

Chapter 12

ADDRESSING FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION IN GERMANY

The Work of the Women's Rights Organization Terre des Femmes and the Situation in Germany

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Abstract: Terre des Femmes is a women's rights organization, whose name translates as "Women's Earth." Terre des Femmes is committed to the problem of female genital mutilation in Germany.

1. INTRODUCTION

The German public was first confronted with the problem of female genital mutilation (FGM) in 1977, when articles on the subject were published in the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, as well as in the excellent publication of the feminist movement, *Emma*. In 1978, a very detailed and blunt article by Fran Hosken was published in *Courage* magazine. People who read the magazine were shocked, uncomprehending. Nobody could believe it, moreover, nobody wanted to believe it. People would have preferred to be spared hearing about the issue. This is why the feminists who wanted to campaign for the abolition of female genital mutilation were not welcomed with open arms. At first, their voices fell, for the most part, on deaf ears.

2. WALKING A TIGHT ROPE

One major reason for the lack of interest was the blunt and rather simplistic way in which the issue was presented. This could be why many

people balked at the subject: it was less a matter of ignorance and more a matter of self protection. The feminists wanted to stir up people's awareness as powerfully as possible in sincere solidarity with the girls and women affected. For the mass media, however, the issue was tailor made — and apparently still is — for boosting circulation and viewing figures with gore and sensationalism. This counterproductive and sensationalist reporting made the work of FGM activists even harder. Now they also had to fight deliberate disinformation, burgeoning resentment, racist tendencies, and voyeurism. Early public relations work on the issue was like walking a tightrope. Gradually, with time, this was taken in stride. A dynamic learning process was set in motion, and this is reflected in particular in the work of Terre des Femmes. Terre des Femmes is concerned with presenting the issue in all its complexity but without playing it down. It is not a neutral issue; female genital mutilation is viewed as a severe violation of human rights. In the case of doubt, however, priority goes to the dignity, interests, and opinions of those directly affected by FGM. Problems that are “foreign” in one society — one could even say “alienating” — can only be discussed and questioned in a dialogue of equals.

3. A DIFFICULT DIALOGUE BEGINS

The dialogue between the European and black African activists, who joined the anti-FGM movement at a later date, was very difficult and, at first, recriminatory. African activists felt they were not properly represented and that their voices were not being heard. In 1999, during this difficult period, a voyeuristic poster campaign was launched against FGM, which led to a public stigmatization of African women living in Germany and helped increase the already latent racism. This campaign widened the gap between European and black African activists. Another disastrous result was that, now, the “white” organizations were apparently no longer qualified to deal with the issue. This had a serious impact on Terre des Femmes. The wounds and resentment were difficult to heal, and we only really have overcome them in the past two years.

4. A KEY ISSUE

FGM has always been a key issue at Terre des Femmes, ever since its creation in 1981. Since then, we have become the foremost FGM information center in Germany. The type and scope of the incoming queries are as varied as the origins of the senders themselves. They range from

individuals, who are interested in the issue for personal or professional reasons, to representatives of the media or of various organizations and governmental offices, and to those affected by FGM themselves. In 1995, women volunteers from all over Germany got together to form an FGM study group under the auspices of Terre des Femmes. This group meets twice a year to share information, to network, and to plan joint activities. In 1997, the Terre des Femmes office recruited a full-time expert. With her help, work that had previously been performed by volunteers became more professional.

5. PROVIDING INFORMATION

Our work to abolish female genital mutilation is based first and foremost on information. We draw people's attention to the problem, lobby politicians, educate, and try to drum up the solidarity and support of as many people as possible to make our efforts even more effective and intensive. To do so, we use all the means at our disposal. For example, we regularly publish articles on the issue in the Terre des Femmes magazine, *Menschenrechte für die Frau* (Human Rights for Women), with reports on new developments or grassroots projects sponsored by Terre des Femmes. In addition to flyers for public relations work, we have also published a brochure for women immigrants entitled "We want to protect our daughters." We based this on a French brochure that has been used successfully in prevention work for many years. This collaboration gave us valuable experience and, at the same time, demonstrated how two European countries work together to abolish female genital mutilation. The brochure is aimed at prevention in Germany, informing women, German legislators, and international conventions. The brochure is available in six languages:—German, English, French, Arabic, Somali, and Kiswahili.

We also have published two books on the subject, with contributions from African, European, and American experts on FGM to allow people who are interested but have no previous knowledge of the subject to get the facts. The first book was published in 1999 and was immediately sold out. The second book, published in 2003, is also in demand. Less and less literature is available on the subject in German. This is all the more surprising since relatively large numbers of people are now interested in it. We can thank Waris Dirie's book, *Desert Flower*, for a major part of the interest in the subject. It was featured on the best-seller list for a long period of time and had a very broad impact.

Our website is updated regularly. There, besides plenty of information and numerous links, are listed the addresses of centers for those affected by

FGM and, unique in Germany, international guidelines for health workers. We have organized several touring exhibitions, most of them showing photographs, but one showing paintings, entitled “Female Genital Mutilation: Nigerian Artists Speak Out.” Another notable example is our short film, “A Very Special Day,” which has no dialogue. It tells the story of an African mother, living in Germany, who has made all the arrangements for the circumcision of her daughter. Suddenly, she remembers the pain of her own circumcision and, in the end, spares her daughter the operation. Terre des Femmes placed great importance on the fact that the film, which was produced by the Munich Film Academy, should be neither shocking nor voyeuristic. The filmmakers met these requirements. To date, the film has been featured on the supporting bill in over 150 cinemas in more than 100 towns and cities. By Germany’s standards, that is a significant social sponsoring.

We also hold numerous talks on the issue, organize seminars, workshops, vocational continuous education courses, and panel discussions. We work with schools and universities, youth welfare departments, midwifery schools, and with the Federal Office for the Recognition of Foreign Refugees. We frequently collaborate with other organizations and especially welcome the chance to work with activists from Africa. We continuously train people in expert meetings and are part of national and international networks.

6. LOCAL INITIATIVES

We support local initiatives, sponsoring three grassroots projects in Burkino Faso, Tanzania, and Kenya. All three projects were initiated by local people and are managed by them. Direct involvement is not part of the project philosophy of Terre des Femmes because nobody is better qualified to enlighten people than those concerned with their own ethnic group. This is why we restrict our work basically to fund-raising or passing on information, if it is requested.

Luckily, women’s rights organizations such as Terre des Femmes today are no longer alone in their commitment. Now, all human rights activists in Germany, male and female alike, agree that female genital mutilation should not be portrayed as a cultural tradition worthy of conservation but that as a violation of human rights specific to women that must be abolished.

The international movement against FGM for decades was impeded by accusations of cultural imperialism and “Eurocentricity.” The first opponents of the practice in Germany, the feminists, were thereby silenced. In the late 1970s, so-called “progressive” circles attacked these early activists as racist and “Eurocentric.” The subject continued to be sensitive in Germany.

When Terre de Femmes took up the issue in 1981, it too was attacked. This situation changed little up to the mid-1990s. Public relations work proved difficult and bore little fruit. Even the outcome of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, which, for the first time, firmly anchored FGM in the human rights debate, bore no results for many years. Despite Terre de Femme's 1997 estimate that at least 21,000 women in Germany were affected, the message was always the same: Africa is a long way away. There are no publicly known cases. Therefore, there is no need to act.

Only in 1997 did the issue gain greater public notoriety, with the hearing initiated by the Bündnis90/Green party in collaboration with Terre des Femmes, entitled "A pain that touches the soul." One year later, the parliamentary factions for the first time expressed an opinion on the subject, judging that female genital mutilation constituted a serious violation of human rights and severe bodily harm.

From then on, society in general began to move and the issue became more widely known. But the real breakthrough among the general public came with Waris Dirie's autobiography, which was published in Germany in 1998 under the title *Desert Flower* and was read by people of all age groups. Moreover, in March 1999, a report on German television shook many people and put the whole issue in a new light. It was reported that an Egyptian doctor, based in Berlin, was prepared to practice FGM on young girls for the price of 610 euros. The investigation was abandoned due to lack of evidence and also because police intervention came too late. Public interest, however, was aroused.

7. FGM A NEW ISSUE

Female genital mutilation only became an issue in Germany in 1997, which explains why Germany is lagging behind other Western nations on FGM. FGM gradually gained the attention of German society. This resulted in the creation of other associations, which, like Terre des Femme, took up the issue. The most notable of these include FORWARD Germany and INTACT. With Terre des Femmes, they form the core of the anti-FGM movement in Germany. Other associations that are working to combat the practice include DAFI, G.R.A.F., and "stop mutilation."

Each of these associations has chosen to focus on different methods in their struggle against FGM, which has created an important synergy effect. Terre des Femmes concentrates primarily on public relations work in Germany, while INTACT places more importance on supporting projects in

Africa. FORWARD Germany, as an Afro-German organization, strives to contact immigrants and represent their interests.

Virtually at the same time, from around 1998 onwards, organizations and church institutions began to combat the practice in their development work in Africa, mainly because donors put pressure on them to do so.

After the change of government in 1998, the new SPD Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development put FGM high on her list of priorities, and for the first time provided a budget of one million euros to combat the practice. Just one year later, GTZ, the German Agency for Technical Cooperation, set up the “Fostering Initiatives for the Abolition of Female Genital Mutilation” project. A total staff of three women executes the Ministry’s policy on FGM and is doing an excellent job. GTZ currently supports projects in Ethiopia, Benin, Burkino Faso, Guinea, and Mali.

8. NETWORKS

Two networks exist in Germany today. One, set up in 2000, encompasses organizations that support anti-FGM projects in Africa. These meet once a year to share information about good practices and experiences in the field. The second network, created in 2002, brings together organizations that concentrate on public relations work in Germany. Terre des Femmes is represented in both networks. Some German organizations, including Terre des Femmes, FORWARD Germany, and DAFI, also work within the European Network for the Prevention of FGM.

9. DEFICIENCIES

One example of a deficiency is the lack of counseling for immigrants. The first FGM counseling office was set up in 2001, with funding from the state of Berlin and the support of Terre des Femmes. Two African women were recruited as counselors. Just as the office was established, however, it closed last year, owing to lack of funds.

Although at least 24,000 women and 6,000 endangered girls are living in Germany today, there exists only one official FGM counseling office in Frankfurt, where a Kenyan healthcare worker offers counseling six hours a week. The project is a huge success. It not only deals with the FGM issue but also with the problems of illegal immigrants. Unfortunately, owing to lack of funding, and probably also lack of awareness, the idea has not caught on.

10. MEDICAL CARE AND PREVENTION FOR FGM

Medical care for immigrants who are affected by FGM is also lacking. This is of vital importance in western societies. We owe it to these women and young girls to give them appropriate medical treatment. Secondly, it is our duty to do active prevention work. Healthcare workers play an important role here, which they cannot fulfill without proper awareness of the issue.

Unfortunately, FGM is not part of the prescribed curriculum of medical studies. This means that it is up to the commitment of individuals and NGOs to make it an issue. When healthcare workers are actually confronted with the problem, they often have no idea what to do and ask insensitive and unnecessary questions, which is upsetting for the women and girls concerned. We note on the positive side, however, that there are now committed, informed doctors and midwives who do have knowledge of FGM. They also know more about the organizations that work in this field. As a result, Terre des Femmes is increasingly called upon to provide counseling and to supply targeted information and contacts.

11. THE RIGHT OF ASYLUM

German legislation on the right of asylum is also deficient. It is among the most complicated and confusing in the world. It, therefore, is impossible here to give a brief, concise summary of the basic legislation and of developments in recent years in relation to FGM. In short, under the German Constitution, political asylum cannot be granted on the grounds of female genital mutilation. Depending on the case, right of residence or a short-term residence permit on humanitarian grounds may be granted. Judgments, however, are inconsistent. Similar cases may be interpreted differently, which is an intolerable situation for the women and girls concerned. Certainly, German courts have become more aware in recent years of the fact that FGM is life-threatening, and many judges try at least to establish a humanitarian right to residence. The situation, however, remains unsatisfactory and the German government is far from fulfilling its duty to protect women and young girls.

12. FGM ILLEGAL

FGM is punishable under paragraph 223 onwards of the Criminal Code by up to ten years imprisonment in special cases, even if the person concerned was willing. In these cases, the fundamental right of religious

freedom is secondary to the fundamental right of freedom from bodily harm. To date, no such case has ever come before a German court. There are frequent suspicions and rumors of FGM. None have ever been reported to the police, however, and no legal proceedings have ever been undertaken.

Terre des Femmes has achieved a lot, but there is still much to be done. That is why NGOs like Terre des Femmes will remain committed to combating female genital mutilation in the years ahead and will continue to fight for the right of freedom from bodily harm.

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