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# The Art of Social Change

By KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

In 1929, the Church of Scotland Mission, which had a long and successful history of missionary work among the Kikuyu in colonial Kenya, began a campaign to eradicate the practice of [female circumcision](#). The results were hardly what church members hoped for. Large numbers of Kikuyu left the church, and Kenya's leading anticolonial political organization mounted a vigorous attack on the church's policies. Female circumcision became a nationalist issue, and a custom that might have gradually disappeared grew further entrenched. Nearly 40 percent of Kenyan women today are estimated to have undergone some form of it.

So if you care about the foreign victims of immemorial, immoral rituals, you will want to proceed carefully and perhaps learn from history. International humanitarian campaigns don't have to backfire. It might be useful to look at their notable successes, in fact, and see what swung the balance.

Take the late-19th-century campaign against foot-binding in [China](#). The custom began to die out in the first decade of the 20th century. In most places, it happened quickly. The American political scientist Gerry Mackie, an expert on social norms, gives the example of a large group of families in a rural area south of Beijing, in which 99 percent of women born before 1890 had bound feet, and none of the women born after 1919 had bound feet. The campaign against foot-binding didn't work immediately. But when it took hold, that thousand-year-old practice essentially vanished in a single generation.

It wasn't that the campaigners had new arguments. The Chinese knew foot-binding produced suffering and debility. Foot-binding was done to young girls, crushing the four smaller toes under the sole and compressing the rear of the anklebone. After months and years the pain diminished, but walking was usually difficult.

As early as the Song dynasty (960-1279), a Chinese intellectual wrote that "children not yet 4 or 5 years old, innocent and without crime, are caused to suffer limitless pain." In the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), attempts were made to ban it, but did not succeed. The tiniest feet — three-inch "golden lotuses," as they were known — were important as a sign of status for

women who could afford not to work in the fields or walk to market; the bound foot was a sign and instrument of chastity too, by limiting the movements of women. And you can't overstate the force of convention: Chinese families bound their daughters' feet because that was the normal thing to do.

The movement that eventually turned the Chinese around began with Christian missionaries in the 1860s. In 1875, the Rev. John Macgowan of the London Missionary Society, who had campaigned for some 15 years against foot-binding, called a meeting of Christian women in Xiamen. He asked them to sign a pledge to abandon foot-binding. Nine women did. Eventually women joined the Quit-Footbinding Society in larger numbers, pledging not to bind the feet of their daughters and some choosing to undergo the often painful process of unbinding themselves. Then they were joined, in 1894, by the Unbound Foot Association, which the Confucian scholar and reformist leader Kang Youwei helped found. It eventually had more than 10,000 members. The next year, Mrs. Archibald Little, the wife of an English businessman, helped found the Natural Foot Society. Together, a mixture of campaigning outsiders and modernizing insiders built a national movement for change.

The wisest campaigners began by insisting on their respect for China's civilization. Christian missionaries set up newspapers and magazines like *Review of the Times*, founded in 1868, which gave the elite access — in classical Chinese — to ideas and events from the world outside China. The Rev. Timothy Richard of the Baptist Missionary Society, who edited *The Eastern Times* for a period beginning in 1890, was highly influential, too.

Richard grasped that the key to China lay with the literati, the scholarly class that produced the empire's policy makers. He dressed as they did, learned their language and studied the texts that formed the core of their education. As for Mrs. Little, her main strategy was to republish anti-foot-binding essays by distinguished Chinese writers.

Kang Youwei wrote in his autobiography that *Review of the Times* introduced him to Western ideas and that this was what led him to start thinking about foot-binding. He had, he said, been distressed by the pain his female relatives underwent when their feet were bound. He declined to allow the binding of his own daughters' feet. In 1898, Kang sent a memorandum to the emperor. "All countries have international relations, and they compare their political institutions with one another," he began, "so that if one commits the slightest error, the others ridicule and look down upon it." And he added, "There is nothing which makes us objects of ridicule so much as foot-binding."

Kang was ashamed that his society mutilated its daughters, but people like Richard and Little could hone that sense of shame only because their arguments were founded in respect, not in contempt.

A second essential reason for the campaign's success was that it created institutions; it didn't content itself with rhetoric. In particular, it created organizations whose members publicly pledged two things: not to bind their daughters' feet and not to allow their sons to marry women whose feet were bound. The genius of this strategy was that it created both unbound women and men who would marry them. To reform tradition, you had to change the shared commitments of a community. If Chinese families bound their daughters' feet because that was the normal thing to do, you had to change what was normal.

This isn't a complete explanation of the campaign's stunning success, of course. The particular circumstances of late Qing China mattered a great deal, too. Over the previous several decades, a society that had long regarded Westerners with contempt had to accept that these foreigners, however culturally inferior by Confucian standards, could beat it in battles on land and sea. Part of the reason the modernizers like Kang Youwei were drawn into dialogue with Westerners like Timothy Richard was precisely their sense that their society was failing to meet the challenges from abroad.

The abolition of foot-binding didn't come about without backlash. Far from it. Yet reform, if handled deftly, can brave the backlash and prevail. Once you grasp the elements that made for success against foot-binding, you can see examples around the world of what to do and what not to do. In 1997, in the village of Malicounda Bambara in Senegal, a group of women told a press conference that they were going to abandon female circumcision, or female genital cutting (F.G.C.). The decision was a result of discussions that began some years earlier, when Tostan, a human rights group based in Dakar, introduced its Community Empowerment Program. Tostan's aim wasn't to end F.G.C. It was to provide people in the community with knowledge about human rights. But gradually, through the course of discussions of health and human rights, both women and men in Malicounda Bambara turned against F.G.C.

The press conference was a mistake, because it prompted a reaction in the villages around Malicounda Bambara. As the imam of one such village, Keur Simbara, put it: "We are part of an intermarrying community, and unless all the villages involved take part, you are asking parents to forfeit the chance of their daughters getting married." Tostan's leadership recalibrated. They introduced those other villages to the same ideas: if you're going to change the practices of girls, you have to make sure that you change the minds of the families of the boys who might marry them.

Two years later, the government of Senegal decided to criminalize those who "violate the integrity of the female genitalia." Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of Senegalese faced the possibility of up to five years in prison. Tostan had to cease work in the face of outrage from local communities. Many girls were cut in the following months in deliberate violation of the

law. An approach based on respectful dialogue seemed to have been derailed.

Eventually, Tostan's efforts got back on track. Its strategists — Gerry Mackie is one — knew that once enough people in the community change their minds, they can stand up together and pledge their allegiance to new practices. Tostan, in short, applied the strategy that worked against foot-binding. By the end of the coming decade, a generation of girls will have grown to womanhood in villages like Malicounda Bambara free from F.G.C.; and they will find husbands in places like Keur Simbara. The reformers are following the double lesson of the movement against foot-binding. First, begin with a dialogue of mutual respect, free of self-congratulation. Second, when you have a core of converts, organize a program of public commitment to new practices, which takes into account the traditions of the community. To end one practice, as the anti-foot-binding campaigners grasped, you need to start another.

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