



Handout | The story of Maria and her country

(based on a real story)

Maria lived in a country which she loved, but just as with every other country in the world, it had some sad historical chapters. In 1909, her country established *The Society for Racial Hygiene*, with the aim of influencing public policy and public opinion by spreading knowledge about eugenic methods, and their results. The Society distributed pamphlets about the importance of “racial hygiene” and presented the sterilisation of women considered ‘unfit’ as one way of maintaining a higher genetic pool within the country.

The Society was later replaced by a government department called The State Institute for Racial Biology, which operated until the late 1950s. In 1934, Maria’s country adopted a law which allowed for the forced sterilisation of people with intellectual disabilities. Later, this law was extended to other groups of people who were considered ‘unfit’ for society.

When Maria was 17, she was identified as having a very low level of intelligence and was diagnosed by the school doctor as ‘feeble-minded’ (this is the term that was used to refer to people with intellectual disabilities). The doctor also said that because of this fact, Maria would be unable to raise children. She was later called to sign some papers. She was not sure what she was signing, and it turned out later on that by signing these papers she had agreed to be sterilised. In 1943, the doctors performed an operation on her and removed her ovaries, which made her infertile. It emerged later that the reason she was classified as ‘feeble-minded’ was because she was short-sighted (and had no glasses). This had made her unable to read the blackboard.

In 1997, in a newspaper interview, Maria (who was by then 72) said: *“I’ll never forget when I was called into the headmistress office... I was aware of it well before. I hid in the basement bathroom, crying all by myself. I thought of killing myself, and I have been thinking of it ever since. But I never wanted to give them [the government] the satisfaction of getting rid of me. I tried to let my hatred go, to melt it away. But it isn’t possible for me”*.

Maria demanded compensation from her government in 1996, but her claim was initially rejected. However, after prominent newspaper headlines about her story, an *ex-gratia* payment was made to her.

The law allowing forced sterilisation was operational until 1975, and it is estimated that some 60,000 people were sterilised, mainly women. How many of these sterilisations were on the grounds of intellectual disability is unknown. A similar law applied to transsexual people, who had to undergo sterilisation before a sex change. This law was abolished in 2013.

TASK FOR THE GROUP

After reading the story of Maria and her country, discuss the questions below in your group. Prepare a short report to present to the rest of the group, based on your answers to the last two questions. You will have about 2-3 minutes for your presentation.

Questions:

- What did you think about the story? Did it shock or surprise you? Why, or why not?
- Which country do you think Maria was from? Give a reason for your guess.
- Can you imagine Maria’s feelings when she understood that she would be sterilised?
- How do you think that forced sterilisation affected the rest of Maria’s life?
- How do such acts affect the understanding of human rights?