

Methods for the Prevention of Female Genital Cutting in Finland

Female genital cutting has been known in Finland since the 1990s when asylum seekers and refugees started to arrive to the country. The biggest ethnic group in Finland following the tradition is Somalis. Other smaller groups are from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria. According to a rough estimate there are around 18,000 people in Finland who belong to groups following the tradition of female genital cutting.

Female genital cutting (FGC) continues to be a sensitive issue, and both immigrants and authorities require more information and better tools to be able to address it constructively. Existing legislation and general appeals to human rights form the basis for the work against FGC in Finland. However, top priority should be given to preventive work. Preventive work must begin before any suspicion of a girl being threatened by FGC even arises. For this reason, many different actors require information on questions related to female circumcision, so that they can inform relevant parties of the prohibitive stance of Finnish legislation towards the practice, and intervene in particular cases if necessary.

The KokoNainen Project

The KokoNainen (Whole Woman) project, funded by Finland's Slot Machine Association and coordinated by the Finnish League for Human Rights, was launched in 2002. The main objective of the KokoNainen project is to prevent that any girl living in Finland is circumcised, here or abroad. In order to reach the main goal, three specific objectives have been defined:

- 1) *The immigrants who live in Finland and in whose country of origin the tradition of female genital cutting is upheld are aware of the health hazards, the human rights considerations and relevant Finnish legislation as well as all other factors that may encourage them to abandon the tradition.*
- 2) *Most health care, social and child welfare workers as well as vocational students in these fields have at least basic knowledge of female genital cutting, preventive work and treatment and/or know where to find more information and support if needed.*
- 3) *The work against female genital cutting is organised on a permanent basis in Finland.*

When the main goal is to prevent FGC, you have to be sensitive both to your own culture and the culture of others. Firstly, you have to ask yourself how to question the ancient tradition without questioning the person himself or herself? Secondly, how to draw attention to the fact that FGC is prohibited by Finnish law without adding to the reservations that immigrants may have towards Finnish society? And lastly, the main question, how to achieve a mutually respectful and open dialogue on such a sensitive issue?

Since the outset, the ten-year old KokoNainen project has focused on awareness-raising on the grass-root level. The project has gathered ethnically homogeneous groups in whose country of origin female genital circumcision is practised. The groups have discussed about health in general and how FGC affects the health of girls and women. The work has been successful, with the attitude against FGC having become more negative in the discussion groups.

To reach the main objective, it is very important to increase the knowledge and ability among project staff to handle this very sensitive issue. The two workers of KokoNainen project are not enough to reach the goal of preventing FGC of any girl living in Finland. Therefore, the work against female genital cutting has to be organised on a permanent basis in Finland (objective 3), so that all relevant professionals are educated by the state and municipalities (objective 2). The second objective can only be reached if the third objective has been fulfilled.

The Future

The Ministry of the Interior in Finland in 2008 requested the expertise of the Finnish League for Human Rights regarding FGC in the elaboration of the Internal Security Programme. Subsequently, in 2009 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health assembled a team to elaborate a National Action Plan to prevent FGC. The Action Plan will be completed in the beginning of 2012. When it has been implemented, the second and third objectives will have been fulfilled. The work towards the first objective has to continue for years, until the tradition of FGC is transferred to history.

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