

Molly Melching--Women Making a Difference

LeadOps - What inspires you to do what you do?

Molly Melching - I have always admired people who have tried to make a difference in the world. My mother taught me how important it is to volunteer and share with others as she herself did by teaching school for 20 years. My dad was constantly seeking to help others, even in small ways. My professor in Senegal, Cheikh Anta Diop, contributed greatly to the promotion of national languages in Africa and actually inspired me to start this non-formal education program in national languages that is based on people's own cultural values. And when I go to the field and see how Tostan participants, particularly the women, are moving forward with confidence and courage, it is a constant source of inspiration for me.

LeadOps - Tell a brief story that exemplifies why you do what you do.

Molly Melching - When I think about what inspires me, I immediately think of Marietou Diarra from the village of Diabougou. Marietou told me how her daughter died at the age of eight after she was cut during the female genital cutting (fgc) ceremony. The circumcisers had buried her daughter before Marietou even knew that she was hemorrhaging and dying. It was a tremendous shock to her, but she felt powerless to even try and stop the practice since it was required for girls if they were to be respected members of society.

After learning about democracy, human rights, problem-solving, hygiene and health in the Tostan program, Marietou became part of a movement of villagers to abandon fgc. Largely due to Marietou's efforts, her own village and surrounding villages publicly declared the practice ended and that this would no longer be a requirement for marriage in their communities.

I recently went to visit Marietou in Diabougou and she came running up to me, her face beaming with pride. She explained that she had just returned from a 40 village tour where she raised awareness with other relatives and neighbors about the harmful health consequences and human rights violations related to fgc. Looking at her smiling face that day I was so moved and realized that stories like hers are exactly why Tostan promotes education at the grassroots level. Our goal is to reach thousands more women like Marietou who can also have the opportunity to learn in their own language, become empowered and make a major impact in their communities.

LeadOps - Tell a brief story showing a time when you feel you have made a difference.

Molly Melching - I began by developing a life skills and literacy program in collaboration with a Senegalese team and the villagers of a small community, Saam Njaay, where I spent three years sharing their joys and pains. This program was successful and soon led to a more structured non-formal education program that was adopted by many other NGOs. In 1988, UNICEF decided to support our team of committed educators and we formed our NGO in 1991. Tostan, which means "Breakthrough" in Wolof, was created to make a difference globally by starting at the grassroots. The program had considerable success in different regions of Senegal,

but there was a real revolution at the village level when in 1995 we introduced human rights learning as the foundation for all our modules. Human rights education was essential to giving our participants, particularly women and adolescents, confidence and a stronger voice in the community. We also put an emphasis on the responsibilities related to these human rights. The discussions led to community members committing to change the things it's possible for them to change: registering children at birth; increasing democratic practices; promoting vaccination, pre- and post-natal consultation and family planning; and ending harmful traditional practices and domestic violence. We included all members of society in this process of social transformation: traditional and religious leaders, local elected officials, men, women and children. We also recognized that in order for sustainable change to occur, many locally connected communities needed to be consulted and participate in finding consensus around important issues. This has led to over 3,500 villages in Senegal and other African countries abandoning FGC.

Tostan as an organization has grown and we presently have 217 full time employees and approximately 800 village facilitators working in communities in 7 African countries. We also have a wonderful volunteer staff of students or professionals who have come from all over the world and who spend from three months to one year at Tostan. They have contributed greatly in many areas.

LeadOps - When have you overcome a significant obstacle in your efforts to make a difference?

Molly Melching - We have experienced every possible type of problem within the organization, with participants and the communities, and with some partners. Sometimes I am amazed that we have persevered all these years despite the challenges.

One of the initial problems we experienced was with resistance from men in the community when we introduced women's rights into the program. We made a mistake by not including the men and as soon as we observed their reaction, we changed our program to include everybody's rights: men, women and children. This helped tremendously and we now have wonderful support from the men, including many religious and traditional leaders.

In the process of ending fgc through public declaration, some religious and cultural leaders lashed out at Tostan and our village participants. This was particularly difficult as the women were deeply hurt by the attacks on them for actions they had taken to improve the health of girls and women – not to attack tradition. There were even threats on our lives at one point. All that has changed now as more and more people – more than 1 million – have joined in the movement, including thousands of men. It is getting easier and easier now as the social convention is changing.

Also, we have learned that the key to overcoming obstacles is to always show respect for people, to listen carefully to their concerns and be flexible and open to changing things that may not be working. A Wolof proverb states: There is no conflict, there is only a lack of communication.

LeadOps - What is your next big challenge?

Molly Melching - We have realized through our work in communities over the past 25 years that in order for things to move forward, we need to facilitate uniting the people of intra-marrying communities and allow them to participate in the process of change and development in their communities.

The challenge is in facilitating dialogue among remote communities and their relatives in other African cities, Europe, and America where they have now immigrated. We have started linking relatives of extended families all over the world and the results are so exciting that we realize we must continue.

Tostan has learned over all these years that the method in addressing problematic issues is sustainable if the methods used reinforce positive African values, and most of all unify people through consensus, rather than dividing them.

LeadOps - What resources do you rely upon?

Molly Melching - UNICEF Senegal has been our major donor for the past 15 years and has supported our efforts through both successful and difficult times. The Government of Senegal originally requested the Tostan program and we have collaborated closely with them also through this whole process. When we first began the partnership, both UNICEF and the Government of Senegal were interested in an integrated community-based education program in national languages that would help prepare communities for leading their own development. At that time, we had already had over 5 years of experience with the program and were having very positive results. We always emphasize that the continued UNICEF and government support has been key in moving the fgc abandonment movement forward. However, many other donors and individuals have supported Tostan and helped us to expand our program over the years.

Over 250 international volunteers have also greatly contributed to the success of the program in Senegal, Guinea and the Gambia in past years. They help to write reports, interview participants, analyze data and improve monitoring and evaluation systems, just to name a few.

LeadOps - What is your vision?

Molly Melching - My vision is one of empowered, unified African communities who promote human rights and act responsibly to improve health, education, and their economic situation. I believe that this is happening right now and it will have an impact on developed countries because people are achieving development without forfeiting solidarity, family unity and the wonderful generosity of African societies. I am very optimistic for the future.

LeadOps - What frustrates you in your efforts?

Molly Melching - Real social transformation is a process and does not happen overnight. Sometimes people are in pain, or suffering and you want to do something immediately to end this state. The expectation of immediate results from your efforts can lead to frustration. We have found that it is more effective to take the time to allow the educational process to unfold at

the people's own rhythms, and support them in finding their own solutions; otherwise these efforts will be like putting a band aid over the wound rather than really treating it.

Even though I have been through some pretty hard times, I don't think I would change anything because the problems have helped me learn in the long run. If I could change anything, it would be the strong emotional reactions I have sometimes because I get so deeply involved in everything. But perhaps this passion is part of what has helped me to keep going and moving forward all these years.