

Talking Together About Change

This booklet is a report about research we did with the community.

The “Our Selves, Our Daughters” Project has been working with newcomer communities for 3 years.

First, we met with leaders and women in discussion groups. You shared with us many good aspects of culture. You told us how culture makes you strong, and how women are the heart of the community.

We took your advice and held education workshops for women. Women talked and learned about many things: how to get help from a doctor in Canada, preventing illness, women’s role in family and community, relationships, traditional practices, and more. Some talked about how traditional practices like female circumcision are changing back home and in Canada.

We wanted to learn more about this change. Leaders in one community said we should also talk to men and youth. One said, “If men are not involved, there won’t be any change.”

So we decided to do some more research with one community. We learned a great deal. We cannot write it all down in this booklet. So, we have picked some of your words and ideas to share. This can help people start talking about change.



How did we do the research?

In the Fall of 2010, three more people from the community joined the project as Community-Based Researchers.

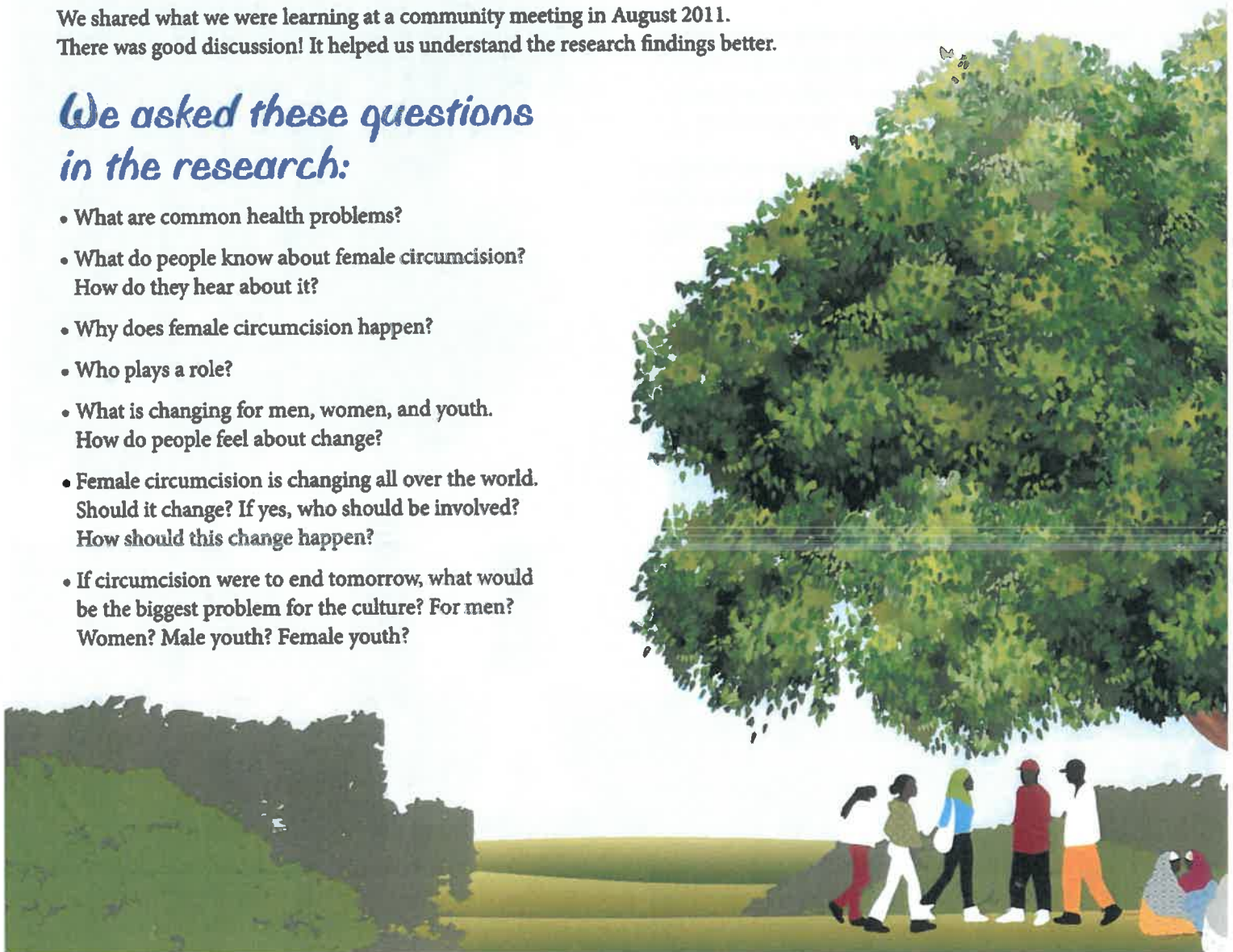
We held 5 focus groups (discussion groups for research) and spoke with 45 men, women, young men and young women. The groups were held in first language and then translated into English.

People who came to the groups were asked to give “informed consent” so they knew why the group was being held and what would be done with the information.

We shared what we were learning at a community meeting in August 2011. There was good discussion! It helped us understand the research findings better.

We asked these questions in the research:

- What are common health problems?
- What do people know about female circumcision?
How do they hear about it?
- Why does female circumcision happen?
- Who plays a role?
- What is changing for men, women, and youth.
How do people feel about change?
- Female circumcision is changing all over the world.
Should it change? If yes, who should be involved?
How should this change happen?
- If circumcision were to end tomorrow, what would be the biggest problem for the culture? For men? Women? Male youth? Female youth?





Is there communication about these issues?

Adult Men Said:

“Families don’t share that much information among their family members, and this topic especially it’s a taboo.”

Adult Women Said:

“Presently, the parents are discussing about things, but before they didn’t discuss.”

Young Men Said:

“Families don’t share a lot of information with us; especially these sexual topics, simply because it’s a taboo for them.”

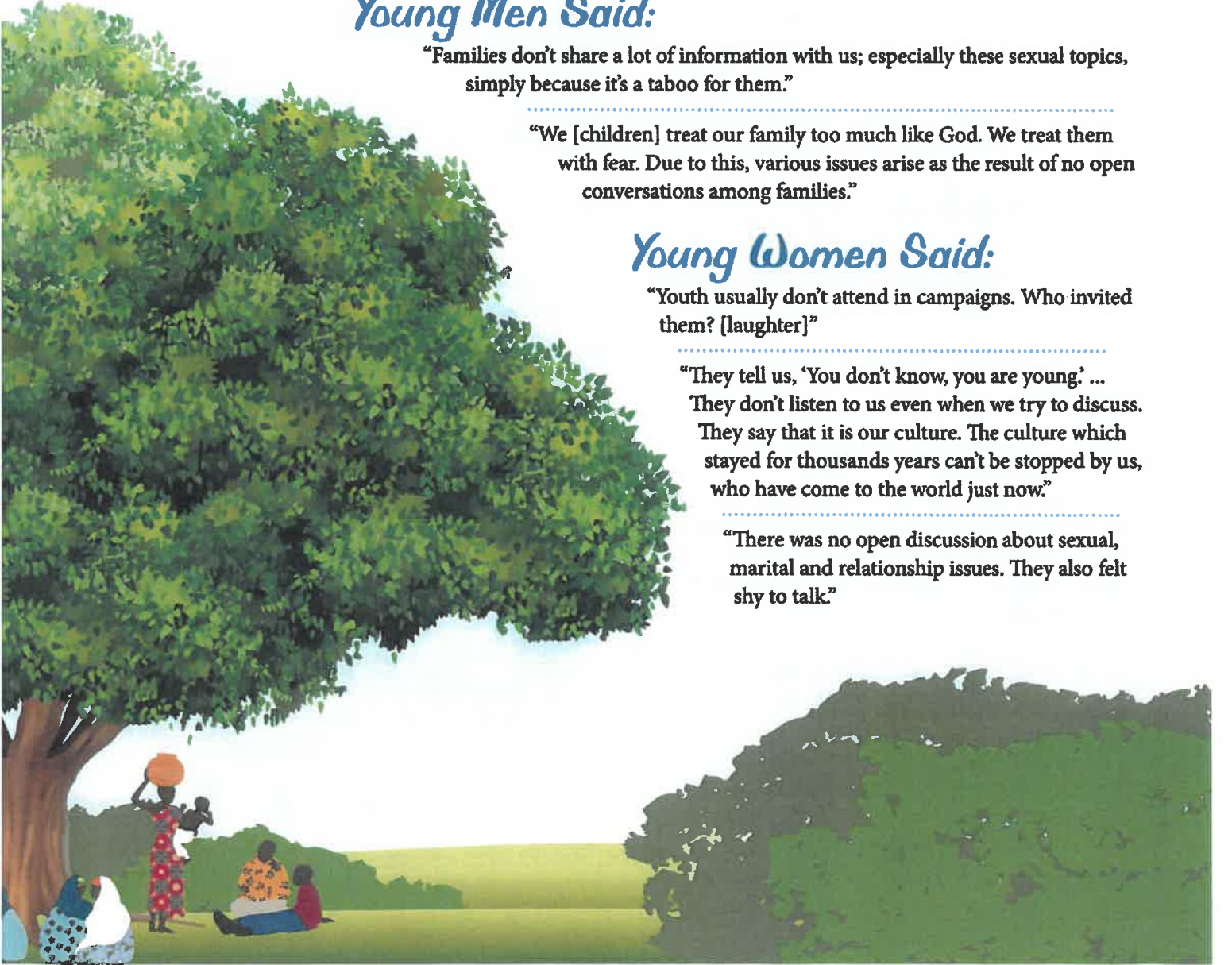
“We [children] treat our family too much like God. We treat them with fear. Due to this, various issues arise as the result of no open conversations among families.”

Young Women Said:

“Youth usually don’t attend in campaigns. Who invited them? [laughter]”

“They tell us, ‘You don’t know, you are young.’ ... They don’t listen to us even when we try to discuss. They say that it is our culture. The culture which stayed for thousands years can’t be stopped by us, who have come to the world just now.”

“There was no open discussion about sexual, marital and relationship issues. They also felt shy to talk.”





Why does circumcision happen?

Adult Men Said:

“Our parents used to practice it to protect their daughters. They also believed that if a girl is not circumcised she tends to be highly motivated for any sexual activity.”

“I know they were doing it to protect their daughters; they had a strong belief that their daughter won't be raped easily.”

Adult Women Said:

“The reason for female circumcision is to make her polite, to prevent her from becoming hyper, to prevent her from looking [for] extramarital sex, to prevent her from misbehaving.”

“I don't think it is because of being circumcised or not circumcised. ... There are women who perform extramarital sex though they are circumcised.”

Young Men Said:

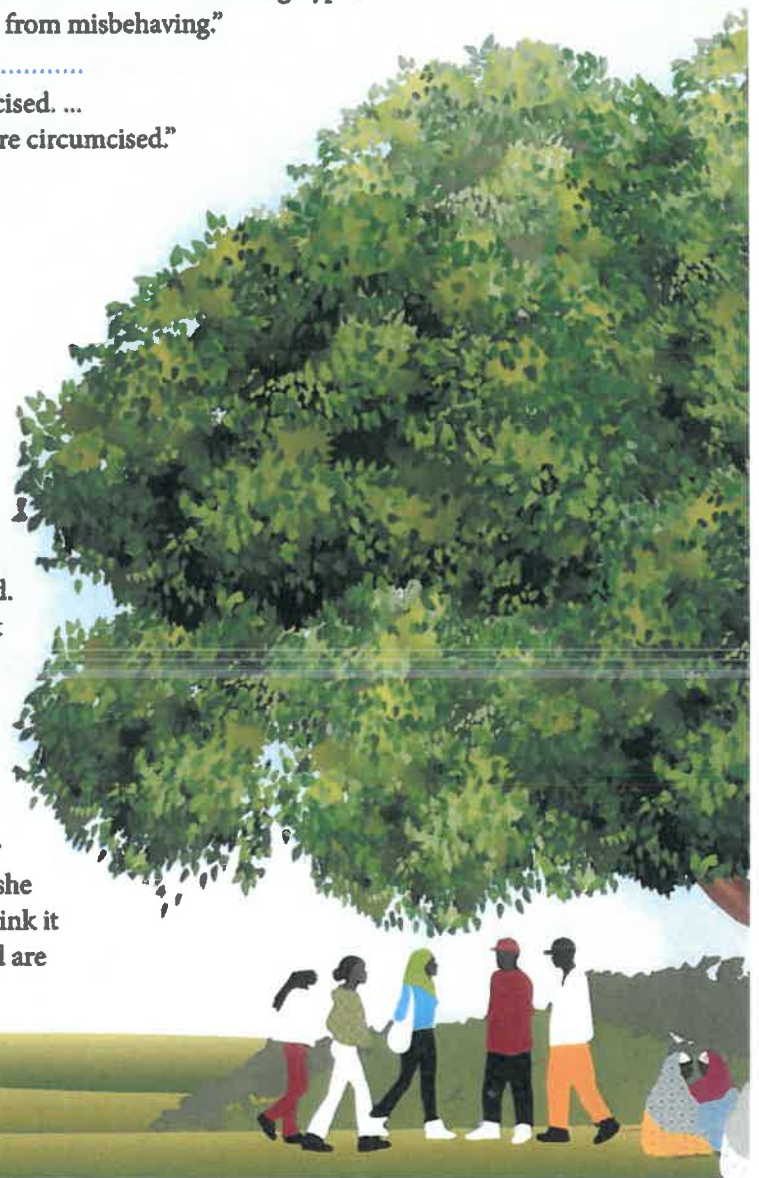
“I think they do it because they believe that it's a good thing to perform it because they got the approval from culture. Simply because culture tells them to do it.”

“I heard that women lose their sexual desire once they get circumcised.”

Young Women Said:

“My aunt used to tell me before. A female must be circumcised. Because if a girl is not circumcised, she will have more interest for sex, she will not be able to control her feelings. ... She told me that a woman must be circumcised. But in Canada a female is not circumcised.”

“But if you let her to grow in good manners, if you teach her which is bad and which is good behavior, if you advise her in which way to go, and the religious commandments, things she must not do—why do you have to worry about that? I don't think it will stop her from doing it. Many women who are circumcised are doing whatever they want to do. So I don't see the point.”





Who plays a role?

Adult Men Said:

“Most of the time it’s women that decide in circumcising their daughters. Men don’t participate. It is a business of women; they come together and circumcise their daughters.”

“When we were in our country years ago, it was women’s decision in anything in their daughter’s life. Nowadays things have changed a lot. Men have equal or even greater authority than women regarding their daughters.”

Adult Women Said:

“Women can do it without the knowledge of men. It is acceptable in the culture.”

“The men usually don’t have a deep knowledge of what is happening to the children as ... they are busy by work. This culture is changing these days. Presently, the parents are discussing about things, but before they didn’t discuss. ... A few couples communicate but usually mothers decide more about necessary things for the family.”

“Men don’t want circumcision because they want to have sex with her in the way she was supposed to be naturally, but parents think it will help them to control their children. He might need an uncircumcised wife, but for his daughter he might need her to be circumcised. [laughter] Therefore, the parent male and the husband male might have different views.”

Young Men Said:

“Youth don’t have any role, all the role is under the family, elders and mostly women.”

Young Women Said:

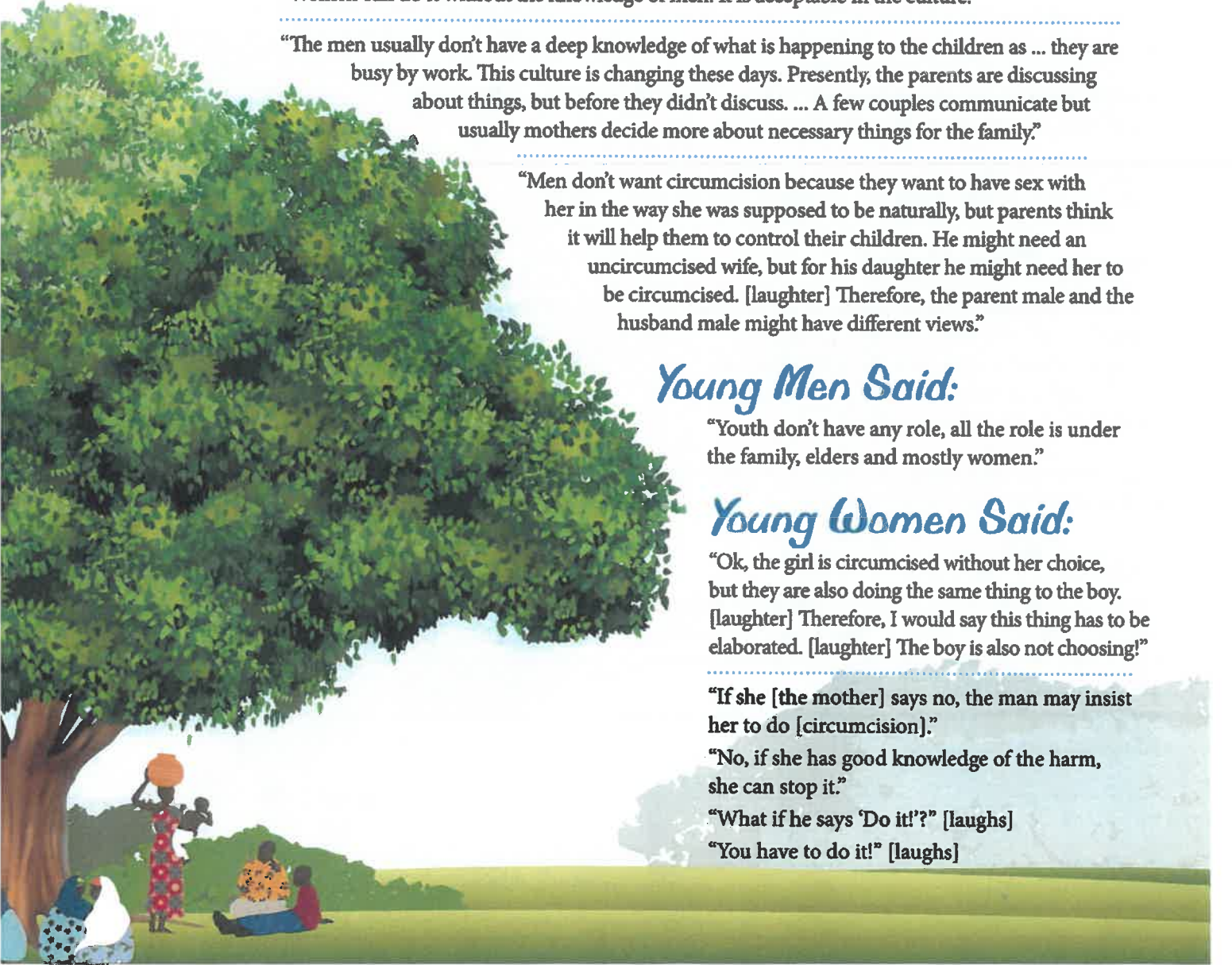
“Ok, the girl is circumcised without her choice, but they are also doing the same thing to the boy. [laughter] Therefore, I would say this thing has to be elaborated. [laughter] The boy is also not choosing!”

“If she [the mother] says no, the man may insist her to do [circumcision].”

“No, if she has good knowledge of the harm, she can stop it.”

“What if he says ‘Do it!’?” [laughs]

“You have to do it!” [laughs]



Are ideas changing about chastity and virginity?

Adult Men Said:

"I think years ago [circumcision] used to affect marriage choices but nowadays I don't think so. Before people used to care about virginity of a girl before marriage but nowadays, no."

"Virginity is the dignity of the women, to keep her dignity."

Adult Women Said:

"If it is not done, it has harm ... and it has this and this many benefits for the future."
(In our workshops, many women felt that circumcision ensures virginity, which was necessary for marriage.)

"I think female circumcision helps, I don't know ... but when you compare our women and Western women, there is a great difference."

"If you see closely when you circumcise, you are harming the woman. ... Even it can have a harmful result on the future marriage of the woman"

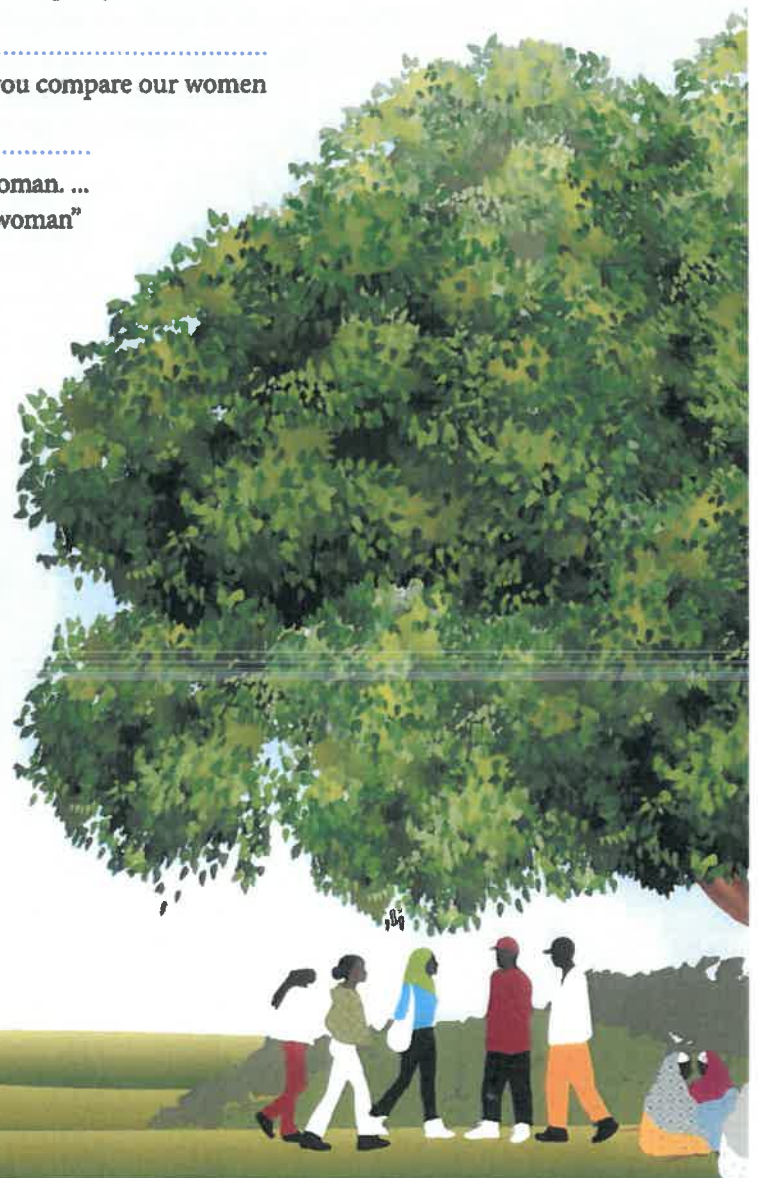
Young Men Said:

"It's not only culture which is the problem now, I am afraid that culture is disappearing but believing [in circumcision] is alive. I am afraid that they still believe that if she is circumcised she will remain virgin until the day of her marriage."

"I guess we youth, especially men, most of us will accept to get married to a girl who is not virgin."

Young Women Said:

"If you in are in [country name] ... the girl has to keep her virginity. If she doesn't keep her virginity that is the end of her married life. However, here, if you don't get married you can accomplish many things. You can work and can support yourself. You can also support your siblings. But here Canadians seem not to consider virginity."





Can circumcision affect marriage?

Adult Men Said:

“When we come to marriage choices I think people are starting to understand many sexual problems that affect marriage.”

Adult Women Said:

“If it causes problems in our marriage, it has to stop. We will live a married life, most of our life is married; therefore, it is affecting all our later life. The time we stay with our parents is short compared to married time. If it affects marriage, I think it has to stop.”

“I heard many divorce are resulted because of sexual issues. In our country if you ask a woman what was the cause of the divorce she says [word in own language], ‘I don’t want to keep living there.’ She doesn’t open her mouth and say. When we don’t talk, the trauma may not be expressed.”

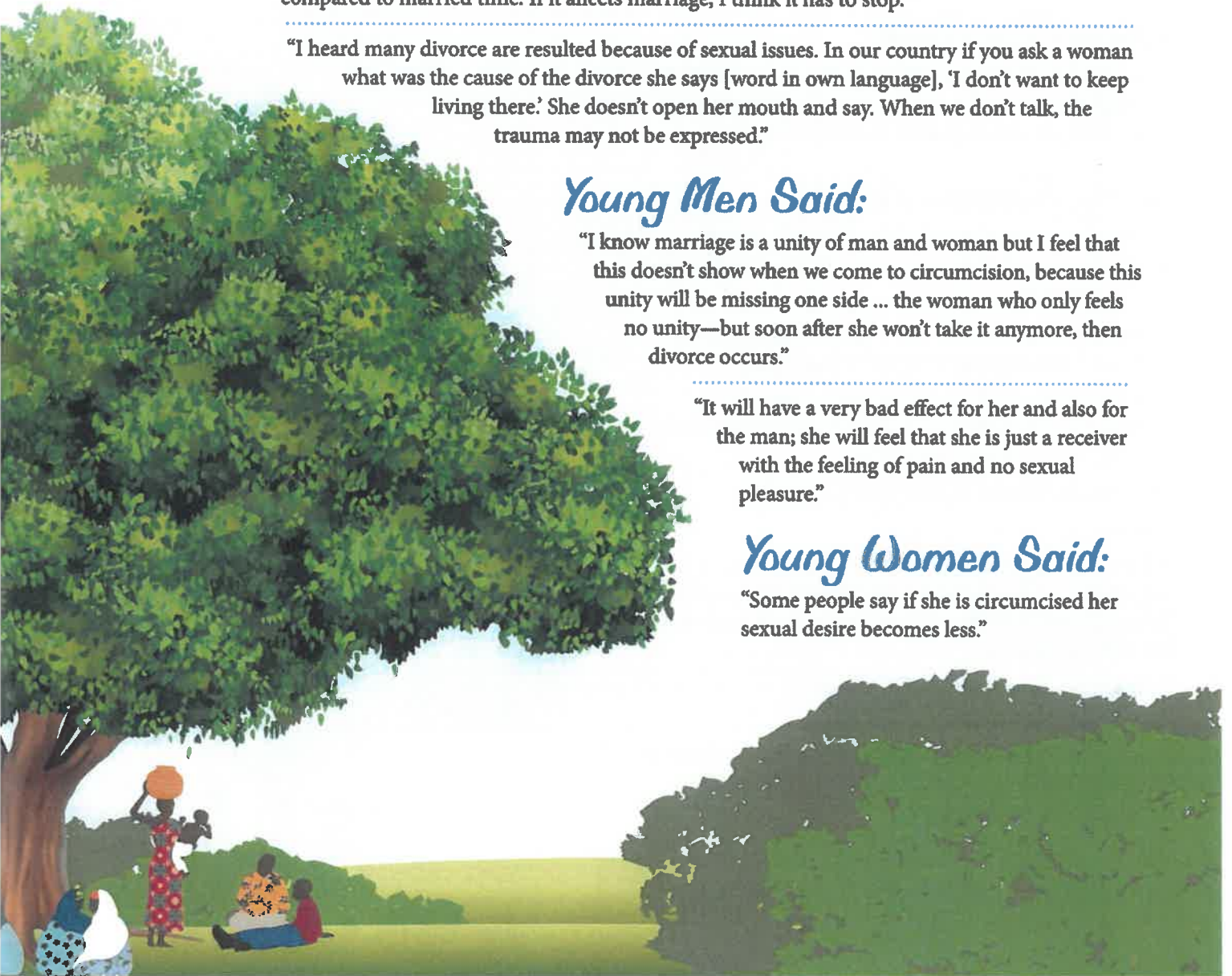
Young Men Said:

“I know marriage is a unity of man and woman but I feel that this doesn’t show when we come to circumcision, because this unity will be missing one side ... the woman who only feels no unity—but soon after she won’t take it anymore, then divorce occurs.”

“It will have a very bad effect for her and also for the man; she will feel that she is just a receiver with the feeling of pain and no sexual pleasure.”

Young Women Said:

“Some people say if she is circumcised her sexual desire becomes less.”



Does circumcision cause harm?

Adult Men Said:

"Mostly, we see women lose their life while they give birth, and some they lose a large amount of blood. We as men, we have to care about them, because she is the family tree root."

"When they perform circumcision they don't have any medical knowledge and equipment. They can't provide blood to the women after being circumcised."

Adult Women Said:

"Even if we are hurt, as a woman we don't open our mouth and say it."

Young Men Said:

"Yes, I guess it will have a bad impact because she won't have the sexual desire, and this will make the sexual activity very poor. This also means they won't have a beautiful relationship; it's also more likely to [lead to] divorce."

Young Women Said:

"It can cause problems to the health of the woman. The sexual desire also can be reduced. Even it can also affect the fertility. She can become infertile."

"I didn't get your point. Do you mean if some organs are injured as a consequence of female circumcision?"

"No, I think she can't become infertile because of circumcision. The fertility part of the woman's body is not on the place where circumcision is done."

"She may experience problems during labour."

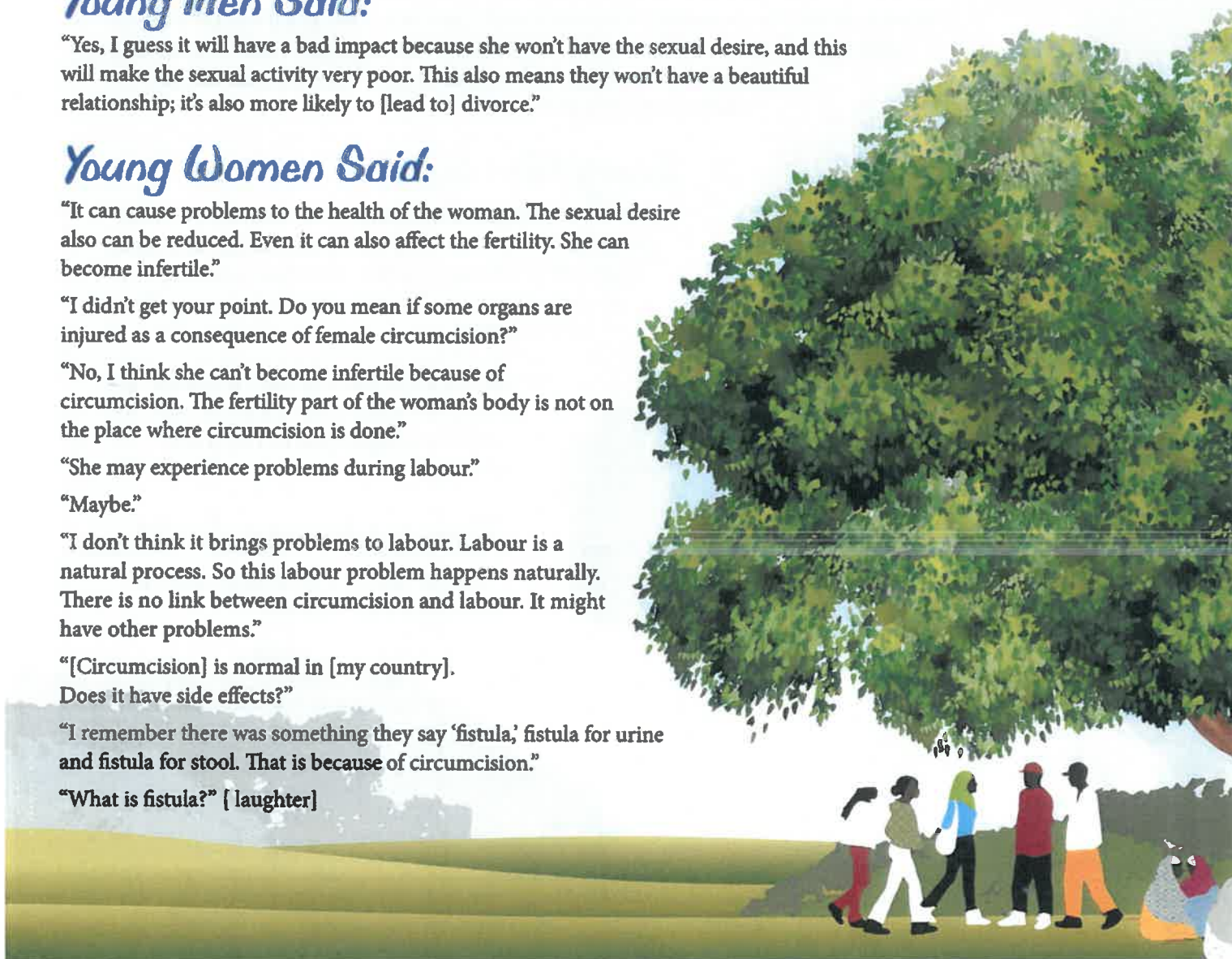
"Maybe."

"I don't think it brings problems to labour. Labour is a natural process. So this labour problem happens naturally. There is no link between circumcision and labour. It might have other problems."

"[Circumcision] is normal in [my country]. Does it have side effects?"

"I remember there was something they say 'fistula,' fistula for urine and fistula for stool. That is because of circumcision."

"What is fistula?" [laughter]





Changes back home

Adult Men Said:

“Back at home our government officially stopped female circumcision, but people do it in their own ways. In [my country] they said it is illegal but nobody will follow you.”

Adult Women Said:

“Though it is being spoken, it is not stopped.”

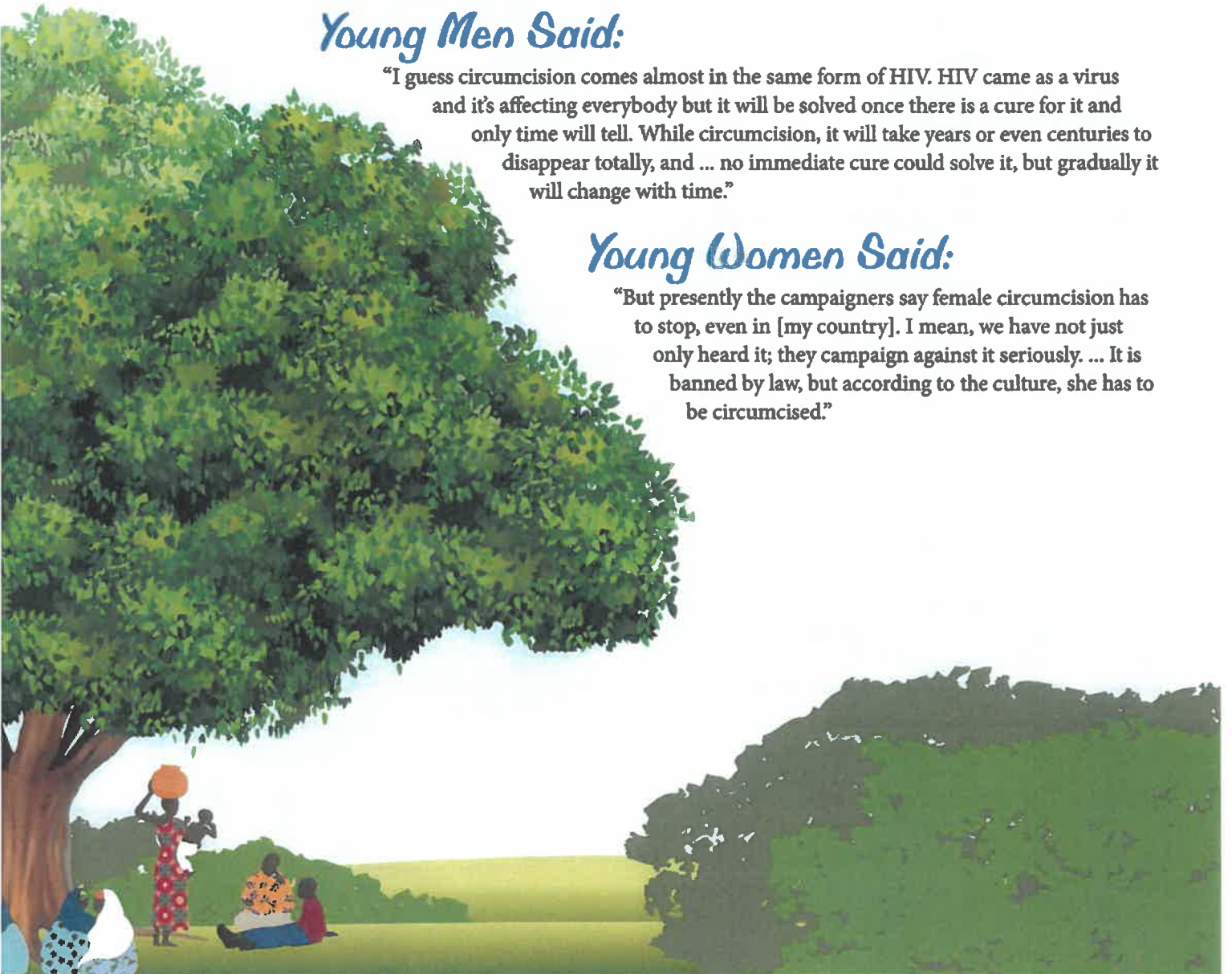
“On TV they say when they circumcise the female they are taking away her rights. They teach us that we are taking her rights.”

Young Men Said:

“I guess circumcision comes almost in the same form of HIV. HIV came as a virus and it's affecting everybody but it will be solved once there is a cure for it and only time will tell. While circumcision, it will take years or even centuries to disappear totally, and ... no immediate cure could solve it, but gradually it will change with time.”

Young Women Said:

“But presently the campaigners say female circumcision has to stop, even in [my country]. I mean, we have not just only heard it; they campaign against it seriously. ... It is banned by law, but according to the culture, she has to be circumcised.”



Changes in Canada...

Adult Men Said:

"I know it's a criminal offence in Canada so I guess many people will respect the law."

"This is something we have to know! It's our culture so it's a must to keep your culture—even though I am a Canadian still my origin matters. So we have to keep our tradition but only the right one."

"Every culture anywhere has negative and positive sides, so we as human beings we should analyze and avoid those cultural beliefs and practices that create any harm to anyone."

Adult Women Said:

"Environment also colonizes people. Here when you give birth to a girl, if you want her to get circumcised ... where can you find a circumciser? There is no one. Wherever you go you will be ruled by the environment."

Young Men Said:

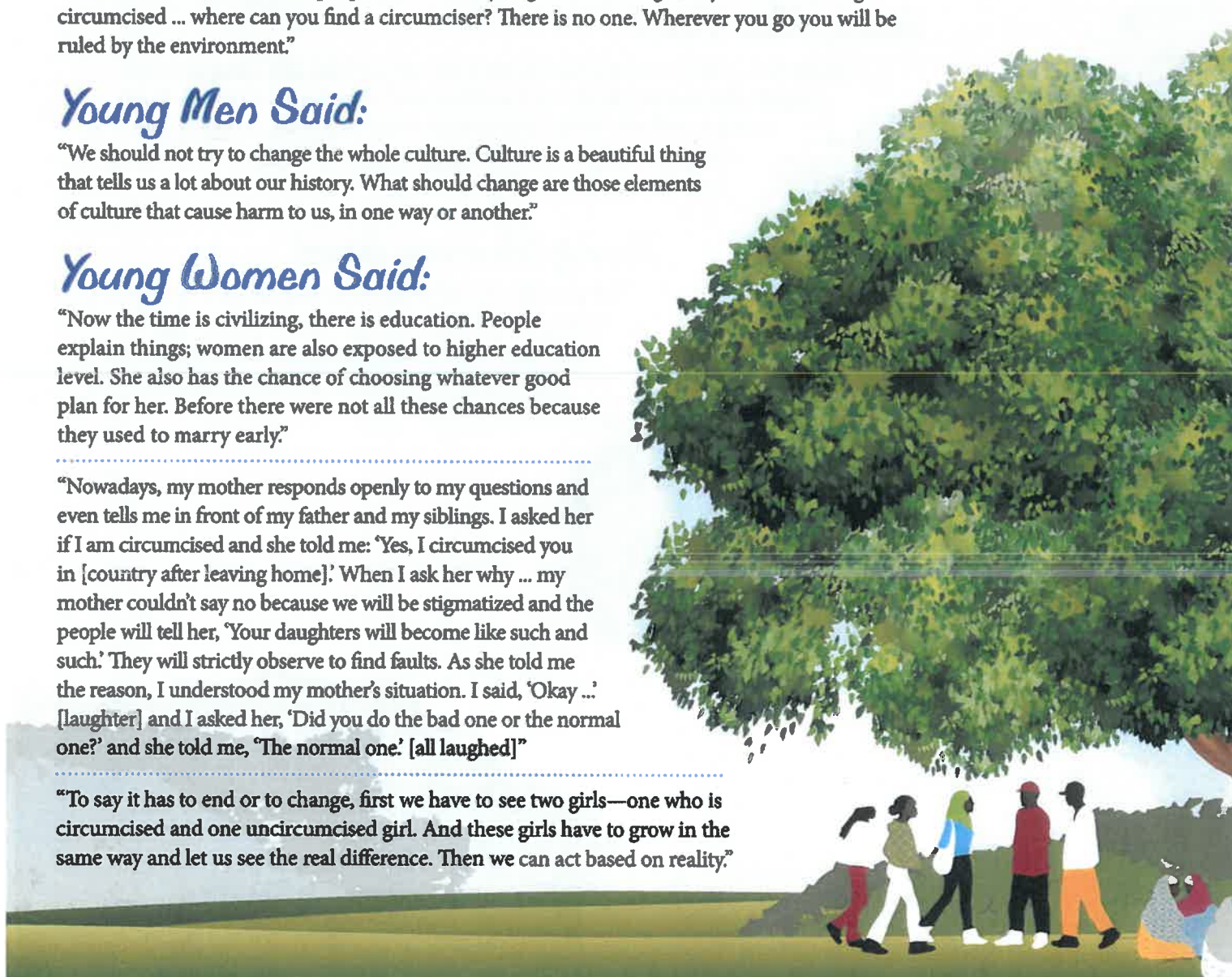
"We should not try to change the whole culture. Culture is a beautiful thing that tells us a lot about our history. What should change are those elements of culture that cause harm to us, in one way or another."

Young Women Said:

"Now the time is civilizing, there is education. People explain things; women are also exposed to higher education level. She also has the chance of choosing whatever good plan for her. Before there were not all these chances because they used to marry early."

"Nowadays, my mother responds openly to my questions and even tells me in front of my father and my siblings. I asked her if I am circumcised and she told me: 'Yes, I circumcised you in [country after leaving home]'. When I ask her why ... my mother couldn't say no because we will be stigmatized and the people will tell her, 'Your daughters will become like such and such.' They will strictly observe to find faults. As she told me the reason, I understood my mother's situation. I said, 'Okay ...' [laughter] and I asked her, 'Did you do the bad one or the normal one?' and she told me, 'The normal one.' [all laughed]"

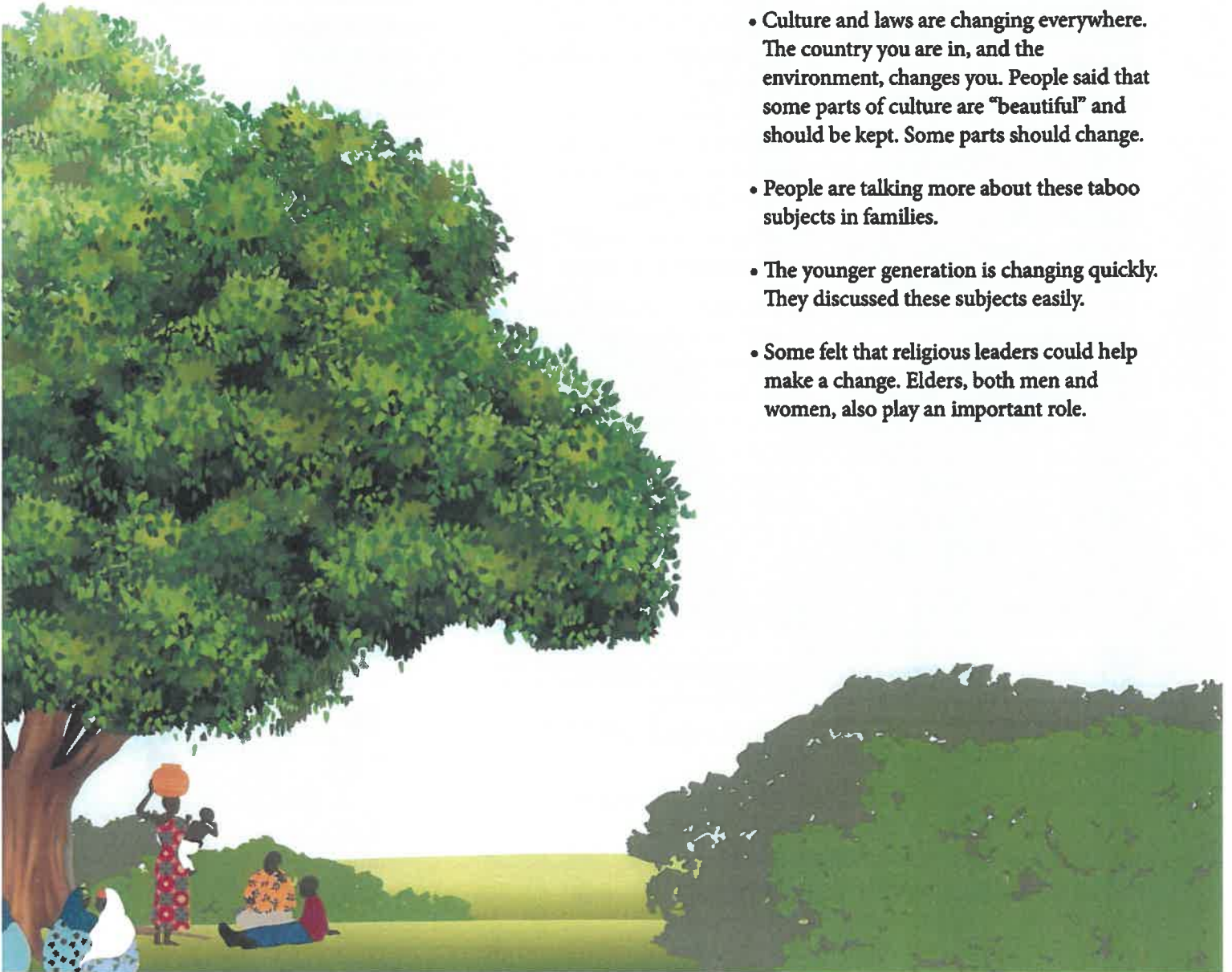
"To say it has to end or to change, first we have to see two girls—one who is circumcised and one uncircumcised girl. And these girls have to grow in the same way and let us see the real difference. Then we can act based on reality."





Some interesting things we learned in the research:

- Male youth are especially concerned about marrying circumcised girls. They are worried about intimacy in the marriage. They wonder how closeness and the sexual relationship might be affected.
- Some are saying that the virginity of the girl for marriage is not so important now.
- Many women and female youth do not know that some common women's health problems may be caused by circumcision. Because almost everyone is circumcised, it is seen as normal. Also, women do not talk about their suffering.
- Many men (adults and youth) have strong feelings that female circumcision should end.
- Culture and laws are changing everywhere. The country you are in, and the environment, changes you. People said that some parts of culture are "beautiful" and should be kept. Some parts should change.
- People are talking more about these taboo subjects in families.
- The younger generation is changing quickly. They discussed these subjects easily.
- Some felt that religious leaders could help make a change. Elders, both men and women, also play an important role.



Some Facts About Women's Health

- At some clinics and hospitals, you can get a free health interpreter. You can ask them: "Please arrange for an interpreter who speaks [your language]. Call 788-8585".
- Back home, people usually go to the doctor only when they are sick. In Canada, there are many tests to find an illness early on, or prevent it. You can see a doctor for a "regular checkup."
- We know that people often believe that health problems and bad luck are caused by evil spirits, or a curse.
- However, research shows that female circumcision can cause much harm depending upon how it is done. Here are some examples of harm:
 - When it happens to the baby or girl, it can cause infection, the wound may not heal well, she may bleed badly.
 - Sometimes other body parts are hurt because the circumciser cuts the wrong parts. In some cases, the child may be blocked from urinating (peeing).
 - She may catch a disease from an unclean blade. She may die.
- Sometimes harm can occur over many years:
 - Some women have serious problems in labour and childbirth (having a baby). Sometimes recovering (getting better) after birth is also very hard.
 - Sometimes, a "fistula" is caused (a tear between inner body parts, that can cause pain, suffering, and a strong smell).
 - Women can have difficulties with menstruation (monthly blood flow) and in peeing. This can cause embarrassment and shame.
 - Sometimes they get many infections, which can cause infertility (when a woman cannot have a baby).
- In many countries, female circumcision is now illegal.
- In Canada, it is against the law to carry out female circumcision on anyone under 18 years. If someone sends a girl back home to be circumcised, they can also be charged with a crime. It is important that people know the laws.

What can YOU do?

- Put this booklet where people can see it, read it, and talk about it. Use this booklet to help you talk about this taboo subject.
- Talk to your husband, wife, parents and friends about female circumcision. What do they believe about it?
- Think about how culture is changing—what do you like to keep? What do you want to change? What do others think?
- Get help if you have problems with your health.
- Contact Simret Daniel at SERC if you have more questions or want information.



We would like to thank the many community members and leaders who shared your thoughts and stories in this research, and who supported the project. Your openness and cultural wisdom helped us all learn together. This project is a partnership between the community and SERC which is a non-profit agency that promotes sexual health through education.

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This booklet and the full report are available at: www.serc.mb.ca
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