

# FAIR TRADE FOR Women's Health

INTERVIEW BY ROSE HYDE INTERVIEWEE ABIDÉ AWESSO

Since 2006, Alaffia has funded maternal health care for disadvantaged women in our fair trade supplier communities in West Africa. In 2012, we expanded the program to ensure prenatal and delivery care are available specifically to women who have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM). Abidé Awesso, a licensed midwife and director of our maternal program at the time, identified FGM as the leading contributor to pregnancy and birth-related complications and deaths in the Bassar region of Togo. At first, our goal was to make sure these women got the care and support they needed to have a healthy pregnancy and delivery, but after the first year Abidé convinced us of the additional benefit of conducting FGM eradication and awareness activities in our communities.

Last year, I sat down with Abidé to talk about our FGM program and asked her to give a little background on the practice in Togo, and why the work Alaffia is doing in the communities is so important to women's health now and in the future. These are excerpts from our conversation:

## CAN YOU SPEAK A LITTLE ABOUT THE HISTORY OF FGM, OR "EXCISION" AS IT IS KNOWN IN TOGO, IN THE BASSAR REGION?

Excision can happen in any of the ethnic groups in Bassar. There is no age for excision; it can be done from birth to eighteen. It is usually due to tradition, to prevent the woman from desiring men other than her husband. The older

women in the communities perform FGM on their children and grandchildren because it is believed that they will find better husbands.

## WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF FGM FOR THE GIRLS/WOMEN?

We midwives see that excised women often have problems during childbirth. When an excised woman comes to the hospital to give birth, we know that the scarring from excision will impede the stretching of the vagina, which complicates childbirth. The baby cannot come out, which causes fatal oxygen deprivation for the baby, and the baby dies or is disabled. When a woman forces the baby out, it is she who will tear, suffer and possibly die either from bleeding or infection.

## HOW DOES ALAFFIA APPROACH FGM AWARENESS OUTREACH IN THE COMMUNITIES?

To help these women, Alaffia organizes awareness training on the dangers and consequences of excision. From time to time, we go from house to house to talk to women individually, because when we train in a group, they are ashamed to ask questions. In her own house, a woman can freely ask questions and tell us what

happened when she was excised. We always conduct awareness training on the consequences of excision, including the physical consequences of infection, sterility and even death, as well as the psychological consequences of shame and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

## HOW HAVE ALAFFIA'S ACTIVITIES BEEN RECEIVED IN THE COMMUNITIES?

In the beginning, we saw a lot of resistance, especially with the older women who thought that we were judging their traditions. Now that their daughters and granddaughters have been saved, their attitudes are changing. Actually, many people have understood why they should no longer excise women. We even have young men explaining to community elders that they do not want this to happen to their wives.

## DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER THOUGHTS YOU WANT TO TELL US ABOUT FGM?

In Togo, we have seen that there are too many maternal and infant deaths because of FGM and poverty. We are encouraged to see young people changing their minds about FGM. We also see that women, who have their own money from participating in the fair trade collectives, are making the decision to refuse FGM, for themselves and for their daughters. So, we are hopeful and encouraged that we will eventually be able to reduce FGM to 0% in Togo.

