

**Classification:** Women's Rights and the Law

**Title of Study:** Mobilizing Networks for Legislation Against Female Genital Cutting in Rivers State, South-South Zone, Nigeria

## Introduction

Female genital cutting (FGC), also known as female circumcision or female genital mutilation, is internationally recognized as a threat to women's health and a violation of their fundamental human rights. FGC is practiced in countries in Africa as well as some communities in Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North America. It survives mainly by the "power of tradition" and culture. Confirmed by a recent study, the prevalence rate for Nigeria remains at about 40 percent, in spite of the country being a signatory on many of the relevant United Nations Conventions that ban FGC, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), ratified by the Nigerian government in 1989.



## Rivers State

Rivers State, in the Niger Delta and South-South Zone of Nigeria, is richly populated

with several ethnic groups who practice unique cultural traditions that were handed down through generations. Many of these groups, including the Ikwerres, Ogonis and Kalabari, have survived for centuries as autonomous political units but share many social, economic, religious and historical ties. With 23 local government areas (LGAs) and the capital city of Port Harcourt, Rivers State has witnessed a tremendous amount of modernization instigated by the booming oil trade. This has resulted in many international oil companies siting their local headquarters in Port Harcourt and oil rigs in several parts of the state. But the opening up of markets has not significantly dislodged or influenced centuries-old practices, such as FGC, which infringe upon the rights of women and adversely affect their health, as well as their economic and psychological well-being.

**Rivers State has witnessed a great deal of modernization, buoyed by the booming oil trade.**

- Circumcision -- the clitoral prepuce or tip of the clitoris is cut away
- Excision -- varies from cutting away (part of) the clitoris and cutting away (parts of) the labia minora
- Infibulation -- involves cutting off the clitoris, the labia minora and (part of) the labia majora

## FGC in Rivers State

A baseline study commissioned by CEDPA in 2001 involved a total of 243 respondents, drawn from 89 communities in eight LGAs. This survey, which replicated the cultural diversity of the state, indicated that 31.3 percent of the communities practiced FGC and 57 percent of respondents actually

participated in the ceremonies. At the time of the survey, 38 percent of respondents indicated that they intended to carry out the procedure on their children. Females undergo FGC anywhere between the ages of one month to 44 years, with a higher incidence rate among women around age 20. The study also showed that circumcision is the more common procedure (67.1 percent), and that FGC is aimed at reducing promiscuity in females and promoting fidelity within marriage.

## Laws and Policies on FGC: The Challenge

The adoption of the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action and the agreements signed by the Nigerian government pledging to improve the status of women within their national boundaries has provided an impetus for concerned women's groups to advocate for legislation on key issues that affect women, such as FGC. In Nigeria, through the efforts of women's groups, FGC has been successfully banned in five states -- Cross River, Edo, Enugu, Ogun and Rivers. However, while legislation has been passed in these individual states, there is still no national policy in place to curb its practice.

### FIDA - Rivers State

The International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Rivers State Branch is a non-governmental association of professional women affiliated with FIDA International, established in the 1940s. With a grant from CEDPA, FIDA-Rivers implemented the Engendering Legislative Issues (ELI) Project. The objectives of this project included: 1) the generation of awareness and support around CEDAW issues; 2) the identification of issues/needs that constrain women at the grassroots level; 3) linking women's grassroots groups with state- and national-level professional networks; and 4) using women's advocacy networks to influence women-friendly policy. The overarching goal was to bring women's issues into the Rivers State legislative agenda through policy and advocacy.



One of the key concerns of FIDA-Rivers was the elimination of harmful traditional practices, such as FGC and other forms of violence against women, through legislation. The issues of early marriage, widowhood and inheritance rights were also areas of focus for FIDA-Rivers.

### Results

The Female Circumcision (Abolition) Law 2000 was signed by the Rivers State Executive Governor, Dr. Peter Odili, on August 17, 2001. The law states in part that "any person who circumcises or allows the circumcision of a female is guilty of an offence and shall on conviction be liable to a fine of N50,000 [approximately US\$500] or to imprisonment for a term of ten years or to both fine and imprisonment."

**"No female shall undergo the practice of circumcision. Such practice is hereby abolished and declared unlawful"**

*-- From the Rivers State FGM Bill  
Passed August 17, 2001*

### How Abolition of FGC was Achieved

FIDA-Rivers played a key role in advancing the legislation abolishing FGC in Rivers State. Historically, other women's organizations attempted to raise awareness about this practice and to seek legislation to curb it. But these women's groups had met with a high level of resistance and therefore halted such campaigns.

Taking its cue from the lessons learned during previous attempts, FIDA-Rivers took a completely new approach -- utilizing the power and strength of networks.

## The Network Approach

Building on the awareness already created by women's organizations, FIDA-Rivers mobilized women's groups to join forces with them on the project. Among the organizations who joined were the National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS) and the Medical Women Association (MWA). Together as a team, the groups formed a network to mobilize support for a bill against FGC.

### **FGC Advocacy Network**

- **National Association of Women Journalists**
  - Provided publicity in the mass media
- **Medical Women Association**
  - Raised awareness on the medical implications of FGC
- **The Adolescent Project**
  - Provided support and resources

Each member of the coalition took up roles and responsibilities based on their area of expertise. While FIDA-Rivers provided the legal technical assistance in the area of bill drafting, NAWOJ provided statewide media coverage of the issue, which generated public interest and support through public hearings and debates. The network relied heavily on NCWS for mass mobilization of its extensive membership and built a critical mass of advocates and supporters across the state. Women in the medical profession also provided facts and information about the health implications of FGC.

## Strategic Advocacy

The network also carried out intensive lobbying and advocacy efforts aimed at the executive level of the government. Visits were made to high-ranking officers in the state including the Attorney General and Minister of Justice, who once held the position of State Chairperson for FIDA-Rivers and was therefore an ally.



*Mrs. Mary Odili (right), wife of the Rivers State Executive Governor, receives FIDA-Rivers advocate, Mrs. Elsie Thompson (left).*

The strategy proved to be so successful that the coalition received direct support from the wife of the Executive Governor, Mrs. Mary Odili; the Attorney General and the Rivers State House of Assembly's Committee on Women Affairs and Social

Development. The alliances forged were so effective that the Ministry of Justice eventually tabled the bill and this gave it some level of importance in the Rivers State House of Assembly.

### **Linking Women's Advocacy Networks with Policymakers**

- **National Orientation Agency**
  - Mainstreamed the FGM issue into government activities at various levels using their networks
- **Ministry of Justice**
  - Co-sponsored the draft bill with FIDA Rivers
- **The State House of Assembly**
  - Formed alliances within the House and worked with advocates

In fact, through the support of the First Lady of the State, the bill was tabled in the House of Assembly as an executive bill. At this juncture, FIDA-Rivers and other members of the network were invited to collaborate with the Ministry of Justice to refine and promote the bill.

## Key Lessons Learned

The participation of NAWOJ in the network proved to be a very important element of the strategy. Every stage of the bill's development was highly publicized. This made it extremely difficult for officials of the Rivers State House of Assembly and other dissenting voices to publicly oppose the bill.

Promotion of the bill to the executive arm of the government lent greater weight to the petition of the network than would have been achieved ordinarily coming from a coalition of women's organizations. But in choosing this strategy, FIDA-Rivers and the network had to first affirm that a cordial and amiable relationship existed between the executive and law-making arms of the government. Otherwise, the strategy could have easily backfired.

## Way Forward

Develop post-legislative strategy for monitoring and enforcement.

Document/disseminate case studies.

Use the FGC model to advocate for other issues.

Scale-up/replicate models in other states.

Strengthen and expand existing ELI networks.

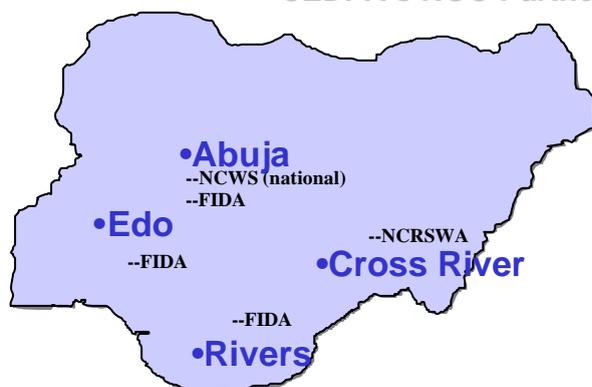
Integrate CEDPA's 100 Women Group networks into the ELI framework.

Build momentum for national-level legislation.

Secure long-term funding for the initiative.

## Engendering Legislative Issues (ELI)

### CEDPA's NGO Partners



**FIDA** -- International Federation of Women Lawyers

**NCRSWA** -- Northern Cross River State Women Association

**NCWS** -- National Council of Women Societies

*The ELI project was implemented under CEDPA's Democracy and Governance Program with funding assistance from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).*

