

# Female Genital Cutter Leaves Lucrative Trade Behind

By Judith Achieng

*'I was getting money for something not good'*

DAKAR—Until 1997, Ourey Sall's occupation, as a traditional female genital cutter in the tiny Senegalese village of Ngeringe Bambara, sustained her family and helped her built the two bedroom stone house she lives in.

In her late fifties, Sall is now one of the staunchest critics of Female Genital Cutting (FGC). She walks from village to village across Senegal preaching against the practice.

"I was getting money for something that was not good," she explains.

She now sells tomatoes and beads, and has vowed never to return to the lucrative trade, even though she can hardly make ends meet.

"If I earn 5,000 Francs (about US\$7) to cut a girl and she ends up in hospital with a prescription of 50,000 Francs (about US\$68), it is not worth it," she says.

Sall is among the five women in Senegal and a local Islamic leader who have been honoured by the Washington-based Population Institute and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) for their courage to stand up and tell the world that they were ending female genital cutting.

What began as literacy classes for women in Malikunda Bambara village in Senegal by a non-

governmental organisation (NGO) has resulted in Africa's best success story on the fight against female genital cutting, a practice that is pervasive throughout Africa.

Through basic education from Tostan, a Senegal-based NGO working to provide basic education to village women, explains Tostan's Molly Melching, the women were able to question the relevance of female genital cutting, which was causing serious reproductive health problems.

Tostan, meaning "breakthrough" in Wolof language, has reached up to 400 villages in Senegal, providing basic literacy classes for women to enhance their personal and community development.

The women, after the classes, began discussing female genital cutting openly with their husbands, local chief and the village Imam, a recognised religious leader. One-year after, the women declared publicly that they were ending the practice.

"We only inform them. We believe, when they have the right information, they are intelligent enough to

choose what is right," Melching says.

Predominantly Muslim, religion plays an important part of everyday life in Senegal, a fact which called for the involvement of village elders and Islamic leaders to address people's concerns about the Islamic position on the sensitive issue.

The public declarations, which have received extensive media coverage, have since had a snowballing effect on villages across Senegal, where up to 274 villages have vowed to stop the practice.

The project, which has received support from the Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade, has led to the implementation of legislation against the practice.

"It was hard for us when we decided to end the practice. Everyone thought we had been paid to stop," explains Maimuna Traore of the Malicounda Bambara village, who on 6 November 1996 led the first public declaration in Senegal against the practice.

"Many people resisted at the beginning, but we persisted and walked from village to village with the Imam," she said in Wolof, while receiving her award in the Senegalese

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will be prosecuted if caught, states ECPAT's report, "Five Years After Stockholm."

"This is unacceptable," said Harris. "If there is no action plan, there is little evidence of a budget to crack down on commercial sexual exploitation of children. The problem is not a lack of resources but a lack of distribution of the resources."

A government delegate from Central America attending the congress admitted that the countries have not done enough for their children. "It is a pity. There is awareness, but five years after Stockholm we have few concrete measures to show," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"When allocating public funds, programmes to combat this perversion are not a priority," he confirmed. "The sex exploiters are getting away."

For Ines Maria Dias, a 22-year-old Brazilian student attending the Yokohama congress as part of the Latin American youth representatives here, the situation in Central America reflects a disturbing trend about national policies on child sexual exploitation.

"Either there are no laws to stop such abuse or implementation of the laws is lacking," she said.

"Governments cannot ignore the way children, girls and boys, are being

sexually exploited in Latin America. Domestic sexual violence is among them," Dias asserted.

However, the conference participants were also given some hint about the positive interventions to combat sexual abuse in the region, among them an effort led by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

In January 2002, El Salvador will serve as the springboard for a programme in Latin America that seeks to stop commercial sexual exploitation of children through a "time-bound programme."

"Between 3,000 and 4,000 child prostitutes in El Salvador have been identified by the ILO to participate in this effort," Panudda Boonpala, a senior programme officer at the ILO, said of the four-year programme that seeks to remove children from the sex trade and provide them with an alternative.

"This is the way forward," Panudda said of the five million U.S. dollar ILO project.

This ILO effort, which comes after a comprehensive study of the circumstances that force children into the sex trade and why they remain in it, has already been tried in northern Thailand with a measure of success.

Source: Inter Press Service, 19 December 2001

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Female genital cutting, also known as female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM) involves the alteration or cutting of the female genitalia, usually, for social rather than medical reasons, is a widespread practice in Senegal and 27 other sub-Saharan African countries.

Only ten countries in Africa have outlawed the practice. Through migration, FGC also has spread to Europe and other parts of the world.

The FGC term, according to the U.S.-based Population Reference Bureau, is being used by reproductive health scholars as a more neutral term to replace the more judgmental FGM term, used by women's rights groups to emphasise the damage caused by the practice.

Senegal, also this year's venue for the Population Institute Global Media Awards, which presented awards to six individuals and media organisations for their efforts in highlighting global population and reproductive health issues, was chosen for its success in fighting the female genital cutting.

Inter Press Service (IPS) received the award for the most conscientious news service in "fostering support to solve the world population crisis through a demonstrated commitment to share ideas, knowledge and experience towards...creating a better quality of life for all the world's people."

Source: Inter Press Service, 17 December 2001