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Senegal makes progress against female genital excision

But the practice, called mutilation by most, is still common in Africa and parts of Asia.

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NEMANDING, SENEGAL — When Oureye Sall walked through her village in years past, young girls would flee in silent panic at the sight of her face. She was the cutter.

She inherited the trade from her mother and made a tidy profit: a dollar per operation for the practice known locally as "cleaning," and in much of the rest of the world as female genital circumcision, or mutilation.

Sall broke each razor blade in two for economy's sake and used each half until it was too blunt to cut properly. Sometimes she did 15 or 20 operations a day, other times two or three. She has no idea how many girls she cut in her decades-long career.

"Of course the girls would fight," she said of the procedure, in which she sliced off the external sexual organs. "Of course they would hit you. They would cry, they would kick.

"But you'd have three good strong women to help you. Someone had to actually sit on each leg and someone had to control the arms and upper body. We would cover their mouths. You don't want the neighbors to hear."

'Fear and alarm'

Isa Toutouri was 9 when her time came. She almost bled to death.

"You can imagine your heart beating so strongly from fear and alarm, just before they come over and hold you down, said the 40-year-old, who lives in a village called Keur Omar Bambara. "You cannot imagine the terror when they just hold you down, without even touching you yet."

Sall says that when she cut the girls, sometimes the mothers would inspect their daughters and say it wasn't "clean" enough. More must be excised. Or sometimes a girl would bleed so much that she would pass out, and Sall would slap her face and call out prayers. She claims she never lost any.

The story of how the cutter changed her mind and gave up her work tells of how a few hopeful seeds blew across Senegal, ushering in a revolutionary social change that had eluded Western agencies for decades. With the help of a U.S. humanitarian agency named Tostan, Sall and others are campaigning to wipe out female genital excision in a single generation, much as China abandoned foot-binding.

Sall began attending classes for villagers on health, human rights and literacy, organized by Tostan, which means "breakthrough." Women at the classes began voicing concerns that the operation Sall performed was harmful or dangerous, but she didn't stop. She was convinced that critics of the long-standing rite were jealous of the money she made from the business.

Yet there was a pricking doubt. To reassure herself, she went to a religious teacher, looking to confirm her belief that the practice was required by Islam. He said it was not.

"In that moment I looked back with so much regret at all the girls whom I had harmed and asked God to forgive me," she said.

There seemed only one hope of redemption for all the pain and suffering she had caused: She joined the campaign to wipe out the practice.

Since the 1950s, the United Nations has opposed female genital excision as an abuse of human rights, yet more than half a century later, the World Health Organization and many other humanitarian agencies have failed to make much headway in eliminating the practice in Africa.

According to a 2005 UNICEF report, as many as 3 million girls are cut each year in 28 African and Middle Eastern countries. In some countries, such as Guinea, Sudan and Somalia, 90% to 99% of the population practices it.

There are varying degrees of excision. In Senegal, some communities remove the clitoris, others all external organs. If men marry women of other ethnic groups that do not practice female excision, their wives are shunned. No one will sit near them, talk to them, eat their food or drink the water they fetch. Villagers will walk away when they approach, sometimes complaining loudly of a bad smell.

Sall once cut a woman, about 30, who was so desperate for acceptance that she was willing to go through the excruciating pain.

The day the country outlawed the practice in the late 1990s, Sall cut 15 girls.

"I knew the law was a joke because I was doing it out the back of my house, and I'm not going to tell anyone and the people bringing their daughters are not going to go to the law," she said.

Unlikely preacher

Like Sall, Imam Demba Diawara, a 74-year-old Islamic leader, was determined to cling to the ancient practice, which he felt defined his people.

It's difficult to imagine a more unlikely convert for the rights of girls in Africa than this elderly conservative

imam. He speaks in a soft, gentle voice and is rarely moved to anger.

Diawara used to spend a lot of time praying to save dying young girls in his small village of Nemanding. Bad spirits took them, or an excess of blood, or some other mysterious, wicked force. Often, the prayers went unanswered.

Initially, he was furious that Tostan wanted to stop the "cleaning." He was determined to stop any interference in what he thought was a sacred tradition, a prerequisite for marriage.

"I was upset and angry and disappointed and afraid. Our ancestors created that practice and it was part of our identity. All the past generations have left it alone, and then one generation comes along and decides to change it."

He went to the Tostan director, an American named Molly Melching who lives in Senegal, and demanded that the organization stop. She begged him to talk to women in his village about it, but he retorted that such things were absolutely taboo.

An education

If Diawara hadn't had a burning desire to learn to read and write, he might never have changed his mind. But he attended the literacy classes run by Tostan at which health and human rights were also taught.

As women in the classes shyly revealed their own suspicions about the harmful effects of "cleaning," he made the connection: When girls bled to death or women had complications during childbirth, it actually was because of the operation.

He remembered all the dying girls he had prayed for.

"When I look back, I'm moved to tears because I understand that it's something we could have prevented."

Today, Diawara has personally persuaded 174 villages to abandon the practice. Of 5,000 Senegalese villages that have practiced female genital excision, 1,993 villages where Tostan has been working have abandoned it.

Mamadou Jara remembers the day Diawara arrived at his village, Soudiane Bala, in 1997.

"Of course we were upset and angry. We thought he was paid and sent by some NGO and he was coming to undermine and destroy our traditions and to humiliate us," Jara said, referring to nongovernmental aid organizations.

"All we heard is that he wants to separate us from our ancestors. We hurled insults at him. But he is a person who is very calm and patient. He managed to convince us it had nothing to do with money, but the health of our own families."

Maryam Bamba, a committee leader who lives in Soudiane Bala, said abandoning the practice "hasn't really changed things for women; it's too late for us."

"But it is definitely a happier and healthier group of children. You can really see it in the faces of the children."

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