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Creating Social Norms to Prevent Violence against Girls and Women

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Introduction

One day in the Mandinka village of Dialacoto located in South Eastern Senegal, West Africa, a pregnant woman was beaten by her husband so severely that she had to be taken to the hospital.

Normally no one in the community would have become involved in this incident. Heads might have shaken in disapproval behind closed doors, but silence around violence was the norm. Silence around what was considered as a "private family affair" was the expectation. Certainly, almost everyone in the community knew that this kind of thing happened—it touched the lives of most people at some point or another.

Yet speaking out publicly against domestic violence would cause trouble in the family and community. Arresting the husband was unthinkable because it could lead to divorce of the woman and division between the two families that had arranged the marriage. The sanctions would fall not on the man who perpetrated the violence, but rather on the woman who dared to protest against what most men saw as their personal right – the "disciplining", through violence, of their wives and children.

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

Why did this man from Dialacoto believe that his act of violence was possible and an accepted practice for solving a dispute? Perhaps because he had seen his own father frequently hit his mother with no reaction from anyone. Perhaps he believed that this is what "real men" do and that he would not receive disapproval from his male peers. Probably no one had ever openly questioned the use of violence and he believed that it was thus accepted by all to do so.

But on this one day in Dialacoto, the reaction to violence would change forever.

On hearing the news of their friend's beating, a group of women immediately went to the local authority, asking for an official authorization to march peacefully across the village. The local authority who had never heard of villagers marching for anything, refused categorically. But the women would not be stopped. They went to the Governor of the Region who, acknowledging their constitutional rights, gave them the authorization to march. The women then invited local journalists and, drumming on pots and pans, sang out as they marched together from the market place to the town police station: "Violence is no longer acceptable in Dialacoto! No more violence in the land of the Mandinkas!" They explained to the surprised journalists that they were not marching against men, but rather were marching for peace and the end of all violence in general, for women and children, but also for men.

After the march in Dialacoto, the previously frequently episodes of violence ended. In fact, there were numerous meetings held to openly discuss the problem and the men began to work with the women and contribute to their movement to end other forms of violence by supporting the abandonment of female genital cutting and child/force marriage in the area. They participated actively in reaching out to surrounding communities to raise awareness on the harm of these practices and the human rights violations involved. The respected religious leader himself became one of the most active in the process. Together, the communities organized inter-village meetings to discuss the abandonment of these practices as an interconnected group of relatives and neighbors who shared the same values and traditions. One year later, 200 villages participated in a public declaration in that same town of Dialacoto, announcing their decision to end female genital cutting and child/forced marriage forever.

Stories like this one from Dialacoto are now numerous throughout Senegal, in The Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, and Guinea Bissau. Indeed, there is an ever-growing grassroots movement in West Africa today to end violence against girls and women. But it is not a movement **against** something. It is a movement **for** health, wellbeing and peace. It grew out of a non-formal education program developed over a 20 year period in Senegal which is currently implemented in 21 national languages in eight African countries.

It is a movement through which Tostan, the organization which I represent, and our longtime partner, UNICEF, and more recently UNFPA, have learned important lessons on how it is possible to end harmful social norms and introduce positive new social norms in place of many negative practices which existed. But first, I would like to use the work of philosopher

Cristina Bicchieri to discuss what we mean by a social norm and the difference between social norms and practices.

According to Bicchieri, a social norm is a behavioral rule that applies to a large class of situations where:

1. Individuals know that the rule exists and when it applies
2. Individuals prefer to conform to the rule on condition that they
    a. expect a sufficiently large part of the population to conform to the rule (*empirical expectation*), and
    b. believe that a sufficiently large part of the population think they ought to conform and may sanction their behavior if they do not (*normative expectations*)

A **practice**, however does not involve such social sanctions if not followed. For example, if Penda throws trash out as she walks down the street in Dakar, people may not approve of it, but no one will say anything negative or stop her because so many other people do the same. However, they would not applaud Penda either because they know that this is not contributing to a clean environment. Most people would agree that it is a negative practice, but know also that there will be no sanctions from others if they do it. Thus, throwing trash on the street is not a social norm because there are no expectations that people should throw trash on the street and no belief that someone will be sanctioned if they do not throw trash on the street.

Thus, in the example of Dialacoto, it may have been a common practice for a man to hit his wife, but certainly it was not a social norm since there were no expectations that all men should act in this way and he would certainly not be socially sanctioned by the group if he did not hit his wife. However, as in the negative practice of throwing trash on the street, most often, no one would intervene to stop him either.

Female Genital Cutting however **does** involve a social norm. In practicing communities it was absolutely expected that every girl of the same ethnic group undergo this operation. Not to do so was unthinkable and not even viewed as an alternative. To question the established group norm could lead to a person being shunned as a "traitor" to the group culture and identity. But perhaps an even greater deterrent to non-participation was the threat of retribution by evil spirits. The fear of these malevolent spirits for violating certain traditions is passed down from generation to generation and is deeply rooted in the psyche of people who have never had scientific explanations for certain health-related phenomena, often difficult to comprehend. Harsh conditions in rural communities required strict conformity to shared values and practices, often for purposes of survival. Not to conform to the common cause was believed to jeopardize and endanger not just the individual, but the entire community. It is these spirits which were evoked to ensure obedience on pain of punishment or sometimes even death.

For the Mandinka ethnic group in Dialacoto, ceremonies were held and girls were cut just as were their mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers. The girls looked forward to this moment, as they knew it involved a public proof of their courage, determination and readiness to join the community and the world of "real" women. Any woman who came to the village

of Dialacoto who had not undergone FGC was scorned and rejected by the women. This girl would never have been accepted as a wife by any well-respected family. Although aware of the pain and often harmful consequences of FGC, the practice was seen as a rite of passage to fully "belong"and be respected within the Mandinka society, one that people were proud of and most of all, one which ensured the future of their daughters.

How then does one change a social norm which, although viewed as extremely negative and a violence against girls and women by those outside the group, is seen as essential and positive for all those within the practicing group – a social norm which also holds fear of retribution from those who really matter to them, but also from other more powerful and mystical sources?

Is it by producing messages on the radio and television to tell people that this is bad for them and that they must – "Stop now!"? Is it posters hung on village walls with images of blood and knives telling them that FGC is barbaric? Is it a 2 hour village stop made by health workers lecturing on the negative health consequences of the practice? Is it ended by passing laws without involvement or consent from those most affected by the practice?

Imagine that you are the person receiving these messages and commands from people who are "outsiders" or perceived to be influenced by outside interests, who have never been through the practice and who do not understand the power of evil spirits and the fierce rejection of the entire community if one dares question the practice. How would you react? Although done with the best of intentions, the messaging and legal approach did not lead to hoped-for results.

So knowing that FGC violates the human rights of girls and can lead to harmful health consequences, even death, what can be done to end such a practice?

A powerful solution to changing this social norm came from people in rural communities in Senegal who had always practiced FGC. In 1998, groups of ethnically-connected, intra-marrying villages in Senegal decided to end this practice **collectively**. Through a holistic three-year education program, groups of participants first came to a consensus around their deeper goals for their families and communities. These goals included health, well-being, peace and prosperity. They then spent four months studying and discussing human rights and responsibilities as guiding principles for achieving their goals. Through personal narrative, theater, poetry, story and song, they realized, or as one participant expressed it, "were awakened" to the fact that certain traditional practices were actually hindering them from realizing the best health possible. They then brought up FGC themselves as being one of these harmful practices. But since FGC was an obligation for good marriage and an expectation of the family and the extended family living in other communities, both nearby and far away, they understood that they could never end such a practice without including everyone who mattered to them in this decision.

This aspect of the social transformation process has often been neglected by development workers who have emphasized individual or community behavior change, but do not take into account the fact that interdependent behaviors are determined by a large and complex network of inter-related families and villages, connected through marriage and family ties, religious

affiliations, and a host of other influences. In order to end social norms and create new ones, these networks must be included in the process—otherwise, any one individual or group within that network will be unlikely to adopt a new behavior on their own, as others will be unaware of, surprised at and often resistant to the change if not first consulted. This requires a process involving what Tostan calls "organized diffusion" through which participants – over months and sometimes even years – reached out to the larger community, going from neighborhood to neighborhood, from village to village and even contacting numerous family members and friends living in the Diaspora. They held inter-village meetings where the issue was discussed as a decision that needed to be made not in order to blame or shame or to "fight against a tradition", but rather to promote the health, well-being, peace and prosperity of the entire social network.

Finally, when there was widespread agreement to take action, they organized public declarations for collective abandonment. These public declarations were critical moments in the process of abandonment where representatives of connected communities came together and publicly announced that the expectations in their communities would now change. FGC would no longer be a criterion for "good marriage"; girls would no longer be insulted or rejected if they had not undergone the practice. To the contrary, a new social norm was established during the public pledge – that of respecting the human right to health by **no longer cutting their girls**. Any violation of the new social norm, it was announced, would be sanctioned by the members of the social group. At these declarations, health workers, religious leaders, parliamentarians, and local and national government officials reinforced the decisions and congratulated the community members on their decision to seek better health for their families. Although an official law against FGC was passed in 1999 in Senegal, it was only the new "community law" with community-led sanctions that allowed people to give up the practice without worry for their daughters' future. Indeed, because initially the law was in such contradiction to popular beliefs and practices, it held no sway whatsoever. This is still the case in many countries in Africa where there are FGC laws on the books, but where the law is rarely, if ever, applied. It was only when hundreds, then thousands of communities in Senegal had already made the decision from within that the law was finally evoked as a potential deterrent.

It is important to note however, that not all community members were able to abandon FGC during these public declarations. Some in the community belonged to different family networks or ethnic groups than the declaring majority and they had not been able to contact their relatives to make the decision as a unified group. Thus, the expectations in their social network were still in place and the fear of rejection and negative sanctions was so strong that they dared not abandon. Many, particularly class participants, eventually were able to reach out to their network and in the following years, held their own declarations. In other cases, certain community members were not as enthusiastic and some, openly resistant to the change. But the fact that all community members did not abandon at the public declaration was not critical to the larger social transformation process which was occurring.

What was critical in this process was that committed and informed people who were of the group which practiced – women, religious and traditional leaders, health workers, former

cutters, adolescents – were standing up and speaking out publicly for the first time on radio and television, sharing experiences and declaring an end to a practice which they formerly said they would rather be imprisoned for then abandon; a practice that carried a deep taboo because of punishments more powerful then government law – punishments from the evil spirits who demanded conformity and obedience. Only when people heard and saw thousands speaking out, with congratulations rather than punishment, were they willing to consider changing the social norm. As more and more communities publicly declared, more decided to abandon. A critical mass had been reached—and was growing.

Establishing a new social norm which tapped into the deep values of unity, health, community wellbeing and peace in the group made an important difference. These were values people cherished, values conveyed in everyday language, in cultural exchanges, in proverbs and oral stories. However, people had never before had the opportunity to participate in open discussion and public deliberation around many entrenched social practices because there had never been a safe space created for this type of dialogue and the issues had previously been deemed taboo.

The leaders of this movement did not spend their time condemning the practice with inflammatory rhetoric or personally attacking those who defended it, even when those defenders made such attacks against them. They instead centered their discussions on these deeper moral values the community held most dear. As Bicchieri notes, the goal of social norms and legal norms is often to reinforce deeper moral norms that many human societies share. By respectfully appealing to these deepest values, the women and men set themselves up for success. Also, by not judging and accusing others, but instead approaching them as caring parents trying to make a very difficult decision, they created space for people to make the decision to end the practices without feeling defensive.

When one foreign journalist questioned a class participant, saying these public declarations seemed contrived and that Westerners would never do something like this, she gave an important reply: "But isn't that exactly what you did when you created all these human rights documents? You made declarations which promote the human dignity of all people! This is what we learned in our class sessions. Representatives from all nations in the world came together and made declarations that were then accepted by most of the governments of the world, again through public declarations." The villagers were going a step further by owning human rights at the grassroots level, applying them in their communities and announcing their adherence to those principles to others in their group as well as to the rest of the world.

During inter-village meetings and public deliberations, people also discussed other forms of violence against children and women. As noted earlier, physical violence, rape, incest, and verbal and psychological abuse would normally not be considered as social norms. Unlike FGC, they are not expectations of the group and of course do not carry negative sanctions if not performed. However participants started ending these negative practices by establishing new social norms. Whereas previously there was pressure to maintain silence around the violence in order to "preserve the couple" or to "maintain family relations", the women of Dialocoto established a new social norm the day of their march across the village. "Violence

is no longer accepted in Dialacoto!" they chanted as they marched peacefully across the village. The women decided that dialogue and mediation could be used to resolve disputes between couples or within the family, but no acts of violence would be permitted. The new sanction that would help keep in place the new social norm was that of publicly denouncing any such act, or even taking legal action. The reaction to violence would no longer be silence.

Several communities which heard about the Dialacoto march soon adopted similar methods in reaction to child/forced marriage and succeeded in stopping many of these marriages. Other communities worked to collectively bring legal charges of rape and incest against men who normally would have only been given a "talking to" by the elder family members. In the court cases, it was not the woman herself who had to bring the charges on her own, but rather a group of respected and committed community members. They had previously announced publicly that they would no longer allow this violence to go unpunished and showed they meant business.

In Senegal, concerning both cases of harmful social norms such as FGC and negative practices such as beatings, rape or incest, deep and sustained transformation occurred most successfully when connected communities established these new, more positive social norms and put in place social sanctions for non-respect of the new norms. Each community then applied the sanctions, becoming what Cristina Bicchieri has termed "social norm entrepreneurs".

Understanding the nature and dynamics of social norms and how extended networks of communities can create new social norms is crucial. Yet the key element that laid the foundation for this entire process was **empowering education**. Rural women lacked the information they needed to make important decisions, the safe space to dialogue and the confidence to defend and convince others of these new decisions. Learning about human rights and responsibilities, health and hygiene, in a supportive context that validated and built upon their experiences and values allowed a small group to reach out to others knowledgeably and lead an historic movement for positive change which ultimately has influenced hundreds of thousands of others across West Africa.