Country Information

Sierra Leone is situated on Africa’s West coast. Civil war raged in Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002; the country has not recovered to this day. The largest of the country’s 16 ethnic groups are the Mende and the Temne, with 30 per cent of the population each. The Krio, with about ten per cent, are not indigenous to the region, but are descended from African slaves.

Prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM) refers to all practices involving partial or complete removal of or injury to the external sexual organs of women and girls for non-medical reasons. The World Health Organisation (WHO) distinguishes among four types of FGM based on the invasiveness of the procedure.

According to the 2008 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 91 per cent of women in Sierra Leone between the ages of 15 and 49 have been cut. Nearly all of Sierra Leone’s ethnic groups practice FGM, with the exception of the Krio. Thus in the West of the country, where most of the Krio live, markedly fewer women (80 per cent) have been subjected to FGM than in other parts of the country. The highest rate of prevalence is in the Northern region (97 per cent).

Younger women have not been subjected to FGM as frequently as older women. Among 15 to 19 year olds, 76 per cent have been cut, among 20 to 24 year olds, 89 per cent; among those older than 24, the rate is at least 95 per cent. This does not mean, however, that many girls in the next generation will be spared. Only nine per cent of women with at least one daughter explicitly oppose the practice, whereas 33 per cent of those surveyed have already had one daughter cut, and a further 52 per cent intend to have their daughter cut. This means that a rate of 85 per cent must be anticipated even among the daughters. Most women undergo excision (Type II of the WHO classification), during which the clitoris and labia minora are partially or entirely removed. Three per cent report having been infibulated (Type III of the WHO classification, narrowing of the vagina and (partial) removal of the labia minora/majora and/or the clitoris).

Characteristic of Sierra Leone are secret societies for both men and women, with FGM as the first stage of initiation into the women’s secret society, the Bundo Society. Thus FGM is an integral part of a rite of passage from childhood to womanhood. This being the case, nearly all genital mutilation is performed by traditional circumcisers. The initiation procedure used to last for a number of months, but today it often takes only one to two weeks. Hardly any traditional knowledge is passed on during this process anymore, so that critics point out that initiation has become mere cutting without ritual. Because of this, girls are cut at an ever younger age. In the mothers’ generation, 55 per cent of women were cut when they were ten years old or older, whereas now, among the daughters, only 34 per cent have reached that age. The Mende adhere to the practice of cutting girls who are older: 54 per cent in the daughters’ generation are 10 or older when they are cut; 18 per cent are older than 15. Today most people in Sierra Leone are still in favour of FGM. Of persons surveyed in the DHS, only 26 per cent of women and 40 per cent of men were in favour of ending the practice. The most important argument given in favour of FGM is the social acceptance conferred by initiation into secret societies.

Approaches

Sierra Leone has ratified a number of international conventions condemning FGM. Among these are the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Convention on the

Due to massive resistance a clause in the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act explicitly protecting children against FGM had to be withdrawn from the final version in 2007.

Since the end of the civil war in 2002, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and Plan International have become two of the main international players opposing FGM. Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have also been founded, including the Amazonian Initiative Movement, which works in the Port Loko District in the Northwest of the country. The NGOs often lack sufficient funds and there is too little coordination and networking among them. Another obstacle is the lack of political backing, but greater even than this is the active resistance of the secret societies themselves. Open threats, verbal and physical attacks and intimidation against anyone who dares to break the taboo surrounding FGM are not rare.

Frequent arguments raised against any serious commitment to ending FGM are the greater priority of the enormous challenges the country faces following the civil war and the broad social acceptance the practice enjoys. These arguments are countered, however, by others supporting such commitment, for instance, that the high cost of the ceremonies linked with FGM has a direct impact on the economic circumstances of families and communities.

Since 1999, GTZ (GIZ as of January 2011), has been implementing the project ‘Ending Female Genital Mutilation’ on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in Sierra Leone, the FGM project began advising a GTZ ‘Employment Promotion Programme’ in 2009. The priority area for cooperation is the implementation of the generation dialogue approach. In two districts the generation dialogue is implemented through a local NGO, in another one by the partners themselves. As a result, the communities decided to abandon initiation rites, including FGM. Furthermore, women and girls could be strengthened in decision-making processes.

Among the future measures planned are a compilation of promising practices and the sensitisation of GIZ personnel in Freetown and the project regions with a possible expansion to other German development cooperation programmes in Sierra Leone.

The term GTZ or Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit refers to one of the predecessor organisations of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). Established on 1 January 2011, GIZ pools the long-standing expertise of Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (DED) (German Development Service), GTZ (German technical cooperation) and Inwent – Capacity Building International, Germany.

Sources:

- **Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) Sierra Leone 2008.**

For further information about the work of GIZ on FGM: www.giz.de/fgm.