

Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear Mrs. Hoss, dear Mrs. Bankier,

I am honoured to welcome you on behalf of TERRE DES FEMMES to this European wide Conference about Female Genital Mutilation.

The conference marks the end of the CHANGE project - a joint partnership project between different European organisations, which aims at **promoting behaviour change in communities and focuses on the abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation**. The CHANGE project has been co-funded by the European Union through the Daphne Programme.

I represent TERRE DES FEMMES, which is a human rights organisation for girls and women based in Berlin, and which is the coordinator of the CHANGE project.

TERRE DES FEMMES was founded in 1981 because the human rights of women continued to be breached. The group of female founders realised that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 applies on paper equally to women and men, however, in reality it seems to protect first and foremost the human rights of men. Article 1 of the **Declaration affirms that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."** Nevertheless, it has been questioned, mostly by women, in how far female genital mutilation, forced prostitution, honour crimes and the condition of abused women can be reconciled with that sentence. One thing is certain: Violence against girls and women presents a common feature in all cultures worldwide. UN reports show that throughout the world every third woman has either been raped or otherwise abused.

In the European Union as well every third woman has experienced **physical and/or sexual violence** since the age of 15. That corresponds to 62 million women, according to the findings of a recent report by the Agency for Fundamental Rights.

TERRE DES FEMMES deals with a big variety of subjects, focusing on **four areas** specifically: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), honour crimes and forced marriages, domestic and sexual violence, and trafficking in women. Activities include counselling services, training, public relations and awareness raising, networking and international cooperation.

When trying to understand FGM and working together towards overcoming this extremely harmful practice, we need **to look at violence against girls and women in general**. FGM is happening within a system that is denying basic human rights to female persons and it is often connected to other forms of violence, such as early marriage and domestic violence.

The topic of this conference promotes Change in attitudes in order to end the practice of FGM in Europe. We consciously selected the date around the **international zero-tolerance day against Female Genital Mutilation on the 6th of February, hoping** to catch media attention and thus, to create awareness for the topic.

The practice of FGM is a global problem. According to various reports and studies, FGM is practiced mainly in 28 African countries, but also in few regions in the Middle East and South East Asia.

Data collected by UNICEF amount to over **125 million girls and women affected by FGM worldwide**. A half a million of these girls and women live in the European Union alone and another 180.000 girls living in the European Union are currently at risk of being cut.

The genital mutilation of women **causes severe physical and psychological damage**. It is therefore extremely detrimental to the quality of their lives.

The abandonment of FGM is a goal that has been set by many governmental and non-governmental organisations. Among them are TERRE DES FEMMES and our partners of the CHANGE project.

**The European Commission (EC) under its Daphne Programme supports** projects, which aim to reduce violence against girls and women. This includes violence caused by harmful practices, such as FGM.

The CHANGE project is a joint partnership of **TERRE DES FEMMES (TDF) and Plan International in Germany, FSAN (Federation of the Somali Associations) in the Netherlands, FORWARD (Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development) in the UK, RISK (National Association for Ending Female Genital Mutilation) in Sweden and Euronet-FGM for the European level.**

Within the project, we have trained committed women and men to become so-called Change Agents - among them **influential community members, experts and volunteers, young and old - who are all united by their motivation to overcome FGM**, to work against FGM in their own families, with their relatives and communities.

I am more than happy to welcome **8 of the 50 Change Agents** who were trained within the project. Among us today are two from each partner country and I am very much looking forward to listen to them, to hear about their experience and achievements within their communities.

The CHANGE Project aims to create a "**snowball effect**" – by breaking the taboo of FGM in the communities. Information is spread which would otherwise not have spread. More and more community members join the Change Agents and their stance and create a critical mass of opponents – to make Change happen.

We also hope this conference gives the opportunity for a European **wide exchange of experiences and mutual learning**. I am glad to see so many representatives of different organisations, all working in the field of FGM!

Once again, I warmly welcome you to this conference and I thank you all for travelling to Berlin to join us here - in the premises of the representation of the **European Commission in Berlin. I would like to thank the information office of the European Union for hosting us in their wonderful venue and the European Commission**, who co-financed these activities.

I wish us all a fruitful discussion. Let Change happen and help stop mutilating girls. Thank you.