

AGE OF CONSENT OR TOTAL ABANDONMENT?
AMNET’S APPROACH TO FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM)

FGM is deeply enshrined into Sierra Leonean culture. It has been practiced for centuries as part of a rite of passage for girls from childhood to womanhood. FGM is the key part of the initiation ceremonies into Bondo, the female secret society. In the past matured young women spent a time of up to one year in the Bondo bushes / shrines to be prepared for marriage, to learn how to take care of their home and children and about the medicinal values of herbs. As FGM was part of the secret rites, talking about this topic by non-members in the past used to be an absolute taboo. The Bondo society has served as a source of solidarity, support and power for women in the country. About 84% of women have undergone the practice. The tradition of initiating matured girls only changed in the second half of the 20th century, with more and younger children being initiated. The rationale for initiating young children was to reduce cost and to help control resistance during the painful ordeal of cutting. The ‘Soweis’ (the heads of Bondo society) depend on performing FMG for their livelihoods, sometimes earning as much as US\$200 per child. Until today the Bondo society continues to play an important role in the social life; many Soweis have enormous influence, especially in rural communities. They are often linked to formal politics because they can command the political support of many female voters.

Due to these strong political ties and the power of the secret societies, speaking out against FGM is very sensitive and thorny. Many women’s rights activists have put their careers, health and life at risk by addressing the issue. In Sierra Leone the campaign against FGM started with Olayinka Koso-Thomas nearly three decades ago. Her book entitled “Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication of Female Genital Mutilation in Sierra Leone”, was banned in 1987. Due to the courageous efforts of many women and men, this culture of silence has been broken in the years after the end of the civil war, so that now even men dare to participate in the discussion.

However AMNet has seen that a confrontational approach of activists often resulted in a hardening of the proponent’s viewpoints and even in backlashes. While on the other side a culturally-sensitive attitude yielded more results. Thus we believe in a practical approach: real social change can only happen as a step-by-step process. We need to inform, to educate and to convince the grassroots population as well as political stakeholders. Even though AMNet’s long-term objective is to end FGM in Sierra Leone, we commence from a soft and acceptable spot.

This is why we have chosen to promote the age of consent as a mid-term objective. The age of consent means that no girl below the age of 18 shall undergo FGM in Sierra Leone. When she has come of age, she shall take a free and informed decision if she wants to undergo the procedure¹. Because the child initiations have only commenced a few decades ago, we can convince the chiefs and Soweis as the custodians of the tradition to stop child FGM within their localities. With a longer term perspective we advocate for the ratification of the Maputo Protocol² of the African Union, which demands to ban FGM completely, and sensitize on the short and long term health risks associated with the practice.

¹ We are aware that even with the age of 18 family and community pressure very often conflicts with the idea of a ‘free and informed’ decision. That is why continued sensitization efforts are needed – and indeed undertaken by AMNet and other organizations.

² Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa

We have come a long way in our struggle to see no child suffers FGM anymore: Initially we advocated for a legal ban on child FGM – only to meet total rejection by politicians who feared that this would mean political suicide for them. Even in 2007 a clause in the draft Child Right Act was removed from the bill at the last minute - and has not been reintroduced. So AMNet changed its approach and emphasized grass-roots work first: In district after district we have convinced the Paramount Chiefs to sign Memoranda of Understanding to ban the practice on children below 18 years. In a public launching ceremony of the signed MoUs, the chiefs as the custodians of the tradition and traditional laws pledge to stop the practice. Representatives of the Soweis – the women who undertake the cutting – and the Sierra Leonean state actors signed the MoUs as witnesses. With this backing of the local authorities AMNet can start its long-term community engagement. We train community volunteers to use the Generational Dialogue, a culturally sensitive tool, to lead their communities through a process of normative change concerning FGM and support them in the process. In our sensitization work we help communities to become aware of the serious medical risks and negative consequences of FGM. We facilitate the development of community-based monitoring structures for the adherence to the ban and collaborate with the local administration to develop bye-laws banning child-FGM. Today in eight of the fourteen districts of Sierra Leone MoUs to ban Child FGM have been signed. In some of these districts, the Generational Dialogue has been used to effect real change in behavior, thus a drastic decline in cases of child FGM has been observed in these areas. The change is often not limited to stopping the practice of child FGM but looking at other harmful traditional practices that affect women and children. For example in Kambia district the former Bondo Bush, the place where the initiation and cutting took place, has been transformed to an education center. Now also politicians show a commitment to address the issue. Most importantly the President of Sierra Leone declared a legal ban on child FGM as a flag ship project of the new Agenda for Prosperity. AMNet supports the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs in the development of the respective bill and in lobbying for its enactment.