**Religious leaders in Puntland raised their voice in support of birth pacing and addressing GBV, including abandonment of FGM/C**

On the 16th of June 2013, 25 prominent religious leaders (imams and sheikhs) attended a five days meeting at the the Ministry of Women, Family and Social Affairs (MOWFSA) to come up with messages on gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, including abandonment of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and promotion of birth spacing.

During the first two days, the religious leaders reviewed verses from Qur’an (*the Muslim Holy Book*) and Ahadith (*pieces of information of religious nature based on statements or actions of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH narrated either in a small quantity or large*) to come up with messages related to GBV issues and birth spacing in the legacy of Islam.

As result of their thorough review, interpretation and deliberations imams and sheiks succeeded in drawing a fine line between the true religious values and principles and old traditions, including cultural aspects (e.g. FGM/C practice in the pre-Islamic era).

Over the next three days, the religious leader worked on developing their own messages with references to either Qur’an or Ahadith.

UNFPA Representative, Mr. Cheikh Tidiane Cisse and Minister of Women, Family and Social Affairs, Ms. Halimo Haji Elmi attended one of the sessions of the meeting. Mr. Cheikh Tidiane Cisse noted that religious leaders and scholars are respected and trusted by both the society as a whole and in their respective communities, and therefore, can guide their communities using the right interpretations. He also emphasized that sometimes people without proper religious background and knowledge talk on behalf of imams and sheikhs, interpreting the religious texts in a way that are not conformity with the Islamic values and principles. Mr. Cheikh Tidiane Cisse congratulated the imams and sheikhs for their courage and commitment to serve their people thru addressing the topics of the meeting.

As a result the five days consultation meeting the religious leaders came out with the following selected key messages:

1. Islam promotes two years of breastfeeding as a way of ensuring the health and wellbeing of infants and children that can also be referred to birth spacing.

والوالدات يرضعن أولادهنّ حولين كاملين.

1. Islam prohibits gender-based discrimination and violence against women and girls

* قال تعالى ( ياأيها الدين أءمنو لايسخر قوم من قوم عسى أن يكونو خيرا منهم ولا نساء من نساء عسى أن يكن خيرا منهن) في سورة الحجرات الأية(١

1. There is no single verse in Quran that obligates Muslims to circumcise their daughters, but Qur’an emphases that human are created in best nature and structure (one of the key messages addressing FGM.C):

* قال تعالى ( لقدخلقنا الإنسان في أحسن تقويم) في سورة التين الأية(٤)

1. Rape and sexual gender based violence are haram in Islam, which means it is not accepted, and if it happens it must be properly prosecuted.

* قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم:المسلم على المسلم حرام دمه وماله وعرضه" متفق عليه

Two participant of the meeting – prominent sheikhs can be qualified as champions on GBV and birth spacing, as in the immediate aftermath of the meeting they accompanied the Minister of Women, Family and Social Affairs, Ms. Halimo Haji Elmi during her visit to the rural areas to assess the overall situation of women there. They were expected to facilitate the needs assessment exercise, delivering statements on the rights of women in Islam, human rights and importance of birth spacing.

The messages developed by the religious leaders will be used during subsequent awareness raising and advocacy initiatives on promoting birth spacing and addressing GBV, including FGM/C. Over the next three month - July-September, 2013, MOWFSA envisages disseminating the messages through Somali international TV and radio channels as well as websites.

**Media coverage**

<http://saadaalnews.com/2013/06/19/dhagayso-wasaarada-haweenka-puntland-oo-maanta-garowe-kulan-kula-qadatay-hayado-caalami-ah/>

<http://www.kalshaalenews.com/?p=24959>

<http://www.allradiogaalkacyo.com/2013/06/20/dhagayso-wasiirada-haweenka-horumarinta-arimaha-qoyska-puntland-oo-ka-hadashay-kulan-ka-dhacay-magalada-garoowe-oo-looga-hadlayey-tacadiyada-haweenka/>