



Press statement 14 May 2015

ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY CYGEN CONFERENCE CALLS FOR END TO FGM

The Commonwealth Youth Gender and Equality Network meeting in Malta has called on Commonwealth Countries to take immediate action to end the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). The Royal Commonwealth Society has brought together young gender specialists and advocates from 22 countries and every region of the Commonwealth to discuss vital gender issues in the lead up to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Malta in November.

Issues discussed have included child marriage, sexual and reproductive health and rights, equal access to education, sexual orientation and gender identity, and governance across all societies. Sexual and reproductive health and rights have been a central theme, with access to services, information and comprehensive sexuality education discussed as major issues to be overcome in Commonwealth states. The issue of FGM has also been discussed, with prevalence high in several Commonwealth countries – standing at 88% in Sierra Leone. FGM has devastating and long-lasting consequences for women and girls, including physical trauma that can manifest in severe health problems such as complications in childbirth, infections and infertility, as well as mental health repercussions. There are around 130 million victims worldwide.

FGM is a harmful practice, and a violation on human rights – including the right to health, freedom from violence, and the right to life when the procedure results in death. FGM is a result of social and cultural norms, and as with other harmful practices that disproportionately affect young girls, it must be eradicated through challenging damaging gender identities. The practice also interacts with poverty: in Senegal alone, the operation to repair fistulas can cost around 1000 Euro in a country where most people earn less than 1 Euro per day.

Girls are often cut between the ages of 1 and 10 years – before they can say no. There is also a huge risk of passing infection including HIV as the procedure is often carried out in unsafe environments with the same equipment used on a group of girls one after another. The conference today stressed the urgent need to educate to create change:

Sengalese singer and campaigner, Diatta Fatou Mandiang (Sister Fa) told the youth network delegates that education of children now is the guarantee of change in the future:

"Those who are 14, 15 years old, who will probably very soon be parents, if they get the right message from the work we are doing, I hope the next generation will be free of FGM. We cannot force women to protect their children, we can only give them the right information and leave the government to give the stick itself."

Lucy Walker, speaking on sexual and reproductive health said:

"As a consequence of learning more about human rights, about what people are entitled to, the right to their bodily integrity... people make that decision to abandon female genital mutilation for themselves."

The CYGEN conference is the first of its type in bringing Commonwealth citizens together to use their common connections across the 53 nation family to form a youth network for change. It's hoped that the outcomes and objectives reached by the youth network will feed into the first-ever Women's Forum at CHOGM in November.

BROADCASTERS, AGENCIES AND ONLINE VIDEO SITES

A free-to-use Video News Release featuring conference highlights is available for download below.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7XVgx5S_NZWNm0xdkNHVmF4NHc/view?usp=sharing

Video format: Quicktime H.264 1080i HD.

Contents:

Interviews with

- Sister Fa, Anti FGM Campaigner and Singer
- Lucy Walker, CYGEM delegate and Orchid Project spokesperson
- Fatima Haase, CYGEM expert facilitator
- Dr Ruth Farrugia, President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, Malta

NOTES TO EDITORS

The CYGEN Conference runs from 13-17 May at the Corinthia Hotel, St George's Bay, Malta. The Royal Commonwealth Society is the oldest civil society organisation in the Commonwealth, established in 1868 to uphold the value and values of the Commonwealth.

RCS Report on 'Hidden Violence in the Commonwealth' can be found at:

<https://thercs.org/assets/Research-/Summit-Booklet-Website.pdf>

RCS Report on 'Building a Constructive Commonwealth Approach to LGBT Rights at:

<https://thercs.org/assets/Research-/LGBTCitizenshipReport-130315-FINAL.pdf>

Contact: Carolyn Jack, COO Royal Commonwealth Society, +44 7718 476 233