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female genital cutting
boy's circumcision

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Alþingi
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Subject:

Umsögn um frumvarp til laga um breytingu á almennum hegningarlögum (bann við umskurði drengja), 148. löggjafarþing, 114. mál.

Ágætu þingmenn Alþingis,

Dear Members of the Icelandic Parliament,

unfortunately I am unable to write in your language. But I do hope you will understand my English.

I would like to congratulate you on the legal initiative to ban genital cutting of boys, protecting them in the same way as your laws already protect girls.

I am a German journalist and filmmaker. I got to know about female genital cutting on a trip to Ethiopia in 1998. This was just some months before Waris Dirie came out with her book „Desert Flower“, causing a worldwide breakthrough in perception which finally recognized genital cutting as a violation of human rights.

It was indeed only after Waris Dirie came out with her book, that me and my colleague were allowed to produce a radio features and a film on this subject in the German public media. „Hibo's Song“, a further film we made, was later shown on several international tv channels. Since that time I have been working on this subject. It has evolved. I also worked on the phenomenon of forced marriages. And my awareness for the harms of male circumcision is now round about 15 years old, started the my reading Hanny Lightfoot-Klein. I feel that all this deeply connected. That's why I have stopped calling this specific subject of mine „fighting AGAINST genital cutting“. I am calling it „campaigning FOR the genital autonomy of all“. And I would like to encourage you to join and contribute what you can do on your side.

Before Waris Dirie came out with her book, female genital cutting was a taboo, ranging from „unheard of“ or „unbelievable“, via „not to touch or talk about critically“ to „a religious and a cultural practice to respect“.

This is 20 years ago now, 20 years in which the worldwide perception of this tradition changed profoundly. Almost nobody in Western world's legislations doubts any more that the cutting of girl's genitals is harmless and a ritual to respect. It took almost 50 years of campaigning for this - since the 1970ies in fact. There are laws now in almost all countries forbidding this practice - and even in those where it is still performed.

Waris Dirie caused this breakthrough with her personal strength and courage to stand up and to talk about what really changed her life: It was not her career as an international model coming originally from a desert tribe. It was, what happened to her when she was five in the dawn of one morning in the desert. It was, what her mother did to her - meaning to do the best she could imagine securing her daughter's future: allowing her to find a husband and thus a good place in life. Her mother invited the circumciser and had her daughter's genitals cut off with a rusty razor blade, sown with thorns from the bush - all this on a rock in the desert, where nobody else would hear Waris yelling.

This was the moment, that changed Waris' life forever - as it does so with every child who undergoes such a violent assault of integrity, with parents arranging this to happen and telling the child that this was for its very best.

Waris didn't silence herself like most of these children do - she stood up, she raised her voice, she changed her world - and ours with it.

I think we are now at the edge of such a breakthrough concerning the protection of boys.

Your legal initiative to protect children - boys and girls alike - not to be cut at the most sensitive and most intimate parts of their bodies will be:

- a breakthrough into a new thinking in Europe,

- a new consciousness in respecting the wisdom of nature and the physical integrity of boys as well as girls,

- a new and even deeper understanding of the Charter of Fundamental Rights: „Human dignity is inviolable.“

And children just like adults have a right of inviolable human dignity!

Boys just like girls have a right of inviolable human dignity!

It is indeed amazing that to this very day European laws fail to protect them.

Waris Dirie said: „If I can save one child, one mama, that's my mission“.

Concentrating on one child, she changed a whole world of thinking.

There are laws now forbidding female genital mutilation. However, we still have quite a way to go. The practice is still alive and still needs to be eradicated - 200 million women on the planet have been cut! 200 million to much.

Persuading parents to protect their children seems easy.

However, looking at it from a psychological point of view it is hard work for parents to do:

They need to understand and accept that their suffering as a child was unnecessary and harmful, that their parents, who should protect them and know better, did not do so. They need to break with generational loyalty, to come to terms with feelings of loss, pain and being a victim. They must dare to go new ways in the face of a tradition, several thousand years old, which on top of that is often even backed by religious beliefs.

Doing this is indeed pioneer's work and parents who have been cut and do want to protect their offsprings must be admired for their freedom of thinking and acting.

Parents who start to question this tradition need our support.

They need to be encouraged.

They need to be backed up and offered new ways of thinking and acting.

Laws can provide this frame, they can offer new ways of perceiving the world.

The definition of the Basic Human Rights changed the world for the better and it is still changing it. The more we respect Human Rights the more sensitive we become when they are violated.

Changing this law will help all of Europe - if not the world - to cast a critical eye on our way of protecting children against violence, realizing that we must do so much more.

How can you persuade a father not to have his daughter cut, if he was cut himself? One third of our men on this planet have been cut - one third too much! They have undergone an experience of helplessness as a little boy, cut by a group of men of the generation above them, a strong group of men, telling them, that this is what it is to be a man: a man defying violence by denying that it exists.

I am deeply persuaded, that female genital mutilation and sexual violence can only be eradicated when girls and boys alike will be protected against all forms of assault, overpowering and violence.

These girls and boys that you can help to protect by changing this law will one day be adults, sexual partners and parents.

If you protect them by voting for this new law, they will hopefully not have to go through an experience of violence inflicted on them in this helpless situation of a child being overpowered by adults. They will thus be powerful human beings not deprived of the full range of sexual sensitivity that nature offers us. And they will be parents who will never again have the idea, that they should do to their children what their parents did to them, when they were children.

In changing this law you can support Waris' mission: save one child and you will change a whole world of thinking with it.

I can only encourage you to vote for this new law.

If I can be of any help in this procedure, presenting my views on the subject, I am happy to follow your invitation.

Yours sincerely

Renate Bernhard