

Fulda project in Kenya has already been able to protect more than 1,000 girls from genital mutilation

End of a bloody ritual

From Sabine Schuchardt,
Editorial Staff

Fulda
The name "Fulda" has an especially good ring to it for the women in the Kenyan Kisii District, and no wonder: it is women from the Baroque town who have now helped to save more than 1,000 girls from a fate we can hardly envision in our culture – female genital mutilation. This is when a young girl's clitoris is removed – with unsterile razor blades or broken glass.

Female genital mutilation is a very old ritual. For girls, their circumcision is the most important "festival" in their lives after their marriage, as according to tradition, it makes them into women and they are given the approval of the community. No one tells the girls that circumcision is connected to severe pain. There are many reasons for genital mutilation. A woman who has not been circumcised is often considered dirty and said to have an "uncontrollable desire for sex". This makes it all the harder for an uncircumcised woman to find a marriage partner. There is a taboo on the topic and it is rarely questioned: hardly imaginable when one considers the agony a circumcised woman has to endure all her life. First, the wound takes a long time to heal. The girl's clitoris is cut off without anaesthesia, making sexual fulfilment impossible. She is told that "something nice" is now happening: in fact, the total opposite is true. The operation often takes half an hour; the girl is held still by several women while the circumciser removes the clitoris and, in the worst case, also sews the vaginal opening together to the size of the head of a matchstick. The results are severe pain, infection and bleeding. Menstrual blood and urine can



Claudia Wegener at a team discussion; she works on site in Kenya on the Fulda project "Stop Clitoral Circumcision". Since the project began at the start of February last year, more than 1,000 girls have already been saved from mutilation.

girl's legs are tied together for 40 days so that the wound can heal. Many girls die during the operation. Deformations and scarring mean that the vagina can no longer stretch, either during sexual intercourse or birth. The woman has to be "cut open" again; after the birth, she is "sewn together" again. This means that female genital mutilation is absolutely incomparable with male circumcision.

Changing awareness

In their project "Stop Clitoral Circumcision" the women from Fulda have been working for more than a year alongside the people in Kenya to overcome this terrible tradition. This project emerged from the research and practical project "Women in Kenya" run by Fulda University of Applied Sciences, launched by Dr Muthgard Hinkelmann-Toewe, a professor at the University of Applied Sciences, in 1986 after a trip to Kenya. At that time, the idea for the project

arose and the Fulda funding society "Lebendige Kommunikation" ("Vivid Communication") was founded. Managing Director Ulrike Maschke deals with putting ideas into practice. The project manager on site in the Kisii District (highlands near Lake Victoria) is Claudia Wegener, a qualified social educator. She supports people on their route to making a decision. Nobody is pushed or judged, as she knows that "such deep-rooted traditions can not be changed from above", a reference to the ban on the circumcision of girls issued in 2001 by the Kenyan government. "Nobody sticks to it", she realised. Instead, the girls are already mutilated secretly from four years of age instead of from the age of eight.

Teachers are trained in further-education programmes, and even men in the highest key positions – school directors, mayors and churchmen – support the programme. In role plays, men and boys in particular are sensitised:

they discover the torture and agony the ritual entails. This knowledge is passed on in a kind of snowball system. "Amongst the people, we have met with great interest – even traditional circumcisers are giving up their jobs", Claudia Wegener smiles.

The EU is providing financial support for the project, initially conceived to last three years, and which is also getting a health centre. The women from Fulda would especially like to appeal for donations here in the region, as: "Fulda has become a well-known name in Kenya and it would be nice if our project also become known in Fulda, as that is where it has its origins", the professor reasoned.

Helping with donations

Anyone who would like to make a donation can do so here: Sparkasse Fulda bank, account no. 43510203, bank code 53050180. E-Mail: lebendige-kommunikation@gmx.de.