

Teaching Protection

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Female genital mutilation (FGM) or cutting (FGC) are now the most common terms for what used to be known as female circumcision. One is judgmental, the other non-judgmental, and both have their uses — the former works better in raising concern in the outside world, the latter in campaigning on the inside. Reduced to acronyms, however, neither do justice to one of the last great dinosaurs of human rights abuse, a practice that predates monotheistic religion. Part of the clitoris at the least, and all of the external genitalia at the most, is cut from a female child to dampen her sex drive. Her virginity and eligibility for marriage are thus preserved, and so too is her value to her family and “family honour”.

It is estimated that 120 million women in 28 African countries, as well as parts of the Middle East, South Asia and Indonesia, have undergone some form of FGM, and three million more are at risk every year. Some efforts to abolish the ritual date back a quarter of a century and have had little effect. FGM is so culturally embedded that women happily carry it out and girls are proud to have undergone it, even in those countries where it has been outlawed.

Recently, there has been some progress. Tostan is a small American NGO that was last year awarded the world’s biggest humanitarian prize, the Conrad N. Hilton Prize, for its work against FGM in Senegal. When Tostan formally began work there in 1991, UNICEF estimated the number of communities practising FGM at 5,000. Now, as a direct result of that work, 3,308 of those have publicly abandoned the ritual, and Tostan has been able to make a declaration of its own: FGM in Senegal will end by 2012.

Others have tried blaming or punishing the cutters, compensating them or offering them new jobs, launching awareness campaigns using graphic photos and videos, and taking girls into care or opening refuges for them. These approaches yielded poor results. A Tostan programme — essentially a human rights class that moves into a village for two to three years — will typically be several months underway before there is more than a mention of FGM. An earlier topic, for example, might be the human right to a name, which leads the village towards the process of birth registration and so to the ID cards through which all of Senegal’s public services are accessed. Easy victories like these encourage trust in the programme.

Tostan does not criticise what it calls FGC on moral grounds — such an approach has no impact on a patriarchal, tribal society. Instead, it focuses on the indisputable fact that FGM is a health and hygiene catastrophe. Women who have been mutilated are vulnerable to infections and complications in pregnancy for the rest of their lives. So FGM is identified by the participants of the programme as a violation of “the human right to good health”. This is seen as the real drawback to FGM, by women and also, crucially, by men, who want to appear fertile by having as many healthy children as possible.

Later, Tostan trains some of the village's inhabitants to go to other villages, particularly those linked by marriage, to introduce the new ideas. Hostility to change is met with a big show of respect, and Tostan has men, ex-cutters, village chiefs and imams trained to act as diplomats and address their often resistant counterparts. This process of "organised diffusion" is a key part of the method. The movement grows exponentially and becomes self-perpetuating: it is much more effective than white people and outsiders touring the country giving lectures .

FGM was practised in Senegal only by certain minority ethnic groups, but was nearly universal among them. Now Tostan is beginning work in Guinea, Djibouti, Somalia and the Gambia, where FGM rates are 90 per cent and higher nationwide. In the latter two countries, FGM is not illegal, and in all four, opposition from religious authorities will be powerful.

There is also growing evidence of FGM in immigrant communities around the world, where in some case, the ritual is more entrenched than in the community of origin. Tostan has just opened an office in Paris for this reason.

According to a study carried out last year by African women's rights monitor Forward, 98,000 girls under the age of 15 in the UK are at risk of FGM or have undergone it already. We may well need an office here, too.

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