Senegalese mothers in Malicounda Bambara end female genital cutting in their village, 1997-1998

August
1997
to: February
1998
Country: Senegal
Location City/State/Province: Malicounda Bambara and ten nearby villages
Location Description: Rural villages in Senegal
Goals:
To collectively abandon the practice of female genital circumcision in the 10 intermarrying villages spearheaded by the Malicounda Bambara village.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Senegalese mothers in Malicounda Bambara hold a press conference to declare that they are ending FGC in their village
- 063. Social disobedience › Women in Malicounda Bambara refuse to circumcise their daughters

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 063. Social disobedience › Women in Malicounda Bambara refuse to circumcise their daughters

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 063. Social disobedience › Women in Malicounda Bambara refuse to circumcise their daughters

Methods in 4th segment:

- 063. Social disobedience › Women in Malicounda Bambara refuse to circumcise their daughters

Methods in 5th segment:

- 063. Social disobedience › Women in Malicounda Bambara refuse to circumcise their daughters

Methods in 6th segment:

- 063. Social disobedience › 10 intermarrying villages join Malicounda Bambara in abandoning FGC

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):
050. Teach-ins  ›  Mr. Diawara, a local imam, travels to 10 intermarrying villages to talk to the imams and leaders about the consequences of FGC

**Notes on Methods:**
The active part of the campaign was the refusal of women to comply with the tradition of circumcising their daughters and Mr. Diawara's campaign to persuade other villages to join the abandonment

**Classifications**

- **Classification:** Change
- **Cluster:** Human Rights
- **Group characterization:**
  - Senegalese mothers and a local imam

**Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

- **Leaders:**
The women of the Malicounda Bambara village and Mr. Diawara
- **Partners:**
  Tostan, a local NGO
- **External allies:**
The United Nations and eventually the Senegalese president

**Involvement of social elites:**
Not known

**Joining/exiting order of social groups**

- **Groups in 1st Segment:**
  - Mr. Diawara
- **Groups in 2nd Segment:**
- **Groups in 3rd Segment:**
- **Groups in 4th Segment:**
- **Groups in 5th Segment:**
- **Groups in 6th Segment:**
  - President Abdou Diouf

**Segment Length:** Approximately 1 month
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
The traditional social practice of female genital circumcision in Senegal and supporters of the practice

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Not known

**Repressive Violence:**
Not known

Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
Not only was the women's campaign to end FGC successful in the 10 intermarrying villages, the movement spread throughout Senegal and grew exponentially after they had collectively abandoned the practice.

The practice of female genital cutting (FGC) or circumcision has been a prevalent tradition in many African nations for generations. The practice, which involves removing the clitoris or entire external genitalia of young girls without anesthetic, is seen as necessary in many places to deem a woman acceptable for marriage, however young girls have died from infection due to the process. In Senegal, the tradition has been especially prevalent, where one in five girls underwent the procedure before puberty.

In 1997, having undergone a community education program by a local Senegalese NGO Tostan (meaning “Breakthrough” in Wolof), a group of 35 mothers from the village of Malicounda Bambara held a press conference where they declared to journalists that they were ending the practice in their village. The women declared that Tostan’s local education program, which included information sessions on health and human rights, had served as an inspiration to them to end the traditional practice in their village. Tostan had brought to light many of the health risks associated with FGC, and this resonated deeply with women whose daughters had died or been greatly affected by the procedure.

The declaration was met by angry responses from nearby villages that practiced FGC, as many neighboring villages intermarried with Malicounda Bambara women and the practice was considered crucial for a woman to attract a husband. An imam and student of Tostan, Mr. Diawara, warned the women that, if their movement was to be successful, it had to take place among all of the villages that intermarried. Mr. Diawara supported the women’s cause, and took it upon himself to spread the word to the 10 intermarrying villages in the area. He traveled by bike, donkey cart, and foot for three months to each village and discussed the problem with the local imams and men. He was able to convince many imams that FGC was not a part of Islam, and that the practice predated Islam’s arrival to North Africa. Therefore, he argued, the imams would not be breaking with Islam if they supported ending the practice.

Tostan rallied its support behind ending FGC, but it did not take an active role in the movement. Short of condemning the practice or saying outright that it was wrong, Tostan used its educational programs to spread awareness about the health risks...
associated with the FGC, which was effective in mobilizing many mothers against the tradition. Tostan’s programs were met with skepticism by many villages, but some welcomed what Tostan had to offer. Mr. Diawara was careful to follow Tostan’s example when he implored other villages to abandon the practice. He never used the word mutilation or condemned the practice outright. Instead, he highlighted its consequences on young girls, many of which were between the ages of 5 and 7 when they underwent the procedure.

In February 1998, Mr. Diawara’s family counsel, the 10 intermarrying villages that Mr. Diawara had visited, agreed to support a collective abandonment of the practice of female genital cutting. The declaration was the first collective abandonment of the practice in Senegal. Following the declaration, in December of that year, the Senegalese parliament drafted a law banning female circumcision, following the declaration by President Abdou Diouf that he supported the abandonment of FGC.

Although it was not the immediate intention of the mothers from Malicounda Bambara to stop FGC all across Senegal, other villages and groups of villages followed Malicounda Bambara’s example. In 2011, almost 5000 villages in Senegal had abandoned the practice, and the movement continued to spread across borders to neighboring countries.

Research Notes

Influences:
Tostan’s local education program (1)

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Elena Ruyter, 27/11/2011
Links:
[1] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color
[2] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-women