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DE L'HOMME DU CAMEROUN

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STATEMENT BY THE CAMEROON HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION  
TO MARK THE 17<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ZERO TOLERANCE FOR  
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

6 February 2024

Theme.- *Her Voice. Her Future: Investing in Survivors-Led Movements to End Female Genital Mutilation*

The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (hereinafter: “the Commission”), established by Law No. 2019/014 of 19 July 2019 and rendered operational on 29 April 2021, following the swearing in of its Commissioners before the Supreme Court sitting in Joint Benches,

*Bearing in mind that* Resolution A/RES/67/146, by which the United Nations General Assembly (AG/ONU) proclaimed each 6 February as the *International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation* (FGM), to intensify global action to eliminate the practice,

*Considering* that the commemoration of this year’s *International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation* under the theme “*Her Voice. Her Future. Investing in Survivors-Led Movements to End Female Genital Mutilation*” is fully in line with Sustainable Development Goal 5, which commits States to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and whose target 5. 3 is to end all harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation by 2030, by “*increasing the involvement of survivors in the fight, while continuing to mobilise all other stakeholders to end this scourge*”<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> See Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and the Family, 17th International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, 6 February 2024, 6 pp. spec. p. 1.



**Considering further** that Assembly of the African Union, at its 36<sup>th</sup> ordinary session held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 18 to 19 February 2023, recalled the provisions of the “*la Kinshasa Declaration and Call for Action on Positive Masculinity in Leadership to End Violence against Women and Girls in Africa*”<sup>2</sup> and recognise:

that the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls, including sexual violence in conflict situations and harmful practices, are basic requisites for the attainment of full equality between men and women in all spheres of life, in line with Goal 17 of Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063<sup>3</sup>,

**Bearing in mind** that FGM, which “includes all procedures that consist of altering or damaging the genital organs of women or girls for non-medical reasons”<sup>4</sup>, is considered a violation of the rights of women and girls, particularly their right to health, safety and physical integrity, and their right to life, when these practices have fatal consequences for the victims,

**Recalling particularly** that the effects of the practice include increased health risks for the woman or the girl child, with immediate complications that can cause excessive bleeding, infections such as tetanus, urinary problems, damage to adjacent genital tissues, sexual problems, obstruction of the vagina during childbirth, which can lead to the death of the mother and/or the new-born, and the risk of sterility or psychological disorders. It is therefore necessary to take action to eradicate this harmful practice and to help the women and girls who are victims and who suffer in silence in their families,

**Aware** that FGM has been practised by many peoples and societies throughout history, and that the practice is often seen in affected communities as an initiation of girls into womanhood and as a means of controlling female sexuality,

**Noting** that in some communities around the world, the external female genitalia are considered unclean and/or unsightly, resulting in their removal for hygienic and/or aesthetic reasons<sup>5</sup>,

**Recalling** that those who support the practice claim that FGM “*makes girls socially and culturally acceptable*, [but in reality, it is] *an extreme form of male domination, trivialised by the central role of women in perpetuating the ritual*”<sup>6</sup>,

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<sup>2</sup> Assembly of the Union, Decisions, Declarations, Resolution and Motion, Assembly/AU/Dec. 865(XXXVI), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Assembly of the Union, *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See National Action Plan for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation in Cameroon 2022-2026, 51 pp (spec. p. 7).

<sup>5</sup> See World Health Organization (WHO) / United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), “International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation, Origins and Social Norms”, <https://WWW.figo.org>, accessed on 4 January 2024.

<sup>6</sup> See Michèle DAYRAS, « Femmes (Violences envers les-) » in : Joel ANDRIANTSIMBAZOVINA et al. (dir.), *Dictionnaire des Droits de l'homme*, QUADRIGE, PUF, 2008, pp. 426-431, spec. p. 428



**Bearing in mind** that FGM is one of the forms of gender-based violence, which are generally divided into five categories, namely physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, social violence and economic violence<sup>7</sup>,

**Bearing in mind** the preamble to the Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon of 18 January 1996, which states that “[e]very person has a right to life, to physical and moral integrity and to humane treatment in all circumstances [and under] no circumstances shall any person be subjected to torture, to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment”,

**Considering** that Articles 3 and 4 of the Protocol to the African charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa clearly state that:

[e]very woman shall have the right to dignity inherent in a human being [,] to the recognition and protection of her human and legal rights [...], to respect for her life and the integrity and security of her person [and that] all forms of exploitation, cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment and treatment shall be prohibited,

**Considering** that Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that “[n]o one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”,

**Bearing in mind** that Law No. 2016/007 of 12 July 2016, as amended and supplemented by Law No. 2019/020 of 24 December 2019 on the Penal Code, which strengthens the legal framework for the protection of women against attacks on their dignity or physical integrity, provides in Section 277-1 as follows:

- (1) Whoever mutilates the genital organ of a person, by any means whatsoever shall be punished with imprisonment for from 10 (ten) to 20 (twenty) years
- (2) the penalty shall be imprisonment for life where:
  - (a) the offender habitually carries out such practice or does so for commercial purpose
  - (b) it leads to the death of the victim,

**Considering** that Section 350 of the same Penal Code provides that

the penalties prescribed by Section 275<sup>8</sup>, 277<sup>9</sup> and 278<sup>10</sup> of this Code shall become death and imprisonment for life respectively where the offences are committed against a person under 15 (fifteen) years of age, and the penalties prescribed by Sections 279<sup>11</sup> (1), 280<sup>12</sup> and 281<sup>13</sup> shall be doubled,

**Noting** that such a degrading practice, which violates the dignity of women, is still illegally performed in certain regions of the country, despite the obvious will of the authorities

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<sup>7</sup> See Bernadette Françoise BEKONO (Sub-Director for the Promotion of Women's Rights at MINPROFF), *Analyse situationnelle des violences basées sur le genre au Cameroun*, Communication of 7 November 2023, Hilton hotel, 6 pp., spec. p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Section 275 of the Penal Code punishes murder with imprisonment for life.

<sup>9</sup> Section 277 of the Penal Code punishes grievous harm.

<sup>10</sup> Section 278 of the Penal Code punishes assault occasioning death.

<sup>11</sup> Section 279 of the Penal Code punishes assault occasioning grievous harm.

<sup>12</sup> Section 280 of the Penal Code punishes simple harm

<sup>13</sup> Section 281 of the Penal Code punishes slight harm.



to eradicate it, given the serious consequences of FGM for the sexual and reproductive health and well-being of the victims,

*Noting also* that the practice of FGM in Cameroon takes three different forms<sup>14</sup> namely:

- excision, known as *sunna*, which consists of the ritual or religious removal of part of a woman's or girl's clitoris
- clitoridectomy, which is the complete removal of the clitoris and labia minora; and
- infibulation, which is the religious or ritual mutilation of the female genitalia, consisting of the excision and subsequent suturing of the labia majora to prevent any sexual relations,

*Bearing in mind* that statistics from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family (MINPROFF) indicate a national prevalence of 1.4 per cent of women who have undergone FGM, with the highest prevalence in the Far North (5.4 per cent) and South West (2.4 per cent) regions, followed by the North (2.2 per cent), East (1.6 per cent) and Adamawa (0.2 per cent) regions<sup>15</sup>,

*Noting, however*, that this abhorrent practice is characteristic of certain groups and that, according to MINPROFF, there are differences between categories of women, with the highest proportions among women aged 20-24 (3 per cent), women with no education (5 per cent), women of the Arab-Choa/Fulani/Hausa/Kanuri ethnic group (13 per cent) and in the Far-North (5 per cent)<sup>16</sup>,

*The Commission notes* that, following a study by Monique Barrère<sup>17</sup>,

- 85 per cent of FGM cases involve excision, 4 per cent involve clitoridectomy and 5 per cent involve infibulation
- depending on local custom and practice, girls are cut either before they develop secondary sexual characteristics, during puberty or at the time of first childbirth, rarely a few days after birth
- in almost half of the cases, FGM was carried out on girls between the ages of five and nine, about one in five on girls between the ages of 10 and 14, one in twenty on children over the age of 14, and one in five on women in early childhood, i.e. before the age of five

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<sup>14</sup> See Grégoire DJARMAÏLA, « Mutilations génitales féminines : au-delà des discours », article published in *Cameroon Tribune* of 28 February 2023, on-line, <https://www.cameroon-tribune.cm/article.html/55438/fr.html/mutilations-génitales-féminines-au-dela-discours>, accessed on January 31, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> See *Cameroon Tribune* No. 12800/8999 of Tuesday 28 February 2023, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> See Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family, *Cameroon, country gender profile*, November 2020, pp. 144, spec. p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> See Monique BARRÈRE, "Chapter 13 - Excision", in *Cameroon, Demographic and Health Survey 2004*, National Institute of Statistics and al, Maryland, USA, June 2005, 479 pp, (pp. 235-242), spec. p. 237.



- in the vast majority of cases (89 per cent), the excision was performed by a traditional practitioner, who was either an excisor in 77 per cent of cases or a traditional birth attendant in 8 per cent of cases
- excisions performed by health professionals remain minimal at 4 per cent<sup>18</sup>,

*The Commission is pleased* with the range of activities related to the fight against gender-based violence (GBV) in which it participated during the period under review namely:

- the *workshop to improve the draft law on the protection of women and girls against GBV*, organised by MINPROFF in Kribi, on 29 November 2023
- the ceremony to launch the drafting process of the preliminary draft law against gender-based violence (GBV), at the Yaoundé Hilton Hotel, on 7 November 2023
- the official launch ceremony of the project “*Women, Peace and Security in Central Africa*”, organised by the *Association for combating violence against Women (ALVF)* in Yaoundé, on 7 November 2023
- the round table on 17 January 2024 in Yaoundé, as part of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence campaign, on the theme of synergies and innovative ways to reduce gender-based violence (GBV), in partnership with Women on the Move for Equal Development (WOMED), with support from *Care International Cameroon* and *Féministes en Action*

*The Commission* expresses satisfaction with the feedback from public administrative entities to the recommendations brought to their attention in its previous statement to mark the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM on 6 February 2023, in particular:

- the Ministry of Basic Education, which has undertaken to make appropriate use of the CHRC’s statement to implement it diligently in line with the mandate of the Ministry
- the Ministry of Territorial Administration, which has undertaken to make appropriate use of the concerns raised, particularly those concerning the elimination of all forms of FGM, by the relevant services of the Ministry
- the Ministry of Higher Education, which has undertaken to raise awareness among students, about addressing violence against women in general, and FGM in particular, both within this Ministry and in state universities and private higher education institutions,

*The Commission commends* the efforts of the Government and its partners to combat gender-based violence, particularly FGM, through:

- the organisation of a workshop in Yaoundé on 29 November 2023 by the Spanish Embassy in Cameroon, in partnership with the Centre for Research in Peace, Environment and Governance (CREPERG) and the LAPERCHE Association, as

<sup>18</sup> See Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and the Family, *op. cit.*, p. 53.



part of the 16 days of activism to end violence against women, under the theme “Facing violence against women: Break the silence!”<sup>19</sup>,

- the organisation of training workshops for investigators and supervisors on data collection tools for mapping services for survivors of gender-based violence in Maroua, in the Far North Region, from 30 August to 1 September 2023, on the joint initiative of MINPROFF and the Cameroon Representations of the World Bank and the United Nations Population Fund
- the donation by MINPROFF, with the support of the Chinese Embassy in Cameroon, of a plough tractor to 250 female excisors in the Far North Region on 6 February 2008 at Yaounde to encourage them to give up mutilation in favour of agricultural activities<sup>20</sup>;
- raising public awareness during the Youth Day Parade on 11 February 2023 at the Mora Festival Square, by a group of young people holding up banners with messages and slogans against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)
- the organisation on 6 February 2023 by the Cameroon office of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), in partnership with the association *Local Youth Corner Cameroon (LOYOC)*, of an awareness-raising campaign against female genital mutilation, with the support of young people and artists who used appropriate communication channels to reach nearly 83,000 people, in particular parents, adolescents and young people in and out of school and in the digital environment
- the assignment of peer educators to the Centre (in Yaoundé and Soa), Far North (in Maroua and Mora), North-West (in Bamenda) and South-West (in Buea) Regions on 6 February 2023 to raise awareness among teachers, pupils, students and other education stakeholders about harmful practices and the consequences of FGM
- a fundraising event on 14 January 2023 in Yaoundé by the *Femme de valeur et distinction* Foundation (FEVADIS) in partnership with the Yaoundé VI Council for the construction of a reintegration and care centre for victims of FGM,

*The Commission, however*, is still concerned about the persistence of certain excision centres, particularly in Logone and Chari, where the ALFAN association has recorded around 250 excisors for the period 2022-2023 in the 10 Sub-Divisions that comprise the Division,

*The Commission deplores* that excisors in the Far North have not received any financial support for the maintenance of the tractor received from MINPROFF, which poses a risk of them resorting back to such an inhumane practice for survival,

*The Commission notes and deplores* the that climate change is exposing the population to increased risks of poverty and famine, particularly in the Adamawa, Far North

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<sup>19</sup> See [http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es.SalaDePrensa/RedesSocial/Document/NORMAS0%20USO%20TWITTER%20Y%20FACEBOOK\\_2.pdf](http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Portal/es.SalaDePrensa/RedesSocial/Document/NORMAS0%20USO%20TWITTER%20Y%20FACEBOOK_2.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> This donation was carried out at the initiative of the ALFAN association, based in Kousséri, in the *Logone and Chari Division*. See Input from the CHRC Regional Branch for the Far-North, in the preparation of this statement.



and North Regions, which encourages violence against women and the girl child, who are forced to accept their precarious socio-economic conditions and undergo FGM under conditions of technical and operational weakness of traditional excisors, compromising the management of injuries and subsequent medical complications,

*The Commission recommends* that public authorities should:

- further raise public awareness of the harmful consequences of FGM
- intensify awareness-raising campaigns in communities where FGM is practised, through educational talks, conferences, round tables and the involvement of community media, in both official and local languages, especially in rural areas where literacy rates are low and FGM is recurrent
- increase investment in survivors and FGM survivor-led associations
- incorporate training modules on GBV, and FGM especially, into Cameroon's formal education system,

*The Commission* reiterates its recommendation to traditional chiefs and community leaders, made in the 6 February 2023 Statement to mark the 16th International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM, for them to change customary practices that support or condone FGM and eliminate stereotypes that legitimise violence against women,

*The Commission, however,* stresses the need to continue raising awareness among young girls and women of the harmful consequences of FGM on their sexual and reproductive health,

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For its part, *the Commission will spare no effort* to promote and protect the rights of girls and women who are victims of all forms of violence, through training workshops, awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy, fact-finding missions, handling of complaints, self-initiated investigations for the total eradication of FGM, and as part of under the prevention of torture, through visits to all places of detention, including through its toll-free number **1523**, (free call, even without airtime).


#### Useful CHRC addresses

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Yaounde, 5 February 2024

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