



III WORLD CONGRESS AGAINST SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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UNICEF Senegal - Good Practice:

Acceleration of the Movement to Abandon Excision (FGM or FGC) in Senegal

Context: In Senegal, excision is a social convention adhered to by many communities. According to the DHS IV (2005), national prevalence is approximately 28%, although it is not practiced uniformly across all regions. Excision is usually performed on girls between 6 and 7 years old. In 1997, excision was practiced in roughly 5,000 villages in Senegal. The total abandonment of the practice is a major component of government policy to protect girls and women against gender-based violence.



Activities: Since 1997, UNICEF has supported collaboration between the Government of Senegal and the NGO Tostan to implement the Tostan Community Empowerment Program which has led to a large-scale movement for the abandonment of excision. The Community Empowerment Program is a non formal education program with a foundation in human rights. Over the thirty-month implementation period, community members follow a curriculum that includes Democracy, Human Rights and Responsibilities, Problem Solving, Health and Hygiene, Literacy, and Management. The Community Empowerment Program has not only sparked a movement for the abandonment of excision; it has also directly and indirectly contributed to achieving sustainable development goals of the communities participating in the program.

In 2007, Senegal reached an historic and decisive milestone, with a significant number of communities having declared their abandonment of excision. To date, 3,307 of the 5,000 villages that practiced excision in 1997 have ended the practice in their communities. This level of abandonment is considered a tipping point, surpassing a critical mass of 50% of villages. If the program's success continues at this rate, Senegal could achieve 100% abandonment of excision by 2012.

Since 1997, UNICEF SENEGAL has made acceleration of the movement for ending excision a priority in its various in-country programs, focusing particularly on long-term sustainability and expansion on a national level. Because of the complex nature of addressing this sensitive subject, UNICEF has chosen to partner with Tostan to incite a large social movement for accelerating abandonment. UNICEF introduced new components into the program by encouraging an increased participation of adolescents and locally elected officials and concentrating implementation of the program within selected administrative districts. This has created a ground swell of support for changing social norms and ensuring social acceptance for ending this practice. In each district, numerous awareness raising activities by program participants have led to inter-village meetings and group decision-making. This has laid the foundation for influencing others and accelerating the movement on a larger scale.

Impact: Studies and evaluations on prevalence rates confirm that the practice is being abandoned in communities covered by the program, leading to a change in social norms from "practicing to abandoning" excision. The collective nature of the practice tends to force those who want to continue excision to go underground in the communities participating in the program. In addition to the abandonment of excision, the program has created a demand for reproductive health services. It also has given participants an awareness of the importance of sending children to school and better managing their health and hygiene, especially in regards to pre- and postnatal visits, childbirth, knowledge of STIs and HIV/AIDS, nutrition, vaccination, and the harmful effects of excision.

Challenges and Lessons Learned: This experience in changing deeply rooted social norms has provided a better understanding of the importance of encouraging partnerships with other agencies (WHO, UNIFEM, UNFPA) and NGOs (Population Council, TOSTAN and others), involving locally elected officials, traditional community leaders, religious leaders, and legislators, especially in awareness-raising and social mobilization activities. Also critical are collaborations between governments in the region (i.e. the collaboration between legislators from Senegal, Mali, the Gambia, and Guinea Bissau), community involvement, and an approach based on human rights and an understanding of the mechanisms for changing social norms.

The Senegalese government's engagement, which includes a National Action Plan for the Abandonment of FGC and a law banning the practice, was critical to the abandonment movement. The strategies and choices made during the implementation of the program were informed by a series of studies and evaluations carried out by agencies known for their expertise (DHS, Population Council and Macro International). The movement grew and flourished thanks to the organized diffusion strategy, which involves **the adoption of villages by other villages** who have been through the education program and **intervillage meetings** that promote public dialogue involving all members of the community. The strategy also includes weekly **radio shows** in national languages that bring information to isolated villages, encouraging them to join the larger movement for social transformation. This community-based movement has received support from locally elected officials and key public actors who influence decision making at community and higher political levels (administrative authorities, religious leaders, traditional leaders, village chiefs). Special emphasis has been put on the leadership of women, who have been pivotal not only in starting the movement but also in reaching the critical mass necessary for total abandonment.

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