

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Grassroots vs. Treetops*

Are women human yet? If women were human, would we be a cash crop shipped from Thailand in containers into New York's brothels . . . ?

Would our genitals be sliced out to "cleanse" us . . . ?

When will women be human? When?

— CATHERINE A. MACKINNON, *Are Women Human?*

Approximately once every ten seconds, a girl somewhere in the world is pinned down. Her legs are pulled apart, and a local woman with no medical training pulls out a knife or razor blade and slices off some or all of the girl's genitals. In most cases, there is no anesthetic.

Well-meaning Westerners and Africans alike have worked for decades to end this practice. Yet a growing number of mothers were still arranging for their daughters to be cut. Now, finally, in just the last few years, groups of grassroots activists have cracked the code. Led by an Illinois woman who has lived more than half her life in Senegal, these activists seem to have figured out how cutting can be ended, and their movement is snowballing. Incredibly, it looks as if they will make female genital cutting in West Africa go the way of foot-binding in China. That makes the campaign against genital cutting a model for a larger global movement for women in the developing world. If we want to move beyond slogans, we would do well to learn the lessons of the long struggle against genital cutting.

Today, female genital cutting is practiced mostly by Muslims in Africa, though it is also found in many Christian families in Africa. It is not found in most Arab or Islamic cultures outside Africa. The custom goes back to ancient times, and some female mummies in ancient Egypt have cut genitals. Soranos of Ephesus, a Greek physician who wrote a pioneering book on gynecology in the second century, stipulated:

A large clitoris is a symptom of turpitude; in fact, [such women] strive to have their own flesh stimulated just like men and to obtain sexual intercourse, as it were. Now, you will perform the surgical operation on her in the following way. Placing her lying on her back with the feet closed, one should hold in place in a small forceps that which protrudes and appears to be larger and cut it back with a scalpel.

A German textbook on surgery from 1666 includes illustrations on how to amputate the clitoris, and the practice occurred regularly in England until the 1860s—even occasionally after that in Europe and America. Across a broad swath of northern Africa, the practice is still nearly universal. Worldwide, some 130 million women have been cut, and after new research, the UN now estimates that 3 million girls are cut annually in Africa alone (the previous estimate had been 2 million globally). The custom occurs on a smaller scale in Yemen, Oman, Indonesia, and Malaysia; among some Bedouin Arabs in Saudi Arabia and Israel; and among Bohra Muslims in India and Pakistan. The practice varies greatly. In Yemen, girls are typically cut within two weeks of birth, while in Egypt it can occur in the early teenage years.

The aim is to minimize a woman's sexual pleasure and hence make her less likely to be promiscuous. The most common form of cutting involves snipping the clitoris or clitoral hood (sometimes leaving the clitoris intact and more exposed, an incompetent approach that increases opportunities for orgasm). In Malaysia, the ritual sometimes involves no more than a pinprick, or simply the waving of a razor blade near the genitals. But in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, it is common to see the most extreme kind, in which the entire genital area is "cleaned up" by snipping away the clitoris, labia, and all external genitalia. This creates a large raw wound, and the vaginal opening is then typically sewn up with a wild thistle (leaving a small opening for menstrual blood), with the legs tied together so that the wound can heal. This is called infibulation, and when the woman is married, her husband or a midwife uses a knife to reopen the sealed part so that she can have intercourse. Edna Adan, the midwife in Somaliland who runs her own maternity hospital, has been surveying all the women who have come to deliver over the years: 97 percent of them were cut, and virtually all of them infibulated. Edna showed us a video she took of an eight-year-old girl undergoing infibulation; it is excruciating to watch.

Traditional birth attendants do the genital cutting in some countries, while in Senegal and Mali it is often a woman who belongs to the blacksmith caste. Cutters mostly have learned the technique from their mothers or grandmothers, and often they don't use clean blades or can't stop the bleeding. Some girls die or suffer lifelong injuries, but there is no data; a girl who dies after being cut is usually said to have succumbed to malaria. A World Health Organization study found that cutting leads to scar tissue that makes childbirth more dangerous, particularly with the more extreme forms of cutting.

Beginning in the late 1970s there was a Western-led campaign against cutting. Previously the practice had been referred to as female circumcision, but that was considered euphemistic, so critics branded it female genital mutilation, or FGM. The United Nations took up that terminology, and international conferences were convened to denounce FGM. Laws against FGM were passed in fifteen African countries, articles were written, meetings were held—and not much changed on the ground. Guinea passed a law in the 1960s that punishes female genital cutting with a life sentence at hard labor—or, if the girl dies within forty days of being cut, a death sentence. Yet no case has ever come to trial, and 99 percent of Guinean women have been cut. In Sudan, the British first passed a law against infibulation in 1925 and extended that to all cutting in 1946. Today, more than 90 percent of Sudanese girls are cut.

"This is our culture!" a Sudanese midwife declared angrily when we asked about cutting. "We all want it. Why is it America's business?" The midwife said that she regularly cut girls at the request of their mothers, and that the girls themselves later thanked her. And that's probably true. Mahabouba, the Ethiopian fistula patient who battled hyenas and crawled to a missionary for help, remembers how much she looked forward to her own cutting as a rite of passage.

Edna Adan deplores the cutting and says that international campaigns are ineffective, never reaching ordinary Somali women. As we were driving through the Somaliland capital of Hargeisa, she pointed suddenly to a banner across the road that denounced cutting. "So the UN comes and puts up banners in the capital," she said. "What does that do? It doesn't make a bit of difference. The women can't even read the signs." Indeed, the international denunciations of FGM prompted a defensive backlash in some countries, leading tribal groups to rally around cutting as a tradition under attack by out-

siders. Opponents eventually became smarter and backed off a bit, often using the more neutral term "female genital cutting," or FGC. At least that didn't imply that the women they were reaching out to were mutilated, which made it awkward to continue the conversation. More important, leadership passed to African women like Edna, since they can speak with far more authority and persuasiveness than foreigners.

Perhaps the most successful effort to end cutting is that of Tostan, a West African group that takes a very respectful approach and places FGC within a larger framework of community development. Rather than lecturing the women, the program's representatives encourage villagers to discuss the human rights and health issues related to cutting and then make their own choices. The program's soft sell has worked far better than the hard sell.

Tostan was founded by Molly Melching, a hearty woman from Danville, Illinois, who still looks and sounds like the solid Midwesterner she is. Molly's high school French class led her to a fascination with all things French. She studied in France and worked in a slum largely inhabited by North Africans outside Paris. Eventually she traveled to Senegal in 1974 on a scholarly exchange program that was supposed to last six months. Molly is still there.

A born linguist, Molly began to learn a Senegalese local language, Wolof, and then signed up for the Peace Corps in Senegal. Molly ran a radio program in Wolof. Later, from 1982 to 1985, she found herself living in a village working on education and empowerment efforts with a small grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

"Not one person in the village had been to school," Molly recalled. "There was no school. This was a village of wonderful people who were as smart as could be but just had never been to school, and who very much needed information." The experience—plus a stint as an independent evaluator of aid programs—fed in Molly a suspicion of big aid projects. She was living as Senegalese do and flinched as she saw foreign aid workers squired around in SUVs. She also observed aid programs that spent primarily on expatriate staff and didn't know what they were doing. Without local buy-in, a well-meaning group would build a clinic and outfit it with drugs—and then the villagers would divide the clinic's beds among themselves, and the doctor would sell the medicines in the market. "Senegal seemed like a cemetery of aid projects that weren't working," she says bluntly.



*Molly Melching with women in a Tostan program in Senegal who have given up genital cutting (Tostan)*

Molly evaluated literacy programs by going to 240 literacy centers—and found them mostly failures. "What I found were classes where there were supposed to be fifty students, but nobody would be there," she said. "Or everybody would be falling asleep." Likewise, she saw Westerners thundering against genital cutting and trying to pass laws against it, without actually going out in the countryside to understand why mothers cut their daughters.

"Law is a quick-fix solution, and then people think you don't have to do anything else," Molly said. "The real thing that will make a difference is education." When Senegal debated a law to ban cutting, Molly initially opposed it, for fear that it would inflame ethnic politics and stir a backlash (the majority ethnic group does not cut girls, so minorities would feel imposed upon). These days she is ambivalent about the law: While passage did create a backlash, it also signaled to villagers the severity of the health concerns about cutting.

In her own family, Molly saw how peer pressure for cutting was more powerful than any law. Molly had married a Senegalese man, and they had a daughter named Zoé—who made a startling demand.

"I want to be cut," Zoé told her mother. "I promise I won't cry." All of Zoé's friends were being cut, and she didn't want to be left out. Molly wasn't that indulgent a mom, and the girl changed her mind when she was told what the procedure entailed. The incident convinced Molly that the key to ending cutting would be changing village attitudes as a whole.

In 1991, she formally launched Tostan to focus on education in poor villages. Typically, Tostan will send a local trainer into a village to begin a major educational program that includes units on democracy, human rights, problem-solving, hygiene, health, and management skills. The village has to actively participate by providing a teaching space, tables and chairs, students, and room and board for the teacher. Men and women alike participate in the classes, which last for three years and involve a significant commitment of time: three sessions a week of two or three hours each. The program also includes training for village leaders, formation of community management committees, and a micro-credit system to encourage small businesses. Following the lead of local women, Tostan is very careful to avoid antagonizing village men.

"We did a segment on women's rights for a while, and that just built opposition," Molly said. "Some of the men closed our centers, they were so angry. So we sat down and rewrote the whole module and did 'people's rights' instead—democracy and people's rights. Then we had the men behind us, too. The men just want to be included; they don't want to be seen as the enemy."

Tostan sometimes angers feminists for its cautious approach and for its reluctance to use the word "mutilation" or even say that it is fighting against genital cutting. Instead, it relentlessly tries to stay positive, preparing people to make their own decisions. The curriculum includes a nonjudgmental discussion of human rights and health issues related to cutting, but it never advises parents to stop cutting their daughters. Still, the program broke a taboo by discussing cutting, and once women thought about it and realized that cutting wasn't universal, they began to worry about the health risks. In 1997, a group of thirty-five women attending a class in a village called Malicounda Bambara took a historic step: They announced that they would stop cutting their daughters.

From the outside, it looked like a breakthrough, and it was hailed as such. Close up, it was a disaster. Other villagers excoriated the women who made the announcement as unfeminine and un-African and accused them of taking money from white people to betray their Bambara ethnic group. The women were in tears for months and worried that they were sentencing their daughters to be spinsters. Molly decided that Tostan had erred in allowing a single village to make the announcement. After consulting a local religious leader, she came to see that cutting is a social convention linked to marriage, so that no

one family can stop cutting on its own without harming its daughters' marriage prospects.

"Everybody has to change together, or you will never be able to marry your daughter," Molly says. "My mother put me in braces, and I bled and I cried for two years, and an African woman could have come over and said: 'How can you do this to your daughter?' And my mother would have said, 'I saved from my little salary to straighten my daughter's teeth, so she can get married. How dare you say I am cruel!'"

The entire marrying group must make the decision to drop cutting collectively. So Tostan began helping groups identify the other villages that commonly supply their marriage partners and then organizing inter-village discussions of cutting. Tostan also helps women organize joint declarations that they have abandoned the practice, and this approach has worked stunningly well. Between 2002 and 2007, more than 2,600 villages announced that they had ceased cutting. "It's accelerating," Molly said, adding that Tostan's goal is to end all cutting in Senegal by 2012.

In 2008, Senegal's government reviewed all the country's efforts to end genital cutting, and it concluded that Tostan was the only program achieving significant results. It then adopted Tostan's approach as a national model. A few days later, health officials from across that region in West Africa also embraced the Tostan model as part of a regional strategy to end cutting.

Tostan has already moved on to work in Gambia, Guinea, and Mauritania, and it has also opened up programs in Somalia and Djibouti in East Africa. Molly says it is finding a receptive audience to its bottom-up approach in each country. Tostan's work has gained praise from a host of international agencies, and in 2007 it won the Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize and a UNESCO Prize. The recognition has helped win Tostan financial support from private donors as well as from UNICEF and American Jewish World Service, allowing it to expand at a steady pace. To encourage donors, Tostan has developed its own sponsorship plan: Donors can "adopt" a particular village of about eight hundred people and pay \$12,000 for the three-year program there.

Molly is the only Westerner on staff for Tostan in Africa, although there are two Americans working in a Washington, D.C., office to raise funds and publicize the organization. The emphasis on local staff in Africa has also enabled Tostan to become unusually cost-effective,

partly because Molly pays herself just \$48,000 annually. Now the test is whether her model will succeed as well in Somalia, Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia, and Central African Republic—some of which are wracked by conflict that makes work in these countries dangerous. There is a long history of projects that work well on a small scale but falter when introduced across Africa. Early signs, in Somalia at least, are encouraging, and Molly is already wondering aloud whether the Tostan model could be used to help end other pernicious social customs such as honor killings.

Elsewhere in Africa, other groups are also gaining momentum against genital cutting. Leading Egyptians are increasingly speaking out against the practice, and other aid groups, including CARE, are doing pathbreaking work. Some local grassroots groups in Ethiopia and Ghana have been particularly impressive. Bill Foege, a legendary figure in public health who helped eradicate smallpox, believes that genital cutting is finally on its way out, largely because of the work of Molly and the staff at Tostan.

"They have done what UN conferences, endless resolutions, and government statements have failed to do," Foege told us. "When the history of African development is written, it will be clear that a turning point involved the empowerment of women. Tostan has demonstrated that empowerment is contagious, accomplished person by person and spreading village by village."

Painstakingly, the world is learning some important lessons from the fieldwork of groups like Tostan. One is that progress really is possible; challenges are insurmountable only until the moment that they're surmounted. And we're gaining a much better tactical sense of how to do the surmounting. Big efforts that failed—the campaign in the 1970s and 1980s against FGM and the missions by Westerners to Afghanistan with the lofty goal of empowering women—fell short because they were decreed by foreigners high up in the treetops. Local people were consulted only in a perfunctory manner. The impulse of Westerners to hold conferences and change laws has, on one issue after another, proved remarkably ineffective.\* As Mary Robinson, the former Irish

\*One exception: Successful public health initiatives have sometimes been directed from the treetops. Examples include the eradication of smallpox, vaccination campaigns, and battles against river blindness and guinea worm disease. They are exceptional because they depend on research, materials, and knowledge that do not exist at the grassroots.

president who later served as a terrific UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has said: "Count up the results of fifty years of human rights mechanisms, thirty years of multi-billion-dollar development programs and endless high-level rhetoric, and the global impact is quite underwhelming. This is a failure of implementation on a scale which shames us all."

In contrast, look at some of the projects that have made a stunning difference: Tostan, Kashf, Grameen, the CARE project in Burundi, BRAC, the Self Employed Women's Association in India, Apne Aap. The common thread is that they are grassroots projects with local ownership, sometimes resembling social or religious movements more than traditional aid projects. Often they have been propelled by exceptionally bright and driven social entrepreneurs who had encountered the "treetops" efforts and modified them to create far more effective bottom-up models. That is a crucial way forward for a new international movement focusing on women in the developing world.



Jordana Confino  
at a conference on  
girls' education (Lisa  
Alter)

## Girls Helping Girls

The frontline in the grassroots war against the abuse of women may be in Africa and Asia, but Jordana Confino has figured out how to make a contribution while attending high school in Westfield, New Jersey, a suburb of New York City. With her long, dirty-blond hair, Jordana could have just alighted from a prom queen's throne. She enjoyed an upper-middle-class upbringing, oozes self-confidence, expects equal rights as her birthright—and was deeply troubled when she appreciated how unusual her privileged status is.

Jordana and the high school students she works with are reminders that the rise of social entrepreneurship has also facilitated the rise of the part-time aid worker—even one sitting in a high school classroom. In Jordana's case, her initiative started when she was about ten years old and her mother, Lisa Alter, tried to expose her daughters to problems in the rest of the world. Lisa would point out news articles or tell them about challenges faced by girls abroad: *See how lucky you have it here in New Jersey*. Lisa discovered that Jordana was far more moved by the horrors than she had expected.

"We talked about the articles, and especially those that were about girls," Jordana remembered. "Some of the topics were very upsetting, including female genital mutilation, the abandonment of baby girls in China, child labor. Around this time there were also a number of public stories about the Taliban ban on girls' education in Afghanistan. We talked as a family about how hard it must be for girls to escape abuse if they could not even read or write. I have to admit that the problems seemed too big for us to do anything about, but we began to brainstorm about what we might do if we got a group of girls together."

The idea fermented in the back of Jordana's mind. In the eighth grade, she teamed up with a girlfriend and began to talk seriously about starting a club focusing on these issues. Lisa and the friend's mother helped them make plans, and they all attended a United Nations conference on women and girls. Jordana was moved by the stories she heard and switched into high gear. She and her friend soon started Girls Learn International ([www.girlslearninternational.org](http://www.girlslearninternational.org)) to raise money for girls' education abroad. They made calls, put up posters, sent out let-

ters. Jordana started visiting other schools to drum up volunteers. By the time she was in high school, she was a crusader for Girls Learn International, and the group was gathering chapters around the country.

Jordana gave the keynote address during an end-of-year assembly at the Young Women's Leadership School in the Bronx, reminding members of the audience that while they might have encountered their own difficulties, girls in other countries were struggling for food and shelter, let alone the luxury of attending school. Jordana was practically the only white girl in the room. But she had become a role model for many girls her age, as she talked about the challenges around the globe.

"In 2007, nearly sixty-six million girls do not have access to education in communities across the world," she said. As these girls grow up, she continued, "they join the ranks of illiterate girls, increasing the gender gap between men and women. . . . Girls who are denied access to education are more likely to be trapped in a cycle of poverty and disease, forced into child marriage and prostitution, become victims of sex trafficking, domestic violence, and so-called honor killings."

Girls Learn now has more than twenty chapters in high schools and middle schools around the country and is working on an affiliated college program as well. Some of the girls start out just trying to polish their activities lists for college applications, but many of them become moved by the foreign students they learn about and ultimately are passionate about the cause.

Each chapter of Girls Learn is paired with a partner class in a poor country where girls traditionally do not get much education: Afghanistan, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, India, Kenya, Pakistan, Uganda, Vietnam. The American girls raise money to help their partners and upgrade the foreign schools. Jordana, for instance, helped improve the office of Mukhtar Mai, the anti-rape campaigner in rural Pakistan. When Mukhtar Mai e-mails us to inform us of the latest threats against her, she does it with a computer and Internet hookup that Girls Learn paid for.

Girls Learn partners are chosen mostly by the connections cultivated by Jordana, her mother, and a professional staff of two in an office in Manhattan. Each chapter is supposed to raise at least \$500 a year, and the kids have raised a cumulative total of about \$50,000, which goes exclusively to partner classrooms abroad. Supporting grown-ups separately raise more than \$100,000 annually to cover administrative expenses. That means that Girls Learn isn't the most efficient charity around to support girls' education abroad, since far more money goes to administrative costs in Manhattan than to keep Pakistani girls in school. Still, the purpose of Girls Learn isn't just to support girls' education abroad but also to create exchanges and build the basis for a movement at home. As an educational venture for the American girls, it's a bargain. American high school students who might otherwise be obsessed with designer bags are sending their spending money abroad so that girls in India can have notebooks.

"Talk about getting girls involved in the process," said Cassidy DuRant-Green, a staff member of Girls Learn. "What better way to start than in middle school? We're building leaders, women we could be working for in twenty years." So while the ostensible aim is to empower girls in countries like Pakistan, some of the major beneficiaries are the American girls. You see that in Jordana, and the polish and passion she has found in her cause. In her speech in the Bronx, Jordana exuded maturity and empathy as she exhorted the students to support the Girls Learn chapter, noting that girls the same age as those in the audience are being trafficked or killed for "honor," and she ended with a ringing crescendo: "Girls' rights are human rights!"

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*What You Can Do*

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

—MAHATMA GANDHI

Americans knew for decades about the unfairness of segregation. But racial discrimination seemed a complex problem deeply rooted in the South's history and culture, and most good-hearted people didn't see what they could do about such injustices. Then along came Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. and the Freedom Riders, along with eye-opening books like John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*. Suddenly the injustices were impossible to look away from, at the same time that economic change was also undermining Jim Crow. One result was a broad civil rights movement that built coalitions, spotlighted the suffering, and tore away the blinders that allowed good people to acquiesce in racism.

Likewise, skies were hazy, rivers oily, and animals endangered for much of the twentieth century, but environmental destruction unfolded without much comment or opposition. It seemed the sad but inevitable price of progress. And then Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, and the environmental movement was born.

In the same way, the challenge today is to prod the world to face up to women locked in brothels and teenage girls with fistulas curled up on the floor of isolated huts. We hope to see a broad movement emerge to battle gender inequality around the world and to push for education and opportunities for girls around the world. The American civil rights movement is one model, and so is the environmental movement, but both of those were different because they involved domestic challenges close to home. And we're wary of taking the American women's movement as a model, because if the international effort is dubbed a