Engaging men in the abandonment of female genital mutilation

Documentation of the panel discussion, GIZ, Eschborn, 6 February 2013
Dialogue, arts and the right language

On the occasion of the tenth International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH organised an afternoon event at its headquarters in Eschborn, which focused on how to engage men in combating FGM. The lively event comprised a panel discussion, a musical performance by the Guinean singer Sayon Bamba and her band, and an exhibition of paintings by Nigerian artist Godfrey Williams-Okorodus and other Nigerian, Burkina Faso and Canadian artists.

‘Men should act as change agents’

Martin Müller, Director of East Africa Division, GIZ

In his welcome address, Martin Müller stressed the important role men play in ending female genital mutilation. Religious leaders, doctors, teachers and politicians in particular have the potential to act as change agents in this process and need to become more involved. He highlighted GIZ’s successful work in combating FGM: since 1999, on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), GIZ has been implementing the supraregional project ‘Ending Female Genital Mutilation’; and, since 2009, an advisory project of the same name. Currently, GIZ is focusing its support on programmes and projects in Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Burkina Faso. One of the biggest successes so far has been the issuing of a fatwa against FGM by a group of religious leaders in Mauritania, which has subsequently been adopted in nine other West African Muslim countries. ‘We are proud to say that success in the fight against FGM is possible, despite a lot of scepticism,’ Müller stated.

‘FGM violates a woman’s personal freedom’

Annette Bähring, Head of the Competence Centre for Key Issues in Good Governance, GIZ

In her presentation, Annette Bähring expressed in unequivocal terms that FGM constitutes a severe and irreversible form of violence against girls and women, harming or destroying all their outer sexual organs and causing psychological damage. ‘There is no doubt that we have to call it a serious human rights violation,’ Bähring affirmed. Apart from injuring the body, FGM also seriously restricts a woman’s personal freedom, as she can
no longer determine her own sexual and emotional life or her personal development. Bähring went on to describe FGM as 'part of the structural inequality between men and women.' That is why the fight against FGM must be embedded in efforts for good governance and gender equality. Bähring also focused attention on several important international conventions relating to the violation of women’s rights, such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979), the Maputo Protocol (The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, 2003), and the UN Resolution against FGM, adopted in December 2012. Furthermore, FGM will be an issue under discussion at the 57th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women to be held in March 2013 in New York City. This will also be an opportunity for GIZ to present its work on combating FGM in West Africa. Bähring asserted that cooperation between state actors and non-governmental organisations is extremely important. GIZ works with Integra, a German network of NGOs fighting FGM, which seeks to protect women and girls at risk of undergoing FGM procedures.

In search of convincing arguments

Guinean singer Sayon Bamba and Nigerian artist Godfrey Williams-Okorodus participated in the panel discussion, alongside Professor Abdoulaye Sow from Mauritania and Dr. Abdoulaye Zono, a GIZ advisor who has worked in Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Monika Hoegen, a journalist who specialises in development issues moderated the discussion. The main arguments put forward by each panelist are presented below.

‘Art is the subtest language for addressing issues like this’

Godfrey Williams-Okorodus, born in 1970, is a Nigerian artist and painter who has dedicated a large part of his work to the struggle against FGM. He created the series ‘Soul Gazers’, 50 portraits of unknown women affected by excision. The backgrounds of these colourful paintings consist of playing cards, symbolising life as it should be: full of joy, colours and lucky streaks. However, each woman’s face is covered by a metal mask, symbolising the blade that destroys her body and life. The women’s faces are kept hidden, which prevents the onlooker from gazing into these women’s souls.

What reactions do you get as an artist to your anti-FGM work?
The reactions are rather mixed. I have shown my work in very different countries, like Nigeria, the United States, Belgium and Germany, and I must say that the audience in the U.S. seems to be more sensitised. In Europe, the work has not received the same kind of attention.
How was the reaction in Nigeria?
A lot of people in Nigeria, especially in the South, don’t know much about the practice, as it mainly takes place in the rural North. This meant it wasn’t so easy to broach the issue with them. That said, I haven’t been openly attacked – that is, except by one Kenyan woman who was angry to see Africa yet again being negatively portrayed. This surprised me. I thought that, being a woman, she would want to engage in the fight against FGM. I told her that we need to communicate with a large audience in order to stop this practice, and I hope I convinced her.

What would be the main arguments to convince men that this practice has to stop?
I think we need various arguments. You see, the reasons for practising FGM are also diverse and differ according to the community involved. Some people think FGM prevents women from being promiscuous; others even think that having a clitoris can affect a girl’s health. So, what we need is ongoing education and information. I think the medical sector can play an important role in combating these completely false notions. That said, we also have to be careful how we tackle the issue. Simply telling people that what they are doing is barbaric will not help. We have to engage in a dialogue with them. We must tell men to talk to women, so they can fully understand what women go through during and after excision. I am sure that, if the man is told the truth or if he is bold enough to ask, he will rethink the issue. Art can also do a lot – it is the subtlest language for addressing issues like this.

Do you think the practice can be eliminated within one generation?
No, I think it will take more time. But there is hope. The generation of grandmothers who transmit FGM procedures is ceasing to be and the younger generation is becoming increasingly critical. I think that moving away from talking about ‘female circumcision’ to instead talking about ‘female genital mutilation’ helps a lot. Men have to fully understand that this is a completely different thing and can in no way be compared to male circumcision.

‘You have to convince people in their own language’

Professor Abdoulaye Sow is an anthropologist who is researching FGM at the University of Nouakchott in Mauritania. He is internationally recognised as an expert on the topic. Abdoulaye Sow has developed a special strategy called ‘cultural counter-argument’ to convince people in his home country and elsewhere that there is no cultural, traditional or religious justification for this harmful practice and to show that it is, in fact, a human rights violation.

Professor Sow, why do you place so much emphasis on the human rights approach for FGM?
We have to understand that the violation of women’s rights is not just the preserve of Africans. Men have always been afraid of female sexuality – all over the world. Women’s rights violations and FGM have nothing to do with religion, culture or tradition. FGM is not, as it is often alleged, an Islamic phenomenon; it already existed in pre-Islamic times, such as in pharaonic Egypt. For anthropologists, these historical connections are evident. When my little daughter was born, I wanted to make sure that no harm would come to her and I made it clear to everyone that she was not going to be excised.
One can imagine that you experienced difficulties because of that decision…
Yes, of course it wasn’t easy. There is social pressure. But what’s important is to talk to people in a way that they can understand. I speak French, but most people living in the parts of my country where FGM is a problem cannot even read or write. In addition, when they practise FGM they are unaware that they are doing something wrong. They think it’s what’s best for the girl and her family. So, when working with communities you have to take these cultural contexts into account.

How does your strategy of ‘counter-cultural argument’ work?
First of all, you have to appeal to reason. For instance, people say that FGM prevents women from having a child outside marriage. I tell them that there is no evidence for this argument; on the contrary, excised women can still have children outside marriage. So, the overall strategy revolves around collecting up these arguments and then formulating counter-arguments. To do this, I first send my students out into the villages to collect villagers’ reasons and arguments in favour of FGM. Back on campus, we then develop the counter-arguments and, prior to sharing them with the public, perform a feasibility test. As a next step, we hold discussions in secondary schools because pupils are normally quite a receptive audience. Engaging with girls’ mothers is more problematic. We also engage with the women who perform excisions and their response is usually that this practice has been their livelihood for generations.

And how many were you able to convince to stop the practice?
Some 10,000 of the 13,000 pupils we worked with were girls and a lot of them had already been mutilated themselves. They decided not to allow this to happen to their daughters in the future. We paid compensation to 234 circumcisers in return for them quitting the practice and no longer passing on their know-how. This is how we are working to cut the chain of transmission. Our counter-cultural arguments were also translated into all of Mauritania’s ethnic languages. Activists in other countries, like Somalia and Ethiopia, are now also using this approach.

‘Men are equally affected - as husbands and fathers’

Dr. Abdoulaye Zono, originally from Burkina Faso, worked as a GIZ expert in Mali and led a project to integrate the topic of FGM into school curricula. His work also consisted of engaging religious leaders in dialogues on FGM and communities in so-called intergenerational dialogues. Currently, Dr. Abdoulaye Zono works on behalf of GIZ in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where FGM is not an issue.

Integrating FGM into school education sounds extremely challenging. What were your experiences in Mali?
Our aim was to integrate the topic into primary school education and to focus in particular on educating girls about it. Subjects like HIV/AIDS and FGM were new topics for teachers and
part of the challenge involved finding teachers who were willing and capable of working in this area. They had to be educated first.

**How can such a sensitive issue – in most cases a taboo subject – be prepared for children to understand?**

We used what we call a ‘sliding’ pedagogical approach. This means that FGM is not expressly addressed at the outset, but rather is brought in while talking about other topics. For instance, we have a session on social mores where we discuss traditional practices. Here, we take the opportunity to ask children if they can think of any traditional customs that have negative effects. Like a shot, children will ask, ‘Can we talk about FGM?’ So this way, they bring up the subject themselves. Of course, at first it’s very difficult. Girls are especially very shy, given that the subject directly relates to their intimate life and some of them are already traumatised.

**How do you avoid coming into conflict with parents?**

Our approach in school is accompanied by intergenerational dialogue in the villages. Of course, we want to avoid a situation where a child comes home from school, tells his or her parents what they have learned about FGM and then has to face any potential repercussions on their own. So instead we organise debates in villages, which are moderated by professional mediators and involve all groups concerned.

**And have there ever been any problems?**

Yes, of course. Some parents have been completely against what we are saying and have quit the discussion. But we still continue the dialogue. For us, it’s important to have mediators who know the community’s arguments and traditional customs really well, and who can discuss these issues with people on the same level.

**What were your biggest successes?**

We talked to almost 8,000 people in around 100 villages. We were able to convince several imams to help us stop the practice. We also made men understand that FGM not only affects women’s lives, but also their lives too – as a couple and as a family. Men are becoming increasingly aware that they are affected both as husbands, because they can’t lead satisfying sex lives with their wives, and also as fathers, because they are supposed to protect their daughters from such violations. They also increasingly understand why their wives suffer so many sexual and health problems as a result of FGM.

Some parents claim they don’t want FGM to be performed on their daughter, but say that relatives pressure them into carrying out the practice...

Yes, this happens. But it shouldn’t be used as a pretext to deny one’s own responsibility as father or mother. Of course, the pressure is there and sometimes the only solution to the dilemma is to relocate to a community where FGM is not practised.

‘We need men fighting alongside us against FGM’

Sayon Bamba is a Guinean singer, who lived in Brussels for some time and is currently based in Marseille. She performs in Europe,
Africa and the U.S. and her music is largely dedicated to the struggle for women’s rights and personal freedoms. Her song ‘Excision’ expresses the outcry against FGM. One of the song’s keywords is ‘regardez’ (‘look’), which incites people to stop turning a blind eye to this serious violation.

Sayon Bamba, on this panel we are joined by men who have all openly campaigned against FGM. Are they the exception to the rule?

First of all, I want to stress that I feel very honoured to meet these men here. But, no, they are not the only ones – perhaps they are just the more courageous ones. In fact, I know more and more men who are getting involved in the struggle against FGM. And, of course, we need to have the men on our side in this fight, especially because girls and women are often too traumatised to be able to talk about the practice.

Isn’t it embarrassing for women affected by FGM to hear men talk in public about such intimate matters – especially when it’s European men discussing this sensitive aspect of African women’s lives?

You see, nowadays, different cultures are increasingly interconnected. I welcome any western man joining us in the fight against FGM. But it all depends on how we talk to each other. It doesn’t help simply coming along and saying: ‘Stop this! I know better than you!’ We need to engage in real dialogue in order to convince people.

Women are suffering from FGM, more and more men are also against the practice – so how come it doesn’t just stop?

It doesn’t stop because it’s still a taboo. It doesn’t stop because the social pressure is still there. If you don’t want your daughter to have an excision, you face a lot of isolation and discrimination in the village. In African society, people depend heavily on each other, so it’s difficult to break the rules and opt out of community duties.

Is that the reason why even girls themselves might want to be excised?

This can also happen because, if they are not excised, they are discriminated against: they are not allowed to play with their friends, not allowed to take water from the same well.

You have your own experience with FGM and the social pressures related to it...

When my sister and I were children, my mother wanted to protect us, but she found it hard to withstand the social pressure. So, one day, she rushed my sister and me into hospital, pretending that we had both been excised. Afterwards, she didn’t let anyone check to see what had really happened. I also did not want this for my daughter. I wanted openly to stand up against FGM. But I was always afraid of leaving her alone when I went travelling. I told my whole family to watch out for neighbours who might try to take her for FGM. I even threatened to set their houses on fire if they ever tried to do it!

What would be your main argument to dissuade someone still in favour of FGM?

Firstly, everybody has to understand that it is, above all, a serious human rights violation. Secondly, people need to get rid of their false notions. They argue that an excised woman stops seeking intimacy with men. This is not true. On the contrary, they very much long for and continue to seek the sexual fulfilment that FGM has denied them and left them incapable of feeling.