



Beratungszentrum
Lore-Agnes-Haus

**Talk about it! Parles-en! Wowlou fi moun! A fala! A fo!
Lobela Yango! Fale sobre isso! Sara téne ni! Wakh thi!
Sprich darüber!**

Empowerment and Female Genital Mutilation_Cutting

Empowerment und weibliche Beschneidung (FGM_C)
mutilation sexuelle féminine (MSF) – Diongal – Sunningol

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Introduction

„Knowledge is power – the power to be in control of one's own life and to create it after one's own perceptions.“

Hello and a hearty welcome to Talk About It! This brochure shall provide and broaden knowledge, be fun, encourage you to stand up for yourself and claim your rights. Whether in life generally, at the doctor's or in a relationship. It was designed by incredible women with different migration histories. Thus, it includes different perspectives, thoughts and knowledge provided by different women as well as experienced counsellors of AWO Beratungszentrum Lore-Agnes Haus, that have heard many life stories of various females. Not all information in this brochure is suitable for everybody. Maybe you can identify with some Ideas and stories, or you have different experiences. Nevertheless, we hope

that by reading you will gain knowledge and therefore, power over your own life – plus inspiration.

Enjoy reading!

Almaz, Binta, Grace, Lina, Meral, Svenja, Vivienne and Yasemin





This brochure deals with Female Genital Mutilation_Cutting (FGM_C), sexuality and sexualised violence. If you are affected by FGM_C or unsure about it, it is up to you when to read this brochure. Listen to your inner voice! It is okay to skip pages or look at pictures later.

Anatomical Knowledge

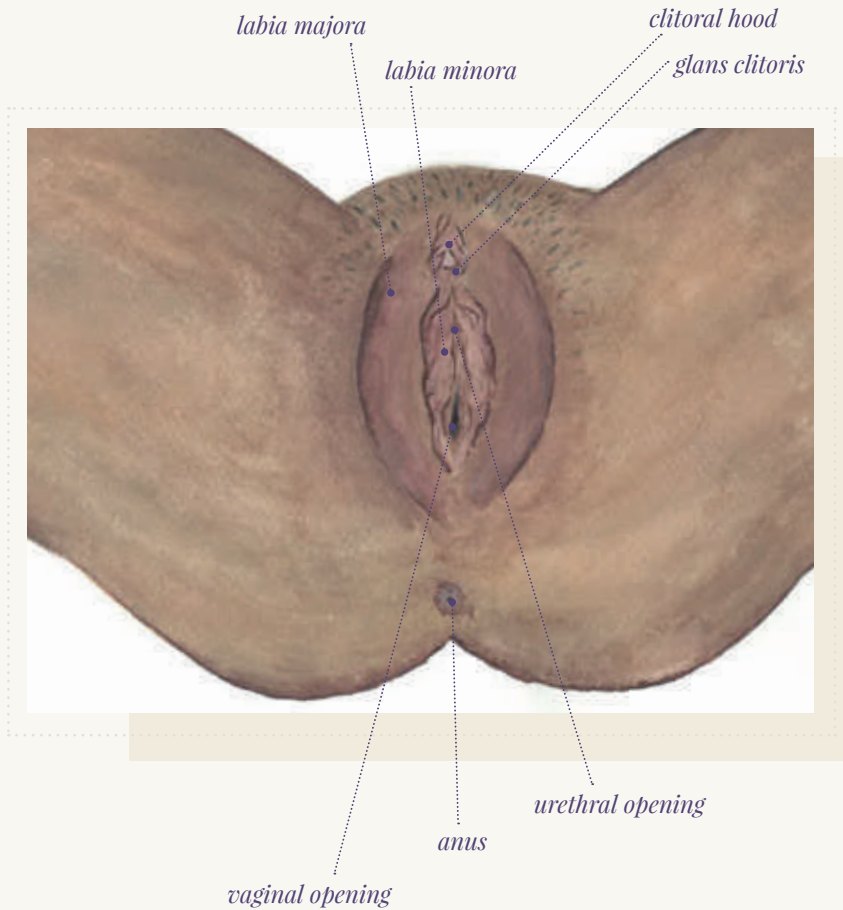
Our work with women often includes anatomical knowledge. Maybe you already know a lot about your body but at the same time some topics are not yet crystal clear, or you have heard myths and stories you are not sure about their truthfulness.

Female Reproductive Organs

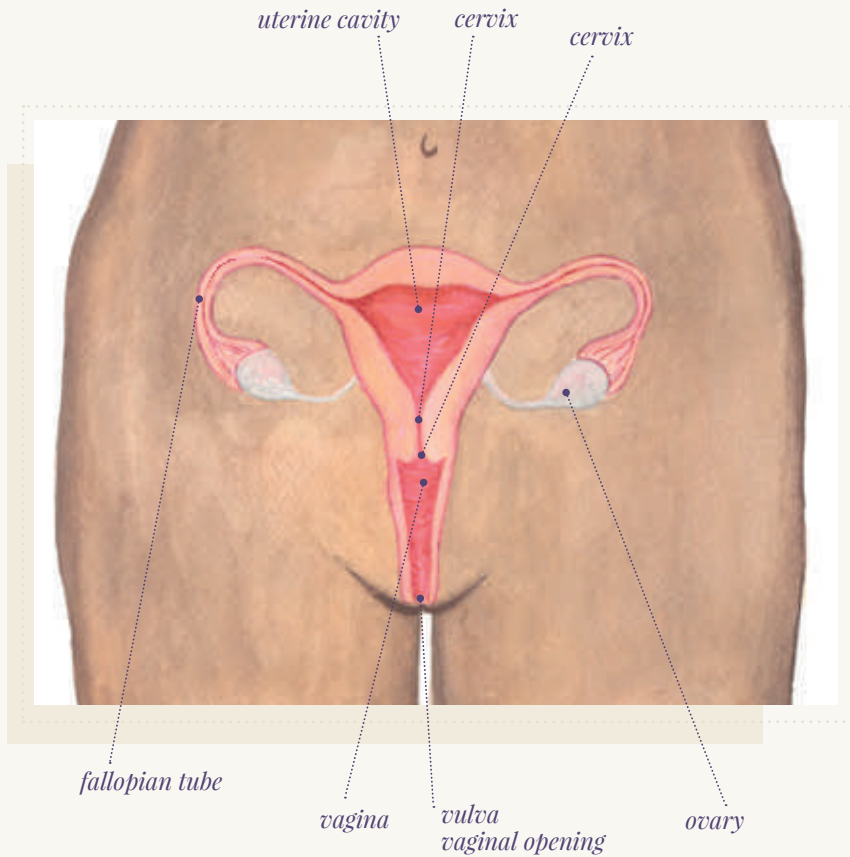
Let's start with the female reproductive organs. These consist, for women born with female reproductive organs, of the outer, visible part such as vulva, labia (lips of the vulva), vaginal opening (vagina) and hymen (not every woman has a hymen!), urethral opening and clitoris.



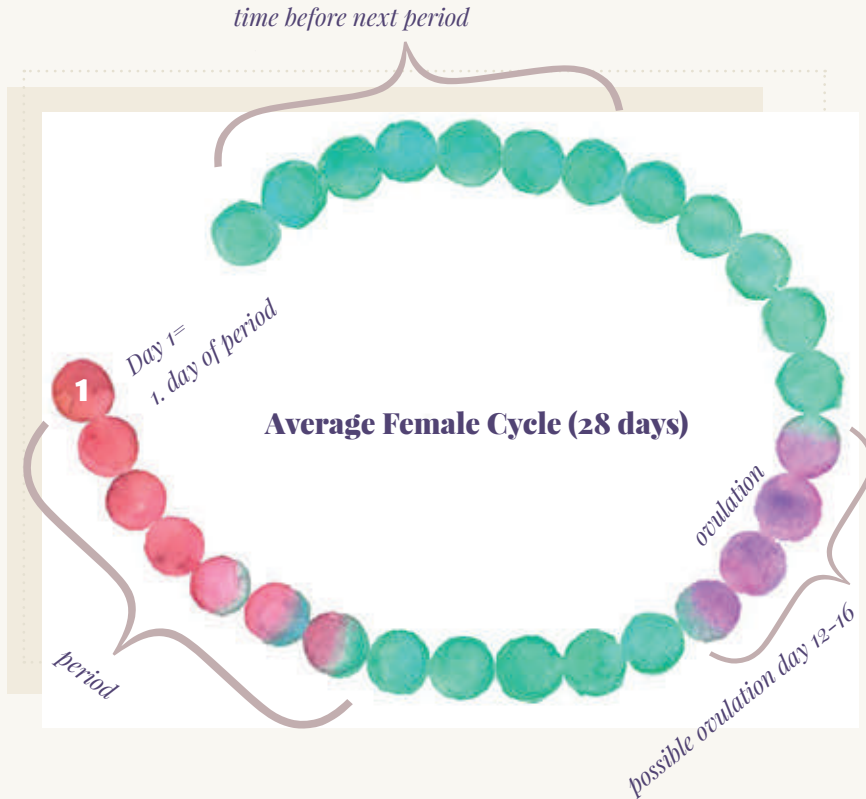
Even though women are the main subject of this brochure, we explicitly want everybody, including people identifying as non-binary or not as women, who underwent FGM_C to feel addressed.



*All woman's labia look different –
just like a fingerprint they are unique.
Some women are circumcised, and the
labia may be removed.*



The vaginal opening leads into the vagina which is an inner muscle tube leading into the uterus. The uterus' entrance is called cervix, it provides access to the uterine cavity. To the uterine cavity's left and right the fallopian tubes are located which lead to the ovaries and are directly connected to the uterus.



Cycle, Menstruation (Period) and Ovulation

The so called "cycle" defines the time between the first day of one period and the first day of the next period. It usually ranges from 20-40 days with an average of 28 days. Most girls start their first period between the age of 9 and 14. Starting one's period early is no indication for a girl's sexual maturity! The average time of bleeding is five days but may vary between three and eight days. At about day 14 (which marks half of the average cycle) the mature egg is released from the ovary. This usually happens once a month, the egg then enters the fallopian tube where fertilization may take place if semen is present.



There are also women without uterus and/or vulva.

Good to know: The egg is fertile for about 24 hours and the survivability of semen is up to eight days! Contrary to what most people think, the timeframe to become pregnant is longer!

❧ *Becoming pregnant by glances or touch is impossible!*

Many women suffer cramps, back pain, stomach pain, tiredness, cravings, mood swings, retention of water; the list is long. It is good to know what helps you personally: Fresh air and exercise? A hot water bottle, chocolate or just relaxing and watching a series? Feel free to make your personal list:

.....
.....

By the way, starting one's period is genetically predetermined and is not affected by external influences such as drinking coffee or tea!

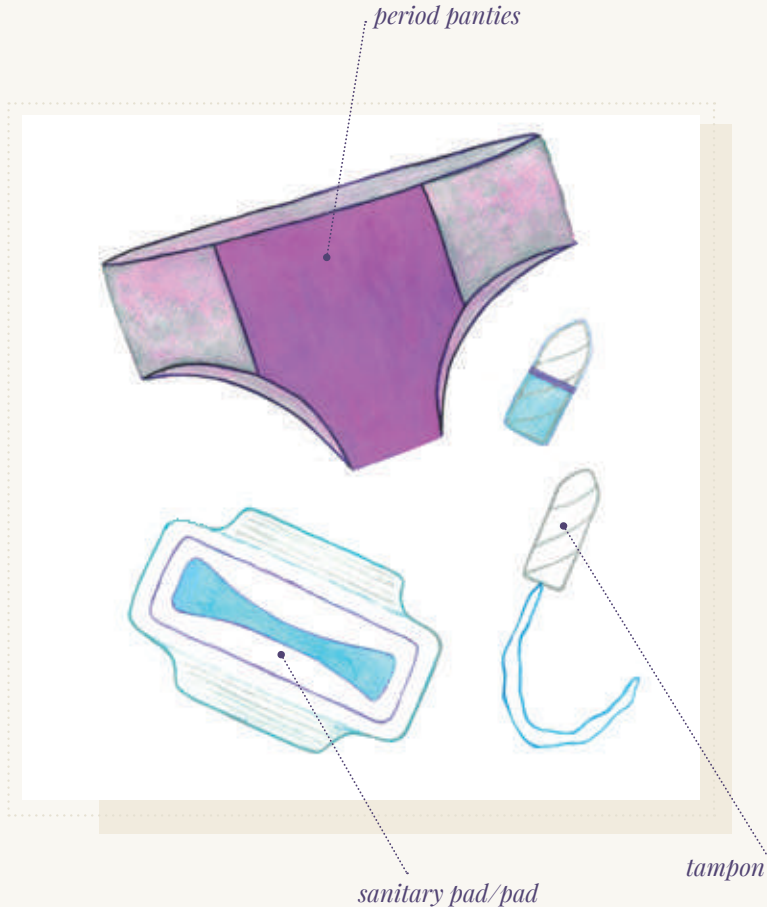
❧ *Even if it is often said that menstrual problems get better after pregnancy, this is not always true.*

Periods are natural processes, but not meant for cleaning the body. The vagina is a very smart organ which cleans itself daily through slight vaginal discharge. No shower gel or soap is needed! Warm water is sufficient, as shower gel/soap can be counter-productive and cause fungal infections. Many girls are taught that their period is bad or dirty which can create a feeling of guilt or shame. There is nothing to feel guilty or ashamed of as ultimate half of the world's population menstruates and without it, mankind would not exist! On the contrary, having a steady period is a good sign, telling you that everything is all right with your body. So, rather be proud of your body!



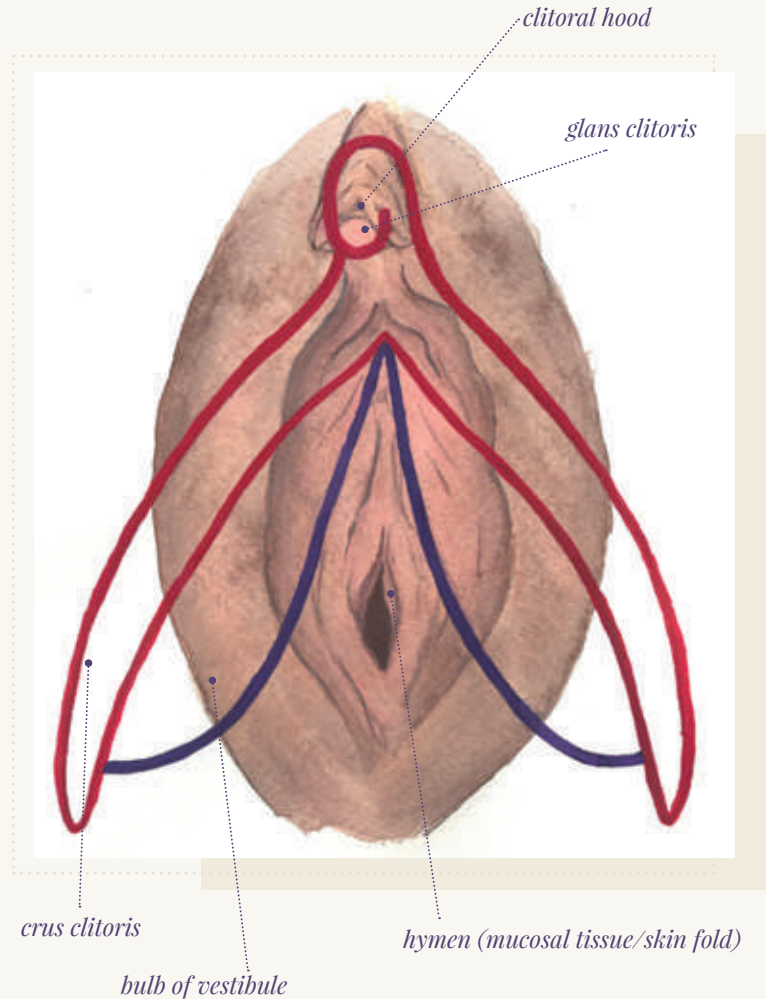
Sanitary products

There is a variety of different sanitary products to soak up or collect blood during your period. Sanitary pads have a sticky side to attach to underwear. Tampons are cotton tubes one inserts into the vagina, a string at the end allows to remove it safely. Sanitary pads and tampons are the most common products to use. Of course, there are many other options (e.g., menstrual cups), but there is one sustainable alternative we would like to introduce to you in particular: period panties. These look like normal underwear but are made of special material that allows to soak up high quantities of liquid and blood. Depending on the period-intensity they can be worn the entire day. To reuse them they just need to be washed. This picture shows a sanitary pad, tampon, and a period panty.



The Clitoris – Female Pleasure-Centre

The clitoris is an about ten-centimetre-long organ consisting of two “legs” and massive erectile tissue. Circumcised women also have a clitoris, usually parts of the external glans clitoris are removed or changed. The internal part usually remains intact and can be felt through the vagina. This organ is comparable to the male glans and has no other purpose than bringing pleasure. Both, touching the external or internal parts of the clitoris can lead to reaching orgasm. For most women an orgasm is an intense enjoyable feeling of pleasure. It is not bad if you do not like to be touched or touch yourself at your vulva or vagina. There might be other parts of your body you like being touched at. Don't be afraid to try what feels good, find your own way at your own pace. Many circumcised women are in pain when having sex, especially when the erected penis enters the vagina.





You are allowed to stop sexual intercourse at any time, especially if you are in pain. You could suggest other things that give you pleasure, but only if you feel like it. Talking to a doctor about how to treat scars and alleviate pain could also help. (See chapter Sexuality, Pleasure and Relationship)

The Hymen

The Hymen is a major topic for many girls and women as this small mucosal tissue (skin fold) is often regarded as an indicator for virginity which is not true. It is located at the vaginal opening and differs in looks just like the vulva. Some women do not have a hymen. When having penetrating sex for the first time, the hymen does not necessarily break or cause bleeding.

If you are worried about not bleeding when having sex for the first time because your own or your partners family will check, **counselling centres like AWO Lore-Agnes-Haus offer help.**

Female Genital Mutilation_Cutting (FGM_C)

FGM_C is a tradition practiced in about 30 countries for different reasons. Reasons can be:

- ~ **to ensure a woman's place in her community**
- ~ **to be treated with more respect within communities**
- ~ **the assumption that women will be faithful, honest, and pure which would lead to finding a husband faster**
- ~ **conformity to an idealised beauty image**

Sometimes tradition and superstitions are reasons, too. Please note, there is no religion that dictates or supports FGM_C.

Women that underwent FGM_C also tell that in their opinion circumcision is used to hurt girls and women as well as to control and limit their sexuality.

Some women that underwent circumcision never really thought about what happened to them. For them it is common practice, but it is prohibited in Germany, as it is against children's and human rights. Therefore, FGM_C and imminent FGM_C is grounds for asylum. Since many years, affected women advocate for a prohibition on circumcising girls.

They know from experience how harmful this tradition is. Even though not ever affected person suffers after being circumcised there are many severe health and psychological consequences:

Some women have difficulties during urination or their period. Circumcision can cause infections as urine and menstrual blood cannot be excreted correctly (see picture on page 19). Pain during sexual intercourse, being unable to reach sexual satisfaction or recognise pleasure as such, are possible consequences, too.

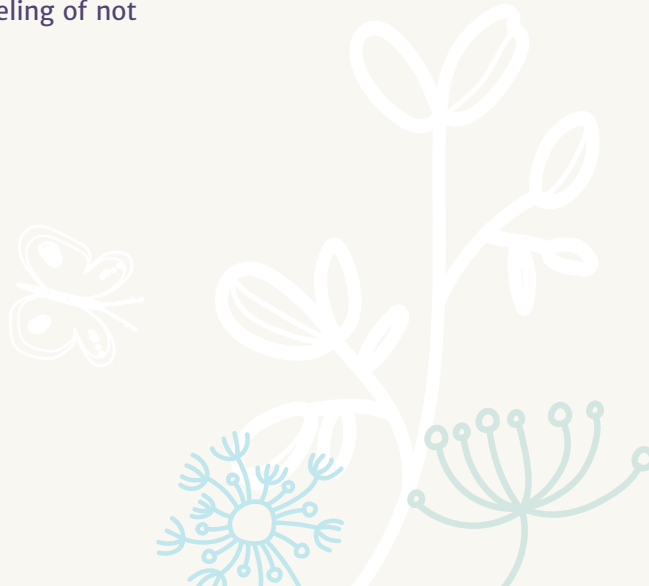


When you are unsure if your physical complaints can be traced back to circumcision, doctors and counselling centres can help. (For further information proceed to pages 25 and 26)

Medical care

Usually, female babies are circumcised right after they were born or at such a young age that many cannot remember, or the memory is repressed. If you are unsure about yourself being circumcised, suffer pain or other health consequences, are pregnant and unsure if natural childbirth is possible, a doctor's appointment (gynaecologist) would be important to talk about your concerns. Not all doctors in Germany are familiar with FGM_C or with how a circumcised vulva looks like. Some women feel discriminated or devaluated due to hurtful comments of doctors. When doctors do not address the circumcision, one gets the feeling of not

being treated properly. Withheld information about reconstructive surgery and comments like: "This can't be changed anymore." are unacceptable. You are free to choose your doctor and change doctor at any time you are not treated with respect. Help with finding a new doctor is provided by some counselling centres (see appendix).





Often doctors only prescribe ointment to treat scars but do not inform about other options. Reconstructive surgery is possible and even covered by health insurance. Options for reconstructive surgery are numerous and range from surgery of the vaginal opening for painless sex to reconstruction of the clitoris for more sensual sex. The final decision entirely lies with you.

The German Law

In Germany, FGM_C is a crime and punishable with imprisonment between one and fifteen years. Parents or other relatives are guilty of complicity if they arrange, support, or tolerate circumcision.

As imminent FGM_C is grounds for asylum it might be useful to talk about it during hearings at BAMF even though it might be unpleasant. Girls facing imminent FGM_C when travelling to their home country, e.g., during holidays, are protected by family law.



This map shows all countries where FGM_C is common practice:



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Pregnancy and Childbirth

Counselling centres offer help and information about support. Pregnancy entitles you to regular preliminary medical examinations and assistance of a midwife. Depending on the type of circumcision it is important to talk about it for better planning of childbirth. It may happen that some doctors and nurses working in hospital delivery rooms have never seen a circumcised vulva, therefore, they may react inappropriately or cannot handle the situation suitable. Always remember: You have the right to be treated respectfully at any time! If you wish for vaginal delivery, it might be necessary to open your vagina, depending on the type of circumcision. Sealing the vagina after birth is against the German law, so consider carefully beforehand if an opening is an option for you. If not, a c-section could be an alternative.



All costs relating to medical examinations and a midwife are covered by health insurance. In case you do not have any health insurance, you can contact any counselling centre.

Talk About it!

Talking about FGM_C requires courage, that is why many people do not dare to talk about this topic, neither within family nor in public. It is said FGM_C is a family matter. As it often is very important what others might think, also men do not dare to talk about their wives not being circumcised. Not being circumcised is often considered a matter of disgrace. Many fear to be excluded from their community by talking about FGM_C or not letting their daughters undergo it. Talking about it helps! It is never easy to take the first

step, even though many women want to bring about a change. Mothers often do not want their daughters to undergo FGM_C but fear that their community does not accept it. It would help if they would talk to their daughters and explain to them why they are against it. In the past girls often had to undergo circumcision during holidays, luckily this does not happen too often nowadays.

It is important to know that FGM_C is prohibited in Germany and can be prosecuted. Paediatricians also keep an eye on this issue. Doctors in other countries, such as Eritrea and Guinea also combat FGM_C.

Anatomy (FGM_C)

Circumcised vulvae may look different just as any differ. Following there are three pictures showing circumcised vulvae and one showing an uncircumcised. Of course, your vulva may look different to the ones shown. We want to show you which parts could be removed or manipulated (by a hot object or pressure).



The next pages show pictures of circumcised vulvae. Feel free to skip these pictures or have a look at them later.

(To skip the pictures please proceed to page 20.)

Uncircumcised Vulva

*clitoral hood &
glans clitoris*

labia minora

labia majora

urethral opening

vaginal opening



FGM_C Type I

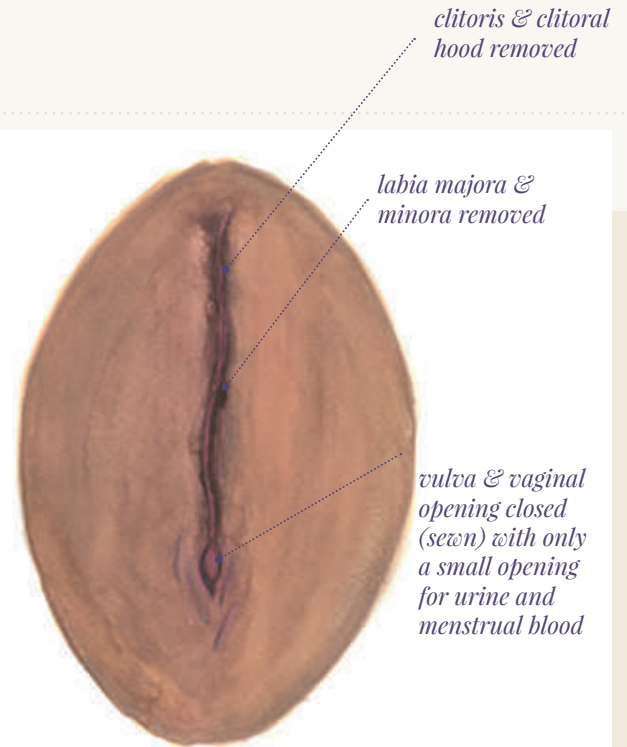
*clitoris & clitoral hood partially
or totally removed*



FGM_C Type II



FGM_C Type III



Sexuality, Pleasure and Relationship



Everyone is different and therefore, has their own body feeling and own way of feeling sexual desire. If you feel confident about your body, it is easier to enjoy sex. The most important sexual organ is the brain. Allowing sexual pleasure and letting sexual fantasies run free helps to get to know one's personal pleasure even better. Humans are sexual beings by nature which means from early childhood we can feel pleasure, not necessarily sexual based pleasure. The better one knows one's body and what brings pleasure, the easier it is to verbalise one's needs. Exploring one's body by having a closer look, for example having a look at your vulva by using a mirror, helps with getting to know your own body better. Men are usually used to explore their bodies during their childhood, this has to do with their sexual organs being more visible as female sexual organs, plus they are more often allowed to explore their body.

Sexuality and FGM_C

Through circumcision the labia or parts of the clitoris can be removed or harmed but as the main part of the clitoris is inside the body it is still possible to feel pleasure after FGM_C. It is also possible to increase libido and decrease pain during sex by reconstructive surgery. There is a way to e. g. reconstruct nerves of the clitoris so that external stimulation is possible again.

What Happens Inside the Body When Being Aroused?

Sexual arousal leads to increased blood flow inside the vulva and clitoris which causes them to swell. This is comparable to what happens to cause an erected penis. The male glans and the clitoris function very similar. Additionally, to increased blood flow the vagina becomes wet, deeper and opens a little wider, which is important to prevent painful sex. Using lubricant gel helps if the vagina is not wet enough even if desire is present.

Sexual arousal can be negatively affected by negative thoughts, fear of pain or pregnancy as well as trauma caused by consciously experienced FGM_C or violence. **If you experienced such things, it is normal to not be sexually aroused easily or at all. To get help, feel free to contact any counselling centre as they provide help.**

Pleasure and Relationship

Not everyone is aroused and feels pleasure the same way. Some may like to be touched and caressed all over their bodies, others may find pleasure when something is inserted into the vagina. Discovering new body parts that bring pleasure by touching can be fun. It is something pleasant to do alone or with one's partner. To share sexual fantasies with a partner is important but it is as important to know that not all fantasies need to be lived out. It should be joyful for both partners. No one should be forced to have sexual encounters of any kind and having sex is not mandatory! Forcing anybody into sexual activity of any kind is prohibited in Germany regardless of the relationship's status (e.g., marriage). It is exclusively your decision when, how often to have sex or to have sex at all!

Family Planning and Contraception

Family planning is an active decision whether and when to have children or not. For many women it is not easy to plan when to become pregnant. Either a lack of information about how to become pregnant or expectations of others, that women should become pregnant right after the wedding, can be reasons for this. There is a broad variety of contraceptives for women to prevent unintended pregnancy. The contraceptive pill is the most common method. The only contraception method to prevent STIs (sexual transmitted infections) is the condom.

Doctors or counselling centres such as AWO Lore-Agnes-Haus can provide information as well. It is every woman's free will to decide whether and when to become pregnant.

🌿 We often hear from women that their partners are „careful“ during sex. Which means he pulls his penis out of the vagina before ejaculating. This is NOT a suitable form of contraception! Women can become pregnant from the slightest amount of sperm emerging from the man's penis during intercourse. Additionally, men are often unable to control ejaculation.

Almaz's Story



Almaz is 60 years old, she was born in Asmara/ Eritrea. She now lives in Bochum and is mother of five children.

"I was raised in Eritrea where I went to a catholic boarding school. When I turned thirteen, me and other girls joined the revolution. During this time bad things happened in Eritrea. At the age of seventeen I lived and fought in the jungle. I was a child soldier until 1991, when the Eritrean War of Independence ended. I was wounded three times and missed out on many things in live. However, I also learned a lot about politics and being a woman. There were conferences on women where we discussed how women can be satisfied with themselves. Many women were highly educated and taught us knowledge of the body, about sex and why circumcision is dangerous. They also told us what



can happen to a woman that underwent FGM_C when giving birth. I have been to many villages and got into contact with different cultures and religions, that is why respect for others is very important to me. When I was born, sixty years ago, almost every girl in Eritrea had to undergo circumcision during their first month of live. Since 1991, after the revolution, it is prohibited in Eritrea. We fought hard for women's rights and for being in control of our own bodies. Girls had to undergo FGM_C so that they did not sneak out with a boy to have sex, they should not feel the desire to have sex at all. They should be circumcised to get married. Religion did not play a role in this. Even though it is prohibited now, there are still families that circumcise their daughters in secrecy. Until today it is not usual to talk to one's mother about it and ask why they did it. I do not have any memories of my own circumcision.

My family wanted me to circumcise my daughter and son, but I said NO! I did not do what they wanted and let not undergo any of my daughters FGM_C. I want to do things better for my children.

One of my daughters has a major handicap and as it was not possible to provide her with the best medical care in Eritrea, I decided to leave the country and move to Europe. In the end, I went to Germany and had to leave my family and work behind.

I am a strong, hardworking woman and want to set an example for my children. I learned to be self-confident, independent and have an own opinion on things. I talk to my daughters a lot and they are thankful that I protected them from undergoing FGM_C.

I wish for every girl and woman to be allowed to marry out of love and not because their families decide for them. I wish for love for all girls, self-love, and loving relationships."



Our Most Important Messages for You!



- ~ **You are perfect** just the way you are!
- ~ **You are free to take your time** in whatever you do, regardless of what others say!
- ~ **You have the right to be treated respectfully** by anyone (doctors, midwives, and counsellors)!
- ~ **You do not have to endure racism!**
- ~ **It can help to talk** with other people with similar experiences!
- ~ **Every kind of feeling and expression of feeling** is accepted and welcome – there is no need to always stay calm!
- ~ **Find things in your everyday life** that help you cope with your experiences and supportive people you can trust!
- ~ **Dare talking to your daughters**, your mother and partner about FGM_C!
- ~ **It is okay not to be okay.** There is no need to suit others!
- ~ **You are allowed** to seek for help and support!
- ~ **There is no need to be ashamed!** You are not worth less because of circumcision!
- ~ **It is your right** to be in a safe and violent free relationship!
- ~ **You have the freedom** of choice concerning everything in your live – your live, your body, your relationships!



Where to Find Help:

There are meanwhile many institutions that provide professional and sensitive support. We would like to encourage everyone affected to seek for help and get support if needed. Many helpful offers and activities are also provided by trained specialists. Rule number one is: What is done, is your decision! If you just want to talk to someone, then that is it. In case you need further help e. g. medical or psychological help, then you will get it! Following we listed some counselling centres in your area:

Agisra e.V.: autonomic, feminist information and counselling centre by, and for female migrants, female refugees, black women, and everyone affected by racism, Köln
www.agisra.org

ARIC-NRW e.V.: anti-racism information and counselling centre, Duisburg
www.aric-nrw.de

AWO Lore-Agnes-Haus: counselling centre for topics as: pregnancy, conflict during pregnancy, family planning, sexuality, Essen
www.lore-agnes-haus.de

FIM e.V.: intercultural information centre for female migrants and their families, Frankfurt a. M.
www.fim-frauenrechte.de

Luisenhospital Aachen: reconstructive surgery of female sexual organs, Herr PD Dr. O'Dey
www.luisenhospital.de

Mädchenhaus Bielefeld e.V.: refuge for girls and young women facing violence
www.maedchenhaus-bielefeld.de/zufluchtstaette.html

Maisha e.V. self-help group for African women, Frankfurt
www.maisha.org

Stop mutilation e.V.: association against Female Genital Mutilation_Cutting (FGM_C) in Europe and Africa, Düsseldorf
www.stop-mutilation.org

Yuna: project against Female Genital Mutilation_Cutting (FGM_C), Köln
www.yuna-nrw.de

website, in different languages about body, contraception, STIs (sexual transmitted infections) and much more,
www.zanzu.de





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Talk about it! Parles-en! Wowlou fi moun!
A fala! A fo! Lobela Yango! Fale sobre isso! Sara téne ni!
Wakh thi! Sprich drüber!

Stay strong, you are not alone! Sattino, a weddaaki!
Goorgorlul, douniou labbayyi yaw kenna! Zala makasi, ozali yo moko te!
Mo douti ngangou, mokè mo oko apè! Mantenha-se forte, não está sozinho!
Sois forte, tu n'es pas seule! Sois forte, tu n'es pas seule!