

**Launch of the Innocenti Digest No. 12,
“Changing a Harmful Social Convention: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting”**

POWERFUL CAMPAIGN - UNICEF SWITZERLAND BATTLING FGM/C

Female genital mutilation/cutting calls for immediate action not only in Africa, but also across Europe. As a result of worldwide migration, women who have been mutilated and girls who risk becoming victims of this human rights violation currently reside in European countries as well. In Switzerland alone, one out of seven gynaecologists and midwives have been confronted with an FGM/C victim, as ascertained by a UNICEF survey in 2004. 208 respondents confirmed that they had heard about a case of FGM/C in Switzerland, and, in six cases, healthcare providers were even asked to personally carry out such a mutilation.

“In 2000, UNICEF Switzerland started targeted efforts to address FGM/C in Switzerland. Until then the public considered FGM/C an issue which does not affect Switzerland”, says Elsbeth Müller, Executive Director, UNICEF Switzerland. A survey among gynaecologists, conducted by UNICEF Switzerland, in collaboration with professor Patrick Hohlfeld, President of the Swiss Association for Gynaecology and Obstetrics, produced surprising results. Some 51 percent of the respondents reported that they had been confronted with circumcised women. “The survey not only clearly indicated the occurrence of FGM/C in Switzerland but also the corresponding need for action” says Elsbeth Müller.

The survey prompted UNICEF Switzerland to hold a conference on the subject of FGM/C in Switzerland, in collaboration with the Swiss Foundation for Sexual and Reproductive Health, PLANeS. The conference took place in May 2001 with the participation of various NGOs. Topics included the cultural background of FGM/C, the human rights situation, and the medical and mental consequences of circumcision. The conference resulted in three goals for UNICEF Switzerland which the organisation subsequently met:

1. Compilation of medical guidelines for nursing staff

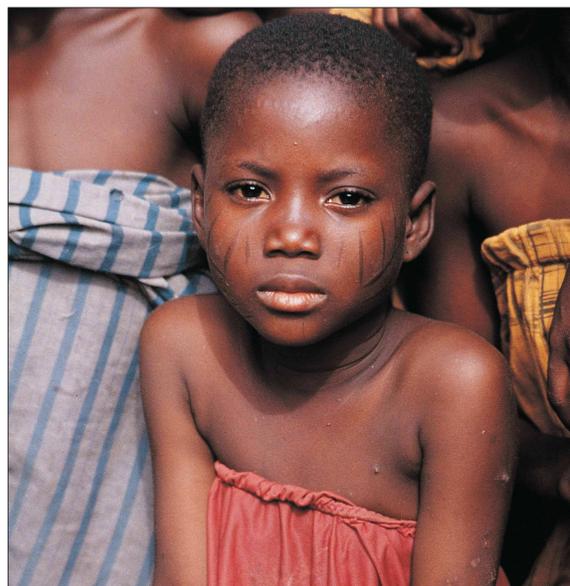
Medical guidelines were elaborated under the guidance of Prof. Patrick Hohlfeld, and in cooperation with non-governmental organisations. These were adopted in early 2005 and published in the “Schweizerische Ärztezeitung”, the prime publication for health professionals. “In view of the fact that Swiss health professionals lack experience with this subject, it became indispensable to elaborate an information brochure containing official medical guidelines for health staff”, says Patrick Hohlfeld.

2. Clarification of the legal situation

“There were also some doubts as to the legal situation in Switzerland. UNICEF Switzerland therefore commissioned a legal opinion as to the consequences Swiss penal law had in store for someone who performed FGM/C”, says Elsbeth Müller. The experts, Professor Stefan Trechsel, former president of the European Commission on Human Rights, and Dr.iur. Regula Schlauri, concluded that “whoever performs FGM/C is liable to conviction for causing grievous bodily harm. This includes parents who send their daughters to their home country for the bloody ritual. The offence is a felony carrying up to 10 years’ aggravated imprisonment”.

3. Information

In order to gain a better insight into the occurrence and practice of circumcision in Switzerland, UNICEF Switzerland conducted a second survey in winter 2004/2005 in collaboration with the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine of the University of Berne and with the support of Professor Patrick Hohlfeld. Besides gynaecologists, midwives, paediatricians, welfare centres were also included in the survey. Not only did the



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survey once again confirm the importance of fighting FGM/C in Switzerland, it also showed that all professions are

confronted with this issue. The survey also revealed a considerable need for information. Members of each of the professions included in the survey strongly suggested the issue to be included into their initial or continued training.

Successful campaigns in 2005

On March 7th, 2005 UNICEF held a European-wide conference on the issue. The conference addressed subjects such as the handling of FGM/C by western countries, approaches to solutions, as well as questions concerning the contentious area of traditions and cultural rights versus human rights. "UNICEF Switzerland's integrated campaign against FGM/C was a great success in more than one respect: the fund raising and public relations elements enabled UNICEF not only to raise funds for UNICEF programmes but also to sensitise the public and the media to the issue", says Elsbeth Müller.

Besides sensitising professional health workers and the Swiss public, the campaign against FGM/C also intended to raise the awareness of the immigrant communities concerned. The campaign revealed that in this respect much closer cooperation with female migrants is required. "One way out of the dilemma are the migrant women who live here" says Anisa Osman, head of a Somali women's group in Switzerland. "What our women need from the people here is knowledge. But women affected by FGM/C have to make an active contribution by deciding which is the best way to overcome the problem. If mothers and daughters become stronger and reduce their dependency, they will be able to say no to circumcision. The necessary self-confidence and means they will get through their own income, their own employment".

The next steps

UNICEF Switzerland will continue its efforts to address FGM/C in Switzerland and much remains to be done. With regard to legislation, a parliamentary initiative for an explicit ban of FGM/C in Switzerland has been submitted which UNICEF Switzerland will accompany professionally. The initiative is aimed at amending the existing legislation. Another step focuses on lobbying in favour of an obligation to report: social workers and health professionals should have a duty to report cases of child abuse. However, the amendment of existing legislation will not work unless it is part of an extensive programme that includes sensitising. Collaboration with women from affected migrant societies and their decision makers and religious leaders, as well as mutual dialogue, are to be furthered and intensified. UNICEF Switzerland will assist in promoting this dialogue.

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