



ENDING FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING

Julia Lalla-Maharajh, founder of the Orchid Project, shares personal reflections on her cross-cultural journey to end female genital cutting and what this means for facilitating social change.

It was in 2009, while volunteering in Ethiopia, that I found myself confronted by the reality of female genital cutting (FGC). I had learned how it affected 74% of all Ethiopian women. Girls were often cut before their fifth birthday. The more I read, the more concerned I felt. But I had so little legitimacy to raise my voice around this issue, as an outsider, that it was initially easy to simply look away. After all, here was a taboo on the grandest scale, related to other women's genitals, a chronic human rights abuse and part of a culture that wasn't mine.

But as I did a deeper dive into FGC, I realised I had to move outside my comfort zone. The cut affects more than 200 million women globally, with four million girls at risk each year in over 60 countries around the world across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. A chance meeting with two small girls whom I was unable to 'rescue' helped solidify my intent and, not knowing what I could do, I simply vowed to do whatever I could. It would take tenacity and more.

The moment of shift was winning a YouTube competition to go to the World Economic Forum in Davos and create a

panel discussion about how to effect change. This helped me overcome some of my doubts and introduced me to one of the most important teachers in my life.

SHIFTING SOCIAL NORMS

Molly Melching is the founder of Tostan, an NGO headquartered in Senegal, working for sustainable change and community-led development to allow people to choose a better life for themselves. I first met Molly in London in 2010, and I had mapped out the model that I wanted to create to support systemic change. I had put 'my' organisation, what would become Orchid Project, right in the middle. Molly gently said to me: 'Where do you think change really comes from? Is your organisation the most important locus? What about the communities where the change actually happens? Why don't you come to Senegal to see what it's all about?' Unlike others who had used their learning to shame me with how little I knew, her approach was to ask me into her world to witness and then form my own conclusions.

Molly looked at my model and gently said: 'Where do you think change really comes from? Is your organisation the most important locus?'

Six months later, I travelled to Senegal to learn from Tostan. My whole worldview shifted as I realised that community-level change needed to be primary. Molly and her team supported communities to set their own agenda for change, and not allow external organisations to impose theirs. In the absence of formal education, most communities were used to oral communication and continued doing what their families had always done. In many communities, cutting had taken place unquestioned for centuries. Moving away from 'the tradition' could interrupt a girl's future belonging to the community, which could threaten her survival.

Importantly, Tostan understood that FGC is a social norm. A social norm is an informal code that upholds our behaviour in a society¹. If it is not adhered to, it can disrupt the entire societal framework. Social norms are rarely discussed but their power is extremely strong. However, a social norm can shift if, amongst other factors, it is made visible, so one starting point is helping people to talk about it. In order to do this, two elements have to be in place. Firstly, that people understand their universal human rights and their responsibility to uphold these rights for themselves and for others. Secondly, that they have the capacity to aspire to change and realise that it is possible. Once a community is allowed to talk about the social norm and grasps that cutting is harmful to a girl, it can then choose to question it.

In this way, the individual response to the practice is discussed collectively and the interdependent ownership of FGC is made more visible. Instead of labouring in isolation and perhaps questioning the practice internally (a state called 'pluralistic ignorance'²) people socialise their response towards what was once the taboo of cutting and are able to discuss it. Together the community makes a choice about whether it is ready to abandon FGC and declare an intention to stop the practice. The declaration is vital because it is public and witnessed by other nearby communities. Thus, everyone knows that a girl will be uncut – both their families and their current and future social networks. This declaration is a moment like no other: when the social norm visibly shifts from 'all girls are cut' to 'all girls are uncut'. Now, over 9,000 communities throughout West Africa have taken this decision for their daughters: these girls will no longer go through cutting.

Seeing this change allowed me to support it with renewed vigour. I returned to London and set up Orchid Project, an NGO with a vision for a world free from female genital cutting within the next generation. The model for achieving social norm shift is replicable, so our work has now embraced communities all around the world; most recently we have launched an Asia network to end FGC there with the same guiding principles.

In the last decade, we have worked to galvanise change by supporting social norm change but also by persuading those who are mandated to do more to follow through. Often these persuasions are made easier by shining a light on the work done at the grassroots. This approach has resulted in governments choosing to fund sustainable solutions and choosing to prioritise the issue³, something UK readers might recognise.

WHAT COULD COACHING LEARN FROM THIS APPROACH?

- Listen and learn, without judgement, at the right level, and as close to the issue and its ownership as possible.
- Major shifts in behaviour first need the issue to be made visible.
- Mapping the interdependencies, including everyone in decision-making positions, fosters ownership and sustainability.
- Taboo issues might seem too difficult to tackle, but finding an entry point can lead to incredible change.
- Once there is momentum for change, people are inspired to share this themselves, which can lead to onward change.
- Those who are pioneering change need to be supported.

MY LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

By the time I had to decide whether to pursue a vision of a world free from female genital cutting, the time had also come for me to make a conscious choice to be a leader. I'd spent my life in positions of follower: partly fate, partly the lot of a young woman of colour excluded from an invisible system of privilege, partly a well-honed impostor syndrome founded in a taught modesty. In retrospect, I developed some helpful characteristics in my time in the corporate sector: a quiet confidence, cemented by a track record of competence, reliability and effectiveness. I actively enjoyed the intellectual rigour that working on infrastructure in the private sector proffered.

What I didn't know then was that life experiences would enhance some of these competencies and take my personal philosophy to a different level: a humbling acceptance of life with a chronic illness, volunteering in Cambodia and Ethiopia that allowed me to find values that had long been dormant, and a burgeoning realisation of what integrity and dignity meant to me. When I chose to set up Orchid Project, I also chose no income for a vulnerable two years. It helped me act with congruence and authenticity, never asking others to do what I wouldn't myself.

It was crucially important for me to speak truth to power. I vowed that I would tell people clearly about FGC but that I would never belittle, confront or shame anyone for not doing more; instead, I would aim to help them understand the part they could play in ending the practice. I found myself telling queens, princesses, archbishops and ministers about FGC, but always in such a way that, if those affected had been listening, they would have been nodding in agreement.

I made uncomfortable decisions, such as setting a vision of a world free from FGC within the next generation, which is both audacious and completely impossible to qualify statistically. For the last decade, I have been trying to describe how exponential change happens: one community communicates with up to five others and, in turn, each of those to another five, and on it goes. Suddenly, the coronavirus pandemics means we all know about exponential transmission and I shall never have to search for an imperfect metaphor again.

Through coaching, I've learned how to recognise the invariable shadow that comes with leading in the glare of the spotlight

I'm clearer about living with uncertainty, knowing a social-change line graph will never be linear, but instead mimic the flight of a bumblebee. Throughout my time at Orchid, I've been privileged to work with incredible people. Crucially, through coaching, I've learned how to recognise the invariable shadow that comes with leading in the glare of the spotlight. My fallibilities are many, and being able to self-identify and be shown them is a humbling process of constant learning and course correction.

Humility is very important as a founder: you have to recognise that your ethos and DNA flow through the organisation, but that this power must be held lightly. Lastly, as I transition away from the CEO role, I'm re-examining my intentions and who I am as a leader. This time my volunteering has taken me into my local doctor's practice to support primary healthcare in this time of

crisis. Humility is the watchword as I see our care workers carry the brunt of what matters most to me. I've helped set up a group to converse and support each other as we think and do more to be part of creating a new normal. The world needs all sorts of leaders, now more than ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Julia Lalla-Maharajh is a change agent, advocate and speaker. She has worked across the corporate, voluntary and third sectors in a career spanning three decades. Her journey to Ethiopia as a volunteer in 2009 led to her founding an NGO, Orchid Project, with a vision of a world free from female genital cutting. She has inspired and catalysed a global movement to end female genital cutting in the next generation. In 2016 she was awarded an OBE for her work.

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- i. Gerry Mackie, Francesca Moneti, Holly Shakya, and Elaine Denny. *What are social norms? How are they measured?* UNICEF/University of California, San Diego, Center on Global Justice, 27 July 2015. www.unicef.org/protection/files/4_09_30_Whole_What_are_Social_Norms.pdf
- ii. 'The misalignment between attitude and norm can influence the actions of multiple people in a group, to the point that everyone in the group might hold a protective personal attitude... but think that everyone else holds a different position. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as *pluralistic ignorance*.' B Cislighi, L Heise, 'Theory and practice of social norms interventions: eight common pitfalls'. *Global Health* 2018; ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6098623/#CR77
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