Executive Summary

Female genital cutting is a major public health and human rights problem in the world today. The PI’s research has been essential to the refinement and propagation of methods for the organized abandonment of the practice, and those methods have just been endorsed by an international consensus document. The PI seeks near-term support for desk work on origins of the practice and on novel analysis of existing survey data. He seeks partial support for a sabbatical year to write a book on the abandonment of harmful practices. He seeks multi-year support for several large multi-year projects, first in priority to gather descriptive data on the contents and consequences of transformative human rights deliberations in effective abandonment projects.

The Larger Need: What problem in society will this project address? Why would a foundation want to fund this project?

Female genital cutting (FGC) is a major public health and human rights problem in Africa and among the African diaspora, of concern to development agencies and to wide publics across the world. More than 100 million women are cut, two million girls each year. The practice entails immediate and delayed health problems, and is a violation of the right of the child to develop to her full potential.

Field programs to assist in the abandonment of the practice are adequately funded, but research on the practice is not. Field programs were achieving few behavioral results prior to the PI’s research intervention on the topic. Further research by the PI would accelerate field successes, and would be of intrinsic social-science interest. Also, the theories and methods recommended by the PI about changing harmful community conventions and norms are probably applicable to a good number of other social problems.

Project Strength

The PI is one of the leading world authorities on the topic, especially on the sociology of the practice and the organization of its abandonment. The approach he recommends was endorsed in 2009 by the international Donors Working Group on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, made up of seven European
development cooperation agencies, USAID, 11 United Nations agencies including UNICEF and WHO, the International Organization on Migration, the European Commission, the World Bank, the United Nations Foundation, and Wallace Global Fund.

**Funding Need**

*Origins of FGC in Ancient Imperial Empires.* Single year. There are almost no hypotheses concerning origins of the practice save for the PI’s that it originated in the ancient empires of Mali and Nubia. The PI wishes to work with a University of Chicago historian of Africa on a publishable research paper on the hypothesis. If the PI’s origins hypothesis is supported, that adds impressive additional support to his hypotheses about the nature of the practice and the path to its abandonment. Summer ninths and research assistant.

*Theorize and Measure National-Level Abandonment.* Single year. There are now excellent, abundant, and mostly comparable survey data on FGC in a dozen practicing countries. These data have not been analyzed with today’s statistical methods. The PI proposes to investigate cross-national and subnational factors in prevalence and decline of FGC. In particular, the PI notes extraordinary secular declines in Kenya and Nigeria, and hypothesizes that it is due to competitive religious sects in each case. Possibly in collaboration with the new Program on African Political Economy, and would yield one publishable research paper. Summer ninths and research assistant.

*Tell the Story.* Single-year. The PI seeks partial support for a sabbatical year in 2010-2011, in order to write a book with Molly Melching (director of the African NGO, Tostan) about the organized abandonment of harmful practices. The effective abandonment of FGC began with the theories of the PI and the practices of Tostan. The PI revised his theories in response to Tostan practice, and Tostan revised its practice in response to his theories. The book would alternate chapters on theory and practice.

*Understanding Transformative Human Rights Deliberations.* Multi-year. The first two programs to achieve effective organized abandonments, in Senegal and Egypt, did so independently after the introduction of participatory human rights education, among other essential elements of the program. Another two highly effective programs, in Ethiopia and Kenya, also report in some detail their reliance on HRE, among other methods, and all effective programs mention it. The PI has already developed new research hypotheses concerning the workings of HRE. We are lacking descriptive detail about HRE, both about exact program methods and participant responses. Thus, the research is initially descriptive and comparative: 1. To document by desk research and field visit HRE in one program each in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Kenya. 2. The most effective program, Tostan in Senegal, carries out a nonformal education program for two years in villages which brings about large and measured results on many
development goals and has aroused high policy interest. The PI proposes to videotape, transcribe, and translate the most transformative human rights sessions, and to archive them so they may be accessed by multiple scholars and practitioners. The PI is already collaborating on an unfunded pilot project to tape a few sessions, which would provide guidance for a fuller documentation project.

3. From descriptive data revise explanatory hypotheses and eventually test them. Travel and per diem to four countries, twice to Senegal; videotaping in the field, in-country translation and transcription, archiving; course relief, summer ninths, research assistants.

**Network Topology of Abandonment.** An essential element of the process of community abandonment is termed organized diffusion. For Tostan in Senegal, for example, it is sufficient to mobilize directly one percent of the population in order to win over eventually the vast majority. Conceptual application of social-network-analysis has already helped explain important differences in program experiences: in rural Senegal, communities with reciprocal ties overlap, and thus activation of one activates others which in turn activate more; in Coptic Egypt, the community is geographically and culturally isolated, making abandonment easier to obtain but more difficult to diffuse to new communities; in urban Guinea, we know from new survey data that the poor are oriented in their decision-making to their home village and its leaders, but the upper and middle are oriented in their decision-making to friends, coworkers, mosque, national media, and civic influencers. The usefulness of social-network-analysis has been popularized by Watts’ *Six Degrees* and recently by UCSD’s James Fowler’s work on the contagiousness of obesity, and of happiness, in social networks. Moving from conceptual analysis to actual network measurement and analysis is a costly step, but it would yield two important results. First, how persuasion and attitude change about a nearly universal practice diffuses within a community is of intrinsic scientific interest. Second, understanding of actual rather than supposed paths of diffusion would improve program performance. To be developed.

**Prospective Study of Abandonment Effort in the Gambia.** Multi-year. Scholarly consensus is that there is a surplus of survey data and a shortage of ethnographic data on this topic. Anthropologist Bettina Shell-Duncan at the University of Washington, with whom the PI has collaborated on two past grant applications, has under an expired NSF grant gathered valuable ethnographic data on the practice of FGC in the Gambia (a small English-speaking country surrounded on three sides by Senegal). This establishes a baseline. Tostan is implementing its program in the Gambia, and would cooperate in randomized selection of target villages for scientific purposes. The PIs would gather ethnographic data in villages exposed to Tostan intervention, those not exposed, and compare both with baseline. This would take a year to set up, two years to measure, and one year to analyze, but would yield the most methodologically scrupulous investigation of abandonment activities and results. To be developed.
Extending Organized Abandonment from Rural to Urban Areas. Multi-year. All of the effective organized abandonments are in rural areas, probably because the community horizon is more well-defined there. Since 2000, the PI has called for more specific theorization and program experimentation in the urban case. To be developed.