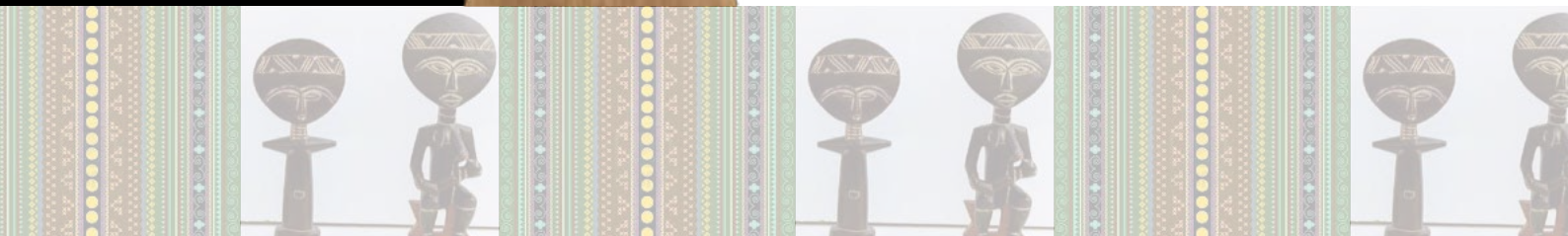





ALIGNING WITH LOCAL CULTURES TO END FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING





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If there's one thing that decades of effort to end female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) has made clear, it's that direct assaults on practices laden with cultural significance are doomed to fail.



The lesson dates back to the early part of the last century, and has been repeated countless times since. In 1929, to take one example, the Church of Scotland Mission, which had a long and successful history with the Kikuyu in Kenya, launched a campaign to eliminate FGM/C. While other well-intentioned efforts had been successful, this one backfired in the largest possible way. The Kikuyu left the church in droves, and the perceived attack on local culture became a rallying cry in the movement for independence.

Over the ensuing years, FGM/C has remained remarkably persistent, despite its often dire consequences—including death, disability, sexual dysfunction and complications during childbirth—and various attempts to end it. But new strategies, which take a more nuanced, ‘culturally sensitive’ approach, appear to be working.




SHIFTING SOCIAL NORMS



More than 125 million women and girls alive today have undergone some form of FGM/C, according to a 2013 report by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) that analyses the latest data on the practice. But the report also says that prevalence has dropped in more than half of the 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East where the practice is concentrated. In most of these 29 countries, support for FGM/C among women and girls has declined, and girls aged 15 to 19 are less likely to be cut than older generations of women.

The most successful approaches to FGM/C use facts and human rights principles to empower communities to decide for themselves to abandon the practice. This instils a sense of autonomy and avoids the perception that they are being coerced—or judged.

“There is a limit to what you can impose on communities,” said Nafissatou J. Diop, coordinator of the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund)-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: Accelerating Change. The programme, which was established in 2007, is now working in 15 African countries with the goal of supporting them in ending FGM/C in a single generation.



Earlier in her career, in the 1990s and early 2000s, Ms. Diop evaluated development projects in her native Senegal, including those that addressed FGM/C. What she and other researchers found, she said, was that education and information about the practice were important, but were not sufficient to stop it. Even in areas where attitudes towards the procedure had changed, among both men and women, prevalence was not decreasing. The reason? Social norms that held communities together made it difficult for individual girls or even families to defy tradition without feeling ostracized.

The key, researchers have found, is to stimulate a shift in the social norms of a community as a whole, and in networks of intra-marrying communities. As the following examples from Senegal, Kenya and Sudan make clear, such a shift can occur in different ways. What all of them share is a process of dialogue, involving everyone in the community, that avoids a blanket condemnation of FGM/C. Rather, the reasons behind the practice, along with its pros and cons, are dissected and debated in light of traditional values and universal principles of human rights. Working through traditional and religious leaders, through existing cultural practices, and through any available communication channel can facilitate the process of change.

LESSON

Shifts in social norms occur when communities collectively realign around new ways of thinking about traditional practices and behaviour.


BREAKTHROUGH IN SENEGAL



The evidence for a social norms approach to FGM/C came about serendipitously, through a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Senegal called Tostan (meaning ‘breakthrough’ in Wolof). Established in 1991, Tostan’s objective was straightforward: to help people acquire the knowledge, skills and confidence they needed to jump-start and sustain their own development. The method used was non-formal education, but the approach was far different from the rote learning of the past. Tostan developed a highly interactive methodology that relied on Senegal’s oral tradition—including songs, dance, poetry and theatre—while conferring knowledge about hygiene, health, literacy, problem-solving and project management. But it was the inclusion of sessions on human rights and democracy that provided the context for women to rethink FGM/C.

Aware of the taboo surrounding discussion of the issue, Tostan staff were at first reluctant to include FGM/C in the curriculum they developed. But at the insistence of village women, who had little information on the practice and rarely spoke about it publicly, they did.

The decision set off a chain of events that surprised even Tostan and became the stuff of legend—in the

The header features a repeating pattern of vertical stripes in green, yellow, and blue. Interspersed within these stripes are small, stylized figures of people carrying large, round objects on their heads. The figures are rendered in a dark, almost black color, contrasting with the lighter background.

development community at least. In July 1997, more than three dozen women in the village of Malicounda Bambara announced, in the presence of 20 journalists, that they, their husbands, the village chief and religious leaders had all agreed to end FGM/C.

A local imam, Demba Diawara, who was also a former Tostan participant, was at first sceptical about the decision. His fears were played out when the pronouncement created an uproar among neighbouring villagers—and not only because they were potential marriage partners. For the people of Malicounda Bambara to criticize FGM/C to their neighbours' faces, Mr. Diawara explained, meant a loss of solidarity. Tostan asked him to look into the matter further. And so, over the next few months, Mr. Diawara travelled to nearby communities to explore the religious implications and health effects of FGM/C. When he returned, he explained to Tostan leaders that he had found that the practice was not an obligation of Islam, and realized that it caused much harm. But he also observed that one village could not abandon the practice alone. He took it upon himself to walk to neighbouring villages related to the people of Malicounda Bambara by marriage, and begin a dialogue about FGM/C. Eventually a public declaration to abandon the practice was held in the village of Diabougou and included 13 communities, not just his own.

A third ingredient for success came from an American political scientist and expert in social norms, Gerry Mackie, who recognized the parallels between a campaign that ended foot-binding in China and FGM/C. Mr. Mackie, who had read about the events in Malicounda Bambara and Diabougou, argued that because FGM/C is considered a prerequisite for marriage within a given ethnic group, it will only end when intra-marrying communities decide, all at once, to end the practice together. Foot-binding in China ended through a series of interventions, including public declarations, which he proposed would also work for ending FGM/C. In both cases, many members of the respective communities already had doubts about the practices, but they needed the support of others to shrug off firmly entrenched traditions.




TIPPING THE BALANCE



Over the last 16 years, three elements—empowering education that fosters in-depth dialogue, organized diffusion of information by participants to their social networks, and collective public declarations—have formed the basis of Tostan’s work on FGM/C. After each session in Tostan’s Community Empowerment Programme, as it became known, participants ‘adopt’ someone in their village with whom they share information discussed in class. A committee is established that travels to connected villages to discuss FGM/C and other issues and inter-village meetings are organized. Once agreement has been reached on the abandonment of FGM/C (usually among a network of inter-connected villages), a public declaration is made, signalling that the social norm surrounding FGM/C has shifted. At that point, change tends to become rapid and universal.

Since 2009, the Joint Programme has contributed significantly to Tostan in Senegal and has also provided support for programme implementation in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Djibouti, Mauritania and Somalia.

“Our goal at Tostan has never been behaviour change,” said Molly Melching, founder and executive director of Tostan. *“Our goal has been to empower people at the*



community level to improve their lives. We found that the key—the instigating factor and a huge catalyst for change—has come from human rights education. Without that, women would never have felt the confidence to take the brave stand for positive change, and then reach out to their own and to other villages.”

LESSON

Information and dialogue concerning human rights can lead a community to question certain behaviours and propel it towards self-directed change.

LESSON

Public declarations can signal the building of a critical mass, after which change tends to become rapid and universal.



ALTERNATIVE RITES OF PASSAGE IN KENYA




On the other side of the continent, in Kenya, the once intractable practice of FGM/C is also losing strength, proving that cultures can and do evolve. According to the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2008/2009, women aged 45 to 49 in Kenya are three times more likely to have been cut than girls aged 15 to 19, although FGM/C prevalence varies dramatically among different ethnic groups.

“For a long time, donors were simply not interested in supporting FGM/C programmes because they could see no signs of movement,” said Florence Gachanja, a programme analyst in the UNFPA Kenya office. *“But that, too, is changing.”*

A key shift, as in Senegal, has been the involvement of the broader community in openly discussing and debating the issue. In parts of the country where FGM/C is associated with coming of age ceremonies, as in the example below, new rituals and practices are replacing old ones—but without the cutting.

In the past, explained Ms. Gachanja, the most common approach to tackling FGM/C in Kenya was through health education. A group of outsiders would come into



a community and tell people all the reasons why FGM/C was harmful. Peer education, which works in some areas of reproductive health, was also tried, she said. But neither approach worked in the case of FGM/C, a practice linked to the most sensitive of issues—female power and sexuality.

The fact that Kenya is a mosaic of ethnic groups makes the situation all the more complicated, since the reasons behind FGM/C vary. In the case of the Meru people, an ethnic group of over 1.6 million people in Kenya, the practice is primarily regarded as a rite of passage to womanhood that reinforces cultural identity. It is also seen as a way of preserving family honour: Mothers who do not have their daughters cut risk being thought of as irresponsible, immoral or imitators of Western ways, according to a 2007 situation analysis by UNFPA.

In collaboration with an NGO called Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, the Joint Programme used this knowledge to support alternative rites of passage, which prepare girls for marriage and adulthood, but without the cutting. During a week in seclusion, girls entering puberty learn about reproductive health, including HIV, and the effects of FGM/C, communication and other ‘life skills’, children’s rights, the culture of their people, and family relations. This is followed by the traditional ceremonies and gift-giving.


Alternative rites of passage have been used since the 1980s to discourage FGM/C, said Ms. Gachanja. But they are now proving more successful because the entire community is involved in the process from the beginning, and ends with a public pledge. *“Previously, girls would pass successfully through the alternative ritual, but when they went back to their villages they would encounter the same old mentalities,”* she said. Some of these girls were forcibly cut, and others ran away, *“which was not the solution we intended.”*

ELDERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE



In the case of the Meru community, the driving force behind FGM/C abandonment has been its Council of Elders, who are enormously influential in decision-making of all kinds, reaching down to the community and even family level. A study by UNICEF found that the Council had publically banned FGM/C in 1956. But during the complicated dynamics leading up to independence, the decision had not stuck. In 2008, the Council of Elders said it wanted to renew its commitment to end FGM/C.

The Council of Elders became an ‘entry point’ into Meru society. Through a series of meetings supported by the Joint Programme, elders and other local leaders, including those associated with the Catholic Church, strategized on ways to accelerate FGM/C abandonment. And in 2009, the Council of Elders made a public declaration prohibiting FGM/C, vowing to impose a fine on anyone who conducts or abets the practice. At the same time, community dialogues and educational forums for parents were organized, so that the issue could be widely discussed and debated. As in Senegal, people have begun to see that FGM/C is no longer consistent with the cultural values of their community.



From 2010 to 2012, during the traditional cutting season in December, 435 Meru girls participated in alternative rites of passage. While an official evaluation has yet to be undertaken, Ms. Gachanja said that more girls are staying in school, even going on to university (until recently, it was common in parts of Kenya to end girls' schooling so that they could be cut in preparation for marriage). Moreover, in the last two years, she has heard no reports of cutting among the girls who participated in the alternative ritual and pledge ceremonies.

LESSON

Work through village elders and other community 'gatekeepers', who can ignite a process of change from within.

LESSON

Build on the positive aspects of culture to promote new values and develop new practices.



CHANGING CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS IN SUDAN



In Sudan, as in Kenya, efforts to address FGM/C dating back to British colonial rule had yielded little progress. Regional and Sudanese NGOs took up the issue again in the 1970s, emphasizing the health hazards of the practice. But while awareness increased, the cutting continued. By 2000, Sudan still had one of the highest prevalence rates of FGM/C in the world—at around 90 per cent—though the wall of silence surrounding the issue had started to crack.

In 2008, with support from UNICEF, the Government of Sudan endorsed a strategy to end FGM/C within a generation. The strategy embraced the community dialogues and public declarations that had been so successful elsewhere, but it also delved deeper into Sudanese culture to uncover the popular perceptions surrounding FGM/C that were impeding progress. The strategy drew lessons from another centuries-old practice—facial scarification of both men and women, which was abandoned in Sudan in only 15 years by changing the culture’s perception of beauty. The genius of that initiative was that it was able to successfully incorporate new social values and norms into traditional poetry, songs and theatre. Over time, facial scars were no longer regarded as desirable or required by marriage suitors.



In the case of FGM/C, a major challenge was linguistic as well as value-based. In Sudan, the practice is associated with family honour, morality, modesty and women’s socially approved roles. Prior to the current initiative, there was no positive term in wide use in Sudanese Arabic to describe a woman or girl who had not been cut. In fact, the word most commonly used throughout Sudan, ‘Qulfa’, had connotations of impurity, promiscuity, even prostitution. Identifying a positive term to replace it became the first step in developing a new messaging strategy, and poets, artists as well as traditional FGM/C partner organizations were called in to brainstorm. What they came up with was ‘saleema’, a word meaning whole, intact, healthy in mind and body, unharmed, pristine—in perfect, God-given condition. ‘Saleema’, which had the advantage of also being a women’s name, thus became the centerpiece of a national social marketing campaign that was officially launched in 2010.

For two years prior to the launch, local activists and media throughout the country were briefed on how to introduce positive ‘saleema’ messaging when describing the physical, psychological, emotional and social consequences of FGM/C. A ‘saleema’ training manual was subsequently developed for use by governmental and non-governmental partners. And, in 2012, about 500 facilitators were taught to conduct community dialogue sessions. The ‘saleema’ campaign is now active in 960 Sudanese communities in 12 states, each of which has developed networks of women, young people, traditional leaders, religious scholars, lawmakers and media representatives to disseminate the ‘saleema’ concept and messages.



GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS



To reach into Sudan's popular culture, 'saleema' was 'branded', and an ambitious social mobilization campaign devised. A visual symbol for 'saleema' was created, using a swirling pattern of vibrant colours—orange, red, yellow and green—favoured by the Sudanese. The design was transferred onto cloth and used to make headscarves and other traditional women's and men's garments, along with swaddling cloths. Promotional products, including pottery, banners and tablecloths, were also developed, along with radio programmes, animated television spots, billboards and a campaign song. Hundreds of thousands of signatures have been collected on pieces of cloth (called tagas), encouraging collective abandonment of FGM/C. And well-known singers, comedians, artists and religious scholars have been appointed as national and state 'saleema' 'ambassadors', helping to spread the word and to serve as role models. A 'born saleema' campaign is also under way in the maternity wards of nine hospitals, where health personnel are counselling new mothers and their families on keeping newborn girls intact—or 'saleema'.

In every country in which it operates, the Joint Programme uses whatever media and messengers it can to get the message out. Since its inception, the programme has



trained more than xxx journalists in 15 countries [UPDATE FROM ANNUAL REPORT DATA] and regularly works through the press, television, radio and film. In the Gambia, Guinea and Mali, it is also working through traditional communicators, known as griots, who both entertain and educate through traditional storytelling and theatre. “*There is no better way to fight tradition than through tradition itself,*” said Lansana Condé, president of the National Network of Traditional Communicators in Guinea.

LESSON

Explore the function that a traditional practice serves within a culture, and the way it is perceived and discussed, before trying to change it.

LESSON

Use every available medium and messenger—both traditional and modern—to get the word out.




BRINGING RELIGIOUS LEADERS ON BOARD



In Sudan, as in many other countries where the influence of Islam is pervasive, acceptance into the broader culture is impossible without the endorsement of religious leaders. Since its inception, the Joint Programme has been working with some of the most esteemed religious scholars in the region to ‘delink’ FGM/C from Islam, through careful interpretation of the Koran and other Islamic teachings.

While consensus on the issue is still a long way off in Sudan, UNFPA convenes monthly meetings of more than 1,000 religious leaders representing different affiliations. The platform was created to enable clerics to discuss privately among themselves the impact of FGM/C and of early marriage. In 2012, the first Sufi forum on FGM/C was held, and a dozen leaders of various Sufi sects endorsed ‘saleema’ as an Islamic principle. Sufism represents mainstream Islam in Sudan, with millions of followers. The public pronouncement, made on holiest night of Ramadan, was highly publicized and attended by over 1,200 spectators. The participation of the Minister of Guidance and Endowment, considered the voice of official Islam in Sudan, was considered by the media to be a breakthrough and a clear-cut message of government support for the abandonment of FGM/C.



The Government of Sudan is going even further, by training a new generation of religious leaders—both male and female—in the ‘saleema’ concept. With support from UNFPA, the Ministry of Guidance and Endowment is providing orientation and training on FGM/C to the heads of 30 of the most conservative Koranic schools around the country. The leaders, in turn, are passing the information on to their students. This represents a major shift, since traditionally these institutions, known as khalwas, concerned themselves only with the study of religious texts.

One of the schools, led by Sheik Al Sayim Deema, a Sufi leader, is now including FGM/C in its regular curriculum, reaching a student body of 1,200 boys and 800 girls. In recognition of his work, the sheik was recently named a goodwill ambassador for the abandonment of FGM/C. He continues to use his website and weekly broadcasts on radio and television to advocate for the elimination of the practice.

LESSON

In many conservative societies, the endorsement of religious leaders and other ‘custodians of culture’ may be needed before a shift in social norms can occur.



ENDING FGM/C IN ONE GENERATION: WHAT IT WILL TAKE




While progress on FGM/C in some countries is promising, UNICEF estimates that as many as 30 million girls under the age of 15 may still be at risk.

Tostan's Molly Melching, for one, is optimistic that many of these girls can be reached, and predicts that FGM/C abandonment will accelerate as the process gains momentum. She cites the case of Guinea-Bissau, where the practice is firmly entrenched, but is now disappearing *“faster than she ever dreamed possible.”* With support from the Joint Programme, Tostan began its work there three years ago, in 39 villages. Just recently, 144 villages publicly declared that they had abandoned FGM/C.

“When I asked them how they were able to make this decision so much more quickly than other communities, they said: ‘Well, when we saw our relatives in Senegal and the Gambia standing up and abandoning the practice, we realized there was an alternative. They’re doing it, and we can also’.”

Ms. Diop, who heads the Joint Programme, is more circumspect, while acknowledging the gains that have been made. At the end of 2012, 10,000 communities—



representing 8 million people—had publically renounced the practice. *“I am very optimistic about a number of countries, but for others, not at all,”* she said. While most governments recognize FGM/C as a violation of human rights, and have legislation and national programmes in place, she explained, many countries have not made the investments they need to in terms of human resources.

“We need to build the capacity of local NGOs, who are in the best position to work flexibly with communities,” she said. *“But such training needs to be well organized, so we don’t repeat the mistakes of the past.”*

Ms. Diop also cites the need for more research, especially on the links between FGM/C and sexuality. She knows that mothers act on what they believe are the best interests of their daughters. However, she is troubled by the fact that women remain the key actors in perpetuating FGM/C. *“On some level, women do it to please men, because they think that is what men expect,”* she said, *“and despite the suffering they know it entails.”*

She explained that FGM/C lies at the intersection of the most intimate and emotionally charged areas of life—sexuality, gender roles, reproduction, perceptions of beauty and marriageability, power relations—adding quietly: *“So there are things we still need to learn.”*



OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

Nafissatou J. Diop, coordinator of the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on FGM/C

“In the 1980 and 1990s, feminists and other activists were very strong in their condemnation of FGM/C, and the reaction they encountered was equally strong and very defensive. Even today, a punitive, strictly legal approach to banning the practice was rejected, because it was perceived to be a direct attack on culture and tradition. When that happens, people will not listen to you. So what we try to do is to develop strategies that draw from the positive aspects of culture and encourage new values and practices to replace old ones.”

A member of the Bambara ethnic group in Diabougou, Senegal, quoted in Breakthrough in Senegal: Ending Female Genital Cutting, Tostan, 1999

“We Bambaras are hard-headed. If we learn something and decide it is right, we will follow through on this decision forever. But if something is forced upon us from outside, we will pick up our knives to fight without hesitating.”



Molly Melching, founder and executive director, Tostan

“People maintain certain traditions, certain practices, because they have been told it’s a good thing to do. Their ancestors did it, their parents did it, and it is expected, valued. What we are trying to do through Tostan is to encourage people to reflect on their deepest values. And if given the right information, they sometimes realize that certain traditional practices no longer uphold these values. It’s a way of working that opens doors to dialogue—that doesn’t make people defensive. Another aspect of what you might call a culturally sensitive approach is to start from where people are. You recognize the value in what they are already doing, help them come to a consensus around what their deeper values really are, and through that process they themselves realize that certain changes need to be made.”



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UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme
220 East 42nd Street, 17th floor
New York, NY 10017 U.S.A.
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3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017 U.S.A
Web : www.unicef.org

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