



Tostan: A breakthrough movement

Ourèye Sall used to earn her living performing female genital cutting in Senegal. Not even when one of her daughters nearly hemorrhaged to death three decades ago, after being cut by her grandmother, could Ourèye stop. Culture and tradition were too strong. Plus it was her only source of income. But in 1997, together with others in her village, Ourèye put down her knives.

Female genital cutting, the removal of part or all of the female genitalia, has existed for thousands of years. Yet during the past four years, 282 villages in Senegal, representing approximately 220,000 people, have stopped the practice. The villages did not stop female genital cutting in response to outside pressure or national laws. Instead, it was a grass-roots movement arising from the people that put an end to the practice. Ourèye Sall is a leader in that movement.

She holds her head up high as she speaks to villagers, religious leaders, government officials, journalists and the international community about her decision to stop cutting and her role in helping to end the practice throughout Senegal.

This movement to end female genital cutting began in the village of Malicounda Bambara. Villagers decided to abolish the tradition after participating in a UNICEF-funded basic education programme run by the NGO, 'Tostan' ("breakthrough" in Wolof, a local tongue). Unlike literacy programmes of the 1970s and 1980s, which involved teacher-led discussions and letter and syllable repetition, Tostan depends on a participatory process where learners sit in a circle and use role-playing, singing, proverbs, poetry and theatre.

In 1997, two years after Tostan first began, women of Malicounda Bambara, with the support of their husbands and religious leaders, ended female genital cutting in their community. Citing human rights articles and negative health consequences for their daughters, the women had begun a movement of cultural change. A shorter version of that original programme is now in place in over 400 villages in Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal and Sudan, with similar results.

Without a doubt, the practical, student-focused classes are what led to the groundswell of social activism. The straightforward programme focuses on

technical information. Beginning with human rights education and collective problem-solving, the core of all other modules, the class learns about hygiene, oral rehydration, immunization, financial and material management, leadership, group dynamics, women's health and income-generating options. Each module incorporates village customs, language and traditions to create a respectful environment that matches the participants' learning styles. Social mobilization activities assure the learning process is participatory and relevant to the community.

As they move through the programme, learners become more at ease with discussing once taboo issues. The Tostan programme gives facts, not judgments. It's up to the participants to decide what to do with the new information they've received. "If you impose on me, I'll fight," says Demba Diawara, the Imam from Keur Simbara who walks from village to village in his campaign to end female genital cutting. "But if I am allowed the dignity and space to decide, I will fully cooperate."

One activity begun in the classroom and carried to neighbouring villages is a play. The class members act out the story of Pooler, an eight-year-old girl who is to undergo the ancient rite of circumcision. Like other girls her age, she is to become a 'real woman' who will be clean, respectable and marriage-ready.

As the play evolves, Pooler goes through this rite of passage but bleeds profusely. Fearful that the young girl will die, the family takes her to the health clinic nurse. The nurse arranges for Pooler to go to the regional hospital where she dies the next day.

After discussing the play and their feelings and answering questions about female genital cutting, many classes have concluded that the ancient practice must stop. Bolstered by their new understanding of the rights of women and children, the participants are galvanized to protect their daughters, granddaughters, nieces and other village girls.

"African women are such incredible mothers and do so much for their children," says Molly Melching, the director of Tostan. "To say they are mutilators is offensive. Female genital cutting was an act of love to protect their daughters' honour. Ending the practice to protect their daughters' human rights and health is now their act of love."

In Senegal, the real impetus for abandoning female genital cutting is at the grassroots, where women, men and religious and traditional leaders are engaged in a dynamic collaboration.

Since the movement has taken hold, the Senegal Parliament has passed a national law abolishing the ritual. While laws may be supportive of the people's actions, the real power lies in village declarations. These public decrees tip the

balance. Where once women like Ourèye Sall could not stop cutting for fear their daughters would not be able to find husbands, now it is just the opposite.