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Turning their backs on tradition

Female genital cutting is on the verge of ending in Senegal. By providing information about human rights and health consequences, Tostan has helped women take control of their bodies.



Photo: Lotta Härdelin

The women's colorful tunics and headscarves stand out in stark contrast to the barren and dusty desert landscape that lie on the outskirts of the village of Younoufere in northern Senegal. At midday it is unbearably hot, but the women's meeting begins with singing and dancing. They then roll out their mats in the shade of two big neem trees. Some have carried their plastic chairs from their own huts.

Mariata Diallo begins to speak. She clearly states something almost too good to be true. The women have collectively decided that it is best to put an end to the traditional practice of female genital cutting. In a solemn ceremony, they will turn their backs on a practice during which the clitoris and labia

of girls is removed, often before the age of two — a practice they thought was necessary — a tradition which was passed down from mother to daughter for generations.

"We will step forward one by one and defend this decision," says Diallo.

One hundred and twenty other communities in the conservative Muslim area, known as the Fouta, have also decided to join in this collective declaration along with Younoufere.

The women enthusiastically plan for a celebration with thousands of participants who will publicly declare their decision to end FGC. Only a few years ago, a similar event would have been totally

Republic of Senegal



Capital: Dakar

Population: 13.9 million

Main languages: Wolof, French

GDP per capita: Over 14 000 SEK

Life expectancy: 63 years

Export Products: Canned fish, peanuts, oil products

Source: NE

Three million girls are cut every year.

Female Genital Cutting (FGC) occurs in at least 30 countries, most of them in Africa. The procedure, in which the clitoris and labia are removed, is associated with significant health risks. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) three million girls are cut each year and there are 140 million women who have undergone FGC worldwide.

unthinkable.

"The tradition was perpetuated without us ever questioning it. We assumed that these practices were required by our religion. But when we asked the Imam about this, we were told that there is nothing in the Koran that says girls must undergo this operation," says Haby Fary Sow.

The women learned that the practice can have significant health consequences.

"The turning point came when we learned about human rights. That's when we decided that FGC is a violation of children's rights. We also realized that some of the complications we had experienced during childbirth were most likely due to FGC."

When the women finally started talking to each other, it was as if a button was pushed. Everyone had an experience to relate.

"I put a lot of time and thought into this decision. It's terrible that so many women have suffered, but there's no point feeling guilty about it because we were doing what we thought was right. Instead, I now feel proud to be involved in this decision to speak out," says Lourel Sow.

She keeps her daughter Souadou, nine months old, in her arms.

"My daughter, and her future children and grandchildren, will be able to avoid the health problems caused by this tradition," she continues.

The American development worker, Molly Melching, could take credit for the revolutionary innova-



Photo: Lotta Hårdelin

tion sweeping through thousands of villages in Senegal; however, she is quick to say that it is the villagers themselves who are the source of the movement.

"I was just as surprised as everyone else when the first village made the decision to abandon FGC. There were discussions on human rights that led to the decision. I believe that when people have access to good information, they make wise decisions in order to improve their lives," says Melching when we meet her in the village of Keur Simbara, an hour's drive from the capital city of Dakar.

But it's Melching's initially small-scale development project that explains why village after village in Senegal and several neighboring countries in West Africa have chosen to abandon this most ancient custom of FGC. Tostan's three-year education program has led to a mass movement at the grassroots level. The new knowledge, based on human rights, has been a beacon of light which has helped

The result of Tostan's work is not yet visible in the statistics of genitally cut women, according to Molly Melching. The girls are cut young, the statistics are based on adult women. But more than 7,000 villages have now said no to FGC.

Tostan's three-year education program (the Community Empowerment Program) is founded on human rights and democracy. Participants also learn about health and hygiene and are taught to read, write and do math.

The NGO was founded by Molly Melching 24 years ago. Today Tostan works in six countries in West Africa: Senegal, Mauritania, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau and Mali. The organization has more than 1,000 employees. In total, more than 7,000 villages in eight countries have publicly declared they will end FGC and three million people have been affected by these declarations. In Senegal, the Government expects that FGC will end in several years.

For many years, Tostan has been supported by the Swedish branch of Tostan: Tostan Sweden (www.tostan.se) of which Anne Charlotte Ringquist is chairman. Other supporters in Sweden include Sida, UNICEF Sweden, Radiohjälp, the Postcode Lottery, the Malin and Lennart Philipson Foundation, Berth von Kanzas Foundation and the Tam Group.

Molly Melching and Tostan have received several international awards, including the Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize (the world's largest humanitarian prize), the Anna Lindh Human Rights Award and the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship. The World Health Organization (WHO), has named Tostan's program one of the best approaches for sustainable development.

people be able to choose new alternatives.

The movement has spread so quickly that the Government of Senegal expects that FGC could end in the country within a few years.

Melching has been active in Senegal for 40 years. She arrived there as a 24-year-old exchange student from the University of Illinois in 1974. Melching expected to do African studies for six months and then return to the US, but she remained in Senegal. The model of education which she developed over such a long period of time is today being hailed by the likes of Hillary Clinton, former President Jimmy Carter and Melinda Gates and has received several prestigious awards.

"I have made many mistakes over the years. When something does not work I get frustrated, but I realize it's always me who has

done something wrong or misunderstood some important signal. I never put the blame on the people in the villages," says Melching.

After a few years of living in Senegal Melching had learned to speak Wolof, the national language, fluently. She worked teaching children to read in that language. Because all children's books were written at that time in French, she decided to write African children's stories in Wolof.

Her first contact with development work came when she was hired as an interpreter for several international organizations. Molly became disheartened when she saw how donors with good intentions often failed to achieve the results they had hoped for.

"I learned that it was important to start from people's everyday lives and speak their language. You can not just go in and say 'do this'

or 'stop that.' A current example is the countries affected by Ebola epidemic. Just to drum out the message 'stop shaking hands with everyone' without explaining how germs are spread does not work," she says.

Melching is a popular guest in the village of Keur Simbara where the education program was conducted in the late 1990s. Several times we stop for villagers who want to tell me something or just greet her. For three years, Melching lived in a simple hut in a village some distance away. In Saam Njaay she lacked electricity and running water as she kicked off a project to empower women in rural areas. She realized how important perseverance was for doing sustainable development work.

"Anyone who wants to achieve results in development must be patient, there is no other way. If



Photo: Lotta Hårdelin

The women of Younoufere prepare for a declaration ceremony where they will abandon the tradition of female genital cutting once and for all.



Dancing and singing are a vital part of everyday life in Younoufere.

you don't have the patience, it is perhaps better to refrain from the beginning," says Melching.

Saam Njaay laid the foundation for Tostan as Melching tested materials on a small scale. Dances, theater and traditional stories were an important part of village life and became an integral part of the program. She saw that through a participatory methodology, people started learning and questioning certain traditional practices.

"Presenting a program which was intended exclusively for women aroused the suspicion of the men who were not included. The same thing happened when we did programs just for youth. It was only when we included all the villagers that things started working," says Melching.

"Tostan never comes to a new community with ready-made solutions. The course is designed to help villagers work on their own

priorities. Often, health-related issues or opportunities to increase their income are first on their list. We don't tell participants what to think or what they need, rather we give them information and skills they need, always in local languages," she says.

Tostan means "breakthrough" in Wolof, the breakthrough moment when the chicken pecks its way out and emerges through the egg shell. The big breakthrough for Molly Melching came when she included human rights education in the Tostan program.

"Suddenly, the pieces fell into place. All people have the same human rights, but also responsibilities towards one another. A man cannot hit his wife, but his wife also has responsibilities towards her husband and her children. The villagers were able to make connections and adapt this learning to their own realities," she says.

It was during such a discussion in a makeshift classroom in the village of Malicounda Bambara that the subject of FGC first came up in 1996. To the amazement of the village facilitator, the women concluded that it was not right for their children to have to undergo a practice that could endanger their health. Melching was surprised when this information reached her. Talking about everyday problems was one thing, but to question a thousand-year-old tradition was something else entirely. Melching's first reaction was that as a foreigner, she should not interfere, but the women were very determined and wanted to publicly talk about the practice. Thus, the ball was set rolling.

Almost 20 years later, more than 7,000 villages and three million people have rejected both FGC and child marriage. Tostan has more than 1,000 employees and a large

office in the city of Thies. The model has garnered continued support from, among other organizations, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Melching has been cited as one of the most influential figures in the development world.

"Today I am often asked if I could do a shorter version of the Tostan training, but the program is and remains three years. There is no shortcut to sustainable change. Again it is about patience, but this also might create funding problems when UN agencies and other donors can only provide funding for one year at a time," says Melching.

Along with health, hygiene and sustainable development, participant discussions on FGC have now become a cornerstone of the program, but it was slow in the beginning. The women in Mali-counda Bambara bravely stood up to make this decision, but they were met with disbelief from all sides because the tradition had always been perceived as a pillar of society.

The women's initiatives would probably have died out if it were not for the religious leader Demba Diawara in the village of Keur Simbara. The 80-year-old man is one of Melching's key advisers. He offers us strong mint tea in a small glass as we walk between family huts and says with pride that he was invited to speak at a UN meeting in New York.

"When I first heard that women wanted to stop cutting their girls I was horrified. I went to see Molly Melching and told her not to interfere in one of our oldest traditions. She explained that the women's decision was based on harmful health consequences and asked me to go ask medical doctors, talk with religious leaders and the women themselves. I realized pretty quickly that it was I who was wrong," says

Diawara. "Still, I was quite sure that there would be real problems if one village alone stopped practicing the tradition. The tradition was a way for young women to be respected in the community and ensured their future marriage. The risk was that by ending the tradition and improving the health of our girls, they would then become outcasts. If a village wanted to abandon the tradition, it would be necessary for the other villages in the social network to do the same in order to change the social norm."

Diawara decided to initiate a campaign of persuasion. He walked to villages where his relatives lived, and then to other communities which were interconnected. For over 13 years, he visited a total of 347 villages along with his niece and nephew.

"Sometimes the mood was so hostile that you could cut the air with a knife. It took courage, intelligence and diplomacy. We had to visit many of the villages several times - the people needed time to digest the information and talk among themselves," he said.

The large public declarations where people from many villages gather is a result of Diawara's insightful strategy. There you are sure that everyone is represented, but even if, in the communities, one hundred percent do not agree to ending, you are still building critical mass among those who do agree.

Melching is appreciated in most camps

in Senegal for how she relates to the country's culture and religion. When Tostan establishes itself in a new area, they always meet first with the religious and traditional leaders and listen carefully to their advice.

In the conservative Fouta region in the north, she was met in the beginning with demonstrators who burned tires outside the hotel where she was staying. But in this same region today, the influential religious leader, Ibrahima Sow and his wife Aissata Ba, in the village of Velingara, are two of the organization's main supporters.

"I have always been interested in development. I got in touch with Tostan during a trip many years ago. When they came here I realized at once that much in the village would change," says Ibrahima Sow.



Photo: Lotta Herdelin

80-year-old Demba Diawara is one of the key thought leaders of Tostan.



Tostan's youth caravan travels from village to village and performs short skits on human rights and democracy.

The Imam is well known in many villages and he understood that he would be asked many questions about Islam's view on female genital cutting.

"Very many people, even those who are themselves deeply religious, believe that FGC is a religious rite, but that's not true. There is nothing in our sacred texts requiring women to be cut. The tradition has a different origin. Why would Islam advocate an action that can harm women's health?" says Sow.

"I give the same answer to everyone who comes here or calls to inquire. Sometimes I get accused of being corrupted and bought by Tostan, but I simply refer people to other religious leaders. Then they get the same answer from them," he says.

During our visit, two of the Imam's five children come home from school. His wife, Aissata Ba,

is not visible and the Imam says jokingly that we should look for a group of women who are sweeping the village streets or planting trees if we want to talk to her. Through Tostan, women have learned the importance of cleanliness and nature conservation.

We find Aissata Ba along with 20 or so women who have been meeting. The three-year program is over but the Community Committees continue to meet regularly.

The next day, we find a group of young people from the village, getting ready to leave to participate in a youth caravan that will travel through the Fouta to spread awareness on human rights through theater and song. In the village meanwhile, people are preparing their public declaration to end FGC.

"That we have ended FGC is amazing — it feels strange that it went so fast given that it is such

an old tradition. The education has brought us so much more that makes a big difference in our everyday life. Women who never attended school have learned to read and do math. The whole village has been given a completely different future," says Aissata Ba.

The women in Velingara live a hard life in a remote part of Senegal, near the border with Mauritania. The families live from livestock and from cultivating millet.

The discussions on hygiene and health have laid the foundation for major changes. Vaccinations make kids healthier. Infant mortality decreases when women take care of themselves and go for prenatal visits during pregnancy. And cases of malaria decrease when weeds are cleared and puddles filled in outside the huts and when the villagers regularly use mosquito nets.

"Now we go to the doctor when

children are ill. We always tried to cure our children's fevers by using leaves from the large tree in the middle of the village. Now, we learned that the leaves can cause diarrhea," says Ba.

Soap has become an important commodity in the village. All wash their hands before meals and after using the toilet. Now women can laugh at how they used to cook with one hand and wipe their children's bottoms with the other.

The girls in Velingara were often married to adult men when they were twelve, sometimes even younger. Now, child marriage has ended as community members learned about children's rights. Ba tells us that a community Peace Committee intervenes if parents in the community are suspected of planning a marriage for a young girl.

"First, the Peace Committee goes to the family and talks to the par-

ents about children's rights. If that does not help, we go to the Imam and ultimately to the local government authority in his office located at the outskirts of the village. Both child marriage and female genital cutting are of course illegal in Senegal," she says.

One result of Tostan's program is that thousands of villages have become more democratic and egalitarian. After the training, the women dare to speak out and participate freely. They become candidates for political elections and win over male candidates. 19,000 women have been elected to leadership positions in the villages.

In Velingara, the 42-year-old Cumba Camara now fully participates in community activities.

"The village feels better about women having a say in decisions. I think we are also now more concerned about children going

to school rather than being put to work. The school is becoming the norm for children now," says Cumba Camara.

"At first I was a little nervous that the men would not accept me as I learned rights in class but had little practice. But it went well from day one, and now people even come often to my hut to ask my opinion on issues."

In Keur Simbara, the 60-year-old housewife Duusu Konate has become a model for the whole village and for many other women. She learned to read and write when she was over 40 years old. Five years ago she went to India for six months and learned how to construct solar units. Since then, she has provided all the village huts with solar electricity.

"When the village voted to send a representative to travel to the Barefoot College in India, they chose me. My husband was sur-



Photo: Lotta Hårdelin

In Velingara, 42-year-old Cumba Camara now fully participates in community activities.



Twelve-year-old Dieynaba Ba in Younoufere thinks that the most important information is that girls have the right to go to school.

prised, but I explained that it was my right to go. He had also been through the program and so could not agree more," says Konate.

"Ten years ago it would never have happened. When I think back, I realize that women of all ages have been discriminated against. The change we are experiencing is probably bigger and more important than we can understand."

Konate shows us her small solar workshop located in a village hut. When the solar panels started to break, it was impossible to get replacement parts. But she searched for a long time in the local market and finally was able to use spare parts she found in a motorcycle shop to substitute for the solar parts.

"It was a great triumph. Many other villages had the same problem and I was the one who came up with a solution," Konate says proudly.

Melching is listening with a big

smile as Konate tells her story even though she has heard it many times.

"It shows that knowledge of human rights makes a big difference. What makes me most proud of Tostan is that we achieve change by starting from the equality of all people," she says.

When she looks back on her four decades in Senegal, she is most pleased with her work at the grassroots level.

"It would have perhaps been easier to accept a position as a consultant or in an international organization, but I have managed to stick to my original ambition," she says.

After a many years, Molly Melching now spends less time in the villages as she must travel around the world to do fundraising.

Although she describes Tostan as a stable African organization, most of the financing comes from Europe and the United States. Tostan

has even had a branch in Sweden for more than ten years.

As the sun begins to set over Keur Simbara, Melching takes us back to Thies to Tostan's training center. A training session is going on there linked to one of Tostan's new projects that Molly particularly loves (Reinforcement of Parental Practices).

"We encourage women to talk more with their babies and toddlers. There is a misconception here that children only begin to learn when they go to school. So far, the results in the villages have been astonishing," she says.

A few days after our visit, Melching turned 65. In the past 40 years she has hardly had much of a private life but quickly waves away the idea of retirement.

"I just think about all the people who have a better life thanks to Tostan. As long as there is more to do, I will continue," she says.