

Senegal: The Struggle to Stop Female Genital Mutilation

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IN JANUARY, 1999 the Senegalese parliament joined several other African nations imposing a ban on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). At the time of the ban over 700,000 women — approximately twenty percent of the female population — were estimated to have undergone some form of FGM in Senegal.

In most cases FGM was performed in early adolescence. Throughout Africa it is estimated that between 100-130 million women have suffered under this practice.

In Senegal popular support for the ban developed after several years of education and grassroots mobilizing by local NGOs (including Amsatou's own work discussed in the interview).

What is interesting about most accounts is the fact that these educational initiatives were broadly focused, aimed at promoting literacy and engaging women more fully in the economy.

These are both laudable goals since nearly three quarters of Senegal's female population is illiterate and more than half economically active. But the subject of FGM became unavoidable as topics like infection, stillbirth and death during childbirth continually arose in group discussions.

A breakthrough came when several Bambara villages began banning the practice in 1998 (Bambara are an ethnic minority among whom the practice is more widespread than the dominant Wolof). In all, more than fifteen villages had banned the practice before the national government imposed the countrywide prohibition.

Despite the success in winning the ban on FGM, experts are now concerned with its enforcement. They point to Djibouti, which has nominally banned the practice, and where upwards of eighty percent of women continue to be subjected to FGM.

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