the practice is not equally distributed across all Eritrean societies. The good news about the findings is that the decline is most notable among women (under 25 years), urbanites, and among women who fall under the highest quintiles of wealth index (EDHS, 2002:197-202).

Bracketing the above-mentioned optimistic evidences, it is also clear that FGM is a widely practiced cultural rite that still pervades among all Eritrean communities' socio-cultural landscape. Eritrea has committed itself to arrest this HCP along with various national and international organizations. As Eritrea is a signatory of the international conventions that protects the rights of children and women, as it is a country that upholds on the principle of social justice, and since there are plenty of evidences that show the immediate and long-term consequences of the FGM practice, the relatively young country is determined to curtail the cultural rite. In this regard, NUEYS and NCA have established a partnership to combat FGM at Sawa - a project site the two organizations agreed to work in a joint venture. This three years joint partnership started in the 2004/05 to 2006/07 academic years. Before I present the 3-years' project activities evaluation methodology employed by the external evaluator and his main findings, it would be helpful to highlight some notes concerning the two cooperating organizations.

### **Structure of the Report**

The next section of this report entails a bird's-eye-view about NUEYS and NCA with the intent of presenting a snapshot on how they came to establish a partnership in combating FGM practice. This is followed by the nature of the evaluation, which discusses the goals and objectives of the study. Subsequently the evaluation methodology and approach shall

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\*\*\* According to WHO (1995), FGM refers to "all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the female external genitalia and/or injury to the female genital area or organs for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons" (WHO quoted in NUEYS Training Manual, n.d.: 21). While NCA would prefer to use the concept of FGM to emphasize the severity and intensity of the practice, EDHS (2002:197) would prefer to use FGC who define it as "[various] types of ritual surgery carried out on female genitals for traditional, religious, and aesthetic reasons, and usually backed by social pressure."

be presented. The fifth section of the report deals about data findings. Finally, the report ends by providing a conclusion and pointing out some pertinent recommendations.

## Chapter 2: Overview of NUEYS and NCA Focus on FGM

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This section of the report entails about the genesis and mission of the two organizations and how they came to establish partnership in combating FGM practice in Eritrea.

### 2.1 NUEYS' Focus on FGM

NUEYS is an organization dedicated to work for the overall well being of young people in Eritrea. It is an organization established with a grand mission: “to cultivate and produce a versatile youth.” With this broad mission in mind, the organization strives to organize, cultivate and produce an enlightened youth that is aware and proud of their culture, identity, heritage and history. It also aims at building a disciplined, self-confident, mature, and responsible youth throughout the country (Ibrahim and et al., 2004:3).

NUEYS has a functioning network of over 200,000 members in all the six administrative *zobas* (plus a 7<sup>th</sup> one that embraces Sawa and Higher Educational Institutes). With well over 600 full-time employees and thousands more volunteers, NUEYS works in various areas that affect Eritrea's youths and the society at large (NUEYS, 2007a). One among the many areas that the organization engages in is anti-FGM activities. Indeed NUEYS, according to the organization's anti-FGM project coordinator, is one of the three members of the national anti-FGM steering committee that is chaired by the MoH (and NUEW holding a secretarial position).

Though NUEYS has been reportedly working in Sawa since 1993 (NCA/ Eritrea Country Office, 2003), it is with the establishment of Warsai-Yike'alo Secondary School (WYSS) that opening up and forming a 7<sup>th</sup> Zoba within the organization's structure necessitated. This in turn resulted into carrying out various activities including the intensification of anti-FGM activities in an organized manner starting from 2004/05 to 2006/2007 academic years.

### 2.2 NCA's FGM Focus

NCA is an independent organization that works for people's basic rights. Guided by the Christian faith, NCA strives to uphold human dignity among all human beings irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, or any other social stratification factors. Working in more than 70 countries all over the world (including Eritrea), NCA has an Eastern African regional office working in partnership with nine countries in 21 projects. As making 'men and women address gender-based violence' constitutes one of the objectives of NCA's Global Strategic Plan for 2005-2009, the extent of FGM and its appalling immediate and long-term physical, psychological and emotional effects makes it a priority interest globally and more specifically in both Eastern and Western Africa (NCA/Eastern Africa Region, 2005).

NCA's participation in anti-FGM activities is also in line with the Eritrean Government's Health Sector Strategic Plan and that of the Norwegian Government's ultimate aim of eliminating this HCP by 2010 and achieving some of the milestones set for the Millennium Development Goals/MDGs (NCA/Eastern Africa Region, 2005). The NUEYS/NCA anti-FGM sensitization and awareness-raising program is pretty much related to the MDGs and is contributing its modest role in achieving some, if not all, of these goals specifically those that revolve around:

- i. Promoting gender equality and empowering women;
- ii. Reducing child mortality;
- iii. Improving maternal health; and
- iv. Combating HIV/AIDS.

It is in this context that NCA/Eritrea country office established a working partnership with NUEYS with the intent of promoting FGM awareness among the 12<sup>th</sup> grade students in WYSS at Sawa. As this school is the only school for Grade 12 in Eritrea, there has been a massive enrolment of students in it from across the country ever since 2004/05 academic year. Both NCA and NUEYS believe that WYSS would be an ideal place to educate youngsters about this HCP and ultimately eradicate FGM from the country by equipping them with functional and practical knowledge of the dangers of this very old cultural rite. To this end, both organizations are optimistic that FGM practice shall be stopped in the students' natal family and family of procreation in the not too distant future. It is also hoped that the students who go through this awareness raising campaigns shall also constructively influence their communities as well.

In a nutshell, the three years' NUEYS/NCA FGM awareness raising campaign, according to the project's proposal, has been initiated with the following project goals, objectives, and program target groups in mind.

### **2.3 Project Goal**

- Reduce the prevalence rate of FGM practice.

### **2.4 Project Objectives**

While the immediate objective of the project is, as stipulated in the project's logframe, is "to ensure that matriculating students in Eritrea are committed to the eradication of FGM", it could further be broken down into:

- i. To educate students and teachers in WYSS regarding FGM/C;
- ii. To provide educational resources and materials for the use by students and teachers; and
- iii. To enable the students and teachers to be change agents themselves and in their own communities.

## **2.5 Project Target Groups:**

The target groups comprise the students and teachers at WYSS in Sawa. Through raising the awareness of these major groups there are other secondary groups to be reached out as well (namely peers, families and the wider communities of the teachers and students).

## **2.6 Project Site:**

The project site is Sawa. It is located in the western lowlands of Eritrea (specifically in Gash-Barka Region) some 360 KMs away from Eritrea's capital city-Asmara. This project site, according to NUEYS Zonal organizational structure, is divided into three branches. Whereas WYSS is the prime target project area, in 2006/2007 the project activity has flexibly molded itself and incorporated both National Vocational Training Center (NAVCOT) students and members of the Eritrean Defense Training Center (EDTC) too.

## Chapter 3: The Evaluation: its Objectives and Methodology

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Having highlighted the general background of the study, the genesis of the anti-FGM awareness raising campaigns as well as the rationale behind the partnership between NUEYS/NCA, allow me now to proceed with presenting the goals, objectives, timing, methodology and approaches of the study.

### 3.1 Goal and Objectives of the Study

This external evaluation assignment seeks to assess the impacts of the three-years (2004/05 – 2006/2007 academic years) NUEYS/NCA anti-FGM sensitization and awareness raising activities at the project site, Sawa. This being the general goal of the research task, as per the ToR, the goal could again be split into the following specific objectives:

#### 3.1.1 Objectives of the Study

- To finger the project's strength, weakness, opportunity, and threats;
- To assess and document the overall impacts and achievements of the project;
- To discuss the sustainability of the project's effectiveness in terms of whether the positive effects could continue even after NCA's financial support is terminated;
- To assess coordination and effectiveness of project implementation activities;
- To propose effective project delivery modalities for better program implementation;
- To produce full reports of the evaluation findings and make recommendations for further improvements; and
- To draw lessons from the project that can be considered in designing and implementing similar future projects of the same kind and nature. That is, to advise whether this project and its approach is worth replicating in the same area or elsewhere in the country.

In a word, the major purpose of this external evaluation could be summed up as follows: “to identify the strength and weakness of the NUEYS/NCA anti-FGM sensitization and awareness raising activities and to look for possible ways of making future progress and ensuring sustainability of the project.”

### 3.2 Evaluation Methodology and Approach

This external evaluation research assignment focused at assessing a three-year anti-FGM sensitization and awareness-raising project at Sawa. The compilation of the research report relied on what social scientists prefer to call “*triangulation approach*” in which case data collected via various methods and data collection techniques were cross fertilized. Both *primary* and *secondary* data sources of either *qualitative* or *quantitative* nature (with more inclination on former) were employed. Reliance on the qualitative research methods was more preferred by the consultant on the grounds that it helps generate detailed data and provides “*thick description*” of the project activities under

investigation. In this spirit and understanding, the consultant has attempted to present the voices of the project “target groups” (particularly those of the anti-FGM club-members), and some of the silent yet important ideas of NUEYS project staff members who have a reasonable understanding of the project’s achievements and challenges.

Some quantitative data were also employed and presented whenever and wherever it is deemed necessary. Overall, the following secondary and primary data sources were used to compile this report:

### **3.2.1 Secondary Sources**

The consultant has fished and reviewed various reports and documents that he felt are related to the project activity. Prominent among them would be:

#### **3.2.1.1 Desk Studies/ Literature Review**

The consultant has collected as much *statistical* and/or *textual* information as possible that he felt are, directly or indirectly, related to the project. In light of this, prior to his departure to field work, he performed the following document review studies:

- ✓ Undertook an in-depth review of project documents (involving perusal of project proposal, NUEYS’ central and zonal project monitoring reports, and other informative documents exchanged between the two cooperating parties – i.e. NUEYS & NCA);
- ✓ Examined the EDHS (2002) with the intent of finding the prevalence, perceptions and attitudes of FGM practice among Eritrean communities;
- ✓ Unearthed studies carried out on FGM related-issues in the region with the hope of gaining some insights from their findings; and
- ✓ Looked at the contents of the Eritrean government’s new proclamation to abolish female circumcision

### **3.2.2 Primary Sources**

Much of the primary sources of information in this report were gathered via *field research methods* that heavily depended on the following data collection techniques:

#### **3.2.2.1 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**

The consultant has greatly benefitted from the data drawn from two independent ‘mixed group’ focus group sessions held with active NUEYS anti-FGM club members at Sawa. The notion of ‘mixed group’ is carefully used in this context to connote that discussants were comprised of males and females as well as students and teachers alike (though with different proportions). Needless to mention, it is worth pointing out that the FGDs for both WYSS and NAVCOT were held independently in different places and time schedules. The first FGD that was held on Dec 14, 2007 was executed among 10 anti-FGM club members drawn from WYSS. This information-sharing session ran for 3 hours



(time 9:00 A.M – 12:10 P.M). The second group of discussants was drawn from NAVCOT and was comprised of 8 people and held during the afternoon session on Dec 16, 2007. It roughly took around an hour and half time (5:00 P.M – 6:35 P.M).

### 3.2.2.2 Interview Methods

Two interviews were performed in this evaluation assignment: *formal open-ended interview* and *informal 'free flowing' interviews* (conversations). The former method was held with Head of NUEYS NAVCOT sub-zone while the latter approach was used for gathering information from NUEYS FGM program staff members (central and zonal project coordinators) and NCA's Gender Unit focal person (see the interview schedule in appendix attached in the report).

### 3.2.2.3 Observations

The field research of this assignment also involved the consultant's personal observations. The consultant had an opportunity to attend the last day of Sawa Youth Week Celebrations and participated in a workshop arranged to appraise its current state of affairs. My participation in Youth Week activities gave me an opportunity to gain insight into and listen to and observe how members of the anti-FGM club campaign their cause. Moreover, I also visited the FGM IEC-room and observed the types and amounts of IEC materials it is equipped with.



*Photo 1: The Consultant attending the end of year anti-FGM Assessment Workshop at Sawa*

By way of note, the consultant would like to bring to the reader's mind that much of primary data is drawn from the representatives of the project 'target groups' who worked as anti-FGM club-members during the 2006/2007 academic year only.

The compilation of this external evaluation report, as stated in methodology section, has heavily relied on descriptive data (with occasional quantitative data presentations). As the interviews and FGDs were tape recorded, they were painstakingly transcribed to make sense of them and attempts are done to present them thematically. In view of that the consultant's evaluation findings have focused on examining the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact (if any) of the project activity. Although all these factors are highly interrelated, I have opted to treat and address them separately for the sake of clarity and benefit of the reader.

### 4.1 Relevance of the anti-FGM Project

Many of the people the consultant talked to (be they anti-FGM club-members or project staff members) have, in one way or the other, accentuated that the program was very timely and relevant issue to address. In the words of one project staff member Miss Eritrea Osman, NUEYS Head of NAVCOT center:

*Given the fact that FGM is a highly prevalent cultural rite among all Eritrean communities, sensitizing and educating young people [particularly students] seems to me the shortest, easiest and surest way to tackle the ritual in the next generation.*

Such assertion is very valid considering the existing scientific evidences which attests the fact that the harms incurred from the practice on females far outweighs its advantages. FGM practice has both immediate and long-term health complications on those massive number of girls and women who endure them. The ritual could also be condemned on the grounds that it violates the very universal human rights of both girls and women (specifically those rights having to do with non-discrimination, integrity of the person, and the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health). That is why the GoE, who is a signatory of a number of international conventions and declarations, has officially outlawed and criminalized any act of circumcision by issuing proclamation No 158/2007.\*

### 4.2 Effectiveness and Efficiency of the Project

Even though there is a long way to go and concerted efforts have to be performed so as to eradicate FGM practice from Eritrean communities, there is every reason to hope that it could utterly be tackled. NUEYS anti-FGM club members are doing their utmost in working diligently with a commitment to bring about attitudinal and behavioral changes among young men and women regarding this harmful cultural practice. What makes the project activities effective and efficient is the fact that it involves a peer-to peer interpersonal communication and education about the topic that is often considered a *taboo*

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\* This proclamation has been officially released on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2007, and is read as “*A Proclamation to Abolish Female Circumcision.*”

and hardly raised among students' discourses. This peer education concerning FGM practice, the consultant came to learn from the FGDs, are more effective and efficient for the reason that:

- 1) Both genders, males and females alike, actively participate in the sensitization and awareness raising campaigns;
- 2) As all the anti FGM club members are volunteer students, the project activities are executed at barely minimum cost. The free human resources available in this Zoba gives NUEYS the advantage of implementing the project activities at much lower financial cost;
- 3) In this academic year alone the project has in fact reached-out to somewhere around 10,000 students from 57 high schools across the country, according to the project staff members and head-master of the WYSS; and
- 4) The IEC materials employed for the sensitization and awareness-raising campaigns were, for the most part, reportedly well-received by the project's target groups.

Nonetheless, the efficacy of the IEC materials shouldn't be misconstrued as being without its own limitations as the majority of the FGD members highlighted:

- short supply of IEC materials;
- absence of sufficient reference materials (such as manuals) to educate and campaign for; and
- the preparation of the IEC materials (specifically leaflets, brochures, booklets etc.) predominantly in tigrigna language is in some way worrisome for it fails to consider the socio-linguistic diversity of the project's target groups; hence, the urgent need to diversify them in such a way that they accommodate the mosaic project target groups.

To reiterate, it is worth noting that whilst all these IEC support materials are very helpful in disseminating all the necessary information about the beliefs values, attitudes and opinions inherent for the perpetuation of FGM practice among Eritrean communities, several focus group discussants lamented about the way they are prepared. Besides, although I witnessed the importance of utilizing posters to educate youth during Sawa Youths' Week (8-14 December 2007), it appears that the illustrative photos are poorly printed. It seems to me that such posters should vividly show the normal physiology of the female genitalia. They should also categorically show the three major types of circumcisions evident in the Eritrean communities so that anti-FGM animators would be able to convey the required information to their audiences without much difficulty. At any rate, in the 2006/2007 academic year alone slightly more than 14,000 youths have been sensitized and educated about the HCP by the club members (see Table #1 in the next page).



*Photo 2: Anti-FGM Club-member explaining how they sensitize others using posters*

*Table 1: Anti-FGM Sensitization and Awareness Raising Campaign at Sawa, 2006/2007 Ac. Yr. (by Sub-Zone & Gender)*

Type of Activity	Participants			
	NUEYS Sub-Zone	Gender		
		Males	Females	Total
Anti-FGM Sensitization and Awareness Raising Campaign	WYSS	5,823	4,130	9,953
	NAVCOT	1,925	1,466	3,391
	EDTC	650	293	943
	<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>8,398</b>	<b>5,889</b>	

*Source:* NUEYS Zonal anti-FGM Project Coordinator, Sawa (2007)

All the anti-FGM sensitization and awareness raising activities performed at WYSS were carried out within the three NUEYS branch offices. According to Ahferom Tekie, Head of NUEYS at WYSS, there are 72 active anti-FGM club members who tirelessly sensitize peer groups in the three branch offices within their sub-zone. In each branch office there are 27 units in which case all the club members work earnestly. Putting it in plain words, Mr. Ahferom stated that much of “the anti-FGM project activities are planned and carried out in a systematic and directed manner.”

On the other hand, in both NAVCOT and EDTC the sensitization and awareness raising campaigns, according to Ms Eritrea Osman, are performed by 120 active anti-FGM club members who are assigned to seven branch offices - namely in the following schools: Agriculture, Combat Engineering, Commerce & Management, Construction Technology,

HDM, Information & Communication Technology, Tourism & Hotel Management, as well as Wood & Metal Technology. Furthermore, the focus group discussants also pointed out that they too reached out to both women civil servants and members of EDTC during their sensitization and awareness raising and activities.

In addition to the anti-FGM sensitization and awareness raising activities, a number of dramas, poems, debating and general knowledge competitions were also performed in the project site in the three NUEYS sub-zones. The club members wrote the majority of the drama scripts and poems. Unfortunately they predominantly seem to be prepared in the tigrigna language, which raises a concern and doubt as to whether the audiences from the other ethnic groups would also be able to grasp it all (a quick glimpse at Table #2 gives the reader a summary of these activities).

*Table 2: Other Sensitization Activities in the Project Site*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Remark</b>
Drama	10	Written predominantly in Tigrigna, attempts were done to reach out to as many audiences as possible in all the three NUEYS sub-zones
Music/Songs	25	Prepared and performed by the club-members.
Poems	35	Written in most of the Eritrean languages (namely: Arabic, Kunama, Saho, Tigre, and Tigrigna)
Training	150	Offered to members of EDTC at Molover, it educated 90 females and 60 males.

Source: Various NUEYS Zonal anti-FGM Project Coordinator’s Reports, Sawa (2007)



*Photo 3: Various Project site personnel taking FGM awareness training*

Be that as it may, a number of the discussants underscored that both dramas and poems were extremely helpful in conveying the messages to a socio-linguistically diverse audiences. Such dramas and poems were allegedly presented during festive occasions so as to make them reach a wider number of audiences. A famous female drama script and poem writer, Ms. Shewit Tesfai, testified about the effectiveness of using dramas and poems as follows:

*The good thing about dramas and poems is that it can easily reach huge audiences and many of them follow it attentively. Unlike in seminars, the audiences in dramas and poems do not show much boredom.... What is more, as many of our audiences can understand Tigrigna language, I believe that they can easily come to grips with dramas. Overall, I found dramas to be an indispensable tool and approach to conveying all the necessary information concerning circumcision.*



*Photo 4: Anti-FGM club members during drama performance*

Other activities that were performed regarding the anti-FGM sensitization program in the project area were holding general knowledge and debating contests. They were held more or less simultaneously, said one discussant. At WYSS alone such contests were held among all the three branch offices and prizes were awarded for the best three competitors in each branch office during every competition held in the 27 units. Moreover, the IEC materials particularly leaflets and booklets were freely distributed to participants during contest sessions, according to my informants (see the list and amount of IEC materials in the project area in Table #3 in the next page).

Table 3: Availability of IEC Materials at Sawa (by Type & Number)

Items	Quantity	Remarks
Leaflets	10,000	Predominantly prepared in Tigrigna, they were often distributed freely during seminars, debating & general knowledge contest sessions.
T-Shirts	120	Branded as "Stop FGM" (in arabic, english & tigrigna), they were exclusively distributed to the active anti-FGM club members & project staff members.
Booklets	5000	Mainly prepared in tigrigna language, they intend to give a glimpse of the various types of circumcision practiced among Eritrean communities.
Posters	5000	Written in arabic, english & tigrigna, they portray much of the health risks inherent in FGM practices.
Anti-FGM Proclamation	50	GoE's recently released proclamation No. 158/2007 to Abolish Female Circumcision

Source: NUEYS Zonal anti-FGM Project Coordinator, Sawa (2007)

On top of the items listed in the table above, the consultant also witnessed the presence of the following additional equipment in the IEC-room: A TV with a VCR/DVD player, TV stand, LCD projector, a digital video camera, two IEC boards, four shelves and three office tables along with unspecified number of chairs. The head of NUEYS sub-zones and the project coordinators informed the consultant that much of the anti FGM club members' meetings, drama/ music rehearsals are carried out in the IEC room. The two focus group session participants also informed the consultant the importance of additional IEC room materials with more emphasis on the role of the videocassette in their campaigns. A renowned anti-FGM club member from WYSS, Ms. Selam puts its role as follows:

*We are always careful in the way we sensitize out target groups about FGM. We try to be as systematic as we can. Primarily, we provide them with sufficient seminars, i.e., we give them adequate oral information [in the form of lectures] about the prevalence, types, complications ...etc. inherent in this HCP .... It is thereafter that we show the students the videocassette entitled "Gulbab Siqay" [which portrays the appalling immediate and long term physical, psychological and emotional impacts of the cultural rite].*



*Photo 5: Anti-FGM class-level sensitization*

Most of the discussants, thus far, reportedly bumped into a considerable number of hard-line students (males and females alike) who were presumed to be in favor of maintaining the practice but have changed their attitudes about the cultural ritual right after witnessing the horrors of the practice via the videocassette. One male FGD participant from NAVCOT observed:

*Initially many of the students were making fun of my convictions. They used to tell me that this practice [FGM] is ages-old ...part of our cultural value and identity. .... How on earth you dare to question and overcome it!?.... You must be crazy to think of addressing this generation-old culturally embedded practice...? But once I, along with my fellow anti-FGM club-members, “heavily showered” them with many factual evidences through oral, textual and audio-visual information, the majority of them came to realize the severity and dangers of the practice...and came to assist us by debating and educating others who haven't internalized the message we persuasively convey.*

Another member of the EDTC at the project site presented his experience during the campaign in the workshop held on 14<sup>th</sup> Dec., 2007 as follows:

*Though I was a married man at the time I was educated about FGM, the club-members from NAVCOT sensitized us about its overall implications, I became the first person to internalize the message and impart it to my comrades in the Defense Forces. Concurrently, I also have to confess that the education I gained helped me save my first newly born daughter from the anguish of the practice by insisting not to circumcise her!!*



### **4.3 Sustainability of the project activity**

As mentioned elsewhere, the anti-FGM sensitization and awareness raising program at Sawa has been going on for the last three consecutive years (2004/05 to 2007/08 Ac.Yr.). But that shouldn't be interpreted as being a very unheard of activity within the ambit of NUEYS. The fact is that the organization has been engaging itself in this activity for quite too long (either using the meager financial and other resources it has or in collaboration with other partners – national or international). It has the privilege and access to highly energetic and committed volunteers who engage in various clubs with varying activities. In actual fact FGM is one of these activities. In this context the consultant believes that NUEYS Zoba Sawa & Higher Educational Institutes, like the other zobas, can continue to engage into this project activity whatever the case may be. At this juncture, it would be helpful to reiterate Ato. Awate Osman's position, Head of NUEYS Zoba Sawa & Higher Educational Institutes, who disclosed in the workshop opening session on 14 Dec., 2007:

*As long as FGM is highly prevalent in the Eritrean social landscape and is one of the priorities within the government's agenda, NUEYS shall contribute its modest role in combating this cultural practice. Whilst we are very grateful to NCA's generous assistance, I am certain that the project activities shall continue to remain being part and parcel of our programs in the foreseeable future. To this end, least be assured that our staff members and the students alike have every willingness, commitment, and required skills to combat FGM in the Eritrean communities...and together, I believe, we can still make the difference.*

Such assertions leave you with the impression that the anti-FGM activity shall continue to be one of the regular activities within the project site regardless of the circumstances. Nonetheless, the consultant feels that it is better for NCA (and other prospective partners) to continue financially and technically support NUEYS so as to bring FGM practice to an end in the generation to come. In this regard, the consultant recommends that, if NCA is to continue sponsoring the project, its activities have to be expanded further in such a way that it reaches out to more prospective beneficiaries such as members of the EDTC, communities nearby the project site, and young students in higher educational institutes.

### **4.4 Impact of the Project**

Genuinely speaking it is too early to speak of the impact of the project's sensitization and awareness raising activity. Nor could one be confident enough as to whether such changes, if there are, could solely be attributable to NUEYS' efforts at the project site or the outcome of other contributing change agents (or perhaps a combination of the two). In spite of this reality, given the fact that more than 45, 000 youths have already been rigorously sensitized about the practice throughout the project's lifespan (See Table #4 below), there is every reason to hope FGM shall be enormously reduced from being practiced in the youths' families of procreation.

Table 4: No of students sensitized (by Academic Yr. & Gender)

Ac. Year	Gender		
	Female	Males	Total
2004/05	2200	6000	8,200
2005/06	3700	5700	9,400
2006/07	6234	11,366	17,800
2007/08	4130	5823	9,953

Source: NUEYS Zoba Sawa & Higher Education Institutes, Zonal Office (2007)

Even though measuring the exact impact of the project is slightly tricky at this moment in time, be informed that the consultant has attempted to indirectly measure the project's impact on those who are active anti-FGM members by posing the following questions:

- (i) Would the anti-FGM sensitized girls circumcise their daughters?
- (ii) Do you think anti-FGM sensitized males shall have difficulty marrying uncircumcised females?

In both of these questions and the responses gathered from them one way or another indicates that the project activities do have some bearing on the club-members. The responses are so encouraging and promising that there are indicators, here and there, that show the project activities are altering beneficiaries' attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and knowledge. The consultant has come to conclude that not only does the project activity have real impact on the campaigners, but also on the rest of the target groups too. For instance, I found none of the female focus group discussants would be willing to circumcise their daughters (of course by the time they become mothers in the near future). One female discussant put it more eloquently:

*Having witnessed the painful physiological, psychological and emotional implications of those who go through this ritual, and I (myself being the focal change agent who works day -in and out to combat this HCP) wouldn't let my community members blindly continue exercising it, let alone letting it be performed on to my daughter! I believe that we, those who are active anti-FGM club-members, are extremely influenced by the FGM awareness raising training that was offered to us, which has tremendously changed out beliefs, attitudes and knowledge about the subject matter. After all, isn't that I am educating other youths because I firmly believed that this practice has to be discarded altogether and let [social] historians to write about it!?*

Further more, many of the male discussants, who are already adults, have persistently insisted that they would not pester much about marrying uncircumcised girls. "I wouldn't take it as a big deal and worry about my wife being uncircumcised," noted one discussant from WYSS. Both these evidences signify that the project seems to be paying back and

was worth sponsoring. Finally, it seems to me that it is worthwhile conducting follow up longitudinal studies to reliably measure the real impact of the project on the target groups.

To round up my major findings, it would be more helpful to present the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats (in a SWOT analysis) of the anti-FGM project activities at Sawa. By so doing, it is hoped that one could have a sense of some of the factors that facilitate or hinder as well as those that could enhance the project's activities in the future.

**\*Strengths:**

- ✓ Diverse approaches, strategies and techniques in anti-FGM sensitization and awareness raising campaign at the project site;
- ✓ Multi-ethnic and both genders having actively participated in project activities;
- ✓ Ability to reach out to huge number of youths in a "multi-ethnic or "melting pot" project site is cost effective and
- ✓ Presence of many other clever, influential and capable club-members (including that of anti-FGM) to work on any given assignment diligently.

**\*Weakness:**

- Lack of ample time for anti-FGM club-members to influence and change peers' perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and opinion about the harmful cultural rite;
- Absence of adequate material or any other incentives for active anti-FGM club-members;
- Occasional bureaucratic obstacles from the military officers in the project site;
- Shortage of IEC material supplies (e.g. few video cassettes & screens, reference manuals, and the like) and most of existing ones being not as much sensitive to the socio-linguistic diversity of the project target groups as one expects them to;
- Absence of proper documentation and compilation of statistics related to project activities (e.g., of drama scripts, poems, reliable figures of people sensitized per activity, etc); and
- Lack of proper documentation and compilation of project activities and materials.

**\*Opportunities:**

- High prevalence rate of FGM (estimated at more than 92%) and its attendant immediate and long-term consequences among females makes the project activity at this site (and beyond, if you will) legitimate and urgent to cooperate with and engage into;
- As the GoE has signed and ratified a number of the international conventions and declarations that call for protecting the rights of children and women, and has concurrently released a proclamation abolishing female circumcision in very recent times paves the way for national/local and international organizations (be they public, private, and/or inter-governmental) to

collaborate and work within the government's Strategic Plan to combat FGM practice;

- In ordinary Eritrean communities where sex-related discourses are relatively a taboo issue, peer--to-peer education about female physiology and health consequences of FGM practice becomes prudent (so as to bring the desired behavioral and attitudinal changes regarding the cultural ritual);
- Presence of highly committed and energetic capable volunteer club-members organized and working in a range of clubs and activities (including that of anti-FGM); and
- Establishment of the IEC room in the project site is expected to play a superb role in carrying out the project's goals, objectives and overall activities in a sustainable manner in the foreseeable future.

**\*Threats:**

- Too much emphasis on the health-risk approach to anti-FGM sensitization and awareness raising leaving little room to the notion that the practice itself grossly violates fundamental women's rights and is against the very principles of the country's and international principles of social justice;
- Relative absence of support from the national mass-media to the anti-FGM awareness raising campaign puts heavy pressure on NUEYS club-members in bringing about the expected attitudinal and behavioral changes about the practice; and
- Unless FGM is intentionally incorporated into the national educational curriculum (in such courses as Life skills, Family and Consumer Sciences, Biology and the like) sooner or later, there is a danger that students' lack of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions about the practice can and could slip back or perhaps continue to persist.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

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*"The Role of Social Sciences Lies not in the Formulation of Social Policy but in the Measurement of its Results" (Daniel P. Moynihan, 1969:193)*

Having started in the 2004/2005 academic year, the NUEYS/NCA anti-FGM sensitization and awareness raising campaign have counted three solid years now. Its project site being located at Sawa, fundamentally targets 12<sup>th</sup> grade students at WYSS (of course, along with some subsidiary beneficiaries). While NCA constitutes a prime funding organization, NUEYS is the implementer of the program. Indeed as the latter local organization has a well-established network stretching way into the very grass roots, it is very ideal to collaborate and work with. The availability of capable volunteer members at all NUEYS branch offices also gives the organization a real 'competitive advantage' and extra leverage to execute various youth-related program activities.

In addition to the above factors, the rationale behind NUEYS/NCA collaborative partnership to combating FGM essentially emanates from: *one*, Eritrea has a prohibitively higher circumcision prevalence rate among the Sub-Saharan African countries; *two*, the ritual results in outrageous immediate and long-term consequences, *three*, the cultural rite is against national and international conventions on children's and women rights; and *four*, it grossly transgresses the very principle of 'social justice' (which the GoE and Norwegian government both dearly uphold). It is on these grounds that the two organizations are investing a considerable amount of their resources (financial, human, material and the like) in the project site that is recognized as a 'melting pot' of all the eritrean ethnic groups.

NUEYS project staff members continue to work side-by-side with the active volunteers from anti-FGM club-members and are doing their utmost to sensitize youths at the site about the dangers of this HCP. The consultant observed that they are employing various strategies and approaches (with more emphasis on the health-risk approach) to curb circumcision in the families of procreation of today's youths. The various partial statistical records within the organization at the zoba does reveal that more than 45,000 youths have already being reportedly reached through the project's activities.

As a final point the consultant's finding does reveal that the project was well thought-out and rationally invested in as it is bringing about enormous change in the project target groups' knowledge, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes. The evaluator is pretty convinced that the project's long-term impact in the youths' mindset, as it stands now, won't be underestimated. Nor would the sustainability of the project at the site be disputed (though the more funding there is from NCA, the better). In this regard, it is also hoped that the project activities shall continue to alter the age-old and culturally embedded practice on the families of the youths in the nearby future.

## **Recommendations**

- More IEC materials for awareness raising (particularly brochures, ToT reference materials, and videos) have to be prepared and distributed to the club-members so as to assist them to perform their duties effectively and efficiently. Moreover, as many of the leaflets/brochures/ are prepared in Tigrigna language, they should be translated into the other Eritrean languages (particularly in Arabic, Tigre and the other ethnic groups' languages where FGM is highly prevalent). Equally important, a reference manual for anti-FGM ToT (along with FAQs and answers) should be prepared and be distributed to all active volunteer project staff members.
- To ensure the effectiveness of anti-FGM sensitization program, efforts should be made to incorporate it in the national curriculum (in such subjects as Life Skills, Family & Consumer Sciences or its equivalents).
- Ethnic diversity of the anti-FGM club members has to be deliberately crafted so as to reach wider audiences during the sensitization and awareness raising campaigns.
- As the club members seem to heavily rely on health-risk approach in their anti-FGM awareness campaigns (perhaps because that strategy is more convincing and less intricate or owing to lack of other means of addressing the inexcusable cultural rite), campaigners should also incorporate the human right aspect of it. In this regard, more IEC and other reference materials seem particularly needed. As employing the human right approach in the anti-FGM activity seems more abstract and slightly beyond the capacity of most of the campaigners, this portion of the anti-FGM campaign activity has to be taken up by either of the following resourceful people:
  - i. Zonal Project Coordinator;
  - ii. Sub-zonal NUEYS staff-members; or
  - iii. Volunteer teachers at WYSS.
- While raising students' awareness about the harmful FGM rite (as an extra curricular activity) should be applauded, NUEYS & NCA should also look for other prospective partners and stakeholders who are interested in improving women's health status, family planning and reproductive health issues (such as NUEW, UNFPA, FCI, FRHA, WHO, UNICEF... etc) and attempts should be made to harmonize their activities, programs and resources. Such harmonization of various stakeholders should also strive to resolve possible prospective conflicts and duplication of activities in the project site.
- To make anti-FGM efforts fascinating and attract more audiences, it would be advisable to offer it side-by-side with other similar activities such as life-skills, family planning, HIV/AIDS and the like. In this sense, NUEYS/NCA should look for and work with many prospective partners to achieve the desired behavioral changes in similar areas.

- As the anti-FGM IEC room is slightly located at a distant place (and seems out of reach for many students/teachers other than those who are active anti-FGM club members), every means and ways should be explored to transfer it to the nearby location near the WYSS library or else it should be located in the students' compound where most of them are located. Furthermore another IEC room should be established that cater information services to NAVCOT students. Correspondingly, both IEC rooms should be well furnished with IEC materials and its equivalents so that the project activities could easily be sustained even if funding is terminated.
- The anti-FGM activities carried out at Sawa ought to be more inclusive and should reach wider audiences indiscriminately. It is the suggestion of many club-members and zonal and sub-zonal project staff members that the anti-FGM activities should also incorporate EDTC members, civil servants (particularly house- maids in the project site), the wider community in the nearby areas and perhaps stretch it even further to youths at higher educational institutes.
- It is highly recommended that both NUEYS central and zonal anti-FGM project coordinators document each and every activity of the volunteers. In this regard, it is important that there should be sufficient box files and other information retrieval tools to save the project activity documents (including a copy of drama scripts, poetry, debating themes, general knowledge questions, and all above).
- As a gesture of appreciating their contribution and role as well as to facilitate their day-to-day activity in the anti-FGM program (both at the project site and beyond), it would be helpful to give membership cards to all the active NUEYS volunteers working in the project.
- As per the consultant's observations the mass media (particularly the local *'FM Radio Sawa'*) is not exploited by youth in anti-FGM campaigns and other health-related issues. He calls for optimally exploiting this very important resource. Also the national mass media has to play its critical role in allocating a certain portion to combating this HCP.
- As religious leaders, community elders and parents are the major wielders of social power in the Eritrean community, as in any other patriarchal societies, they should be deliberately, systematically and rigorously sensitized about the dangers of FGM practice.

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