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Senegal Curbs a Bloody Rite for Girls and Women

By CELIA W. DUGGER

SARE HAROUNA, Senegal — When Aissatou Kande was a little girl, her family followed a tradition considered essential to her suitability to marry. Her clitoris was sliced off with nothing to dull the pain.

But on her wedding day, Ms. Kande, her head modestly covered in a plain white shawl, vowed to protect her own daughters from the same ancient custom. Days later, her village declared it would abandon female genital cutting for good.

Across the continent, an estimated 92 million girls and women have undergone it. But like more than 5,000 other Senegalese villages, Sare Harouna has joined a growing movement to end the practice.

The change has not yet reached Ms. Kande's new home in her husband's village, but if elders there pressured her to cut the baby girl she is taking into the marriage, she said, "I would resist them." Her parents back her up.

"They would never dare do that to my granddaughter, and we would never allow it," said Ms. Kande's mother, Marietou Diamank.

The movement to end genital cutting is spreading in Senegal at a quickening pace through the very ties of family and ethnicity that used to entrench it. And a practice once seen as an immutable part of a girl's life in many ethnic groups and African nations is ebbing, though rarely at the pace or with the organized drive found in Senegal.

The change is happening without the billions of dollars that have poured into other global health priorities throughout the developing world in recent years. Even after campaigning against genital cutting for years, the United Nations has raised less than half the \$44 million it set as the goal.

But here in Senegal, Tostan, a group whose name means "breakthrough" in Wolof, Senegal's dominant language, has had a major impact with an education program that seeks to build consensus, African-style, on the dangers of the practice, while being careful not to denounce it as

barbaric as Western activists have been prone to do. Senegal's Parliament officially banned the practice over a decade ago, and the government has been very supportive of Tostan's efforts.

"Before you would never even dare to discuss this," said Mamadou Dia, governor of the Kolda region where this village is located. "It was taboo. Now you have thousands of people coming to abandon it."

The night before Sare Harouna joined 118 other villages for a ceremony to abandon the practice, people poured in by horse cart, bus and truck. As darkness fell, women illuminated by wood fires stirred vats of couscous and beef stew for the hordes of visitors.

The next day's event had the feel of a county fair. Dignitaries spoke over a tinny public-address system. Teenagers staged plays about the dangers of genital cutting. Traditional storytellers known as griots entertained the throng gathered around a dusty field.

Over the past 15 years, the drive to end the practice has gained such momentum that a majority of Senegalese villages where genital cutting was commonplace have committed to stop it, Tostan and United Nations officials say.

With too few resources to replicate Tostan's health and human rights classes across Africa, Nafissatou Diop, who coordinates the United Nations-led campaign to end the practice, is looking for quicker, cheaper strategies to change social conventions on cutting. Tostan has pursued an ambitious effort here with support from Unicef and others, but its two- to three-year program costs about \$21,000 per village — a substantial sum considering the countless villages that continue the practice.

"The program is transformative, and I love that as an African woman," said Ms. Diop, who is Senegalese, "but we need to move faster."

An improbable collection of characters shaped Tostan's methods: Molly Melching, a friendly, irrepressible educator from Illinois; Demba Diawara, a revered imam from a Senegalese village; and Gerry Mackie, a political theorist and associate professor at the University of California, San Diego.

Ms. Melching, 61, came to Senegal as an exchange student when she was 24 and never left, working with street children for the Peace Corps, devising a rural education program in a village where she lived in the 1980s, and starting Tostan 20 years ago. The group aims broadly to improve health and spread awareness of human rights. Women in village classes themselves raised the issue of genital cutting. They told of daughters and sisters who had hemorrhaged and sometimes died from botched circumcisions.

In 1997, women in the village of Malicounda Bambara declared their determination to end the practice — a stand that made news.

But Mr. Diawara, an imam in the village of Keur Simbara and a Tostan student, warned Ms. Melching that a single village could not stop such a deeply rooted tradition. The only way, he said, was to persuade villages whose young people intermarried to abandon the practice simultaneously — the defining idea for Tostan. “Even though our villages seem small, behind each village are many other villages,” Mr. Diawara said in an interview.

So Mr. Diawara, 77, visited the 10 intermarrying villages of his extended family. He won over the village chiefs and convinced imams that there was no religious requirement for cutting, which predates Islam by centuries. He was tactful, never using the term “female genital mutilation,” but he explained its consequences. At his family’s annual council, the villages agreed to give up the tradition and in 1998 held what is believed to have been Africa’s first collective abandonment.

That June, Professor Mackie, then a research fellow at Oxford, was proctoring an exam when he read an article in *The International Herald Tribune* about what Tostan had done. “My heart was pounding,” he said.

He bolted from the room after the test, he said, and mailed Ms. Melching a copy of his 1996 article from a sociological journal, proposing a strategy that was similar to Mr. Diawara’s.

Professor Mackie contended that genital cutting, unlike rape or wife beating, was a convention parents followed out of love for their daughters. He likened it to foot binding, which had disfigured Chinese girls over centuries.

A Western woman — Alicia Little, a British novelist — had played a catalytic role in ending foot binding in China, much like Ms. Melching was doing with genital cutting.

Mrs. Little had written literary depictions of Victorian mothers who raised their daughters to win wealthy husbands, and after moving to China in 1887, she researched foot binding and discovered that a congregation’s public pledge to end the practice had worked. Parents pledging neither to bind their daughters’ feet nor to allow their sons to marry women with bound feet ultimately ended the practice within a generation, Professor Mackie wrote.

“I went nuts!” Ms. Melching said of her reaction after reading Professor Mackie’s article. “Here’s our answer: it has to be a collective pledge.”

Professor Mackie, Ms. Melching and Mr. Diawara have collaborated ever since, influencing places like Sare Harouna, a village where the voices of children chanting Koranic verses waft through dirt alleyways at dusk.

Bassi Boiro, the elderly woman who was Sare Harouna’s so-called cutter, said she always performed the rite before dawn under the spreading arms of a sacred tree, away from the settlement.

“Men couldn’t hear the girl’s screams,” she explained. “They are not part of this.”

Four women would hold down the arms and legs of each girl, usually ages 5 to 7. For years, Mrs. Boiro said, she used a knife handed down through generations of cutters in her family until it became “too dull to even cut okra.” She then switched to razor blades.

But Mrs. Boiro says she has now accepted Sare Harouna’s decision to end the practice and speaks about the harm caused by her life’s work. “I didn’t realize it was my doing,” she said.

Muusaa Jallo, the village imam, was convinced of the need to stop the practice and has spread the word in many other villages. As his toddler impishly poked her finger through a hole in his sock, he placed his hand gently on her head and said, “I have already decided this one will not be cut.”

His 8-year-old, Alimata, sat solemnly to the side, her eyes downcast.

“I will abandon it like my parents,” she said, almost inaudibly. “I won’t do it to my daughters. It’s not good to do that, and they did it to me.”

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