

WHY HAS  
MOLLY BEEN  
NOMINATED?

# Molly Melching

Molly Melching has been nominated for the World's Children's Prize for her 40-year struggle to end female genital cutting, child marriage and forced marriage.

Molly and her organization Tostan train people using local languages, in a program based on human rights. They involve whole villages, adults and children alike, in a three-year training program that covers health, education and environmental issues. Other important elements include empowering women and children, and raising awareness of female genital cutting and the rights of the child. Tostan's unique educational model is called the 'Community Empowerment Program'. The program has led to over 7,200 villages across six nations in West Africa deciding to stop practising female genital cutting, child marriage and forced marriage. Thanks to Molly and Tostan, hundreds of thousands of girls in these villages can now grow up without the risk of being harmed for life. And they and the boys in the villages will not have to get married while they are still children. Both girls and boys can now dream of a future filled with knowledge, where they make their own life decisions.



Molly Melching arrives in the village of Malicounda Bambara in Senegal on a historic day in 1996. Until this day, the girls in the village have always been subjected to female genital cutting and child marriage. Molly hardly dares to believe the message that has reached her from the village women:

**'We have decided to stop cutting our girls.'**

**W**hen Molly drives her jeep into the village, she is welcomed by many people. Singing and dancing, they make their way to the meeting place in the shade of a large tree.

"We greet you by your first name and your surname," says the leader of the village women. Before, even talking about female genital cutting was prohibited, so Molly is amazed. Have the women really decided to talk openly about this tradition, and to put a stop to it? Has her organization Tostan's training in health and human rights contributed to ending

a thousand-year-old tradition that has seriously harmed millions of girls in this and other villages?

## Historical decision

The women under the tree begin to talk about how they made their decision.

"We have received information that we didn't have before," says Kerthio, one of the women. "We now know that most women in the world are not cut. That surprised us. We have also learned that a lot of the pain and problems we women live



Adama, 15, is talking about the Tostan program in front of the whole village. When her mother was young, girls weren't allowed to talk like this, but now the village meetings include everyone.



with are linked to the cutting carried out on us as children.”

Female genital cutting is a dangerous procedure, which leads to lifelong health problems. But it is a tradition that meant that a girl could be married and accepted by the village community.

For a long time, the village women have talked about how girls are cut and forced to marry early. For two years, trainers from Tostan have given them support and information on human rights, the body, and health.

“The most important thing we have learned,” says Kerthio, “is that there are human rights. And that we, as adults, are responsible for protecting the rights of the child. That gives us the strength to stand up for our rights.”

“We have talked with the religious leaders and found that this tradition does not come from Islam. Putting a stop to the tradition doesn’t make us bad Muslims.”

The women decide to hold a ceremony, during which both women and men explain why the decision to end female genital cutting is an important one. And how the discussions in the Tostan program helped them to make their decision.

Molly is at the ceremony. She joins in the dancing and shares the joy of everyone in the village.

### First children’s centre

When Molly first came to Senegal as a 24-year-old in 1974 it was to study children’s stories in French, as part of her university studies back home in the USA. But when

Molly came to Senegal as a 24-year-old and stayed. She started a children’s centre in the capital city of Dakar.



All the children have jobs to do, like fetching water, but it’s also important that children have time to play.

she arrived in Dakar she had a feeling: ‘This is my place in the world.’

The stories she was studying were in French, but the children’s language was Wolof.

‘How are the children supposed to learn when they can’t speak or read books in their own language?’ Molly asked herself.

She learned Wolof and started a centre where children could read, experience, learn and develop in their own language. There were no

children’s books in Wolof so one night Molly wrote her first story book in Wolof, about a girl called Anniko. She ran the children’s centre for six years.

### Village life

After six years at the children’s centre in the capital, Molly moved out to a village to learn about the situation for children there.

There was no school in the village. Molly lived there for three years and created an educational program in the



### En route to a Tostan meeting

En route to a meeting in one of more than 7,200 villages that have said no to female genital cutting and child marriage, thanks to Tostan’s work.





local language, based on traditional songs, dances and poems. The program grew out of information on health and hygiene, and discussions and shared problem-solving with the people in the village. In 1991, working with the local people, Molly began to develop what was to become the organization Tostan. Tostan is a Wolof word for the moment when a chick breaks through the egg shell. Tostan's aim was to share knowledge with other villages in different local languages.

Once Molly and Tostan

began raising awareness of human rights, this sparked discussions about child marriage and female genital cutting.

But in 1996 when the village of Malicounda Bambara was the first village to say they had stopped cutting girls, many people were angry. Both women and men protested. They called the women in the village horrible names, and said that they would never stop cutting girls.

### The cutter who quit

In another village lived a

woman called Ourèye Sall. She was a traditional cutter, the person who carries out female genital cutting on the girls in the village.

Ourèye was only fourteen when she was married off to an older man. But before this, her mother had taught her how to perform the cutting procedure. That knowledge gave her a better status in the new village, and brought in money to her family.

By the time Ourèye came into contact with Tostan's education program, she already had her own children and grandchildren. They had been cut, just like all the girls in the village.

"We were sitting in the classroom and I turned to my daughter and said: 'No. It's over now. I don't want to cut girls any more.' Peace and freedom from violence are more important than money. I realised that then," says Ourèye.

Ourèye wanted to share this new knowledge so she visited many villages. Adults listened to her because she was a cutter, and she stood to gain from the tradition continuing.

### The wandering imam

Molly's good friend, an imam called Demba Diawara, was angry at first that Tostan were discussing this tradition. But after talking about cutting with doctors, religious leaders and women in the village, he came to Molly and said:

"I was wrong. I didn't know how damaging this is. Now that I know, I have to do something about it. But to be able to end this tradition we must persuade our relatives and friends. We have to talk to all the villages, and I myself will go to ten villages where my closest relatives live."

Demba walked from village



"I know that I'll have problems when I'm older and I'm giving birth," says Nuima, 14, in Senegal, who was cut as a baby. "Thanks to Tostan, nobody does it any more here, and nobody forces us to get married before we are eighteen."



Ourèye Sall was the first cutter who took a stand against female genital cutting and stopped carrying it out.

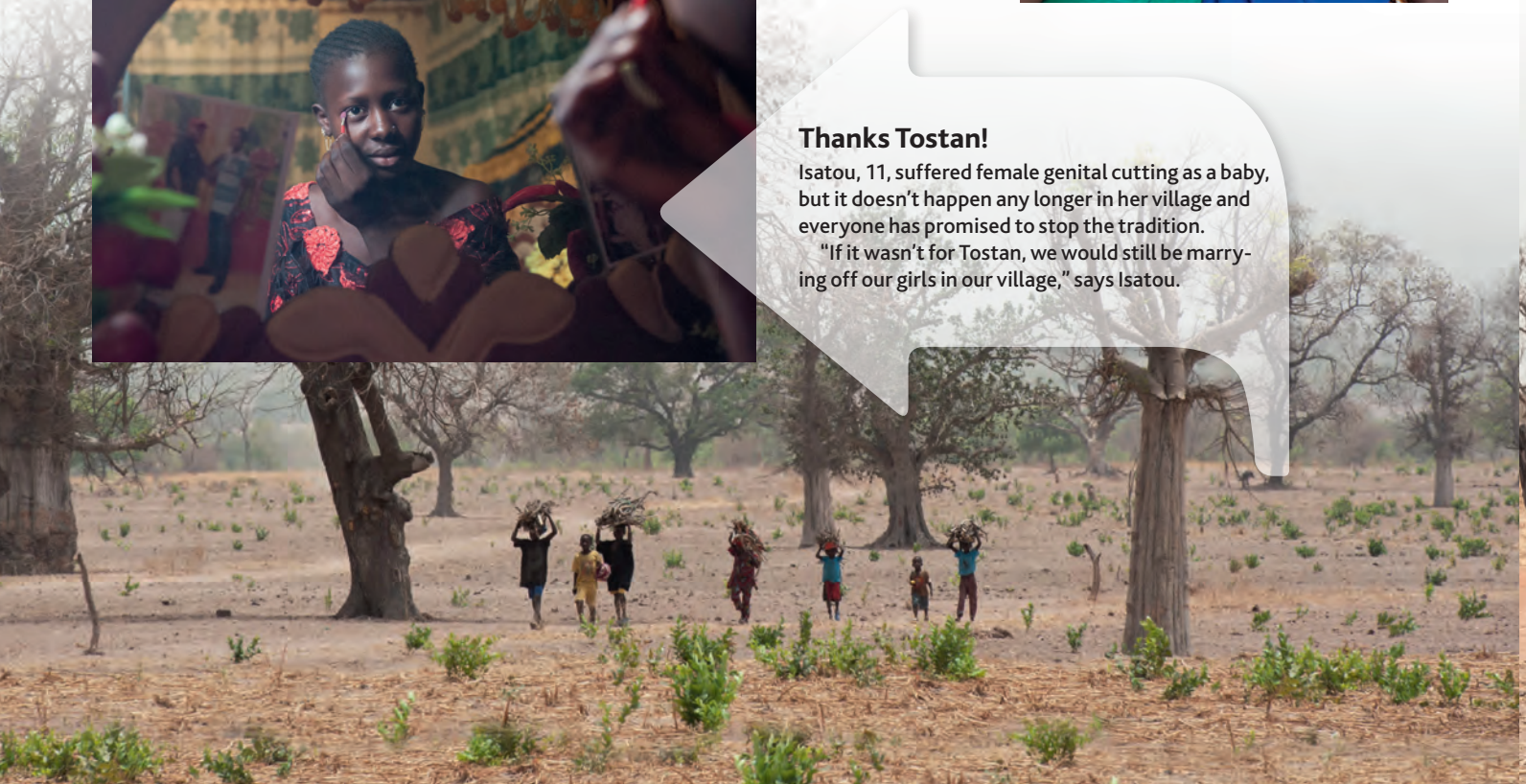
Her granddaughter Rokhaya, 17, is proud of her grandmother's important work to end the practice.



### Thanks Tostan!

Isatou, 11, suffered female genital cutting as a baby, but it doesn't happen any longer in her village and everyone has promised to stop the tradition.

"If it wasn't for Tostan, we would still be marrying off our girls in our village," says Isatou.







Imam Demba Diawara has been an important figure for Molly and Tostan. Once he understood how wrong the tradition of cutting was, he realised he had to talk to relatives in all the villages to put a stop to it.

"I myself will walk to ten villages where my relatives live," he said.

to village. His message was met by anger and fear, but he was always careful to be clear and respectful. Slowly, after many months and discussions, the decision was made. Together.

Hundreds of people gathered in the village of Keur Simbara to celebrate the decision to stop female genital cutting. Now Molly, Tostan, and the people in the villages knew that to create a future where girls are free from cutting, everyone must be involved in the decision. When a decision is made together, it is strong!

### Now 7,200 villages

When Molly visits Keur Simbara now, 20 years have passed since the village began working with Tostan. And no girl has been cut here for

eighteen years. Many other villages have made the same decision. Through the Tostan program, over 7,200 villages in six West African countries stopped practising female genital cutting, child marriage and forced marriage. Hundreds of thousands of girls' bodies are unharmed, and free from pain and discomfort. More girls get to go to school instead of being married off early and becoming mothers while they themselves are still children. Boys too are free from early marriage and can finish their education instead.

Changing a tradition is



Children and adults set goals together for the development of the village, based on everyone's right to live in a safe, clean environment, and everyone's responsibility to keep their surroundings clean. Twin brothers Dyouma and Bilal have gathered up all the garbage in the village of Keur Simbara and they're taking it away.

hard. Together with Tostan, these villages have done something really unusual.

"Human rights hold the key. When we talk about rights and responsibilities, everyone understands. Everyone has a right to freedom from violence, and at the same time, it's everyone's responsibility to contribute

## Knowledge spreads

Tostan works in six countries in West Africa: Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia. Since 1991, more than 200,000 people have taken part in Tostan's program and used Tostan's material, which is available in 22 local languages. Tostan's model means that these 200,000 children and adults have in turn spread knowledge and influenced over two million people. The program participants talk to their relatives and friends in other villages. Knowledge and change spread across entire countries, as well as to other countries.

### A decision worth celebrating

When villages that are linked, through extended families or in other ways, make a joint decision to stop female genital cutting, they hold a ceremony where they talk about their decision. And a party with dancing to celebrate it!







### Times have changed

For the cool young people in the village of Sare Ngai in Gambia, the times have changed. They will never subject their children to female genital cutting or child marriage.



Molly walking through Keur Simbara with the children of the village. Everybody knows about Molly and Tostan, and that they have helped make life better for the village children.

## Human rights violation

Around 140 million girls and women all over the world have been subjected to female genital cutting, which affects around three million girls in Africa every year. This is a human rights violation and brings a series of health risks, both as a direct result of the procedure, and throughout each girl's life.

→ to a society that is free from violence. The Tostan program shows that although not everyone has gone to school, everyone can make wise and brave decisions,” says Molly.

The Tostan program means that village residents can continue to make good decisions

to improve their lives – about access to schools, toilets and medical care, about awareness of malaria, or about whether to build a well or a library. And about registering adults so that they can vote.

Molly listens to the village council explaining the village

goals in terms of electricity, vaccination, road improvements, and women’s participation in decisions. She is delighted to watch the young people’s play about choosing their own husband or wife, as part of the Tostan program. Then the dancing continues. 🌐

## Better lives with Tostan

The focus on human rights in the Tostan program means that life in the villages gets better for children and adults in many ways:

- Over 7,200 villages have stopped female genital cutting, child marriage and forced marriage
- Respect for the rights of the child increases
- More girls go to school
- More children are vaccinated
- Literacy increases
- Maternal and child health improves
- Decisions are made democratically
- Women can be leaders too
- Positive environmental impact
- Fewer cases of malaria, HIV and AIDS, and other diseases
- Solar power brings electricity to the villages

## What is a social norm?

Female genital cutting is part of a social norm on getting married. A social norm is something that many people in a society agree on. If someone chooses to do things differently, usually people have something to say about it. For example, the idea that you shouldn’t drop litter in nature is a social norm.

In many societies in West Africa, there is a social norm that a girl has to be cut in order to be able to get married. This is a thousand-year-old tradition, and nobody knows where it came from. It just is.

Tostan’s program gives participants information on human rights and on how dangerous it is for girls and women to be circumcised. They get to talk to imams, who explain that female genital cutting is a tradition and it is not mentioned in the Koran.

In order to put a stop to this tradition, many people have to decide on a new social norm, together. The new norm is that a girl should not have to be cut in order to be married.

This is how this social norm is changed in the Tostan villages:

- 1. Old social norm:** Girls are cut and married off young.
- 2. Tostan training:** Children and adults discuss and learn new things together.
- 3. Raising awareness:** Adults and children from several villages raise awareness and discuss the issue together.
- 4. Shared decision:** Stop female genital cutting and child marriage in our village!
- 5. New social norm:** Girls go to school, no cutting or child marriage in the village!





# “You’re getting married tomorrow”

After months of drought, finally the rain is drumming on the roof. Mariama Bah, four years old, runs out to the other children. Mariama doesn't know that it's already been decided that she will marry one of the boys who is also jumping in the puddles.

**W**hen I was born, a friend of my parents came over and said: ‘This girl is going to be my son’s wife.’ My parents thought this was a good idea, so they discussed the wedding, and agreed that I would live with the boy’s family from when I stopped being breastfed until I was seven. So I grew up with the boy who was to become my husband. We were like brother and sister.”

## Wedding day

“I went back to live with my mother and father when I turned seven. One day, when I was eleven, my friends told me: ‘You’re getting married tomorrow’. I was upset.

“I was taken to the boy who was to be my husband. I wore a white sheet tied around my hips and a veil on my head. My upper body was bare.

“After the wedding my husband and I went into the house. Two older women sat outside. Later on, we were to give the white sheet to the women. If there was blood on the sheet then the village would celebrate with music and dancing. If not, it would be a scandal.

“When we lay down on the bed my husband asked me: ‘Why are you so quiet?’ I looked up at the ceiling and didn’t know what to say. My husband started talking about all sorts of things and after a while, I started to talk too. We said that it felt strange to be

lying there as man and wife. We talked about other things too, about our friends and the village. And about our new home, where we would live together.

“The women outside were waiting for us to lie together as man and wife. At sunrise we gave them my white sheet, which now had blood on it. The women started cheering and dancing.”

## School for my children

“A year later I gave birth to my first child. It was really difficult. I had to go to hospital and I was bedridden for weeks afterwards. Just over a year later my second child was born.

“We struggled to get enough food for us all, so my husband decided to travel to Europe to find work. I didn’t hear anything from him for several weeks. He’s still in Italy now, he has a job and sends money home. He calls us often, and says nice things to me and asks after the children. Now that we have lived together as man and wife, I have started to love him.

“I’ve learned so much from Tostan. One of the women there tells me everything she knows. My dream is good health for my family. I won’t let my children get married before they are eighteen years old, and I’ll make sure they can go to school.”



TEXT: JOHANNA HALLIN & EVELINA FREDRIKSSON PHOTOS: KIM NAYLOR



# To be married off at age eleven

Mariama is running. Her feet strike the sandy ground hard, and she is struggling not to trip in the darkness. She wants to escape from everything. Her stepfather has decided that she should get married, although she is only eleven years old.



**A**fter running two kilometres in the dark, Mariama reaches her grandmother's home, who tries to console her, but Mariama can't stop crying. If her father had still been alive none of this would be happening, she thinks to herself.

"My father loved me and my siblings more than anything else. His death was the beginning of a new life. Dad was the one who supported us, and when he passed away everything got harder."

## Dreams up in smoke

According to tradition in Mariama's village, women

who are widowed must spend four months in mourning. During this time, they may not even take an object from a man's hand. If a man needs to give her something, he has to lay it on the floor for her to pick up.

When the period of mourning is over, the woman can marry again. Mariama's mother follows tradition and marries one of Mariama's father's brothers. This is when Mariama's problems begin.

Mariama's new stepfather doesn't want her to go to school, and instead decides she should be married off. Since he is a man, he is allowed to make these decisions.

Mariama refuses to go along with her stepfather's plan. She feels heartbroken thinking about what life would be like without school. All her dreams for the future would go up in smoke.

"My father wanted me to go to school. If he was still alive then none of this would be happening," says Mariama to her stepfather.

## More atrocities

There's another thing that makes Mariama even more afraid. When she was a baby, she was subjected to FGC – female genital cutting. In Mariama's village, they 'sew up' a girl's vagina. When she is going to get married, the 'cutter' has to come back to open her up with a knife.

"Most girls faint. Many get ill afterwards, and are bedridden for a long time. It can be hard to recover," says Mariama.

Mariama knows that it will be hard for her to give birth because she has had this done





to her. Especially as she is still so young. But her stepfather is determined. "You are going to marry your cousin. It's for the best for the family."

Mariama cries almost all night long at her grandmother's house. But when she wakes up the next morning, she has decided what to do. She is going to go to an organisation called Tostan for help. She doesn't feel nervous, because she is sure that they

will listen to what she has to say.

When Mariama finds the women who work with Tostan and are part of the village committee, they listen to her carefully. They say they are impressed that Mariama knows that education is so important. They think



## Mariama's wardrobe

Mariama is interested in clothes and has a big wardrobe. Her favourite clothes are ones she has been given by her sisters and cousins for weddings and naming ceremonies.

### Work clothes

When Mariama does housework, like sweeping or carrying water, she always wears old clothes. It's important to keep your special clothes nice!

### Ceremonial clothes

For weddings and naming ceremonies, Mariama wears traditional clothes. When her older sister got married she gave Mariama this dress. All the women at the celebration wore the same clothes.

### Wedding anklets

Mariama's mother makes these ankle decorations, which form part of the traditional wedding outfit. She has made matching ones for all the girls in the family.



### Henna tattoo

Mariama gets help to paint a traditional henna decoration on her hands and feet. It can stay on for up to three weeks.







### Favourite everyday dress

Favourite everyday dress  
Mariama likes to dress up when visitors come to the village, or when she is spending time with friends.



### Party dress

Mariama has embroidered 'Princess AK Jallow' on her skirt.



→ Mariama is ambitious, and she is no longer afraid.

### Checked designs

Many of the fabrics in Mariama's village have checked designs, like this skirt.



### The Tostan plan

The Tostan group quickly make a plan. They have to talk to Mariama's stepfather, and fast. They gather a group of 17 people, and together they go to her parents' house. They are indignant. An 11-year-old shouldn't have to get married! She should be going to school and getting an education.

Mariama stays out of sight to avoid hearing the conversation with her stepfather,

### Secret party clothes

The older people in the village don't like it when the girls wear trousers and a short tunic. So when there are parties in the village, Mariama and her friends usually wear traditional clothes with trousers underneath. Once the older people have gone to bed, she takes off her skirt and continues dancing with her friends.



but even from a distance she can hear that he is furious. "Mariama has asked others for help because she has no respect for her own family," he says. Then he shouts: "She will do as I say!" and refuses to listen to the group gathered at his house.

### Everyone is angry

Mariama knows that she is right. The message from

Tostan is clear: girls have a right to an education! Mariama should not have to quit school and get married. This could have serious consequences for her health, and destroy her future. But what happens if her stepfather forces her?

That night, Mariama can't sleep. Her stepfather is still angry and she feels sad that this big argument is going on







### Party dress

Mariama has embroidered 'Princess AK Jallow' on her skirt.



### School uniform

Mariama is very careful with her school uniform, and always has a bath before she puts it on.

in her village. She slips out of bed and out into the night. Without even thinking, she starts to run. It's as if her feet are moving by themselves, leading her along the road to her grandmother's house.

When she arrives her grandmother takes her in, but says that she has to go home in the morning. Mariama knows what she wants and feels supported by Tostan. At the same time she is afraid, because so many people in the village are angry now. Her stepfather is angry with her and the Tostan women

are angry with him because he won't listen. Several of her relatives are upset that she is not obeying her stepfather. They do not believe that a girl should be able to make decisions for herself.

### Help from the police

When she comes home from her grandmother's house, Mariama realises that her stepfather has not listened to Tostan. He is going to make sure that the wedding goes ahead, unless something drastic happens. She has to act!





Mariama with the women from Tostan who helped her when her stepfather wanted to marry her off. "Lots of girls are forced to quit school, but Mariama was brave and dared to talk to us and put a stop to it. Now she can be whatever she wants to be," says Kumba Bah.



→ Mariama writes a letter to the governor, explaining her situation. Then she goes to the police. The police have seen similar cases and they understand the situation. They invite Mariama and her stepfather to a meeting.

Mariama, her parents, and two police officers attend the

meeting. The women from Tostan are there too. The police are clear: "Mariama is doing well at school and she wants to continue her education. That means that you have no right to take her out of school. If you do not allow her to go to school, we will arrest you," they say to her stepfather.

Her stepfather is afraid now, and submits to the police officers' demands. With eyes fixed on Mariama, one of the police officers says: "Remember this moment. You have gone through all of this to be able to go to school. Now promise me that you'll do well."

Mariama leaves the police

station feeling relieved, nervous and shaken all at once. She is delighted to be able to continue going to school, and that she will not have to go through the trauma of child marriage. At the same time she feels uneasy. She has put her parents at risk of being arrested.

### Keeping her promise

Returning to the village is not easy. People turn away from Mariama. Her own relatives say unkind things, and the village elder is annoyed. He says that Mariama has disrespected him, and that going to the police was the wrong thing to do.

Things don't get any better when Mariama goes to school. It feels like everyone is



### Weekly market

Near Mariama's village there is a weekly market. Everybody gathers there, and you can buy anything you can think of. This week Mariama has saved up to buy new eyeshadow.





“At first I didn’t want to listen to the Tostan group, but now I’m grateful that they helped me to understand how important it is to get an education,” says Mariama’s stepfather.



### Mariama AK, 16

**Dream:** To become a nurse

**Motto:** Forgive your enemies and move on towards your dream

**Sad:** When she thinks about her dead father

**Proud of:** Fighting to continue her schooling

**Wants to stop:** Child marriage

looking at her. After school, she goes home and goes to bed. She can’t eat, and she can’t stop thinking that everybody is against her. For days she just lies there, not going out. What should have been a victory is weighing her down, and Mariama feels alone.

Then Mariama’s best friend walks in the door. She sits on the edge of Mariama’s bed and hugs her tightly.

“You have fought too hard to just give up now,” she says. Mariama’s friend tells her

about school, and says all the things that Mariama herself has been saying for the last few weeks. That schooling is a right, and education is the key to a better future. In that moment, Mariama resolves to focus fully on her studies. Nothing else will distract her. She will keep her promise to that stern police officer.

#### Village for girls’ rights

Time passes, and Mariama feels that people are no longer against her. Her stepfather forgives her and explains to her, and the whole village, that he was wrong.

“All girls have a right to go to school. I understand that now. I didn’t want to listen to Tostan, but now I am glad that they helped me. My advice to everyone I meet is that you should never forget the people who help you make the right decision,” says her stepfather in front of everyone in the village.

When Tostan have been working in Mariama’s village for three years, the whole village makes a declaration:

We will never again cut a girl! We will never again demand that someone under the age of 18 has to get married!

Mariama is the one who reads out the declaration for

the people who have gathered. She concludes with a speech that she wrote herself, which ends with the words:

“We are victims. But our children will not be!” 🌍

## Responsibility and styles!

“Tostan taught us to talk about important things with our friends. Both about our rights, and about how we can influence our own lives, although we’re young. We used to just sit around and wait, but we have learned that we can take responsibility for ourselves. So now we do small extra jobs. I shell peanuts and sell them in little bags. My friend Kanku makes fish soup and sells it with bread. When we make a profit we like to go to the tailor and try on different styles of clothes!”

Kora, 13



Kora and Kanku, 13, like listening to pop songs from Guinea.



# Best friends with different lives

At the video club in the village, two friends Saikou and Ebrima are watching football. They have a lot in common, and they both support Real Madrid. But their lives are very different. Saikou goes to school and every day, thanks to the Tostan women in the village, he takes a small step closer to his dream of becoming a doctor. Ebrima works in the fields, and can't give his wife and three children what they need.

**B**efore school, Saikou tends the family's cows. Once he has given them what they need, he hurries to the village school. From a very young age Saikou has wanted to be a doctor. He knows all too well what it means not to have access to medical care. When his father fell ill and died, life became difficult for the whole family.

"Our father loved me and my siblings. Losing him is the worst thing that's happened to me. When he died, it became hard for us to make ends meet."

After while, Saikou's mother married again. Saikou's stepfather already had children of his own, and it's hard for him to support everyone in the family. The family continue to struggle to afford the basic essentials, like food and school resources.

## **You have to leave school!**

When Saikou is thirteen, his mother tells him:

"Saikou, you have to leave school and start working. And we will give you a wife."

But Saikou refuses.

"School is the most important thing in my life. And I'm much too young to get married," he says to his mother and stepfather.

His stepfather won't listen. He has already planned everything and doesn't see any problem with Saikou

going to work instead of studying.

Saikou stands his ground. He explains that if they let him continue his education, he will be able to help the family much more than if he is forced to get married and start living an adult life this young. When they still won't listen, Saikou walks out the door. He knows he doesn't have to solve this problem alone. Help is available.

## **Help from Tostan**

Just a stone's throw away, Saikou finds the Tostan representatives in the village.

"It was Tostan that taught us all about the importance of education. They also taught us that even we children have a right to make our voices heard. We should be allowed to express our opinions in important decisions. Tostan said straight away that they would help me."

The very next day, the Tostan women sit down with Saikou's parents. They talk over the situation. Tostan has a special method to resolve problems and conflicts in the villages where they work. The women are experienced and know that it's important for everyone to express their opinion and feel heard and understood. That's why Saikou's stepfather feels prepared to listen to Tostan. When they are finished, they



Ebrima and Saikou are best friends. But they have lived very different lives since Ebrima quit school.





have all agreed that the best thing for everyone is for Saikou to carry on with his schooling.

“I was so happy. Now my dream could come true!”

**Talked into getting married**

At the same time, a short distance away in the village, another boy’s future is being discussed. He is called Ebrima, and is in the same class as Saikou.

“If I want water, I can just tell my wife to get me some,” boasts a boy who is a couple of years older than Ebrima.

“Imagine having a home of your own,” says another.

Ebrima is listening. His mother wants him to get

married and everyone around him seems to agree. Maybe school isn’t that important after all, thinks Ebrima.

Ebrima is a few years older than his classmates. Old enough to get married, his parents think, even though he’s only 16.

What Ebrima doesn’t know is that his parents have gathered a group of boys who have left school and got married, and told them to tell Ebrima that married life is better than going to school. Ebrima is persuaded, and agrees to marry the cousin his parents have chosen. She is only thirteen and Ebrima has never talked to her before.

**Never enough money**

On his wedding day, Ebrima realises he has made a mistake in allowing himself to be talked into this. Nobody has actually asked him what he thinks, and he feels that he



**Saikou, 16**

**Dreams of:** Becoming a doctor.

**Tip for other children:** Don’t accept everything adults say. Be sure to include educated people in decision-making.

**Idol:** Ronaldo – he started with nothing and is now the best footballer in the world.

**Believes in:** Democracy.

**Happy about:** Tostan helping us find ways to solve our problems and work on projects together.

In technology and design lessons, Saikou has made a picture of a judge. “I am interested in the judicial system, but I made this picture entirely from my imagination. I’ve never seen a court case.”





# Working

The Tostan program is based on people in villages deciding together to make life better for everyone in the village. In order for it to work, everyone needs to take part in discussing what is important. They agree that health, community, peace and respect are all needed to make life in the village as good as possible. Everyone also gets to learn to work together to solve problems. The children learn how to talk to each other in a way that builds community – and they practice it all the time as they play!



## Sewing and thinking

"My mother taught me how to embroider. I usually sit and think about life here in Gambia. It's good that we are at peace. War is most dangerous for children, because it splits families," says Isatou, 10.



Alagie, Saikou and Gibbi go to the video club as often as they can to watch football. Saikou supports Real Madrid. "I admire Ronaldo because he comes from a poor background and has worked his way up. I wish I could play like him."

was happy when my mother told me that I was going to get married, even though I was so young. I had no idea what I would do otherwise. But my dream for my children is for them to know that there is another kind of life. I want them to go to school and not to get married too early," says Kaddijato.

The two friends Saikou and Ebrima both work hard for what is important to them. Saikou does his best at school and Ebrima fights to give his family what they need. They often talk about the future, and about what a big difference Tostan has made by raising awareness of the importance of education. If it hadn't been for Tostan, Ebrima and Kaddijato might not have realised that they could give their children the chance to live a different kind of life. 🌍

Ebrima got married at sixteen and now he has three children. He and his wife Kaddijato often talk about making sure their children get the education they never got.

just went along with the whole idea because he didn't want to disappoint his parents.

"Now I thoroughly regret it. I should have made the most of my right to express my opinion, and I shouldn't have agreed to get married so young. When my wife and I slept together on the first night I just felt scared. It was the same for her, she was scared too."

"I have been blessed with three children and I love my wife, but it hurts that I can never afford to give them what they need," says Ebrima.

He has worked hard every day since leaving school, but he still can't make ends meet.

"I'm not educated, and it

shows. When Saikou and I go to watch the football at the video club, he can read all the signs in English that I don't understand, and he can talk about things I know nothing about."

## Children should get an education

Saikou and Ebrima often talk about what going to school and getting an education means for your future.

"I have a lot to learn from Saikou. When we talk, I realise what a difference it makes whether a person gets an education or not," says Ebrima.

Ebrima and his wife Kaddijato agree that their children will not get married before they are 18.

"I didn't go to school and I

## Ebrima, 19

**Wishes:** That I could say yes the next time my children ask me for something.

**Future plan:** For my children to go to school.

**Loves:** My wife Kaddijato and our children Juldeh, Jainaba and Ismaila.

**Regrets:** Leaving school too early.

**Would never:** Sit on my big brother's bed. It goes against our tradition!





# together for the village, and for fun!



## Skipping

Keeping the rhythm going is important when you're skipping together.



## Tick-tock tactical training

"This is a football game. We get into teams and practice tactics. We learn other skills that are useful in real football too. We never do it alone – there are always people watching. We use a marble as the football. Right now I'm Real Madrid playing against Barcelona," says Mamadou, 10.

## Music performance

When Ilo, 15, plays his ritti, everyone in the village gathers to listen. The ritti has strings, but it also amplifies his voice when he sings. He is singing about how a woman who is hungry can never be free.



## Cycling to meet friends

Mamadou likes cycling too. It's handy when he needs to run errands, or do things with his friends.



## Crochet hairbands

"My mother taught me to crochet, and I do it with my friends. Tostan has taught us that we have to work hard to have a good life. We can't just sit around waiting," says Fanta, 7.



## 25-boxes

"This is a social game. You're not allowed to touch one another, and if you do then you're out. Lots of people can play but only four people run at a time," explains Hawh, 13.



## Battery game

"The aim of the game is to hit your opponent's batteries. Often lots of people want to play so we draw lots to decide who will start. Then we set up a tournament. It's important for us children to be able to play. It makes us happy and helps us to be able to think freely," says Gibbi, 12.





# A better life in many ways



## Solar power for all

"Tostan has organized solar power for us. We used to have oil lamps and that was dangerous. If you used them late at night for homework, you could start a fire.

"Before, neither children nor women could express their opinions and be listened to, but now everything has changed. Everyone in the village gets to say what they think."

*Awa, 16, Senegal*



## Parents' apology

"I feel free and happy. Now we can talk to each other, even about difficult things. That has changed my life.

"My parents had me circumcised when I was a baby. They didn't know it was wrong. They were really upset when they realised the problems it causes, and they regret doing it. They asked me to forgive them and they have promised that they'll never do it to anyone else again. On the day I found out what female genital cutting was, and that it had been done to me, I was devastated. Now that we know about it and can talk about everything, it's important that we make sure no daughter ever has to go through that again! I want to fight for that."

*Tombong, 13, Gambia*



## Less malaria

"Malaria used to be a big problem for us. Many people died. We stopped drinking milk for four years, when my stepfather died, because we thought that bad milk caused his illness. Now we know that it's mosquitos that cause malaria. That's why we clear up the village once a week and sleep under mosquito nets. Now nobody dies from malaria, because we know how to protect ourselves."

*Musa, 15, Gambia*



## Helping with cleaning instead of child marriage

"Before Tostan started, boys used to have to get married early, like at my age. But now we know our rights and responsibilities. Nobody gets married before they turn 18. Boys help their mothers with housework, like cleaning."

*Alasana, 14, Gambia*

Tostan works in many different ways to make society better for children and their families. Everything is connected, and everything makes children's lives better. All the children in the Tostan villages have had the chance to share their opinions and learn all about how Tostan works.



## Standing up for human rights

The children in Kere Simbra in Senegal have a poem about rights that the children in the picture are reading together. They stand up for human rights so that they never forget all that the village has learned. An important part of the Tostan program is to dream of how the future could be better. The children's parents and grandparents dreamed of a future free from violence. They stopped the practice of female genital cutting, because it stood in the way of their dreams.

"I love history and I want to be a teacher. My dream is for everyone here to be able to go to school. We need good teachers. I want to build a school that is blue and orange."  
*Ndyaya, 10*

"I love education and I want to be a French teacher. My dreams are to build a school and to take my parents to Mecca."  
*Ami, 10*





to improve things for them. The first thing I would do in a new village is to arrange a clearing up day. Then I'd build a school and register everyone. Tostan teaches people about hygiene and dialogue. That's what we need to live a good life, in peace. Children's rights are particularly important. Once children know that they have rights, they can also take responsibility and help to make life in the village better for everyone."  
*Kajatai, 13, Gambia*

### Children can take responsibility

"My dream is to work with Tostan and go to more villages



### Back to school thanks to a cow

"Last year my parents took me out of school because it was too expensive. Then Tostan came and talked to my father about the importance of education. He understood, and he sold a cow so that I could stay in school. I was so happy I couldn't sleep. I dream of becoming a doctor and helping women. I also think about how important it is to prevent ebola and maintain good hygiene."  
*Mariama, 15, Gambia*



### Tidy village

"My village used to be dirty. It isn't any more, because we've learned how to keep it clean and tidy. All the children must have their right to go to school respected, because that's the only way to a good future and reaching your goals. It's also important that everybody knows how to avoid getting pregnant."  
*Fatou, 14, Gambia*



Ndeye Fatou Dyouma Ndeye

We are the generation of human rights  
 We accept nothing but human rights  
 Let's identify them and let's ask for them  
 For men  
 For women  
 For children  
 And for those who claim human rights to apply them



### Women and children involved in decisions

"Before, a man and a woman couldn't even sit next to each other and talk. The men made all the decisions. Women and children were never allowed to be involved in discussions or decisions. That has all changed now. We have talked about human rights and about lots of other important things, to make sure life is good for everyone in our village. For example, we have decided that nobody should have to get married before they turn 18, and we no longer practice female genital cutting."  
*Fatoumata, 15, Gambia*



### My sister was married off

"Thinking about Tostan, and the fact that I'm not going to be married off, makes me happy. Our stepfather forced my big sister to get married. She is unhappy and she has three children already. Life is very hard for those who marry young. They become parents while they are still children, and have lots of children of their own. But I'm not going to get married until after I turn 18. Instead I'll go to school, learn lots, and get a good job. My dream is to work with Tostan, talking to people and helping to solve difficult problems."  
*Anastou, 13, Gambia*

## n rights!

"I want to be a business-woman and work in a bank. So I need to learn French, English and Maths. I dream of having electricity in the village, not just solar cells like we have now. Round-the-clock electricity would make life better for everyone."  
*Ndeye Fatou, 12*

"In my dreams, our village looks like the villages I see on TV. Clean, with lots of trees and beautiful flowers. A tap in every home, and electricity day and night."  
*Dyouma, 12*

"I love playing football. I dream of having a football pitch and a team that plays in the league. If we get the chance to play and train, that will make us strong."  
*Bilal, 11*

"I'm in Year 5. When I grow up I want to be the Minister for Education. My dream for our village is a nicer school and a bigger Koran school."  
*Ndeye, 13*



# A day without school

Tostan has changed a lot in the villages, and the adults now know how important it is for both girls and boys to be able to go to school. But there are still families who can't afford to send their children to school. Lots of progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go.

"I live with my aunt because my mother is dead and my stepmother lives in Banjul. My aunt doesn't let me go to school any more. I have to stay at home and do house-work. I think about school every day, but there is a lot of work to be done here," says Nuima, 14.

"Still, my life would have been different without Tostan here in the village. They have taught us lots about health, and now nobody forces us girls to get married before we are eighteen. So I don't have to get married until I am an adult and my body is ready to bear children."

Nuima was cut as a baby, and every month when she has her period she has to lie down for five days.

"It's incredibly painful. I know it will also cause problems when I'm a grown-up and I give birth. But thanks to Tostan, nobody here cuts girls any more."



## Nuima, 14

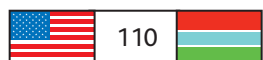
**Likes:** Praying

**Favourite thing in the day:** Cooking

**Grateful:** That she doesn't have to get married until she is an adult, thanks to Tostan.

**Wishes:** That she could go to school.

**Last time she was really happy:** When she got new clothes.



110



**07:00**

Nuima wakes up in the room she shares with her sisters.

**07:15**

It's important to wash before morning prayers.



Before Nuima prays she puts on her veil. Time to bring out the prayer mat. Nuima turns towards Mecca and kneels down.



**07:40**

"Ma an mujamdi," says Nuima to her family after praying. That means 'wake in peace'.



**08:00** Fetching water from the well.



**09:00**

Nuima has a bath in the bathroom, behind a screen.



**09:15**

Before breakfast, Nuima pounds grain in a mortar. When she is finished, she sieves it to remove the husks, before using the grain to make porridge.



**10:00**

Finally, time for breakfast!



**11:00**

Washing the family's clothes.



110





**12:00**

Shelling peanuts. Peanuts are an important part of their diet, and are also sold at the market.



**13:00**

Nuima makes lunch in a smoky kitchen, but she enjoys cooking.



**15:00**

Time to sweep up.

**15:30**

Nuima is embroidering a piece of fabric that will hang in front of her door when she is married.



**16:00**

Nuima gets help to tidy up her plaits.



**19:00**

The family eat dinner.



**20:00**

Nuima watches TV with her cousins. At the same time some of the children who go to the village school during the day are in the neighbouring village, attending Koran school by the light of a large fire.



**22:00**

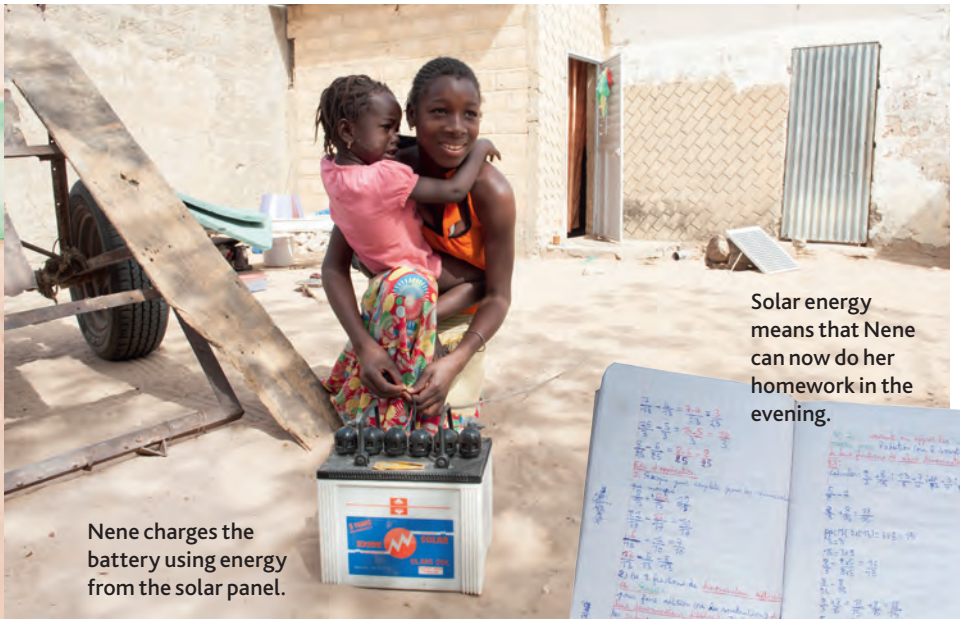
Nuima goes to bed after a long working day. As usual, before she falls asleep she thinks about what her day would have been like if she could have gone to school instead.



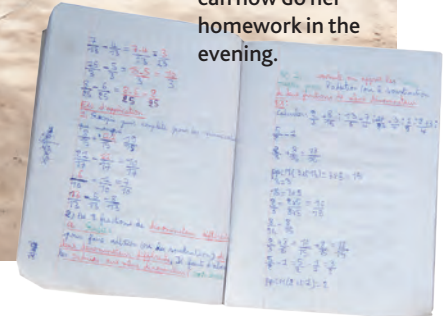




Grandma Doussou is the first solar engineer in the village.



Nene charges the battery using energy from the solar panel.



Solar energy means that Nene can now do her homework in the evening.

# Grandma is a solar engineer

When Nene was little she had to light a candle to be able to do her homework in the evenings. But since her grandmother became a solar power engineer, now there's plenty of light for homework – and for playing!

**N**ene's grandmother Doussou was 50 years old the first time she boarded a plane. She was travelling to India, to visit the recipient of the 2001 World's Children's Honorary Awards, Barefoot College. They train women from rural areas of many different countries to become 'barefoot solar engineers'. Without needing a shared language! Using pictures, colours, and repetition, Doussou was able to learn how solar panels work.

When Doussou returned to Senegal, she was able to help the whole village – all the homes, the school and the mosque – to access solar power

and light. And even the church in the neighbouring village.

"We believe in equality and fairness, regardless of religion. So if we get electric lighting in the mosque, it's only fair that our neighbours have lighting in their church too," she says.

## Sun brings radio and TV

Before the village became part of the Tostan program, a woman had never spoken in front of the whole village before. But when Nene's grandmother came home with 50 solar panels, she was at the centre of the celebrations.

"I had never dreamt of speaking in front of everybody, but it wasn't hard. Thanks to the training Tostan gave us, I felt comfortable talking and sharing the important things I had

learned," she explains.

Grandma Doussou is now teaching three younger women to be solar engineers. And she has also taught Nene.

"Whenever school is closed I'm with Grandma. I watch what she does and try to understand it. I'm proud of everything she's learned!"

At Nene's home, the solar panel is connected to the battery, harnessing the sun's powerful rays.

"The best thing about solar power is that we can listen to

the radio. It's fantastic. I like getting information and listening to popular songs, mostly djembe music," says Nene, who no longer has to do her homework by the flickering light of a candle.

"It's easier to do my homework now, and we have more time to play! And we can watch TV and charge everyone's telephones," says Nene. 🌍

Solar energy means that Nene can do her homework in the evening and get more time to play during the day.



Solar energy lights have transformed the village in the evenings. Now it's no longer pitch black. Circuit board for solar energy from the panel.