



Female Genital Mutilation

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What is FGM?

Alternately known as female circumcision, female genital cutting or FGM, is a procedure that removes part or all of the external female genitalia. The extent of the procedure ranges from the removal of the labia to the most extreme form of FGM called infibulation, in which the labia and clitoris are removed and the vagina is sewn up with a small hole for menstrual fluid. With few exceptions, it is performed by another woman in unsanitary conditions without anesthesia. It is practiced primarily in Africa upon girls as young as a few weeks to eighteen years for cultural or religious purposes. The procedure is often a requirement for marriage to ensure the girl's virginity. In some areas of sub-Saharan Africa, over 96% of women and girls have undergone the procedure. In Kenya, over 70% of females have experienced FGM.

Human Rights

Due to the lack of consent of the girls who undergo this procedure and the health risks involved, many consider FGM to be a human rights violation. FGM violates the right to be free from discrimination and violence on the basis of gender, the right to bodily integrity, the right to health, and the rights of a child. Health risks include bleeding, shock, infection, scarring, infertility, and painful urination from damage to the urethra.

Bottom-Up Social Change

Up until the 1990s, FGM was largely placed on the back burner by international organizations that left it alone to avoid being culturally imperialistic. Among growing protests from African women and the Western world about this practice, experience has proven that legislation and government intervention has not been as influential in the reduction of this procedure as ground-up, collective decisions to halt the practice. Top-down legislation often has a reverse effect; it is seen as an attack upon culture by the government and it is defended even more strongly as an aspect of national identity. Essentially, changes in this practice do not come from top-down organizations, but from the unified decisions of the communities where FGM is practiced.

The Tostan Model

Tostan is a non-governmental organization based in Senegal that is dedicated to empowering Africans in rural villages with little access to formal education. It is not an anti-FGM organization, but instead is an educational organization that organizes educational workshops for women only when it is invited by a village. "When Tostan is invited into a village, it implements a 30-month education program—called the Community Empowerment Program (CEP)—and trains a Community Management Committee (CMC), which sustains the activities and development projects that result from Tostan's education program" (www.tostan.org). There are only two required topics: human rights and group problem solving. From there, the women can choose other topics, such as sanitation or health care. By empowering women to question the practice, many villages eventually decide to collectively end the practice of FGM. From 1997 to 2003, 1,140 villages in Senegal (20% of villages that had practiced FGM) made collective agreements to stop the practice. Often several villages that intermarry with each other must make a commitment together in order to ensure that discrimination in favor of the practice is not exercised when planning marriages. Tostan currently operates in the Gambia, Djibouti, Mali, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mauritania, Senegal, and Somalia, although it is widespread in many

other Sub-Saharan nations as well as in the Middle East. The success of Tostan demonstrates that education about the health risks of FGM and collective decision making can empower women to decide how their communities treat their bodies.

Sources:

Bob, Clifford. The International Struggle for Human Rights. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2009.

Talbott, William. Which Rights Should Be Universal? New York: Oxford University Press 2005.

Tostan. 2010. <www.tostan.org>