

## **Fighting female genital mutilation**

**SIERRA LEONE: “To break the silence surrounding female circumcision and domestic violence” is the name of the project which finds itself in a country where circumcision is very widespread and domestic violence happens way too often.**

*By Jan Saeterli*

“The Baptist women in Sierra Leone are doing a fantastic job. We are glad and humbled by being able to participate in this. And it also does something within us,” says Synnoeve Gaasvaer Angen from Trondheim, Norway, Norwegian’s project leader.

“Wonderful and engaging women. This theme was something they wanted and not something we pushed on them,” emphasizes Turid Nedland from Gyland in Flekkefjord, Norway.

“And we see it’s worth it, even if it takes time,” adds Jorunn Harune from Sommaroey in Troms, Norway.

All three have been in the West African country many times to support and encourage their cooperating partners. Gaasvaer Angen four times, and the two other, two times each.

### **Cultural Practices**

Julie M. Sesay is the leader for the project in Sierra Leone. We were with her during five village meetings in the area of Makeni. With enthusiasm, a sense of humor and good pedagogy, she stands in front of a gathering in the village of Merugak Loko. About 150 people are gathered for this first meeting on the “tour” including many “soweis” (circumcisers). In addition to this were many women, some men, youth and children. The circumcisers hold a high status in the village. They have often learned the profession from their mothers. They receive payment for what they do, whether by money, food or other gifts. In addition to the circumcision, girls must be away from the village and out in the bush for three to six months, where they learn different womanly skills, for example how to make food.

“This delays our schooling,” a young girl in a school uniform points out at the first meeting while other girls sitting on the same bench nod in agreement.

Circumcision is a cultural practice which has nothing to do with religion. It is estimated that 94% of women in Sierra Leone are circumcised (source NKVTS, Norwegian center against

violence and traumatic stress), which often leads to problems with urination and giving birth. Some girls die during the ceremony. If something goes wrong, the circumcisers don't have any knowledge about what they should do to save the girl.

But now things have started to limit this practice.

"It's expensive to pay for the ceremonies, wages and gifts for the circumcisers. Instead the money could be used towards the girls' education," says one man.

"You need to educate our parents because they are often mean to us. Some of the teachers at the school hit us too," says another girl freely.

Julie claps her hands and praises the man and girls for their views.

### **Must have work**

"If you don't bring the girls to us, there won't be any circumcision. It's as easy as that. But how will we and our families survive then?" asks one of the female circumcisers.

Julie admits that this is a problem. Better education, scholarships, vocational training, and work for these circumcisers, and of course the girls, is a crucial question.

"But what would *you* like?" Julie directs her question directly to the circumcisers. The seven or eight women look at each other, then walk away by themselves and come back to the group after a while with one common response:

"We desire to support the village projects and education. Perhaps microcredit loans to start a business. If we get that, so that we can support our families, we'll stop. "

"I don't have money with me today, but we will involve you to find alternatives," promises Julie.

"What kind of punishment can one use, if we can't hit children?" asks another man.

"Good question," smiles Julie and claps her hands. She continues, "One can for example ground them to the house for a certain amount of time, take away their cell phone if they have one, or don't allow them to buy a new dress that was promised. There are many options, but don't hit."

### **Good Results**

These meetings have led to more openness on the theme. Many people in the villages surrounding the project area are not afraid to give their opinions.

“When my father hits me, I have to also strip so that I am completely naked,” says a young girl freely during a meeting in the village of Kamabai. She is perhaps 15-16 years old. Many react with horror; others in the gathering don’t show any expression.

“Now I have finished hitting my wife,” says one of the men with a proud smile and receives nods of recognition and friendly smiles in return.

“Yes, this will create unity and cohesion in the family and also reduces poverty when everyone is in agreement and works towards the same goal,” says Julie with a big smile. She spoke just as engaged and convincing on the theme in all of the five villages where we followed her and her small team.

And the results are highly measurable. According to the project report from Julie M. Sesay, around 27.000 people in the project area have been reached with enlightenment and knowledge on this problem. Many women and men in the villages are trained as communicators for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Domestic Violence (DV).

The registered amount of family violence has been cut in half. 60 percent of the families reported reduced violence in their own families. The number of circumcisions is reduced by about 20 percent and one of three circumcisers now wait until the girls are 18 years old, before they perform circumcision.

The authorities in Sierra Leone have also recently adopted a law which prohibits circumcision of girls under 18 years old, but this law is not practiced as of yet. The police also don’t prioritize investigations of family violence cases.

### **Continues**

“We clearly see that this project has led to much more openness in the country about women’s sexuality and uterus problems due to circumcision,” says Synnoeve Gaasvaer Angen.

“We have the law, it is there, but it doesn’t have any precedent. Let us use it. Let us set an example with the law in hand,” says Julie M. Sesay. But a court case costs money which is in a short supply also among the Baptist women in Sierra Leone.

The project started with a sum of money from a Norwegian TV-campaign called Dream Catchers in the Autumn of 2005, administered by FOKUS (Forum for Women and Development). The year 2006 went to detailed planning. From 2007 and for four years, the money from the TV-campaign (totaling 1.4 Norwegian kroner) by the Baptist women in

Norway has been transferred to the project in Sierra Leone. Now the project is officially over, but the Baptist women in Norway have decided to continue their commitment, however with a relatively limited annual amount, since they are a small voluntary organization and for the time being have not yet managed to get external funding.

### Facts about Sierra Leone

- In Western Africa
- Size: About ¼ of Norway
- Inhabitants: About 5,8 mill.
- Civil war 1991 - 2002
- UN: One of the poorest countries in the world
- 60 pst. muslims, 10 pst. christians, the rest; other religions
- One of 5 children dies before the age of 5, due to lack of ordinary medicines and clean water
- One of 8 women dies in connection with pregnancy and/or child birth
- Democracy, several political parties. Elected parliament, the president choose the government



*Some of the young girls says no to FGM and denies circumcision. 13-year old Kadiatu Mansaray (left), is one of them. Julie M. Sesay to the right.*



*The Norwegian Baptist women Turid Nedland (left), Synnoeve Gaasvaer Angen (middle) and Jorunn Haraune (right) have been several times in Sierra Leone to monitor the project.*



*Julie M. Sesay (left) is the leading lady in this FGM & DV-project in Sierra Leone. Here she is surrounded by some soweis (circumcisers).*