

TOSTAN NEWS RELEASE

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MOVEMENT TO ABANDON FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING AND CHILD / FORCED MARRIAGE IN THE GAMBIA GROWS AS 13 VILLAGES MAKE PUBLIC DECLARATION

In the second declaration in five months in The Gambia, 13 villages declare abandonment of harmful traditional practices to Gambian, National, and International media as well as diaspora community members worldwide

MANNEH KUNDA, THE GAMBIA, October 25, 2009 – On Sunday, 13 Mandinka villages from the Upper River Region (URR) of The Gambia joined a growing movement in the country and in East and West Africa as they publicly declared their abandonment of female genital cutting (FGC) and child/forced marriage.

The declaration signaled the commitment of all 13 villages to abandon these and other harmful practices in order to promote and protect human rights. It was also a call to other Mandinka communities in The Gambia, West Africa, and diaspora communities worldwide, to join them in abandoning these practices.

The village of Manneh Kunda, approximately three kilometers from Basse, the largest town in the eastern-most part of the country, hosted the declaration event which was attended by hundreds of people. In attendance were government officials, the Director of the Women's Bureau, the UNICEF Representative for the URR, other NGOs, neighboring villages, and religious and traditional leaders from the URR.

The program included singing, dancing, and skits that depicted the reasoning behind this collective decision all performed by the URR National Troop and local youth groups celebrating the declaration. There were also several guest speakers, including local UNICEF Representative, Mariama Sabally, who spoke about Tostan's respectful and non-judgmental approach, noting that it had enabled Tostan to succeed in shifting a deeply ingrained social tradition.

Yayhu Bangura, a local religious scholar instrumental in the social mobilization campaign that led to this declaration, reiterated that FGC is not a part of the Islamic faith and called on people present to help spread this information. Two former cutters from villages taking part in the declaration also

testified, sang, and danced at the event. One woman explained how through Tostan she had come to understand that the health problems experienced by some girls, including death, were caused by the cutting rather than by witchcraft. Based on this information and her involvement in the Tostan's Community Empowerment Program (CEP), she voluntarily gave up cutting.

Closing the event, Regional Governor Yadi Nget expressed his support for the Tostan program and the declaration. He thanked the community members and Tostan, emphasizing in particular that the CEP teaches communities how to solve their own problems and explaining that this fosters and facilitates peace in the region.

This event was the second public declaration for the abandonment of FGC and child/forced marriage in The Gambia organized by communities of the Mandinka ethnic group. The first Gambian declaration of 24 communities took place in Darsilameh on 14 June, 2009.

According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2005/2006: UNICEF, World Bank, and The Gambia Bureau of Statistics), the national prevalence rate of FGC in The Gambia is 78% percent, with a 99% prevalence rate in the URR. According to the same data source, the prevalence of child/forced marriage in rural areas of the country is as high as 45%.

The communities leading this movement have participated in the CEP implemented by the NGO Tostan in collaboration with UNICEF, the Women's Bureau of the Government of The Gambia and two local NGOs – Wuli And Sanda Development Agency and the National Youth Association for Food Security – since 2006.

The Tostan CEP is a 3-year non-formal education program comprised of modules on democracy, human rights, problem-solving, hygiene and health, as well as literacy, math, and basic management skills. Social mobilization committees led by each of the communities traveled to surrounding villages to share and discuss the content of the CEP. Finally, a weekly radio program produced by Tostan discussed the content of the CEP classes to a much larger audience.

The CEP has facilitated similar successes elsewhere; including, to date, the abandonment of FGC by 4,229 communities in Senegal, Guinea, Burkina Faso, The Gambia and most recently, on October 5, in the Northeast Zone of Somalia, Puntland.

Molly Melching, Executive Director of Tostan, believes the key to the success of the Tostan model of community empowerment lies in its holistic and respectful approach. “Tostan meets people where they are. The CEP provides information about health, hygiene, and human rights while also providing a forum for dialogue among all members of the community and their extended family network. This empowers communities to identify issues within the community and provides the community members themselves with the tools to find their own solutions.”

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Further information:

Tostan is a US 501(c)(3) nongovernmental organization based in the West African country of Senegal. Tostan works primarily in rural regions to promote basic education and increase community engagement in projects related to health and hygiene, child welfare, human rights and democracy, the environment, literacy, and economic development.

Tostan is committed to innovative and effective means of facilitating community-led development. In 2009, Tostan launched the Solar Power Project in collaboration with the Barefoot College in India, training mothers and grandmothers to provide solar energy and training in solar engineering to their communities. Walking the Path of Unity, a film produced in collaboration with the community of Diégoune in rural Senegal to publicize their abandonment of FGC and to encourage communities elsewhere to do the same, has recently been selected for the UNICEF International Children’s Rights Film Festival to take place in locations worldwide during November.

Tostan is currently implementing its program in Djibouti, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, and Somalia.

For more information about Tostan, please visit www.tostan.org.