Report from Geneva

The intactivist movement was represented for the first time this year at the three-week-long 52nd annual meeting of the United Nations' Sub Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights ("Sub-Commission"). Acting pursuant to the UN Roster status of NOCIRC, and with assistance from team members Tina Kimmel and Ken Drabik who each worked with me on site for part of the session, I traveled to Geneva to work with the Sub Commission. We arranged and attended personal meetings with a number of Sub-Commissioners and I presented each of the 26 Sub-Commissioners with a range of donated material including a videotape and a CD-ROM depicting a circumcision, books, and Jacqueline Smith's article about circumcision as a human rights violation. Thank you to all the folks who helped make this possible through cash or in-kind donations that supported the project. Special thanks to Dan Stranjon and Lawrence Barichello for the videotapes (and to Ken Drabik for transporting them), to Lawrence and Geoffrey Falk for the CD's, and to Tina Kimmel for the books.

On August 9, 2001, I presented a written "intervention" or petition to the Sub-Commission. On August 14, 2001, I gave an oral address to a session of the Sub-Commission. Present in the audience, along with the Sub Commissioners, were a number of governmental mission members, representatives of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, and credentialed observers. Both the written and oral "interventions" will become part of the UN's official records and at least in theory will be reviewed and considered by each Sub-Commissioner. (The text of my oral "intervention" appears at the end of this report.) While a wide range of protections have been instituted by the UN to help stop female genital mutilation, male circumcision has never been addressed by any UN body, including the Sub-Commission. This is true despite the fact that Sub Commissioners, in written reports, have themselves advised the Sub-Commission that sex discrimination against males violates international law.

Initially we had some very interesting meetings with several Sub Commissioners. Apart from Mrs. Warzazi, as discussed in the next paragraph, the Sub-Commissioners who did actually meet with us were very receptive. Some of them indicated their support of our work but none of them seemed inclined to pursue the issue further within the Sub-Commission. I asked in both my oral and written interventions that the Sub-Commission restore the mandate of Sub-Commissioner Mrs. Halima Embarek Warzazi, its Special Rapporteur on Traditional Practices Affecting Women and the Girl Child (formerly "Women and Children"), to again encompass practices affecting male children. Four years ago, in an apparent violation of the Sub-Commission's normal procedural rules, the reduction of Mrs. Warzazi's mandate was effected without official pronounce-ment or substantive discussion of the reasons for the change. In Geneva, Mrs. Warzazi met with us but soon became quite confrontational. She suggested that our position was based on the fact that we are not Muslims or Jews. When we responded by noting that many members of these religions are involved in the movement against circumcision (including one who was present in Geneva, Tina Kimmel), Mrs. Warzazi then claimed that it would violate her religion even to discuss with us the issue of male circumcision. We were able to give her a copy of Jacqueline Smith's human rights article before she abruptly ended the meeting.

Already the UN has recognized that circumcision can under certain circumstances constitute a human rights violation, and we were, among other things, seeking to obtain a general statement to that effect. The United Nations bureaucracy and the Sub-Commission members and employees always treated us with respect. But clearly they talked among themselves and learned what our issue was. Evidently they were not—with some exceptions—seriously considering our claims. Eventually Sub-Commissioners and their staff members started to regularly avoid scheduled meetings with us, without canceling the meetings or contacting us in any way, not even in response to our follow-up contacts.

On August 15, 2001, the FaxNet issued a press release regarding our work. During my time in Geneva, I also arranged meetings with representatives of NGO's from such diverse countries as the United States, Lesotho, and Bolivia. The NGO representatives with whom I spoke tended to support our work but were reluctant (continued page 4)
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Your comments and suggestions regarding this newsletter are welcomed. Please forward them to: arc@post.harvard.edu

Message from the Director

I send out my heartfelt warm holiday wishes to all the readers. This year, made famous in advance by Stanley Kubrick's landmark movie, turned out when it arrived to hold more than its share of challenges for all of us. On the bright side, it has brought us together as a country and as a planet. The challenge, in the work to stop circumcision as in our lives, is to move ahead and learn from past events. Surely it is relevant that evidently all the actors who brought about the tragic events of September are circumcised males. As events unfold, we do not need to allow our concerns about male circumcision to be swept aside by those who would put us off indefinitely. There will always be seemingly "more important" issues.

I am gratified by the numerous fronts on which progress is being made. Attorney David Llewellyn and his client William Stowell have moved on to a new phase in their circumcision lawsuit. This year also was marked by successful lawsuits settled for $1.4 million in California and $117,000 in Massachusetts. (See box on page 1 for more about Stowell and the Massachusetts case.) As also detailed on page 1, for the first time, concerns with male circumcision have been recorded in official United Nations documents and in an oral presentation we made in Geneva in August.

This year, a law was passed in Sweden restricting circumcision. Even though the law was not all we hoped for, this is an important first step. NOCIRC Director Marilyn Milos received a richly deserved award from NurseWeek magazine. Thanks to Marilyn and others, an awesome series of events took place in our nation's capital in early April, including two marches on the Capital and the Supreme Court, a two-day conference, the release of a landmark report on Medicaid funding of circumcision, and an intensive Congressional lobbying campaign. I traveled to Berlin shortly after my wedding and delivered a talk to the 14th Meeting of the International Society for Sexually Transmitted Diseases Research.

Three important books were published this year, including the impressive proceedings of the December 2000 symposium in Sydney. Media exposure has continued, including a superb Nova television special and an article in the December issue of Penthouse quoting David, Marilyn, and myself. The paper I wrote with Bob Van Howe and James Dwyer on consent to circumcision was published in the Journal of Contemporary Health Law and Policy.

ARC has achieved both federal and California non-profit status, allowing tax-deductible donations to be made to us directly (J. Steven Svboda, ARC, 2961 Ashby Ave., Berkeley, CA 94705).

Thanks to all of you for your continuing support. Particular warm thanks go out to my collaborators and to ARC's financial supporters, who make our efforts possible.

Steven Svboda, Executive Director

Book Review


This book contains the proceedings of the excellent Sixth International Symposium on Genital Integrity, held from December 7-9, 2000 in Sydney, Australia. Here is a listing of the contents:

1. Ending the Forced Genital Cutting of Children and the Violation of their Human Rights: Ethical, Psychological and Legal Considerations by Gregory J. Doyle, Ph.D.
2. Jewish Circumcision: An Enigma in Historical Perspective by Leonard B. Glick, M.D., Ph.D.
3. The Compulsion to Circumcise is Constant: The Reasons Keep Changing by Michael Katz, M.D.
4. Male Circumcision in South Korea: History, Statistics and the Role of Doctors in Creating a Circumcision Rate of Over 100% by Myung-Geol Pang, Ph.D., Sae Chul Kim, Ph.D. and DalSik Kim, Ph.D.
5. Attitudes of Egyptian Intellectuals Towards Genital Integrity For All by Seham Abd el Salam Mohamed, M.A., M.D.
6. Sunna Gudin: An Alternative Ritual to Infibulation in Merka Somalia by Pia Grassivaro Gallo, Ph.D., Lydia Rabuffetti, and Franco Viviani, Ph.D.
7. The Struggle Against Female Genital Mutilation/Female Circumcision: The European Experience by Els Leye.
8. A Review of Circumcision in New Zealand: I never liked doing them and I was pleased to give them up by Ken McGrath, V.R.D., M.Sc., L.L.Biol. and Hugh Young.
10. "A Source of Serious Mischief:" The Demonization of the Foreskin and the Rise of (continued page 4) Preventive Circumcision in Australia by Robert Darby, Ph.D.
14. Ritual and Medical Circumcision among Filipino (continued page 4)
Sweden Addresses MGM

On June 1, 2001, I had the pleasure of attending a plenum session of the 349-seat Parliament of Sweden for the floor debate and vote on Sweden’s landmark legislation on Male Genital Mutilation (MGM).

The events that took place during the floor debate were arguably more significant than the legislation that was passed.

The legislation that was passed directs the Swedish Committee on Health and Welfare to study the issue of MGM over the next 4 years and to draft new legislation at the end of the 4-year period to ensure that rights of all Swedish children are protected.

In the meantime, the legislation mandates that MGM be performed only by qualified medical doctors and that anesthetics be used in all MGM procedures.

The legislation contains an exemption for the first 2 months of life that will allow other individuals who have demonstrated their "competency" to perform MGM.

This exemption was placed into the legislation by the The Committee on Health and Welfare under heavy pressure from Stockholm Mohel Maynard Gerber and The Conference of European Rabbis.

Gerber was quoted in the June 19, 2001 issue of "The Jerusalem Post," Israel’s leading English language daily, as saying that the new Swedish legislation "is a threat to the very foundation of Judaism."

The same article, which was published as the Committee on Health and Welfare was in the process of drafting the new legislation, quoted the Secretary-General of the Conference of European Rabbis, Abu Dunner, as saying that European Orthodox Rabbis are making "strenuous reputations" to the Swedish Government.

The article went on to quote Dunner as saying that not allowing Jews to circumcise in Sweden would "seriously discriminate against the Jewish faith" and "would "be tantamount to undermining Jewish life... in Sweden" and would be "a blot on the reputation of country that has been renowned for its battle on behalf of human rights and religious freedom."

The issue of human rights versus religious freedom very much defined the floor debate.

During the floor debate MP Tasso Stafilidis introduced an amendment to criminalize performing MGM on any male under the age of 18 without medical indication.

MP Stafilidis gave a powerful and passionate speech in which he stated the parliament must consider what is best for the child and pointed out that a child cannot choose for himself whether or not he wishes to be circumcised.

MP Kia Andreasson called the legislation that was drafted by the The Committee on Health and Welfare a farce because it did not protect the rights of all children.

MP Andreasson introduced a bill to throw out the legislation that was drafted by The Committee on Health and Welfare and demand stronger legislation to protect children. She objected very strongly to the exemption for the first 2 months of life.

A total of 12 Ministers of Parliament (MPs) from political parties from across the political spectrum in Sweden’s Parliament took part in the floor debate.

All MPs who spoke during the floor debate agreed that MGM is a serious issue that needs to be studied further in order to ensure that Swedish law protects the rights of all Swedish children.

MP Ulla Hoffman gave a speech in which she stated that she totally rejects the notion that religion should justify circumcision. She stated that it is nonsense to say that children will forget the traumatic event of their circumcision and that it is nonsense to say that children will not sense pain. She concluded by saying the issue of male circumcision is not one of religion, but rather of protecting children from harm.

Other MPs spoke of a need to further study the issue of MGM and the harm that it does in order to determine if it should be incumbent upon the Swedish Parliament to enact legislation to protect children from any potential harm that may be done by circumcision, regardless of considerations of religious freedom.

Not one MP in the 349-seat Swedish Parliament rejected the assertion that MGM is a serious issue that must be studied as it may violate children’s rights.

When the vote was called on the issue, the MPs were given 6 minutes to take their seats on the floor of the Parliament. The MPs came pouring onto the floor of the Parliament.

There were two votes due to MP Stafilidis' amendment to criminalize performing MGM on any child under the age of 18 and the bill introduced by MP Andreasson to reject the legislation completely and demand stronger legislation.

In the first vote, the MPs were given a choice between accepting the proposed legislation and moving forward to the second vote or rejecting the legislation and demanding stronger legislation.

249 MPs voted to accept the proposed legislation and move forward to the second vote. 10 MPs voted to reject to proposed legislation and demand stronger legislation. 20 MPs abstained and 70 MPs were absent.

The second and final vote was then called.

The floor of the Parliament fell silent as the MPs decided on whether to accept the proposed legislation as written or to accept the proposed legislation with the amendment to make MGM of any child under the age of 18 illegal.

The sound of buttons clicking could be heard as the MPs made their choices and the large electronic display boards on both sides of the podium began to light up as a sea of green lights as the Parliament of Sweden voted unanimously to acknowledge that MGM is a serious human rights issue that must be studied in order to ensure that the rights of all Swedish children are protected.

247 MPs voted to accept the proposed legislation, 14 MPs voted to accept the proposed legislation with the amendment to criminalize MGM of any child under the age of 18, 20 MPs abstained and 68 MPs were absent.

For the first time in history, a political entity has recognized that MGM is a human rights issue. The political entity is the Parliament of Sweden, a country which is respected around the world for being at the forefront of human rights issues.

The sea of green lights that lit up the electronic display boards of The Swedish Parliament on June 1, 2001 should come as a bright and shining beacon of hope to all those who realize that MGM of consenting minors is a human rights violation that must be stopped.

About the author: Jonathan Dale Rapoport is a freelance journalist who writes on human rights issues. Rapoport is a strong supporter of outlawing MGM of all males under the age of 18.
Physicians Re-Examine
(continued from page 2) enhances sexual pleasure (two reasons), and the glans is intended to be an internal organ. Circumcision is a disservice to both the male and female, and removes a lot more than a little snap of skin. Males with foreskins will have a lot of company in the locker room, and the history of circumcision is filled with hysteria, bias, and misinformation. Even some Jewish people are changing their minds about the procedure, and none of the many suggested health reasons (penile and cervical cancer, urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS—three reasons!) hold up to careful analysis. Major medical associations say circumcision is unnecessary, and some insurance companies are no longer paying for it. Finally, if you're not sure, don't do it! Say no to circumcision!

The book opens with five pages of fine prefatory material, including thoughtful messages to parents who had their son circumcised, to new parents, to circumcised men, and to doctors who circumcise. A useful summary of American medical policy in 2001 is provided. (Fair disclosure: an academic article I co-authored on the inadequacy of parental consent to neonatal circumcision is quoted at length.) Famed anthropologist Ashley Montagu provides a persuasive introduction aptly addressing the remarkable persistence and vitality of cultural myths. Perhaps mostvaluably, a full page is devoted to a tabulation of some thirty fallacies and myths of circumcision. These are the very beliefs that will be debunked in the following pages, and they are so widespread that nearly everybody without an in-depth familiarity with the subject is likely to believe many if not most of them. And yet none of them is true: Circumcision does carry serious risks. Doctors cannot necessarily be relied upon, particularly in the United States, to provide accurate information regarding the procedure. Circumcision does not prevent premature ejaculation.

Repeatedly throughout the book we have the opportunity to hear "victim's voices" and to be exposed to ideas about the procedure which have been raised by numerous other authors and organizations including the American Academy of Pediatrics. On one page, the reader will encounter some photographs which may be painfully graphic in depicting what can go wrong with a circumcision. The drawings scattered throughout the book usefully elucidate the text.

The authors possess a charming simplicity and directness in their writing style from which many if not most professionals such as lawyers and physicians could learn.

Many of us can also learn much from the physicians’ admirable brevity. Under one hundred pages to comprehensively cover the subject! The larger, full page format makes this edition much easier to read and use. Three cheers!*

Discounts are available for quantity orders of “Doctors Re-examine Circumcision”. Contact Lisa Stephon at: (telephone) 717.285.2839 or (e-mail) MusiciansUnited@aol.com for special pricing.

Understanding Circumcision

Geneva
(continued from page 1) to participate directly given their organizations' focus on other issues. Given the recent passage of a Swedish law regulating circumcision, I worked very closely with Swedish representatives in both Geneva and Stockholm, including several Swedish legislators who were very influential in the floor debate over the new Swedish law, and I also met with representatives of the Swedish mission to the United Nations. In preparation for the "interventions," I performed extensive research regarding human rights aspects of male and female genital mutilation at the United Nations and the World Health Organization. I also met with reporter Jonathan Rapoport, who provided some useful Swedish contacts, and with representatives of the International Service for Human Rights.

Thanks again to everyone who helped make this effort possible and particularly to Marilyn Milos of NOCIRC whose permission for us to proceed under NOCIRC’s Roster status made the venture possible. Plans are already being prepared for a return engagement next year, probably in concert with representatives of other credentialed organizations. The Sub-Commission will see that male circumcision is an issue that must be addressed.

J. Steven Svboda, Executive Director, Attorneys for the Rights of the Child


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