

Fulda Professor Combats Genital Mutilation in Kenya

Project achieves amazing success by educating and training multipliers and doing without paternalism / Focus on the needs of affected girls



BILD: CENTER FOR PROFS

Muthgard Hinkelmann-Toewe with a former circumciser, who has given up her occupation and is now involved in the fight against genital mutilation.

BY CARLA IHLE-BECKER (FULDA)

A professor who taught for many years at the University of Fulda has been successful in fighting cliterodectomy among the ethnic in Kenya heretofore known for its obstinate adherence to this cruel ritual. Despite repeated calls by the United Nations for 'Zero Tolerance for Genital Mutilation', some 3 million girls annually are physically and emotionally crippled by circumcision in most parts of Africa and some Arab countries, as has been the case for centuries. The reason? Men won't marry uncircumcised women, because they see the extinction of female sexual pleasure as a guarantee of fidelity. Things are different in western Kenya: among the Kisii ethnic group, 4,000 girls of circumcision age now celebrate their integrate state at a huge festival, circumcisers are abandoning their occupation and local teachers provide well-informed instruction in female anatomy. Was this some sort of miraculous conversion? Not at all, according to Professor Muthgard Hinkel-

mann-Toewe. The success of the project she initiated is also not solely based on effective information on female sexuality. 'Education on Sexuality and Reproduction alone is never enough to change a tradition that is older than any religion'.

Training multipliers

The key to this success is the "Value-Centred Approach" developed by the 65-year-old professor. The project is geared towards the needs of affected girls and women. More respect for women is achieved through reflection on the old structures. The fact that neither men nor the circumcisers are stigmatised or excluded is particularly important. 'Until recently, this was a highly respected occupation', says Hinkelmann-Toewe. Since 2002, the EU-supported project 'Overcoming Female Genital Mutilation' has been training local multipliers such as teachers or clan elders, and has attained model character through its sustainability. It all started in 1985 at the International Women's Conference in Nairobi.

There, the professor met a Kenyan school headmistress who invited the German to her home. After living with Kenyan families and gaining insight into their basic attitudes, she was invited to offer family-planning seminars. 'In general, we only work on invitation'. That was the beginning of the project. 'Kisii came to me and asked for support in creating an environment in which parents could take the courageous decision not to circumcise their daughters'. First, some 200 teachers attending seminars became well-informed opponents of circumcision. One of Hinkelmann-Toewe's colleagues now lives in western Kenya and organises seminars and workshops together with a team. Former circumcisers also gather at the local festival ground and publicly bid farewell to their old occupation at a large ceremony. They wear yellow t-shirts stating, for all to see, 'I was a circumciser and I decided to stop'.

www.fulda-mosocho-project.com