

Address by the German Federal Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Aid, Mr. Christoph Strässer

Wednesday, 28th of January 2015

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I will start by thanking you for inviting me to speak today. I am honored to share my thoughts with you on FGM, as part of your conference on the EU co-funded Change project.

Let me say to you: I wholeheartedly support this project and this conference. Because “Change” must happen and “Change” is for us to deliver.

Female genital mutilation has for too long been considered a problem of the African continent and for the African continent to deal with.

But the images we have of the girls who undergo this mutilation have never reflected reality: Millions of girls are affected in countries such as Indonesia and thousands are affected across the European Union.

Today therefore you have discussed the phenomenon in Europe. I thank you for it. I strongly believe we need to have a public discussion about this human rights violation that occurs right in front of us, in our communities and cities across Europe.

That is why I will also use the 6th of February, the international day for the elimination of female genital mutilation, to deliver a strong message against this practice.

I encourage you all to do the same.

Ladies and gentlemen

When we talk about female genital mutilation, we talk about a serious human rights violation.

It violates the rights of non-discrimination, the protection from physical and mental violence, the right to the highest attainable standard of health and, of course, in some instances, the right to life.

In addition, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Juan Mendez, has repeatedly described FGM as torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. This has been confirmed by treaty monitoring bodies, the special procedures of the United Nations Human Rights Council and not least by the European Court of Human Rights.

Indeed, female genital mutilation has no health benefits. Instead, it is painful and deeply distressing. The removal of healthy female genital tissue interferes with the natural functioning of the body and causes severe immediate and long-term health consequences.

And as with all such human rights violations, States must not only prohibit it, but take steps to ensure that such prohibition is effective. This must include raising awareness, mobilizing public opinion against mutilation and targeting those communities, where the practice is most likely to occur.

Ladies and gentlemen

Allow me to underline my key message once more: Female genital mutilation is a human rights violation. It is an abhorrent practice. I will not apologize to anyone, ever, for labeling it as such.

Yes, some justify the practice with their tradition. But it is a tradition we need to dispose of.

Because society is not a museum; society is somewhere where we live. Somewhere we shape through our daily interactions. And it changes as we live in it.

That is why our traditions must follow suit. We must update our traditions and create them anew.

And the Change project, which you are discussing today, will do much to contribute to such movement to eliminate the harmful practice of female genital mutilation.

At the same time, I want to make clear that the girls and women who have been subjected to such mutilation do not remain victims in my eyes. In fact, some of them have been the most powerful advocates for change.

It is our responsibility to make sure that these efforts are empowered and rendered sustainable.

Distinguished guests

Allow me to set out a few areas of action for Germany on how we intend to continue combatting genital mutilation internationally.

First, we will continue to fund projects that use the so-called inter-generational approach in our human rights and development work. These range from small grants to local NGOs, in Djibouti for instance, to larger-scale technical support projects. In addition, we have just committed to funding the UNFPA-UNICEF joint program, building on its successful run in combatting the practice.

Second, we will work with our African partners to ensure that the initiatives on female genital mutilation in the United Nations Human Rights Council and General Assembly are once again brought to a successful conclusion.

Together, we will make those resolutions more concrete, more actionable, and more beneficial to the people who will actually use them.

Third, we will stay engaged in the protection of human rights defenders, including those who fight against female genital mutilation. Civil society space is shrinking in many parts of the world. But it is those people we need most to eliminate human rights violations such as the one we are talking about today.

Ladies and gentlemen

This brings me to my last point: Because many of you here today, working across Europe, are also human rights defenders, I want to express my profound gratitude and respect for your work. Without you, such change wouldn't be possible.

Thank you.