



European Parliament

REPORT

End Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): Developing a Common European Asylum Strategy Wednesday 24th February 2010

The Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) in cooperation with the European Parliament Office in Cyprus organized the event entitled *End Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): Developing a Common European Asylum Strategy*, on the 24th February 2010, at the EU House in Nicosia. The aim of the event was to promote the End FGM European Campaign led by Amnesty International Ireland and to launch the campaign strategy *ENDING FGM: A Strategy for the European Union Institutions* which focuses on five key dimensions including data collection, health, protection, asylum and European development. The event focused on the development of clear asylum guidelines for combating FGM.

Opening remarks were made by Ms. Dina Akkelidou, President of the House Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women. Guest speakers included Dr. Christine Loudes, Director of the END FGM European Campaign, Ms. Olga Komiti, Protection Officer, Office of UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Cyprus, Ms. Elena Neocleous, representative from the Asylum Service of the Ministry of Interior, and Leyla Hussein, Advisor to the End FGM European campaign. Over 20 participants attended the event including MPs, representatives of NGOs, government departments and agencies, and other relevant stakeholders.

In her opening address, Ms. Dina Akkelidou expressed her commitment toward addressing the issue of FGM in Cyprus and made assurances as to the political will of the House of Representatives for the inclusion of the issue on the political agenda. She stressed the importance of Cyprus's contributing to the pan-European struggle to combat the phenomenon. More specifically, Ms. Akkelidou articulated her commitment to promoting the recommendations of the campaign particularly in the areas of data collection and health.

Dr. Christine Loudes, Director of the Campaign END FGM and representative of Amnesty International Ireland, presented the END FGM strategy for the institutions of the European Union and the objectives of the European Campaign. She emphasized the importance of Cyprus's potential contribution to the development of transnational cooperation to combat FGM, particularly in the area of asylum, protecting from torture and persecution which is what FGM amounts to. Specifically, by targeting both the national governments as well as the EU institutions which have influence not just in Europe but also in some of the key countries where FGM is practised. Through the proposed strategy the European campaign END FGM calls on all European leaders to support the strategy to ensure adoption of these recommendations at a European level.

During the discussion panel on *Granting Asylum on Grounds of FGM*, Ms. Olga Komiti, representing the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representation in Cyprus, enlightened participants with regard to the international commitments / obligations of states on FGM, while making clear that the "fear" of women and girls of mutilation alone, constitutes a form of reasonable persecution for the purposes of asylum.



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In addition, Ms Komiti made clear recommendations for best practice within and outside Cyprus in relation to handling cases involving women asylum applicants on the grounds of FGM.

Ms. Elena Neocleous, representing the Asylum Service, expressed the urgent need to integrate FGM in the work of the European Asylum Support Office, and specifically, in the vocational training programme for the asylum process in Europe (European Asylum Curriculum), in order to effectively combat the lack of a collective and coherent approach in relation to granting asylum on grounds of FGM. In addition, vocational training for officers in the Asylum Service on all aspects of FGM, as well as training on best practices in examining the cases of women asylum applicant through specific methods of conducting interviews, is a very important need that emerged during the discussion.

Leyla Hussein, Advisor to the END FGM European Campaign, presented her personal experience with FGM, and stressed the need for educating the public about FGM. It is important to point out that FGM is practiced in certain communities regardless of educational status, and parents should not be regarded as 'bad' or as 'criminals'. Leyla urged all European citizens to support the global fight against this practice and appealed to Cypriot teachers to give special attention to girls, (hailing from countries where this practice is followed), in order to be able to act if they need help. She stressed that a special approach is needed in order to give girls that may possible victims of the practice the space to speak.

The presentations were followed by productive dialogue among the participants whereby it was established that the Cypriot government should, inter alia, develop specific protocols and guidelines aiming at the educational training of health professionals, midwives and gynaecologists, in order to be able to provide protection and therapy to women who suffer from the severe health implications resulting from the practice of FGM. Furthermore, the state should urgently implement specific awareness-raising and support programmes on FGM targeting immigrant communities. The state should also contribute toward international efforts to combat FGM, and proceed directly with the collection and evaluation of data on the prevalence of FGM in Cyprus. It is worth noting that Mrs. Akkelidou agreed with the above recommendations and expressed her commitment to promoting them at a political level.

Finally, all participants and speakers agreed on the immediate expansion and broadening of public dialogue on the issue, aiming at informing and raising awareness of the Cypriot public, as a condition to eliminate FGM. Moreover, the involvement of Cypriot health professionals in this activation is crucial for effective care and assistance to women who live with the consequences of FGM. The Institute urges the state to immediately implement the above recommendations.

The event received extensive media coverage by major television channels and by major newspapers. In addition, the event organizers and guests were invited in radio programmes to discuss about the conclusions of the event and the situation in Europe in relation to FGM.

For more information on the END FGM European Campaign please contact Christina Kaili at christina@medinstgenderstudies.org or visit www.endfgm.eu.