

**Launch of the Innocenti Digest No. 12,
"Changing a Harmful Social Convention: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting"**

CREATING DIALOGUE: ENDING FGM/C IN SENEGAL

In Senegal, the international NGO Tostan has worked to create dialogue within communities about female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) through a holistic, basic education program in national languages. As a result, more than 1600 villages have collectively ended the practice of FGM/C. Here, one woman speaks about her community's decision to abandon the practice of FGM/C.

"Ten years ago I could never have imagined that I would be a leader in a movement to end the 'tradition' that most women in my community have undergone. Not only did I believe it was a religious obligation, but I myself was the one who operated on girls in all the surrounding communities."

Oureye Sall, a traditional cutter from the Northern region of Matam, is outspoken about her commitment to ending FGM/C in Senegal. "Ever since I learned that FGM/C is not required by Islam and that it is a violation of girls' and women's rights, I stopped practicing. It was when the Tostan program came to our village that I understood the dangers of the practice and began to question the need to continue. Our class called together the whole village and other communities where we marry our daughters and sons. Together we made the decision to end the practice."



Oureye Sall (left) and her assistant during a public declaration ceremony
UNICEF/2004/Mbodj

Oureye Sall's village participated in a public declaration of 13 communities held in Diabougou on February 14, 1998. Since that time, Oureye and other participants in the Tostan basic education program, implemented in collaboration with the Government of Senegal and UNICEF, have ensured that no more cutting has occurred in the village. But they have also traveled to hundreds of other villages where they meet with friends, neighbors and relatives to discuss the need to abandon a practice that has led to needless pain, suffering and even death for thousands of girls and women in Senegal.

"I feel it is my responsibility to make others aware of the dangers of the tradition" says Oureye. "It is my way of saying I am sorry if I caused any harm to innocent girls." Oureye learned that practicing FGM/C can lead to hemorrhage, shock, infection and problems at childbirth. "We used to believe that these problems were caused by evil spirits. We learned differently in our education program."

According to a recent Demographic and Health Survey study, FGM/C was practiced by 94% of the population in the region of Matam where Oureye grew up. Now there is a grassroots movement led by women and adolescents, collaborating with religious and traditional leaders to abandon the practice. Since the first collective declaration in Diabougou in 1998, over 1,600 communities have announced their decision to end FGM/C through 19 public declarations. This represents more than 30% of the practicing population in Senegal which is concentrated mainly in the Northern and Southern parts of the country and accounts for around 20% of the total population. Many more declarations are scheduled for FGM/C abandonment in 2005 and 2006.

Learning we have human rights and responsibilities was key to our decision to abandon FGM/C", Oureye explains. "We together discussed our responsibility to provide the best possible health for our daughters - now we vaccinate our children regularly, take them to the health center when they are sick, have them sleep under mosquito nets and keep them clean. We also have stopped marrying our girls at age 11 or 12 as we used to do. The village decided upon a rule that a girl must be 18 before she can marry. We have done much more than end the tradition. We have engaged a movement."

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