

## 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:

<sup>3</sup>My 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 <sup>3</sup>the tradition<sup>2</sup>, as we all call Female Genital Cutting in our discussions.

As a child, I underwent <sup>3</sup>the tradition<sup>2</sup> 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 <sup>3</sup>operated on<sup>2</sup> 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

other women have. I just assumed that all women went through the same pain and suffering.

Over ten years ago, my own daughter hemorrhaged after being cut and almost died. At that time, I started asking questions, but the older women and the cutter explained that it was the result of <sup>3</sup>bad spirits<sup>2</sup>. At that time, I could never envision that one day I, Kerthio Diarra, would stand up against something so deeply a part of our lives, our culture, our society.

Then the Tostan program came to Malicounda Bambara. We learned about human rights and responsibilities, problem-solving, hygiene, health and good management practices. The goal of the Tostan program is not and never has been to impose opinions or judgments on class participants on any given subject, so the Tostan teacher never told us to abandon <sup>3</sup>the tradition<sup>2</sup>. Rather, the methods used allowed us to meet together, learn information on the subject that were useful and important to us personally as well as in our families and communities, and then discuss openly and truthfully. Most importantly, the program taught us peaceful methods of bringing about change rather than aggressive ones. This is important to us as Africans and particularly as African village women.

After learning that we women have the human right to health but also have a responsibility in relation to that right, we began discussing <sup>3</sup>the tradition<sup>2</sup> among ourselves. Certain of the women and our own daughters had suffered lifelong consequences of the operation and we began to realize that we ourselves were violating our own and our daughters<sup>1</sup> right to health. We learned about hygiene and how germs are transmitted for the first time. Many girls have died after the cutting from tetanus for example. We realized in our class sessions that the tetanus was not the real cause of death, but that it was the operation that caused microbes to enter the body and lead to infection, ultimately resulting in death. We also learned about the normal functioning of the different organs and systems of the body. We learned of positive traditional practices before studying the negative ones, understanding the effects of the negative practices on the body and learning the various consequences of our actions.

Before the Tostan program, we were unable to communicate with our children, with our husbands, with our friends and neighbors and with village leaders because we had so little information on subjects such as human rights, puberty, normal sexual relationships, early marriage, childbirth, menopause, as well as the tradition. Now we can do it with confidence and with knowledge because we practice communication skills in our classroom through role play, discussion, and learning games.

This education and sharing led our class in Malicounda Bambara to make what is now considered a historic decision. We decided, after long debate, to end the centuries old practice of FGC in our families. When we learned of the dangers of FGC and spoke honestly among ourselves about what we had experienced and witnessed with other women, we realized that this was the cause of our problems and not bad spirits. Senegal is a Muslim country and so we went to speak with the religious leaders and imam in our community, with the village chief and with our husbands who all said that it was all right

to end the practice, as it is not a religious obligation.

We announced our decision publicly in front of the government and 20 Senegalese journalists on July 31, 1997, 6 years ago. This came as a shock to the people of Senegal because although there had been talk of the need to end the tradition for many years, no group of villagers had ever publicly stood up and announced on radio, television and in newspapers their firm commitment to abandon the practice. However, the men were not too happy with us. They had agreed to our ending the “tradition” but not to putting it out in “the market place” as we did. But our answer was “We know we have the right to health and the responsibility to let other women know the dangers. We know we have the human right to voice our opinions and make decisions and so we do not regret what we have done.”

Yet inside of ourselves we suffered. We were insulted by our neighbors, criticized and ridiculed for daring to stand up against an ancient tradition of the Bambaras. We were accused of being influenced by the West. But we stood firmly by our decision because we knew exactly why we had made it. Tostan was by our side also but we had to face this ourselves and it was not easy. We were African women who have never been to school never spoken out like this before. Were we doomed to be outcasts of our society forever?

Luckily, Tostan, with support from Unicef and the Government of Senegal, realizing that the basic education program was the key to FGC abandonment, implemented the program in more than 400 other communities. The participants of these classes, now strong and confident because able to analyze issues with good and scientific information, started a movement for the abandonment of FGC. These villagers had less problems than we, the women of Malicounda Bambara, because they made their declarations as intramarrying groups, often with as many as 100-300 communities declaring an end to FGC at the same time to assure there would be no problems with marriage for their daughters.

As of today, February 5, 2004, 1,271 communities have made the decision to end the tradition through 14 public declarations in many regions of Senegal. We women of Malicounda Bambara have been invited to these declarations where we are now congratulated for the courage we had in 1997. We have also gone to many other villages and spoken with our neighbors and relatives, explaining our decision and letting people know that we are not *fighting a tradition*, we are **promoting health and human rights**.

We have also made many other important changes in our community based on our knowledge and we have an active Community Management Committee that coordinates our actions on health, hygiene, the environment, good governance and small project implementation. Although I have never been to school, I am now reading and writing articles, stories and speeches, and for proof, I have brought my democracy and human rights workbook to show you the progress I, and other village women, have made.

Perhaps we would have had less problems if we had waited, but we are proud today of what we did on July 31, 1997. And I am proud to be here today to bring this message from the many other village leaders of the movement to abandon the tradition in Senegal.

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.