

“Dr. Muthgard” and her convincing project against female genital mutilation



15 February 2006 – FULDA – A professor who taught for decades at the Fulda polytechnic has been successfully working against clitoridectomy with a Kenyan tribe that has previously been considered a hard-line supporter of this brutal ritual. Despite the United Nations’ repeated calls for “zero tolerance for female genital mutilation,” most African countries and some Arab ones today continue to physically and psychologically cripple roughly three million girls each year through this practice, which has existed for centuries. The reason: Men will not marry uncircumcised women.

They consider the destruction of pleasure to be a guarantee of fidelity.

The situation is different in Mosocho division in westernmost Kenya. About 4000 girls of circumcision age in the Kisii tribe have meanwhile enjoyed a large celebration of their physical intactness. The circumcisers have officially abandoned their misogynist profession and the “turned around” teachers of the region are knowledgeably teaching female anatomy.

Is this conversion due to a miracle? Not at all, says Fulda professor Muthgard Hinkelmann-Toewe. The success of the project she initiated is due not only—as people often assume—to effective information on female sexuality being made available. “Educational outreach alone would never suffice to oppose a tradition that is older than any religion.” The brutal custom is still practiced in many places even though the consequences of what many consider a small excision are known to be extremely serious. The women have problems with their self-esteem, with sexuality, pregnancy, and giving birth; the wounds heal poorly and the scars keep opening up.

“We wanted to bring bicycles for the women and they said they couldn’t use them,” reported the social scientist and economist. The “value-centered approach” developed by the 65-year-old Hinkelmann-Toewe was the key to success. It is not supposedly “civilized” white know-it-alls who teach “savage blacks”; instead, the project is oriented toward the needs of the women affected. Appreciation and esteem of women, which had been lacking up to now, is achieved by reflecting on age-old traditional structures.

An essential aspect is that neither men nor the women who professionally perform the circumcisions are stigmatized, ostracized, or considered the “enemy.” “Until recently that was considered a highly esteemed profession,” says “Dr. Muthgard,” as the indigenous population refers to the researcher. The European Union provided start-up financing for the “overcoming female genital mutilation” project, which has been training local multipliers—teachers, chiefs, and clan elders. Its sustainability makes it a model project.

It all started at the World Conference on Women in 1985 in Nairobi. There the professor from Fulda met a Kenyan school principal who invited her to visit her home. After having lived with Kenyan families and getting to know the basic attitudes there, Hinkelmann-Toewe was asked to lead seminars on healthy family planning. “We generally only work if we receive a request.” That is how the Fulda-Mosocho project emerged. “Kisii approached me and asked for support in creating an environment that would allow parents to make the courageous decision not to have their daughters circumcised.”

Educational seminars first served to train around 200 teachers, turning

them into well-informed opponents of female circumcision: “We finally understood. We have to offer women greater respect.” Social education worker Claudia Wegener works with Hinkelmann-Toewe. She has since moved to the area and, with a team of seventeen, organizes seminars and workshops in the Mosocho training center. The former circumcisers, who previously earned their living with a bloody knife, also meet there.

These women have publicly bade farewell to a cruel occupation in a large celebration at the Mosocho fairground. Printed on their yellow t-shirts for everyone to read: “I was a circumciser, but I decided to stop.” The non-circumcised girls also received official certificates welcoming them as full and marriageable members of the Kisii community. For further information [in German], go to <weibliche-genitalverstueummelung-ueberwinden.com>.