

MOLLY MELCHING AND KERTHIO DIARRA, SENEGAL

Good morning. My name is Molly Melching. I was born and raised in Illinois, but have lived and worked for the last thirty years in the West African country of Senegal.

In 1991, I created the Non-Governmental Organization, Tostan, which means “breakthrough” in Wolof and now employs 57 Senegalese staff and several hundred Senegalese teachers in 10 regions of Senegal working in 5 different national languages.

Over the past 15 years, our organization has developed a 30-month basic education program for villagers with a holistic, integrated approach. We teach democracy, human rights, problem-solving, hygiene, health, literacy and management skills in an empowering, non-directive way, using positive African traditions such as theater, stories, proverbs, poetry, song, dialogue and consensus building. This educational approach has led to people making important changes in their everyday lives including promoting peace and democracy in the community and standing up for the respect of human rights throughout the country.

Crucially, within intra-marrying groups, implementation of the Tostan program has led to coordinated abandonment of FGC and other harmful practices such as early marriage. The educational process culminates in a public declaration to end FGC, which is a happy and joyful event. In an accelerating series of mass abandonments beginning in 1997 some 1,271 communities, representing approximately 600,000 people, have joined in the process. They have put FGC behind them and have moved forward to new aspirations in health and human rights for their women, children, and men. Furthermore, the process of transformation continues to widen and to accelerate in Senegal as more people go through the program and become human rights activists in their communities.

It has also proven successful across a variety of ethnic groups and settings in Senegal and in Burkina Faso, the Sudan, Mali and Guinea where we are receiving support from USAID to implement the program. There is no reason why it should not work in other countries in Western Africa, and also be adaptable in most other places where FGC is found.

The success of the process is not a matter of happenstance, and the prediction of replicability arises from detailed theoretical considerations rather than from uninformed enthusiasm. In 1996, Dr. Gerry Mackie published in "the American Sociological Review" a comparative-historical and game theory analysis of the practices of footbinding in China and Female Genital Cutting in Africa. Dr. Mackie observed that footbinding was nearly universal within intramarrying groups in China, just as is FGC in Africa, was widespread and persistent, but ended suddenly and decisively within a single generation at the beginning of the 20th century.

Mackie explained that a natural-footed woman, just as an uncut woman in many intramarrying African groups, was unmarriageable. There were many failed efforts to end footbinding in China, including repression by the law. However, the one method that worked was education, followed by coordinated abandonment of the practice within

intramarrying groups by means of public declaration. The method rapidly spread by organized contagion in China, just as it is now in Senegal with Female Genital Cutting.

The method works because it solves the problem of marriageability: everyone in the group is assured of their daughters' respectability and marriageability after the declaration, and there is no incentive to take up the practice again.

Tostan firmly believes that Female Genital Cutting could end within the next five to ten years in Senegal if we can reach at least 1,000 more villages with the Village Empowerment Program, social mobilization activities led by informed and educated villagers themselves and public declaration. Given the strong support we receive from the Government of Senegal and working in collaboration with the National Committee for FGC Abandonment, this has become a heretofore unimaginable possibility. We have found that the program is especially effective when implemented in many villages within the same zone so that neighbors reinforce one another in the social transformation process. This happened last year when, after implementing the Village Empowerment Program in 230 villages of the same zones (with support from the Gates Foundation and Unicef) 563 communities decided to end Female Genital Cutting through public declaration.

Today, I am accompanied by Kerthio Diarra, a woman from the village of Malicounda Bambara in Senegal. Kerthio does not speak English or French, thus I have translated what she would like to say to you on this important occasion; however, I am going to first ask Kerthio to greet you herself in her own language.

Greetings from Kerthio.

Kerthio's speech read by Molly:

³My name is Kerthio Diarra and I am 43 years old. I am from a village in Senegal and want you to know, first of all, that I have never been to formal school. Perhaps it is difficult for you to imagine this as I am sure that all of you here today have been through high school and even further, whereas I had never entered a school until the day that Tostan came to our village and opened a class for us in our national language. This makes a very big difference when you discuss the issue of ³the tradition², as we all call Female Genital Cutting in our discussions.

As a child, I underwent ³the tradition² without hesitation because it was expected of all girls and was a major event in our lives. As a mother, I never questioned whether or not I would have my girls undergo this operation. We all just knew that one had to do it to be respected members of the community and most of all, to find a good husband and have a happy family. Because of this, I tried to forget the pain I felt as a girl and later when I married and had to be ³operated on² once again so that I could be with my husband.

And because I had never received any information on the development of a woman's body and knew nothing about how the different body parts work together to assure good health and protection, I did not realize that I had more problems during childbirth than

They are Bambaras like me, or of the Mandinka, Toucouleur, Fulani, Sarakholé, Serrere, Nominka and Diola Fogni ethnic groups. This is the same message we brought to the Senegalese Parliament in 1999 when a law was passed to prohibit FGC in Senegal. The message is the following:

Adults need information and education in their own national language before they can make important decisions that so deeply affect their lives. Education, not just on one subject such as female genital cutting, but on human rights and many other subjects that are important to us and can help us villagers, who live in isolated and impoverished areas, to build a better life for ourselves and our communities. Ending the tradition is only one example of ways that we can gain better health for our families and communities, and it should always be presented within this context. If not, there will be resistance and anger as there has been in the past.

With a good and solid education, people like myself, Kerthio Diarra, now sitting here before members of the Congress of the United States of America, are then able to do the social mobilization work needed in other villages and do it better than anyone else! My relatives, neighbors and friends trust me because they know we share the same past, the same culture, the same religion and we all have the same problems. If the United States government can help to educate many people throughout Africa in this way, you will see that many of our problems will be solved, including conflict resolution and improvement of economic and social condition. We ask you to have confidence in us, the people at the grassroots level in Africa, to lead this important movement ourselves for a better future for us all.

Thank you very much and thank you for inviting me to this important event.