

My fight for zero FGM, video script

Expert interview with RAIN WORKERS trainer Margaret Bachlechner from Kenya. On the occasion of 7th May 2021, Worldwide Day of Genital Autonomy

Hello! My name is Nina Gruy-Jany from the **Austrian NGO Aktion Regen**.

Today I have the pleasure to interview our **great and experienced trainer Margaret Bachlechner**. She is a **committed campaigner against FGM**, which are the practices of female genital mutilation. To make it easier for you to find your way around the video I have added Chapter-Titles on interleaves.

First, a few words about Aktion Regen: we have been active in East and West Africa **for over 30 years** with **educational projects on family planning and sexual and reproductive health and all related issues**.

We pursue a **sustainable strategy**: we train **local multipliers**, so-called **RAIN WORKERS**. They pass on this existential knowledge to the people in their regions in a low-threshold and culturally sensitive way.

To ensure that the knowledge is comprehensible and understandable, we use **clear, de-taboo teaching tools**.

RAIN WORKERS work in **village communities** as well as **in cooperation with schools, health centres and other organisations** and **institutions**.

Our education programme "**knowledge as a chance**" aims to **protect** children, teenagers and adults from life-threatening and health-threatening practices and traditions such as FGM and teenage pregnancies resulting from early marriages.

The wonderful Margaret Bachlechner is my interlocutor today, as she is an expert in this field. Before interviewing her I want to shed some light on Margaret's **impressive** life and work:

Margaret Bachlechner is a very experienced trainer and has been supporting Aktion Regen for more than 15 years. Margaret was born in 1956 in **Kenya, Nakuru in the Rift Valley District**. Together with her husband, she has been living in the mountains of **East Tyrol** for 15 years and has kept her close ties to her homeland.

Until the Corona pandemic, she flew to East Africa at least twice a year for a few weeks for trainings, workshops, sensitisation and networking meetings. Since Corona, she has been in intensive online contact with her local colleagues and protégés.

A social worker by formation, Margaret was formerly active in the **Green Belt Movement**. This is a Kenyan grassroots movement founded by Wangari Maathai for climate protection and for strengthening social communities, that even got the Nobel Prize für Peace some years ago.

Margaret has also been involved with **street girls** over the last 3 decades and has been particularly active in **protecting Masai girls from FGM practices and early marriage** for the last 20 years.

She is a co-founder of the German association **TUKUTANE e.V.**, which pursues these very goals and has already been able to provide many girls with accommodation in year-round schools or vocational schools.

From the beginning, Margaret's main focus was on the **empowerment of girls and women**. Through AKTION REGEN, she has found the "**missing piece of the puzzle**" for her mission: How will she be able to holistically support societies to develop healthy and sustainable perspectives for the future?

Today, at the 7th of May, together with many organisations around the world, we are taking a strong stand against FGM being part of the **Worldwide Day of Genital Autonomy**.

In February, the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation is celebrated annually, which also aims to protect girls from specific physical violence. All of us organisations speak out on this issue many days of the year - and EVERY DAY there is still sexual violence against children and adults in many countries around the world.

This means that **every day the lives and health of millions of girls and women around the world are threatened**. They suffer physical and psychological pain that often leads to death.

International attention to these life-threatening, painful and humiliating traditional practices of FGM has been around for a long time.

The **UN** has set a **target of zero FGM by 2030**. A total of 200 million girls and women worldwide are currently victims of FGM.

The origins of these practices go back thousands of years and are socio-culturally based; the performance of FGM is prohibited by law in almost all countries of the world - a global commitment to end these unfounded acts of violence is in place.

1) Nina: Dear Margaret, thank you for your willingness to do the interview!

My first question is very personal and emotional. I am a mother of 3 girls between the ages of 10 and 15 Years. It is an *unimaginable* thought for me to deliberately inflict such life-threatening and lifelong torture on my daughters. I love my children more than anything and want only the best for them in every way.

What are the motivations and intentions of parents in Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia etc. who deliberately expose their girls to these risks?

Is this question even permissible or too eurocentric?

My worldview tells me that all parents love their children. What is your answer?

1) Margaret: You are absolutely right - you cannot look at this issue from European eyes and simply change your way of life.

I always tell the same thing when I talk about FGM in Austrian schools! **It is much more complicated.**

We have to be willing to **look at FGM not just as physical mutilation**, we have to look at it as a **whole picture** and look at families and communities as a whole.

Only then we will find an **approach** that allows people to make new, healthy choices for their girls.

That is what Action Regen does. FGM is a brutal practice, thousands of years old, passed down from generation to generation. It is **mainly about the power position of men.**

You are also right that **mothers in Kenya and other countries also love their children. But women have been 100% dependent on their husbands** for the longest time and they still are in many cases - in every respect!

Men have always decided who they wanted to marry and what that woman should be like - that she had to be circumcised.

Men learned this from their for-fathers as the only possible way to live.

Their culture demands that they continue this tradition.

This "male mentality" has developed over countless generations and also has a lot to do with obedience, WHAT is expected of men by society.

To use the value of "love" here would be a completely wrong approach.

For men and many women, love *also* means to follow one's own tradition, one's own culture.

We have to start differently: we have to point at the way they have children, how they can deal with their sexuality, with sexual behaviour in general and how this is influenced.

2) Nina: Another personal question: You grew up in a large Masai area in western Kenya and told me when we first met that your mother worked in a health profession for women.

What and how did she work with or against FGM?

2) Margaret: Yes, my mother had a women's health profession - she was a midwife. She worked in a hospital that had been set up by an Englishman in the Masai area to support the community. The British hospital operator and my mother were aware of the FGM situation and wanted to help the women. Already my mother came from a community, where FGM was not practised! This was in the mid-1960s. They both made an arrangement with the village communities that the women and girls must come to the

hospital to my mother for circumcision. There, my mother then performed a "fake circumcision".

3) Nina: What do you mean by „fake“?

3) Margaret: My mother was a very clever woman!

She realised that men didn't know what a circumcised woman looked like.

Physical issues and sexuality were a very big taboo back then, they were not talked about. It is still partly like that today.

In any case, the men knew that their wives should be circumcised, but not *what it was really like*.

And the women also only had the idea of a "**scar down there**" and no exact imagination.

To keep up appearances, they circumcised the labia minora, the inner labia, which is in line with Masai culture.

Of course, knowing about the **high organic importance of the clitoris**, my mother did not remove it.

Instead, **she sewed the upper skin of the labia majora over the clitoris**. This gave both women and men an externally visible result that corresponded to their cultural conception: a seam or a scar.

However, medical complications, health consequences and pain were relatively limited.

Another part of the deal with the communities was that the women would also be sent to my mother during pregnancy and childbirth. This way she could support the women in the best possible way.

4) Nina: So you grew up in the midst of this FGM tradition. Did you know what exactly your mother was doing?

4) Margaret: As a child, I didn't understand what my mother was doing at all and **I was traumatised**.

Because all I saw were **12, 13-year-old girls bleeding at my mother's house** every year around the same time in December when the initiation rites took place. There were already grown men waiting to marry them.

My mother just said that they had a disease and that she would help the girls to stop bleeding.

I was really afraid of this disease. But my mother did not tell me anything.

She was not allowed to tell anyone the truth - only her assistant at the hospital knew everything.

The pressure from the community was enormous, she was taking **a big risk** with her "fake circumcisions".

Yet she worked in this way for over 30 years! By 1995 she was an old woman when she stopped and she passed on 1999.

5) Nina: How has this time shaped you - after all, you have spent your entire adult life working for girls and women's empowerment, for the prevention of FGM and spreading knowledge on sexual / reproductive health and family planning.

Would you call your effort: **following in your mother's footsteps** or is it all **self-driven**?

5) Margaret: The older, the more grown up I became, the more I understood - because I listened well to what she was talking about with her assistant.

That's how I gradually picked up the truth. My mother only told me everything when she had already "retired" and stopped working.

A midwife in Kenya doesn't just retire in her early 60s. She works as long as she can until she is very old.

I think my mother was a hero!!!

But it was only when I started working against FGM myself that I realised I was **carrying on her** mission forward, but on different terms!

While she was committed to "fake" under the circumstances of the time, I am committed to "ZERO" FGM!

6) Nina: From the very personal view, I now come to the **political framework**.

You come from **Kenya** - FGM has been **banned since 2001** and there have been **major legal tightenings since 2011**.

Nevertheless, according to the **UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund)**, the FGM rate among girls and women between 15 and 49 years is 21% (!) and among those under 15 years 11% - these are only the official figures.

Is the UN naive in its goal of ending FGM by 2030?

I recently read in the Guardian, a British newspaper, that the Kenyan government even declared 2022 - that is next year! - as a target for FGM-elimination.

Does it frustrate you that these targets and the current reality are so far apart? Is the policy doing too little or the wrong thing?

What measures are really working to bring up a change in the population's thinking?

6) Margaret: Yes, the first UN's Development Goals wanted to eliminate FGM as early as 2015 - unfortunately, that didn't work out.

And **in 2022, the Kenyan government wants to tighten the anti-FGM laws again**.

Last October, in the middle of the Corona-Year, **large initiation rites** were held in the Kuria area on the Tanzanian border with **3,000 girls who suffered FGM**.

However, **10 local chiefs**, who are official representatives of the authorities, were **immediately detained and removed from office**. This means that **something is being done by the government**.

For Aktion Regen, I work very close to Kuria, with the Migori Mabera Women's Group. Like Kuria, this is the so-called "bush area" - the communities there think the law is "only in Nairobi and Nairobi is far, far away". Especially from the men there there is still a lot of ignorance.

I have experienced myself, and also experienced in my mother's time, that **together with the church many things can succeed**.

Since the 1980s, church communities have emerged and have also campaigned for girls to be allowed to go to school and for marriages between different tribes to become more and more possible.

This has helped insofar as **FGM is not so established any more in other tribes** and men could now also suddenly marry uncircumcised women.

As an Aktion Regen trainer with a lot of life experience and a certain age, I am very much recognised and respected in village communities. This is related to the traditional-cultural **"respect for elders"**.

But, together with the local church communities, I have even more opportunities to reach out and educate people.

Above all, I can get the men on board better. Churches are the places where people go when they have problems or even too little to eat. They are places of trust and respect - and I use this channel.

7) Nina: And how do you manage to get the men on board, the fathers as well as the influential "elders"?

7) Margaret: It is important to make men understand that their children experience terrible things - and that terrible things have also happened to their wives. And, in terms of their partnership, that FGM negatively affects their sexual life.

We at Aktion Regen name the existence of **2 bridges**:

The **first bridge** symbolises the **way back to the old traditions, the 2nd bridge witnesses the way into the "new time"**.

Through "knowledge as a chance", which is the Aktion Regen education programme, we provide all the necessary knowledge so that people can move forward in the fastest possible way. They are given all the options to be able to take responsibility for their bodies, their sexuality and the future of their children.

Going back in history is not possible, many understand this through our education!!!

It is also important to emphasize that we do not dictate!

We offer knowledge and sometimes use very physical, understandable pictures.

In order for the fathers to really understand what is happening to their girls, and what has happened to their wives, I specifically appeal to their imagination. For example, I let them imagine that the tip of their penis is cut off - and not just a piece of foreskin. It's all fantasy!

And I recognise from the faces that every father can imagine it for real.

We have to make many offers, bring in many perspectives, because we want to achieve understanding.

8) Nina: As an Aktion Regen representative, you work on several "fronts" to fight FGM.

You are **inside the village communities** to reach out to **families and village elders**. You use the structure of established church communities, which have a large influx of people with difficulties, and you often **cooperate with the church**, which also protects girls from FGM and early marriages.

You are **directly involved with families** and also work with **children and young people in schools**.

How important are schools as an educational and protective institution for girls affected by FGM?

8) Margaret: The importance of schools is huge in many ways!

I will give you an example of a community where Aktion Regen conducted education and awareness-workshops.

In this village, the headmistress of the school came from another, more remote rural tribe that provided education for its girls and where FGM and also early marriages were no longer prevalent. These two issues are always strongly connected!

I was able to **appeal to the pride of the men** in this community through the **example of this professionally successful, respected woman**. I said how great it would be if one of their daughters could be a school headmistress once, and not from another tribe.

How great would it be if this community *itself* could produce respectable, recognised, educated women.

The **girls' educational careers** are of course connected to this subject! At least until they are 18 years old.

And another consequence is that they have to **experience adolescence physically protected and above all unmarried**.

The fathers are more and more willing to understand that this educational time is important - **I motivated them!, I did not blame them!** And for the girls I was able to gain time!

When they will reach the age of adults, **they decide for themselves, based on a lot of important knowledge, and make their own professional life plans.**

Girls - and boys too! - who have been educated and enlightened for many years have a **different mindset than their parents.** They can and will make different decisions!

9) Nina: So we were only talking about girls till now - the boys are also very important? Is that right!

9) Margaret: **The boys are another important group in schools, they should be on board from the beginning on, since they will be the future husbands and fathers!**

Schools nowadays are **mixed** - not only **by gender** but also **by origin of the students from different tribes.**

Suddenly there are girls who are never circumcised because it is no longer a tradition in their tribe. And they are together with kids coming from very traditional, FGM-practicing tribes.

And then this dilemma happens: a boy wants to marry such a girl, but his tradition demands something else.

The parents also need the **education** and **perspective** that it is okay for their son to marry a girl who is not circumcised - which contradicts their own tradition.

Conversely, in relation to their own daughters, fathers need to reflect:

If the son is now allowed to marry an uncircumcised woman, then it must also be ok that their own daughters are not circumcised!

After such an educational session, 3 fathers once spontaneously brought their daughters to school for the first time! That was a great success!

Mixing at schools has a turbo effect on a rethinking and learning of today's generation of parents and helps to **break the old patterns.**

We at Aktion Regen use the schools in a targeted and cooperative way as a positive lever or reinforcement.

Sometimes it is also necessary to **„buy“ the girls „out“ of the FGM danger** for the education time. to award scholarships which circumcisers and parents benefit economically.

Because in connection with FGM initiation rites, there is very much about **material values.** It is about **gifts and money - for the families and the circumcisers.** This reality also needs to be acknowledged and solutions need to be found.

10) Nina: How can **compensation** work for these previously provided and needed gifts of money and goods, which are an essential part of the **family income?** What are the **perspectives of the circumcisers?**

10) Margaret: We need solutions for this! Right now we are facing a **transitional period** - until an enlightened generation has grown up everywhere.

One of the options is, as I told you, to **"buy out"** the girls. Then they get **protection** until they become adults and at the same time **education** for their later independent life. So they get **"gifted time". time for physical integrity and time for education.**

The government also often supports sustainable and innovative programmes for the circumcisers.

I have an example: I personally know the case of a female circumciser who successfully "switched" her profession to produce handicrafts. She is now making beaded jewellery for tourism.

I also **work with government agencies** - for example when it comes to such **work programmes** - and of course it is very important to find organisations that also support these goals.

11) Nina: It sounds relieving that **schools** are recognised as **"places of refuge"** to protect girls from FGM.

11) Margaret: Sometimes this is already the case, unfortunately not always.

It sometimes takes even more protection for girls to save them from FGM and early marriages.

I'll give you an example again:

In Tangulbei in East Pokot, I introduced girls to the Aktion Regen programme at a **Girls Rescue Centre**. This centre was co-financed by the Tukutane e.V.

I taught the girls **cycle awareness** and everything they needed to know about **sexual and reproductive health**. Of course, this also includes the consequences of FGM.

We talked together about **family planning AS life planning**.

It was a successful cooperation between the two NGOs.

The Rescue Centre itself also offered the girls **police protection**, which is unfortunately necessary in some cases.

In the course of time, we have succeeded in gaining **understanding from the parents for the girls' educational time**. We could achieve that understanding through ongoing **"reconciliation"**, this means consulting with the families, especially with the fathers.

We had to confirm and reassure them again and again: **"We are not taking the girls away from you, we are just educating them! Let them learn!**

12) Nina: According to UN estimates, the **Covid19 pandemic** has exaggerated the situation and **slowed down the education processes to end FGM:**

It is estimated that the sad number of girls at risk of FGM worldwide, 4 million annually, is **expected to increase** by 2 million more in the coming decade.

What has not been possible in the fight against FGM since the outbreak of the pandemic, what have you been able to do since last spring and how?

12) Margaret: Examples such as the initiation rites I mentioned at the beginning from the Kuria district unfortunately prove the worsening.

I myself, of course, could not "physically" go to Kenya until today. Which I am very sad about!

Last Year I have finished training two **new local RAIN WORKER-Trainers** overlapping with the Corona start and partly online: Joan Khamala and Francis Mukoya from Kenya. I am very keen to provide strong personal support and guidance to both of them.

Since last spring we have **found a good compromise for our communication via WhatsApp, email or ZOOM** and I **advise them in the diaspora** and conduct my **supervisions** this way.

Both Joan and Francis are important **key persons** who will be able to train local RAIN WORKERS in the future. This is a significant step towards **independence and responsibility!**

The last year was really hard for Joan and Francis. They were able to resume their outreach work after the first spring lockdown in August - at least for a short time, until the next lockdown

It was a on-and-off-situation, like everywhere else in the world.

Now they are active again. Just a month ago they successfully certified **9 new RAIN WORKERS** in Migori Maberu! I am so proud of the achievement!

13) Nina: What are the biggest challenges for the RAIN WORKERS, and the RAIN WORKER trainers - due to the pandemic?

13) Margaret: There is one question that I have been asked over and over again which is very difficult, psychologically and emotionally:

"How can we continue the fight against FGM, despite the recurring restrictions on movement and curfews? We can't always go to the bush-land and other areas!"

I have then always replied to them that they should continue their work in the **local areas**. Certain routes have always been allowed, going to the post office or the market for example.

I have encouraged them to use these opportunities for enlightenment, and to always take care themselves!

I'm motivating them to spread the Aktion Regen programme within the limits of what is allowed. I tell them, **"The knowledge starts with you!"**

14) Nina: We are coming to the end of our talk, what I really regret. I could listen to your experiences and plans for a much longer time!

I love your quote, **"Lionesses are survivors, not fighters"....**

14) Margaret: I really feel it - we women are **"silent" fighters!**

We are the **cornerstones of the family**, daily faced with the **challenge of education, children, jobs and survival strategies** which we in turn **pass on to our children**, our descendants.

So when you educate a girl - and of course a boy! - you educate the whole family at the same time!

This is how old patterns are replaced by new ones.

It can only go ahead - now the future is here.

Aktion Regen says: plan your future now, then you can have a better and happy family-life later!

The children are the future - all positive changes that happen now will improve their lives in the future when they will be the ones shaping the world!

**Dear Margaret - thank you for sharing your deep thoughts,
experiences and time!**

I wish you much strength and success in your efforts to help end FGM!