Malin Björk: "Female genital mutilation is a way to control women’s bodies and sexuality"

Some 200 million women and girls have suffered a form of genital mutilation. It consists of cutting off genitalia and is mostly carried out on young girls up to 15 years old. On the occasion of the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation on 6 February we spoke to women’s right committee member Malin Björk, a Swedish MEP from the GUE/NGL group, about what should be done to end the practice.

What made you become interested in this topic?

I am interested in this topic because it concerns women's rights and women's right to their own bodies. This is a global issue. The right to our own bodies and our own sexuality is a very broad subject and female genital mutilation is a serious, patriarchal attack on women's bodies.

How big is the problem and where does it come from?

According to the World Health Organization, 200 million girls and women alive today have been victims of female genital mutilation. It is a practice that is older than both Christianity and Islam. And while it is not linked to religion, it is very much linked to patriarchy. Female genital mutilation is a way to control women’s bodies and sexuality.

What is the EU doing about it and what else should be done?

The European Parliament has passed several resolutions put forth by the women's rights committee denouncing female genital mutilation and other forms of violence against women. The EU and its member states should continue to financially support grassroots movements and organisations that promote women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights, including the right to contraception and safe, legal abortion care.

Are there any refugee women who are victims of female genital mutilation or who are at risk of having to undergo it?

Yes, there may be refugee women who are, or risk being, victims of female genital mutilation and they should naturally receive proper health care and support. We must also make sure that female genital mutilation is seen as grounds for asylum and we have to have good laws in place against it.
However, I think it is extremely important not to isolate female genital mutilation and the struggle against it. It has to be seen as a form of violence and as feminists we have to reject all forms of gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation.

We need to fight violence against women on all fronts, whether it is female genital mutilation or other forms of physical, sexual or psychological violence or abuse. We are seeing constant attacks on women’s rights around the world. The Trump administration just re-introduced the so-called global gag rule, stopping all funding to development organisations that support the right to abortion. And in Russia, domestic violence was just decriminalised. The underlying factor of violence against women is not religion or identity, but patriarchy.

Find out more
Malin Björk
International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation
Factsheet: female genital mutilation
Study
European Parliament resolution
European Commission webpage on female genital mutilation