

## PART 5: USING THE PRINCIPLES OF HUMAN RIGHTS TO IMPLEMENT DEEP-SEATED CULTURAL CHANGE

### ENDING FOOT BINDING IN CHINA AND FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING IN SENEGAL

The two cases presented here are of particular interest insofar as they involve what was considered by many a cruel practice, yet one so old that its origin in the legendary mists of time made any attempt at modification or elimination inappropriate almost by definition. Furthermore, it was so fundamental a practice that its abolition seemed sure to condemn to ruin the culture as a whole and the individual lives of its members, since it would ruin all marriage prospects.

The task was made daunting by the following social parameters, all of which conspired toward a peculiarly intractable dilemma for reformers:

- *the relationship between older and younger generations in societies which considered age a central structuring factor in social life*
- *the fact that the practice served the interests, real or imagined, of men while confirming the status of matriarchs in societies where older women held positions of great personal (if not political) power by virtue of their fortitude and their willingness to face physical pain*
- *the ritual function of the practice in readying the person for adult life*
- *the near impossibility of finding a marriage partner for a woman who had not undergone the ritual*
- *the practice had become an earmark of the local culture in the eyes of conquering outsiders and a last ditch holdout in the eyes of the locals, making reformers suspect by association.*

The fashion of foot binding in China (for aristocratic erotic fashion is what it was originally) can reliably be traced to the 10th century. As for female circumcision, its existence has been confirmed in Ancient Egypt and Ethiopia. It is often, for that reason, considered part and parcel of African cultures. In reality, it was widespread in some areas, with the highest concentration in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, decreasing in vaguely concentric circles from there, but by no means a universal feature of African cultures.

As for the widespread belief that it is an 'Islamic' practice, female circumcision has indeed been practiced widely across the geographic zone that was Islamized the earliest, but it is practiced by people of all religions, and in fact, Islamic orthodoxy considers sacrilegious any form of ritual mutilation, and the prevalence of the practice must thus be considered a toleration of a native practice.

In both cases, the story is one of repeated attempts to suppress the practices, only to have them go underground, and eventually resurge, despite heavy fines and prison sentences. The case of female genital cutting is particularly striking in this respect. Like foot binding, it aroused horrified, if occasionally titillated, repulsion among missionaries and colonial agents, especially in the British colonies. French colonial administrators were on the whole tolerant, in a 'don't ask, don't tell' fashion. Like foot binding, it became a symbol of the pre-colonial culture, and punishments were therefore surrounded with the aura of national martyrdom. Support and suppression of the practice fluctuated and clearly reflected the tides of perceived powerlessness in the face of western cultural influence. The young men and women's drifting away from initiation were a bitter reminder of the elders' loss of power in the modern world; a disempowerment made all the more bitter for older women by the erosion of traditional areas of female economic power in the globalizing economy.

An important aspect of many human rights violations is their conventional nature. Whatever the rationales given in support of a particular practice, it is part of a system of practices connected with conventional rewards and punishments whose operative value resides in the fact that 'everyone else does it.' The fear of seeming eccentric, of 'not belonging', or that one's offspring may not be acceptable to their contemporaries, the fear of falling out of the 'favor economy' which is at the core of all social systems, is a more powerful motivator than theoretical arguments for or against the practice.



## a) *The Movement To End Footbinding In China*

By Garry Mackie

### *Background*

For about a thousand years, the vast majority of Chinese families bound the feet of their

*"The custom of foot binding is unknown throughout the vast universe, with the exception of China. Now there is nothing that parents will not do through love of their children, with the lone exception of this cruel and senseless custom in which they indulge. When a child is four or five, or seven or eight, parents speak harshly to it, and frighten it with their looks, and oppress it in every conceivable manner so that the bones of its feet may be broken and its flesh may putrefy. They are then happy in their parental hearts, feeling that later when she gets married, they will be very proud of her. But if the foot is round and six inches long (natural in shape), relatives and neighbors all feel that this is shameful.*

*A person is unfortunate to be born a Chinese woman. As a young girl she suffers from having her feet virtually dismembered and her skin despoiled. If she is lucky enough to remain alive, all day she requires the support of others. How can she get water from the well or pound the pestle? If there occur calamities such as flood, fire, or bandits, she has to sit and await death, unable to do more than hobble about. The injuring of her physical wellbeing is looked upon as beautiful. This is the height of lewdness."*

Cheng Kuan-Ying

daughters. This was not a minor cosmetic enhancement. Beginning at about age six to eight, the female child's four smaller toes were bent and broken under the foot, the sole was forced to the heel, and the foot was then wrapped day and night in a tight bandage in order to mold a bowed and pointed four-inch-long appendage. Foot binding was extremely painful in the first six to ten years of formative treatment. Complications followed, included ulceration, paralysis, gangrene, and mortification of the lower limbs. Perhaps up to ten percent of girls did not survive the treatment. By the mid-nineteenth century, all Chinese families in the empire practiced foot binding, except for those too poor to avoid the dishonor of natural feet. The more prestigious the family, the

smaller the foot, and the more crippled and housebound were the women.

### *The Opposition*

From its onset in the tenth century C.E. and throughout its duration, liberal Chinese thinkers questioned foot binding. Shortly after it had first become commonplace, Ch'e Jo-shui wrote: "I don't know when foot binding began.

Children not yet four or five years old, innocent and without crime, are caused to suffer limitless pain. What is the use of it?" In the 17th century, the Manchu dynasty (non-Chinese who had conquered the empire) tried twice to abolish foot binding by means of imperial decree and the threat of harsh penalties. An offender was to be flogged 40 times and dismissed from office if an official, and exiled if a commoner. Such opinion gathered force in the later nineteenth century, especially among some intellectuals as they learned that the rest of the world did not bind women's feet. Cheng Kuan Ying, a leading force for change, spoke the language of reformers worldwide. He described a normal, everyday practice in a new way, calling the loving unloving, the beautiful ugly, and the chaste lewd, so as to reveal foot binding as both damaging and useless. Chang Chih-tung, another opponent, opposed foot binding because he believed that it weakened the nation by weakening its women. K'ang Yu-wei advocated abolition in 1882, without immediate result, as did later his younger brother K'ang Kuang-jen. One of his principal arguments was international public opinion. He said that:

### **THERE IS NOTHING WHICH MAKES US OBJECTS OF RIDICULE SO MUCH AS FOOTBINDING**

During the nineteenth century, opposition to foot binding intensified, both among the many Christian missionaries and among Chinese intellectuals. However, the problem was that to abandon foot binding made one's daughter unmarriageable. A way had to be found to make unbound feet culturally and socially acceptable.

The end of foot binding came about both because of international condemnation of it, and because the Chinese themselves decided to end the practice. Some sensitive issues were involved. Outsiders believed that the practice was wrong, and some were outraged by the damage to health. For insiders, it was associated with a girl's marriageability, with her decency and self-respect, with her family's honor, and with the parents' love for their children. Insiders knew that they were morally motivated, and some of them were outraged when ignorant outsiders wrongly accused them of malice towards their children. Morality clashed with morality and condemnations were hurled, causing confusion and pain.

#### ***The Solution***

Mrs. Archibald Little, the wife of an English merchant, was the historically unrecognized genius who figured out how to trigger the avalanche of public opinion against foot binding. Many in the foreign community in China allowed their imperialist and racist attitudes to shape their views on foot binding, some arguing that the Chinese should be left on their own to inflict suffering upon one another, and others angrily denouncing them as barbaric. But Mrs. Little's only goal was to find practical ways to help bring an end to Chinese women's suffering.

### ***STEP ONE***

Mrs. Little first toured the country and interviewed anyone she could find with authority on the subject. She came to understand the connection between foot binding, honor, and marriageability. She interviewed the missionary who devised the first successful pledge society in 1874 and she talked to Confucian intellectuals who had developed arguments against foot binding in Chinese cultural terms. In 1895, she organized the influential Natural Foot Society.

At first, the society was headed by a committee of foreign women, who also provided its resources and labor. The Natural Foot Society lobbied the imperial court, identified influential local critics of foot binding, held public meetings, circulated petitions, submitted newspaper articles, held essay competitions, distributed literature, including poems, on a massive scale, and conducted speaking tours. This was the first modern publicity campaign in China.

### ***STEP TWO***

The Society did not present its arguments in foreign or Christian terms, but rather in Chinese and Confucian terms, and sought to influence the non-Christian intelligentsia and elite. Mrs. Little found that what worked were practical arguments about the consequences of foot binding, rather than larger ideological arguments, and the positive results of allowing feet to grow naturally. The society sent out over a million tracts, leaflets, and placards like the examples below

#### **Ten Sighs About Foot Binding**

- 1. Why was my natural foot ruined?*
- 2. The goddess Kuanyin is barefooted; why do I have to have bound feet*
- 3. You can't get anything done with bound feet, and yet it takes great effort*
- 4. It is easy to get sick, because one's blood circulation gets stopped up.*
- 5. I cannot be filial towards my in-laws because I cannot perform manual labor for them.*
- 6. I get angry to the point of illness because of the pain, but my own moth won't let me loosen the binding*
- 7. The tiny-footed are easily deceived by evil men.*
- 8. Poor women bind their feet. There is no food in the house, but they can't go out to get firewood and the necessities of life.*
- 9. People feel that poorly-bound feet are ugly and not clean enough.*
- 10. Don't make the younger generation suffer. Let out the feet in order to let the family prosper.*

## Ten Delights of Natural Feet

1. *I can work easily.*
2. *I have freedom, and my parents don't worry about my foot size.*
3. *Convenience, because the goddess Kuanyin is also large-footed.*
4. *I can visit my parents whenever I want, even though they live far away.*
5. *When my husband is away, I can take care of anything that occurs at home.*
6. *A large-footed woman is not easily deceived, and she has no problem in keeping her feet clean.*
7. *To eradicate the evil age of foot binding is to restore the intent of our ancient sages, who elevated natural-footedness to a position of honor*
8. *The natural-footed is stronger, more patriotic, and can achieve heroic deeds*
9. *The nation benefits from her vigorous spirit and devotion to study*
10. *She is unhampered by bad roads and can travel freely anywhere.*

## The Three Important Aspects of the Reformers' Work

...**First:** they carried out a modern education campaign, explaining that the rest of the world did not bind women's feet. The discovery of an alternative is necessary but not sufficient for change.

...**Second:** they explained the advantages of natural feet and the disadvantages of bound feet in Chinese cultural terms. New information about bad consequences is necessary but not sufficient for change.

...**Third:** they formed natural-foot societies, whose members publicly pledged neither to bind their daughters' feet nor to let their sons marry women with bound feet. Information and persuasion, combined with relevant action, can bring about change.

The imperialist occupation of China by the British was not as positive as their propaganda pretended (consider, for example, the Opium War, fought to protect the British opium-peddling trade in China). It was unpleasant as well for the proud Chinese to endure ignorant commentaries about Chinese culture from foreigners who, for example, denied their own women the right to vote and forced them to wear deforming bustles that damaged their internal organs. In the end, however, Chinese reformers were more helped

by international condemnation of foot binding than they were hindered by the obtuse xenophobia of some of its western opponents.

### ***STEP THREE***

In 1897, a group of reform leaders founded the Unbound Foot Association, headquartered in Shanghai. The indigenous association was patterned after Mrs. Little's Natural Foot Society and argued in Chinese cultural terms, persuading members to pledge not to bind their daughters' feet nor let their sons marry bound women. Within a few years the organization had 300,000 members in the major cities alone. Members pledged not to bind feet, they recruited new members, held mass meetings, published tracts, sang songs, and petitioned the authorities.

Progress was first dramatic and then miraculous. K'ang Yu-wei was a major figure in the political events of 1898 known as the Hundred Day's Reform, and his memorandum to the court on the topic was an important landmark. In 1902 the Empress Dowager herself took a public stand against foot binding, which transformed it from a radical crusade to a respectable cause and also made it safe for traditional Chinese to make public their support of the reform. A proposal by Minister Chou in 1904 to prohibit foot binding outright was opposed by enlightened opinion. Reformers argued that it would be better for the highest classes to themselves first renounce foot binding, as the masses would follow their example, and that education rather than punishment was the most effective strategy. The student revolutionaries who later became the nationalist movement that carried out the revolution of 1911 also turned against foot binding, demanding its abolition after the author Ch'iu Chin - who was executed for insurrection - published an unfinished novel that condemned foot binding because of its harm to women.

The Natural Foot Society declared that "the custom has been abandoned by practically all people of the official classes, and though it is still widely practiced among the lower ranks, especially in the North, its extinction can hardly be far distant." By 1908 the majority of political and intellectual leaders opposed foot binding.

New shoe stores opened with names like

***GROWN LARGE  
TREADING THE NEW  
AS HEAVEN MADE IT***

## Natural feet had become fashionable at last

### *The Aftermath*

Mrs. Little was wise enough to step aside when the time came, and to recognize that sometimes the best way to achieve your goal is to stop pursuing it. She returned to England and the leadership of the Society was transferred to a committee of Chinese women. Anti-foot binding efforts were gradually perceived as a Chinese phenomenon in a nationalistic context, and a majority of Chinese, especially those residing in urban areas where they were influenced by education and the media, began to adapt their old ways. Victory could only be achieved once the foreign and Christian roots of the campaign had been renounced. The decree succeeded not because of coercion but rather because it was an expression of changed public opinion and practice. The most sought after partners in marriage now rejected foot binding. Indeed the astonishing success of the anti-foot binding movement, ending a custom practiced for a thousand years in less than a generation, and involving the first modern public education campaign in China, made a large impression on the members of the early student movement that matured into the nationalist and communist revolutions in China. This was a legacy demonstrating that sudden massive change for the better is possible in specialized aspects of social life, and suggesting further that revolutionary change might be possible in every aspect of social life.





## ***b) Abandoning Female Genital Cutting In Senegal***

By Molly Melching

On January 13th, 1999, Senegal passed a law prohibiting the traditional ancestral practice of Female Genital Cutting (FGC). Although many factors, including a worldwide UNICEF campaign, played a part in bringing about this law, some of the most important contributions came from **Tostan**, a grassroots NGO providing non-formal education in national languages in West Africa. The history of this NGO, specifically the beginning of its education program, provides a fascinating insight into the methods that empower communities to bring about positive social transformation.

### *The Foundation for Progress*

I founded Tostan in 1991. Through my long work experience in Senegal, I recognized an enormous potential for social change at the village level, but also saw the need for more effective development programs to bring about such change. Though there were many development programs in Senegal, both national and international, examples of positive and sustainable results were few and far between.

Learning from its own experiences and those of other development agencies, Tostan began in 1991 to implement a program completely different from the traditional model. Rather than focusing on literacy or specific developmental issues, Tostan uses a holistic approach in its education program, covering a wide range of topics:

- ... **democracy**
- ... **human rights and responsibilities**
- ... **problem-solving**
- ... **hygiene and health**
- ... **literacy**
- ... **management skills**

The African oral traditions of *theater, dialogue, poetry, and storytelling* contribute to making classes dynamic and engaging. Tostan also runs classes only in the national languages of the participants, making the messages clear and easy to share with other members of the community.

### *A Village with Vision*

*The program, which at all times encourages active village participation, hinges on the idea that students must have a fundamental base of knowledge and that the educational process must respect the traditions of the village environment. It also centers mainly on women, with the theory that this group, normally excluded from or marginalized by many educational models, is the key to motivating villages and ensuring lasting change.*

In 1995, representatives from a village named Malicounda Bambara heard of the Tostan program and invited the NGO to create an education center in their community. Tostan found funding from UNICEF and AJWS and began immediately. During the sessions on women's health, participants learned of the many dangerous health consequences of the practice of Female Genital Cutting. They discussed infections, complications during childbirth, sexual pain, and other negative consequences. The women decided they would work on ending FGC in their village.

The geography and cultural make-up of this village were quite significant. The Wolof ethnic group - which does not normally practice FGC - had become increasingly dominant in Senegal, and villages like Malicounda Bambara, of the minority Bambara ethnic group, were practicing FGC not only as a traditional practice that prepares a young girl for marriage, but also as a symbol of cultural pride. In this environment, even families who did not wish to circumcise their daughters could do little to stop the practice, as extended family members or even the girls themselves would force the operation to avoid social ostracization. With such intense community pressure, Senegalese Bambara villages on average circumcised 92% of their girls. Malicounda Bambara, a proud village of over 3000 inhabitants, was no exception.

With their newfound knowledge, Tostan class participants educated their fellow village members on the dangers of FGC, encouraging discussion and debate on this once-taboo issue. As discussions grew, village leaders began to adopt the views of the class members, and soon the village had decided they would support the class in their desire to abandon this practice. Thus hopes were high as the village held what was called

## “The Pledge of Malicounda Bambara”

UNICEF and Tostan assisted the village by inviting the Senegalese media to interview the villagers on their decision, and to see the plays and songs the villagers had prepared to express their message. The day was a huge success.

### *The Challenge of Change*

The Pledge of Malicounda Bambara had indeed spread the message: two more villages, Keur Simbara and Ngerigne Bambara, also expressed an interest in abandoning this practice after participating in the Tostan program. But it also brought sharp criticism from other surrounding villages. As Tostan and the villagers listened to the objections of neighboring communities, it did not take long to understand the problem: *the inter-marrying relationship between villages meant that it was almost impossible for one village to give up FGC*. Villages that had not decided to abandon FGC would not accept uncircumcised girls for marriage, forcing the abandoning village back into the practice and making sustained abandonment for any one group unrealistic without consent from the entire group.

To overcome this problem Tostan facilitator Cheikh Traoré and participant Demba Diawara, a 66-year-old Muslim Imam from Keur Simbara, set out on foot to visit neighboring villages and explain the changes taking place and the reasons behind the Malicounda Bambara Pledge. Meeting with village chiefs, religious leaders, and relatives in 10 villages in the Thiès region, they outlined their decision to abandon FGC in terms of the human rights, hygiene and health concepts learned in the Tostan program. They also informed the communities that the Muslim religion does not require FGC, and that the Koran actually protects women’s rights to health and human dignity. With each village they visited, support grew as more and more women came forward for the first time with stories of the tragic consequences of FGC, some even telling of hemorrhage and death as a result of this practice.

The message spread by these two men  
allowed changes to begin happening on a larger scale

Villagers had become so knowledgeable and passionate about this issue during the build-up to the declaration that when the Senegalese National Assembly passed a law against FGC in 1999, a group of villagers addressed members of the National Assembly and told them that the law was not enough; that education and social mobilization activities are the key to ending this practice. This was a true testament to the self-motivation of the villagers’ messages and beliefs.

Representatives from 13 villages decided to meet and discuss the issue of FGC in terms of larger cultural values, with those representatives then returning to their villages to further discuss the

issue fully in each community. On February 14, 1998, 13 villages met to make a more formal declaration in the village of Diabougou. This event – *the Diabougou Declaration* – was recognized nationally and internationally as an important hallmark of change in the historic movement for the abandonment of FGC in Africa.

### *Expansion and Evolution*

Because of the success of their human rights-based program, Tostan began to seek new collaborations to test their ideas further. In one such collaboration, Tostan, the People's Decade for Human Rights Education, UNICEF, and the Senegalese Ministry of Women and the Family undertook a program on human rights education in 10 pilot villages in the Thiès region. In doing so, they tested the program's ability to present human rights on a larger scale, and brought much-needed human rights education to the important region of Thiès.

With the help of partners large and small, the Tostan program has continued to educate and support hundreds of villages. Many have decided to abandon their harmful traditional practices through 17 public declarations involving over 1,350 village communities - or 28% of the population that practiced FGC in Senegal in 1997. The growing movement at the grassroots level indicates that the total abandonment of FGC in Senegal will be possible by 2010.

The Tostan program itself, however, remains focused on education, problem solving, human rights, and its other key components, though the modules, trainings and approach have continued evolving since the Diabougou Declaration.

