



RISING UP FOR RIGHTS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

*Abandoning female genital mutilation and
cutting in the Fouta of Senegal*

TEXT AND PHOTOS: Sabine Panet for UNFPA

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Abandoning female genital mutilation and cutting in the Fouta of Senegal

In Senegal, the movement to end female genital mutilation/cutting is reaching the most remote places. On the sandy roads of the Fouta region and along the river, the information circulates, inspiring people in dozens of villages to rise up in support of women's and girls' health. The following photo essay documents a site visit by members of the steering committee of the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, which is supporting communities in abandoning the practice.



IN MAGIC COUNTRY

We are in magic country. The elements exude their power: sand the colour of chalk, the water of the river, the fire of the sky. Sometimes, the whistling winds make the scorpions sing. The night has never had as many stars as it does here, nor the sun as many rays. All along the scorched banks of the Senegal River, the shadows evaporate in the heat. It is still a few weeks before the first rains; patience is one of the great virtues of the inhabitants of the Fouta.

INDIGO REFLECTIONS

Today though, in the suffocating heat of Sinthiou Dambé, an unusual excitement permeates the air. Since this morning, water, oil and butter sizzle in the pots. In the shade of the compounds, all are cloaked in their most beautiful *boubous* and wearing their polished *babouches*, or slippers. The girls, as dignified *Halpulaar'en* (speakers of Pulaar), are made up, hair braided, adorned with traditional jewelry. Blue is everywhere: in the indigo

of their skirts, in the sparkling river, in the attentive reflection in their eyes. They settle underneath the mango tree, where the heart of Sinthiou beats. They stare seriously and strive not to laugh. It is a question of dignity. They have something of utmost importance to tell the visitors that the village awaits. Then we glimpse, far down the path, the oncoming procession.



FROM ACROSS THE WORLD TO THE END OF THE EARTH

One by one the members of the delegation of the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on FGM/C descend from their cars and are swallowed up by the heat.

They come from across the world: Italy, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, the United States. They have traversed thousands of kilometres to reach Senegal, the long tongues of asphalt have paraded before their eyes for an entire day. They have now arrived at their destination – the Fouta, where the Sahel stretches toward the Sahara. Magic country.

They are welcomed by songs, dances and exclamations of joy by the inhabitants, who are gathered by the hundreds under the leaves of the large fruit tree. Nearby, pirogues dance on the river. The fishermen's sons row, one next to the other, in honour of the visitors. The praise singer, keeper of the stories of men, bursts into a song of welcome. She sings, in one continuous refrain, the story of something that resembles a slow revolution: a breakthrough.



SOMETHING TO SAY

That is what *'tostan'* means in the Wolof language: breakthrough. It is also the name of the local partner of the joint programme, which is funded by visitors from all over the world.

For some years, the Tostan facilitator, having brought questions concerning human rights to the village of Sinthiou Dambé, has sparked a process of reflection in the mind of each participant that has reached the intimacy of their homes, the shade of the mango tree. A right to health? A right to be protected from all forms of violence?

"When women make the link between what they have learned about their human rights, maternal health and the difficulties they

have encountered, they understand that these difficulties are due to female genital mutilation/cutting," says Awa Niane, the facilitator, *"but this is only the beginning of the process."*

The thirst for knowledge generated by this curiosity is quenched by learning: about conflict and problem resolution, health, hygiene, reading, writing and math, all in the local Pulaar language. After months of education, of awakening and effervescence, the residents of Sinthiou Dambé, in agreement with neighbouring villages, have made a number of decisions. This has relieved them of an enormous burden, and that is what they say today.



TOGETHER, ABANDON FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING

What must absolutely reach the ears of these visitors from around the world is that the little girls of Sinthiou Dambé will never be subjected to female genital mutilation/cutting. The chubby daughters in their parent's arms will remain intact. This is the decision of the people.

Was it an easy decision to make? The Fouta is a conservative region, very religious, where tradition creates identity. Happily, the programme was implemented in a group of villages bound by kinship. Together, they were stronger than any attempts to

destabilize them by the *marabouts*, or holy men, who are more worried about the interpretation of sacred texts than the health of women.

The villagers proudly tell their tale to Patrice Schmitz, the representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg, who expresses her admiration for the "*collective support of men and women, and in particular their initiatives to spread the good practices to the neighbouring communities.*"



DADO'S EYES

Female genital mutilation/cutting is a powerful social norm to which all families must adhere to ensure the reputation and marriage of their daughters. Until a few years ago, in the Fouta, a girl who had not undergone FGM/C was considered impure and was excluded from her group, mocked by her friends. Ridiculed.

Dado Ndiaye, a 23-year-old single mother with thoughtful eyes, was abandoned by her husband after her wedding night when he realized she was not cut. Nine months later, she gave birth to twin girls, in the solitude that only a pariah knows. To get her husband back, she tried to get herself cut, but her parents, informed at the last minute, talked her out of it.

Dado lives in Gamadji Saré, the village where the visitors will go the day after Sinthiou Dambé. For the past two years, she has been attending the Tostan classes, thanks to the support of the joint programme. She understands that if her daughters had stayed with her husband, they would have already been cut. But they live with Dado, and she would not subject them to that for anything in the world. This strength she has also comes from everything she has learned through the programme. She has decided to take the entrance exam for secondary school. She has promised her daughters that she will succeed.





RAISING THE CURTAIN

In Sinthiou Dambé, as in Gamadji Saré, the process of abandoning female genital mutilation/cutting is a collective one. It is together that the residents publicly announced their decision. From village to village, in carts, by foot, or on the back of a donkey, the word spread, accompanied by meetings to raise awareness, often in the form of plays. *“This experience,”* underscores Simon Narbeth, social development adviser for DFID (the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development) in Sudan, *“is the image of success and shows the multiple issues that arise with the implementation of the joint programme. The positive results of the work done here, in the Fouta, are also the results of the national strategy coordinated by the Senegalese state.”*

Today, for the visitors, the community acts out a scene in which both the issues of FGM/C and child and forced marriage are raised (knowledge of human rights has caused the population to question other harmful practices). The women take the microphone with ease, express themselves and offer their opinions. Speech is like water, they say here: Once it spreads, you cannot take it back.

A LONG ROAD

We could leave the Fouta light of heart. Nine public declarations have been organized since the mid-1990s, through which 760 villages have committed themselves to the abandonment of female genital mutilation/cutting. Yet, behind the immense hope that we have seen here, the road is long. In the region, more than 200 communities have not yet been reached. The financial and logistical difficulties as well as the fierce resistance of a handful of powerful religious leaders make the work on the ground extremely arduous.

The women of the Fouta are on the march, but they need help.

As Gamadji fades in the rear-view mirror, Loredana Magni, a development cooperation adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy, recognizes the impact of the work accomplished in the region. She also expresses the need to intensify activities related to nutrition, education, access to potable water and other health infrastructure. *“The 2012 evaluation of the joint programme will be decisive for future actions,”* she adds, as the delegation bounces along the winding dirt road in the direction of the Ndioum clinic.



INDISPENSABLE CLINICS

It's true. The women of the Fouta need help, as well as viable and well-provisioned health structures. At the Richard Toll and Ndioum clinics, equipped by UNFPA with funds from Luxembourg, the medical teams analyse the obstacles they face. Along with a lack of material things, Seydou Sall, the head nurse, points to the lack of knowledge about family planning and reproductive health. The 60 motorcycles that UNFPA will soon bring them will accelerate the transmission of information and health services. It's a good thing, he says. One grain of sand, and then another grain of sand....

Madame Sall, the matron, puts her scarf back on her head for the photo; she smiles courageously at the lens. She's the one that delivers the babies of cut women, every day of the year. Before, she used to perform FGM/C, but she has thrown away her knife. Her job today is to provide relief, to repair, to guide. Her daily life involves helping with births, and with death.



THE GIRLS OF MAGIC LAND

It's Pollel's look that gives us the key. Chin up in challenge; it's the future that she speaks to. I have a right to my place there, she seems to say. The world turns, and I turn with it.



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