

# Talking Together About Change:

## *Consulting with a Third Community*

**This booklet is based on research we did with the community.**

The “Our Selves, Our Daughters” Project has been working with three newcomer communities over the past five years. This booklet is about the third community.

We started to work on women’s health issues and traditional practices like female circumcision with one newcomer community. When that project was successful, we started to work with your community, because women from your community asked for this.

We learned from the first community that it was important to talk to everyone – men and women, adults and youth - about these issues. We also met with leaders.

Everyone we talked to thought it was a good idea to discuss these issues more. “This is a good idea,” said one leader, “Women have many issues - much knowledge too ... Circumcision is one issue, but there are many issues surrounding this issue.”

In doing this research, we learned a lot. We have made two reports. One is a long report with all the information we learned. You can get it on SERC’s website.

This booklet was made for the community. In it, we have picked some of your words and ideas to share. This can help people start talking about change.

#### OUR TEAM:

Community-based research team:

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## *How did we do the research?*

**In 2012 and 2013**, we hired people from the community to be a “community-based research team.”

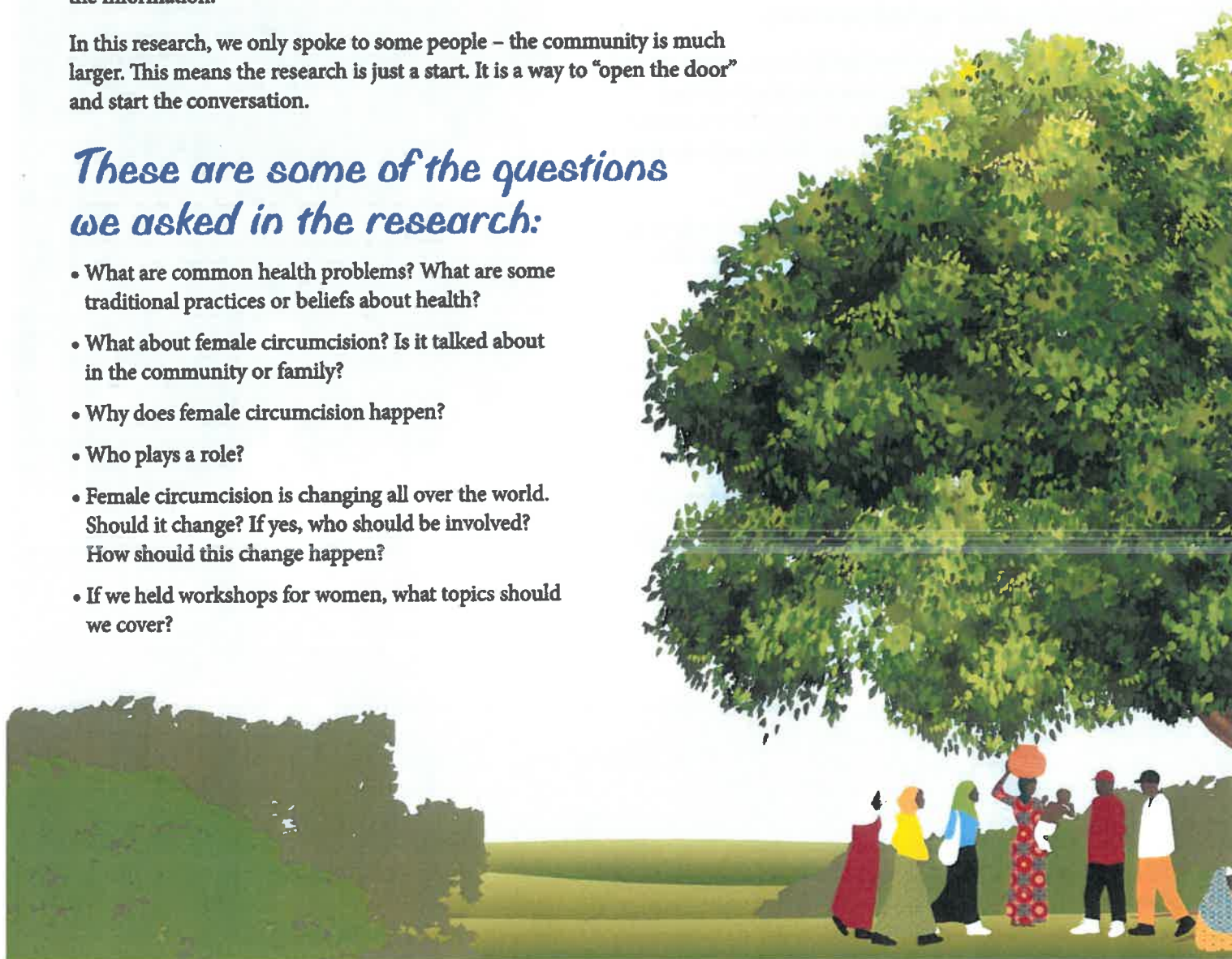
First we met with leaders to get their opinions and support. We then held two focus groups (discussion groups for research) with women, and one group each with adult men, young men and young women. In total we spoke with 57 people from the community.

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.

In this research, we only spoke to some people – the community is much larger. This means the research is just a start. It is a way to “open the door” and start the conversation.

### *These are some of the questions we asked in the research:*

- What are common health problems? What are some traditional practices or beliefs about health?
- What about female circumcision? Is it talked about in the community or family?
- Why does female circumcision happen?
- Who plays a role?
- Female circumcision is changing all over the world. Should it change? If yes, who should be involved? How should this change happen?
- If we held workshops for women, what topics should we cover?





# *Is there communication about these issues?*

## *Women Said:*

“Yeah, it is discussed within the family.” (most agreed)

## *Men Said:*

“Because of the negative impact and experience, grown women are even terrified to speak about their experience due to trauma.”

## *Young Women Said:*

“Everyone is trying to understand what circumcision is nowadays.”

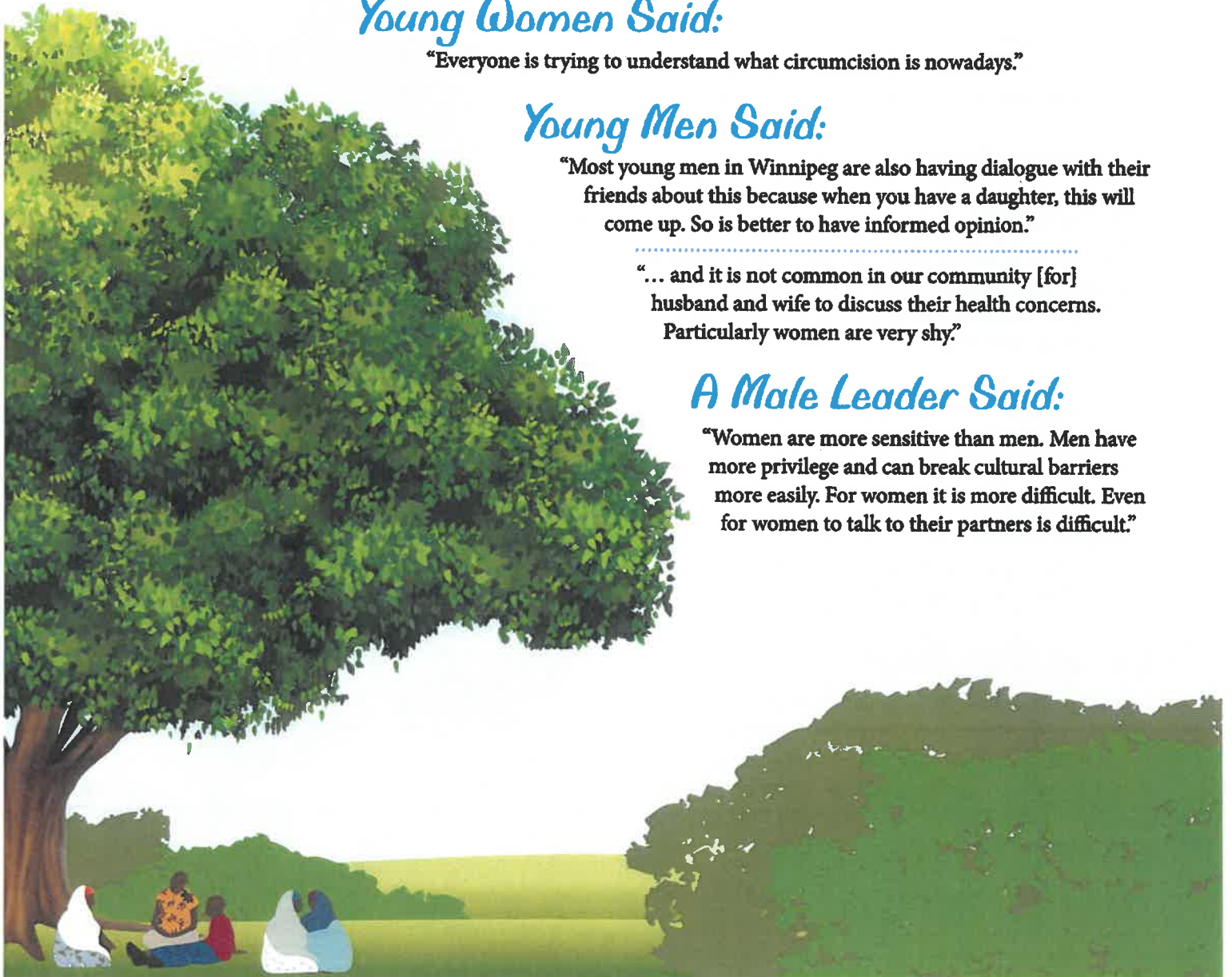
## *Young Men Said:*

“Most young men in Winnipeg are also having dialogue with their friends about this because when you have a daughter, this will come up. So is better to have informed opinion.”

.....  
“... and it is not common in our community [for] husband and wife to discuss their health concerns. Particularly women are very shy.”

## *A Male Leader Said:*

“Women are more sensitive than men. Men have more privilege and can break cultural barriers more easily. For women it is more difficult. Even for women to talk to their partners is difficult.”





# Why does female circumcision happen?

## Women Said:

"I don't know - it's cultural."

"It's old habit."

"The mothers do circumcision because the girl will be given bad name if she is not circumcised. She will not be married too." (most agreed)

"To purify the girl."

"To decrease sexual desire."

"The genitalia will become beautiful."

"The girl will be accepted and respected."

## Men Said:

"Because of strong beliefs, girls who are not circumcised are considered dirty and not qualified to be married, not Muslim. And the main reason this practice happens is lack of education and awareness."

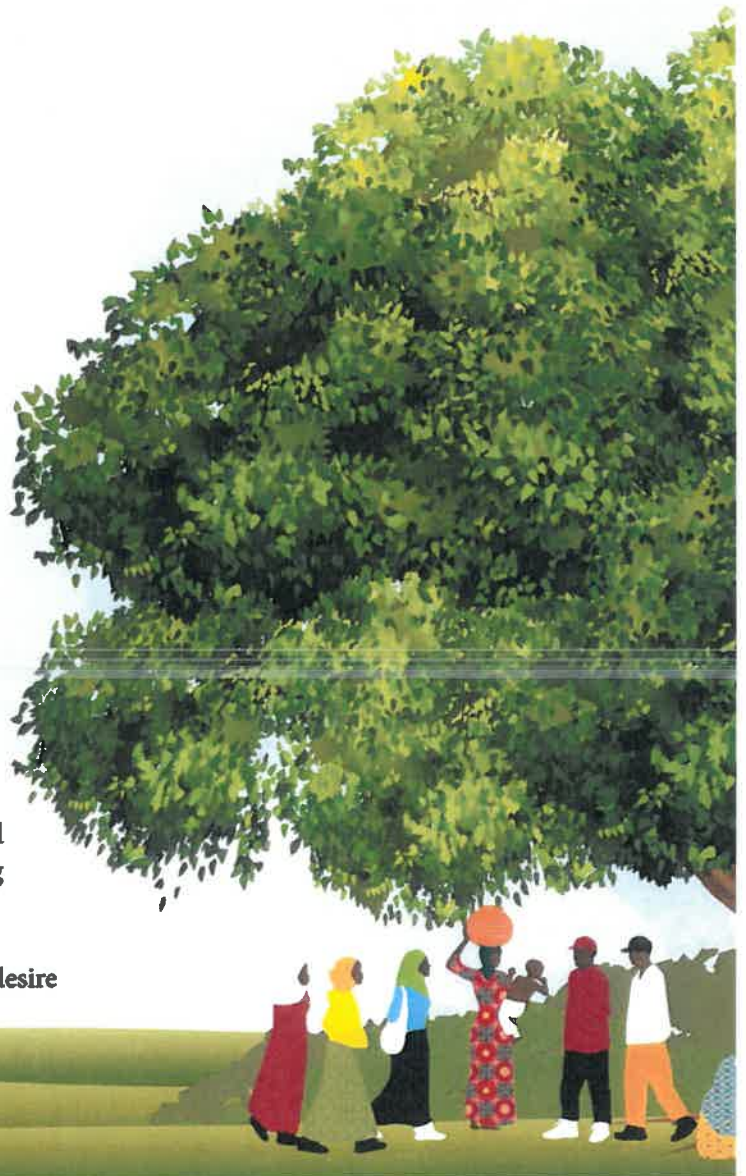
"When men marry, especially when they live in [home country], or other [similar] countries, [they] marry a circumcised woman, [and] take pride."

## Young Women Said:

"Parents believe girls will have less interest in having sex or thinking about it when they are circumcised."

## Young Men Said:

"People don't want to give away their traditional practices, and they want to be proud. People have been doing this for so long and it has become social thing; every girl is circumcised so is like social liking. The other thing that is happening is that many believe that [they are] able to control their girls' sexual desire and their sexuality in general."





# Who plays a role?

## Women Said:

“It’s cultural – mother brings it up and tells the father.”

## Men Said:

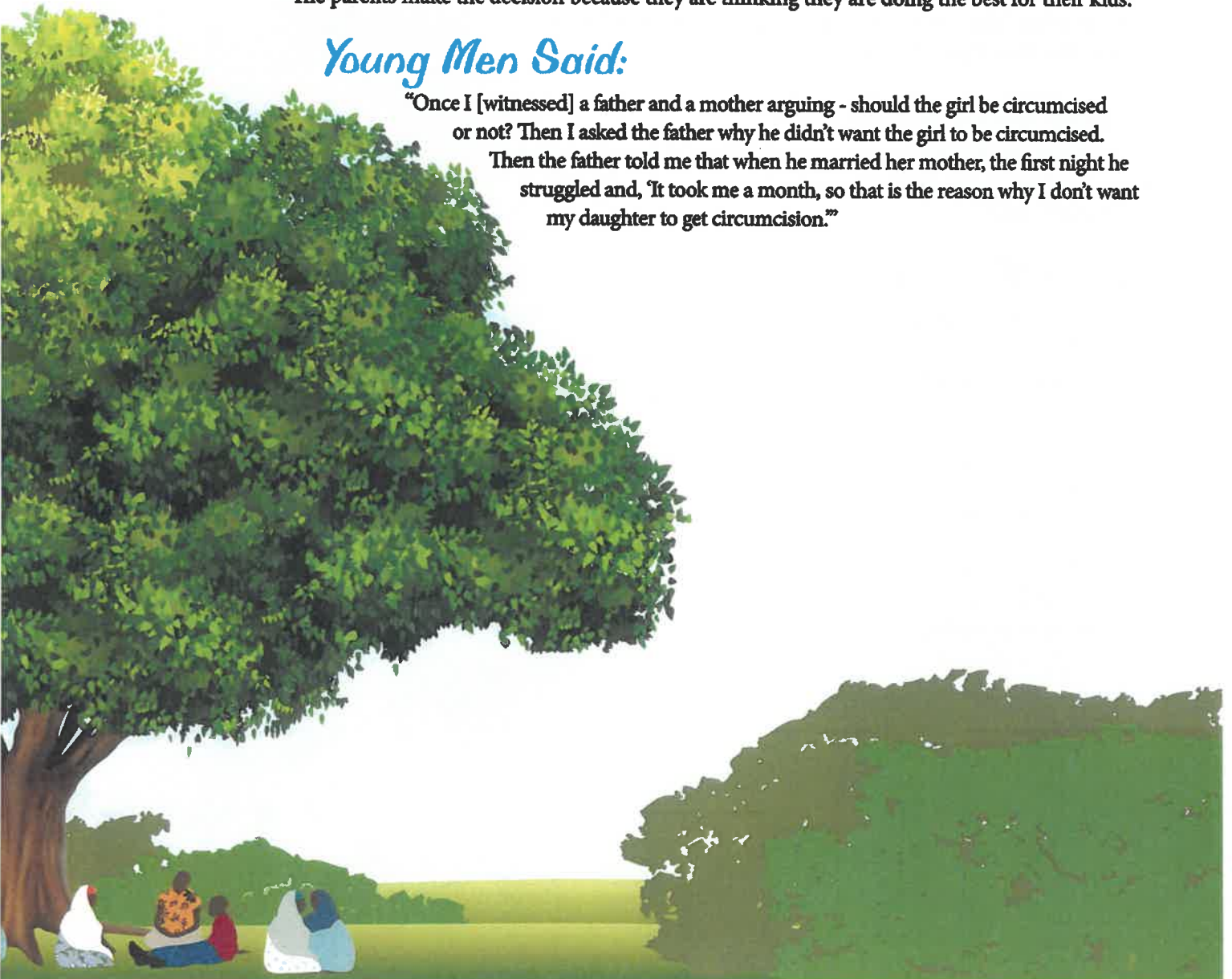
“This is the only time when a women can disobey the men, and men have no power because his own mother and his mother-in-law are both in agreement with the wife’s decision.”

## Young Women Said:

“The parents make the decision because they are thinking they are doing the best for their kids.”

## Young Men Said:

“Once I [witnessed] a father and a mother arguing - should the girl be circumcised or not? Then I asked the father why he didn’t want the girl to be circumcised. Then the father told me that when he married her mother, the first night he struggled and, It took me a month, so that is the reason why I don’t want my daughter to get circumcision.”







# Are ideas changing about chastity and virginity?

## Women Said:

"Men prefer the stitched woman - if not, he will divorce the wife."

## Men Said:

"Men are ... proud of marrying a girl who didn't have sexual intercourse with another man (some of the group said that). Because you are the first men who opens the vagina, will provide self-satisfaction."

"If you married a lady and she is virgin, the groom will shave his hair. If not virgin, [he will] not do anything."

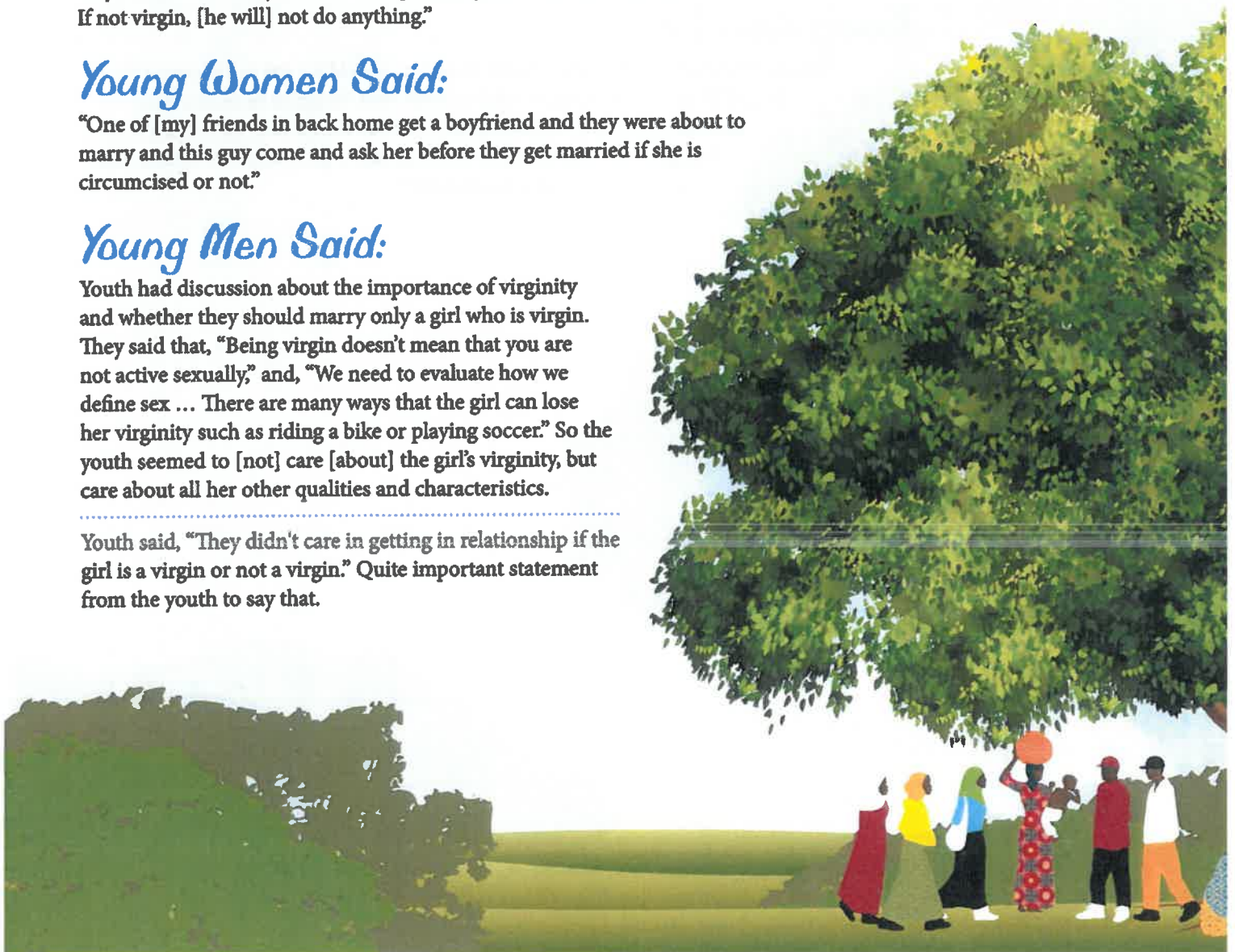
## Young Women Said:

"One of [my] friends in back home get a boyfriend and they were about to marry and this guy come and ask her before they get married if she is circumcised or not."

## Young Men Said:

Youth had discussion about the importance of virginity and whether they should marry only a girl who is virgin. They said that, "Being virgin doesn't mean that you are not active sexually," and, "We need to evaluate how we define sex ... There are many ways that the girl can lose her virginity such as riding a bike or playing soccer." So the youth seemed to [not] care [about] the girl's virginity, but care about all her other qualities and characteristics.

Youth said, "They didn't care in getting in relationship if the girl is a virgin or not a virgin." Quite important statement from the youth to say that.







# Can circumcision affect marriage and relationships?

## Women Said:

"Men don't like it because it affects the sex life. They think that she will not enjoy sex and she won't have an orgasm. Sometimes it could be until the third birth that she experiences painful sex."

"Sometimes the woman's sexual urge is not there because of circumcision. This leads to divorce."

"When a man comes (showing a sign that he is ready for sex) the woman says, 'Go away.'" (all laugh)

## Men Said:

In terms of the bad effects of female circumcision on men, they talked about how they have seen people getting divorce. All the group sympathized for the girls who have become victims of this practice and clearly indicate that they want to stop. Men can't enjoy with their newly married women during their honeymoon if the girl is cut and stitched, then they have to take to a doctor and pay money for her to be opened. Later when she becomes pregnant she will suffer and during birth she will even suffer more.

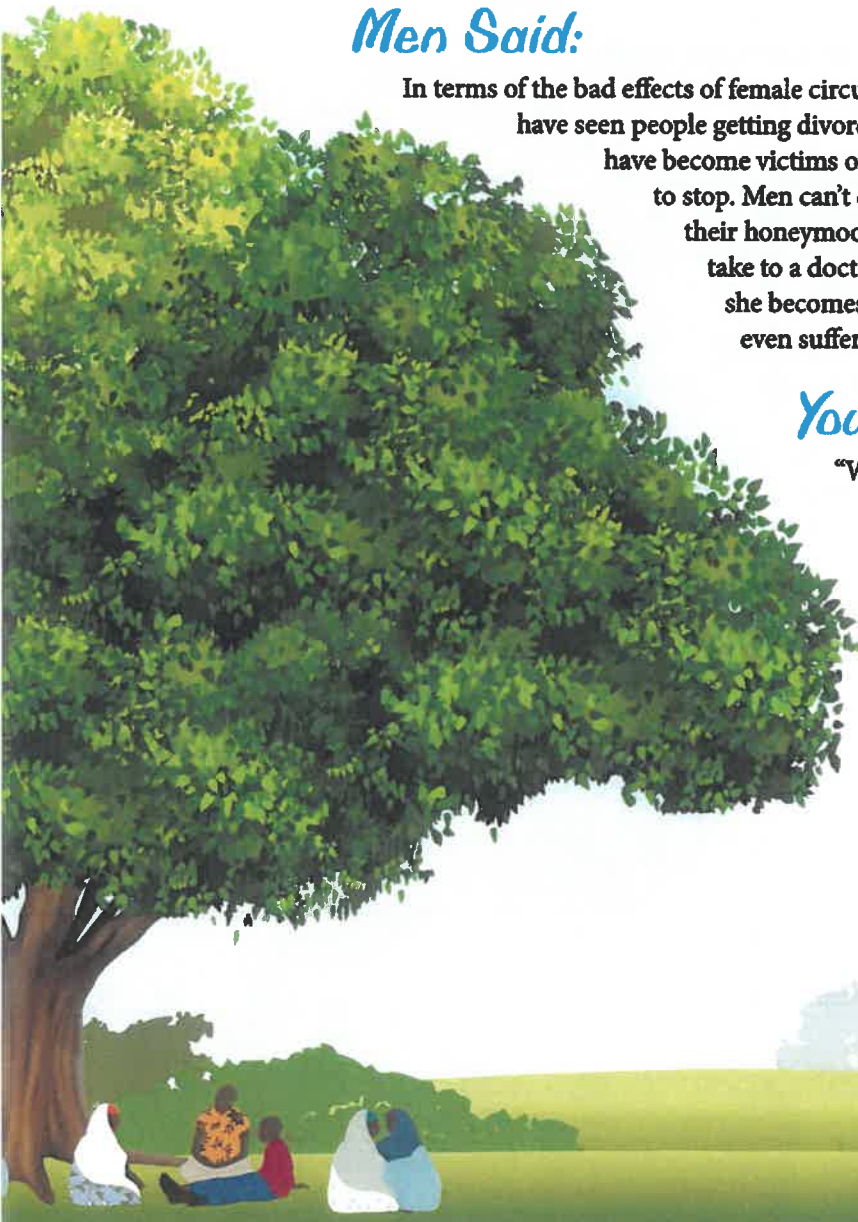
## Young Women Said:

"Would it affect marriage choices? Yes because [community] men think that all good women have to be circumcised."

"Circumcision has bad impacts because it's going to be hard for the women to have kids (the whole group agrees)."

## Young Men Said:

"Due to the practice of female circumcision, a lot of our women, their sexual desire is compromised. To be frank, the girls don't enjoy sexual pleasure or intercourse."





# Does circumcision cause harm?

## Women Said:

"The way woman are circumcised is wrong and it is becoming a major problem. But it is religious for boys. The Pharaoh type of circumcision is wrong and it leads to problems with her menstration. She might also have ongoing infection and she might lose sensitivity. During every child birth there could be complications."

"I have two years old daughter, during the childbirth, I got third degree tear (showing sign of pain). It was difficult to heal."

"A certain woman circumcised her daughter and her daughter bled a lot of blood and she became anemic. The father didn't consent to the circumcision."

"None that we can think of." (They look at each other and nod in agreement)

## Men Said:

"I have seen when the young girls in my community were going through the circumcision process. Little girls were crying loudly, and for me that was horrible. However, pain didn't stop there. I have seen them not been able sit for almost one month properly, can't go to the washroom, can't pee."

"The way they cut the girls and close the whole thing (vagina), and just leave a small place where even her blood clot can't even go through which then makes the girl to suffer for the rest of her life. This practice is based on ignorance because no one knows the health complications. Now many of the women complain about infections, back pain, kidney pain, lots of pain that's related to lower abdominal."

## Young Women Said:

"Circumcision is harmful and it causes so many problems when they give birth."

## Young Men Said:

"What we know is that there are a lot of negative impacts caused by the practice of female circumcision. They are suffering from infections. When they get married they struggle to give birth."

"My question is, what causes the negative health problem is it the cutting (sunnah) or the stitches (infibulation)?"







# Are things changing?

## Women Said:

"The sunnah style is much easier as there isn't any stitching involved but then only girls who had Pharaoh style were married in the past without any problems. But since then things have changed. People don't believe in this anymore."

"Some of them still do believe in it."

"Religious leaders teach against it and the law is changed. There are community campaigns against circumcision."

## Men Said:

"Generation is changing and people are getting to know how this practice is not Islamic. Religious leaders and community leaders are speaking out against the practice. The education and awareness is happening and community discussions like this are the way to move forward in educating our community. The community is in agreement that the female circumcision is harmful and that is not permitted religiously. Everyone is vocal that this practice is backward and not Islamic."

"No girl will accept to through female circumcision and the young boys are also not agreeing the practice of female circumcision."

## Young Women Said:

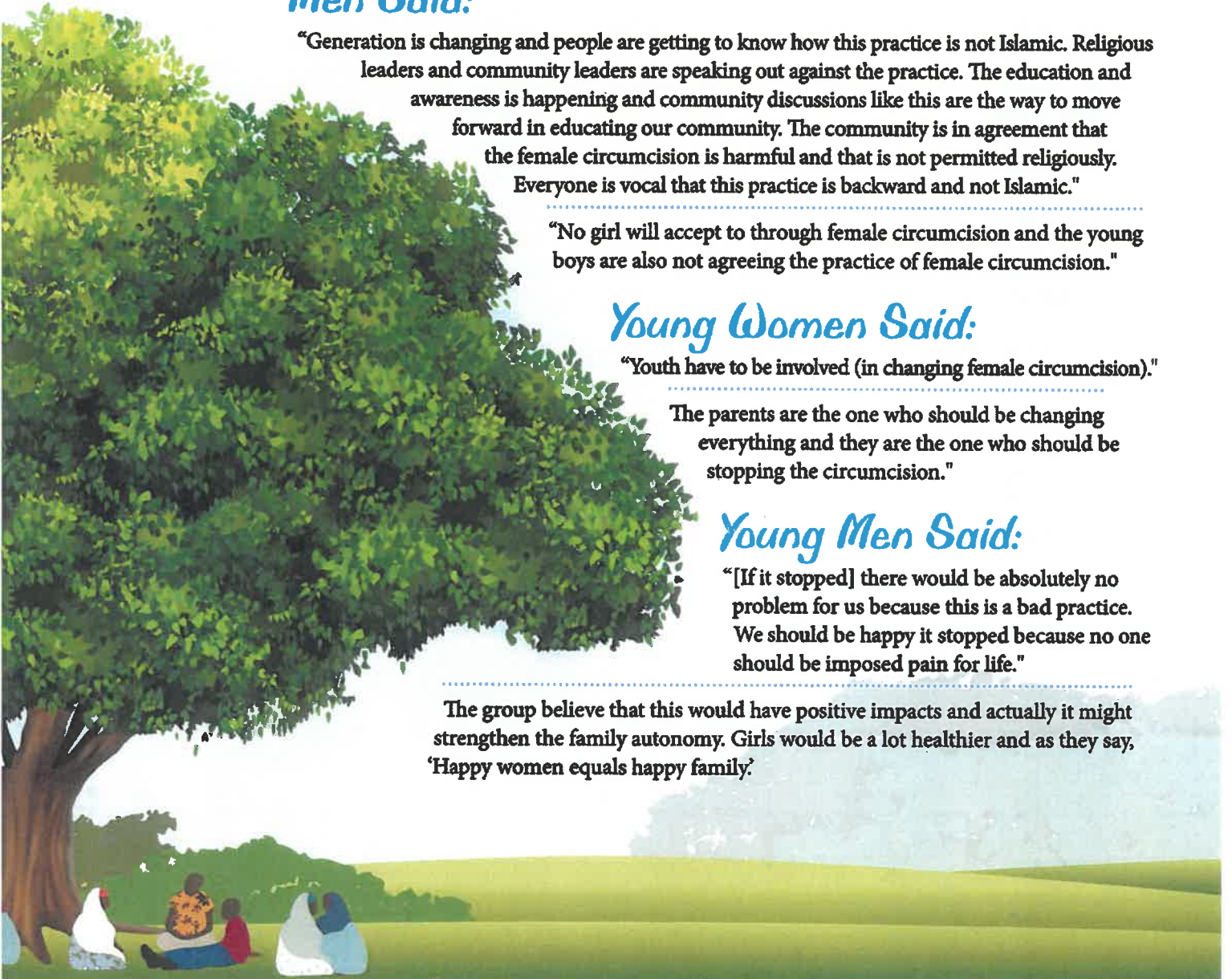
"Youth have to be involved (in changing female circumcision)."

The parents are the one who should be changing everything and they are the one who should be stopping the circumcision."

## Young Men Said:

"[If it stopped] there would be absolutely no problem for us because this is a bad practice. We should be happy it stopped because no one should be imposed pain for life."

The group believe that this would have positive impacts and actually it might strengthen the family autonomy. Girls would be a lot healthier and as they say, 'Happy women equals happy family.'







# What is the role of religion?

## Women Said:

"It is tradition and not religion."

"Religious leaders are always talking about it and asking people to stop."

## Men Said:

"What I am surprised is that for so long we have believe this [was] a religious practice, but then, now we know this is not a religious practice because clerks are now saying this practice is against Islamic religion and anybody who cuts a girl and bleeds will be held accountable for his actions in judgment day. So my question is - why the clerks didn't inform the community before?"

## Young Women Said:

"People are mixing between religions and culture so they don't know the point of circumcising the girls."

"Girl circumcision is not allowed in Islam."

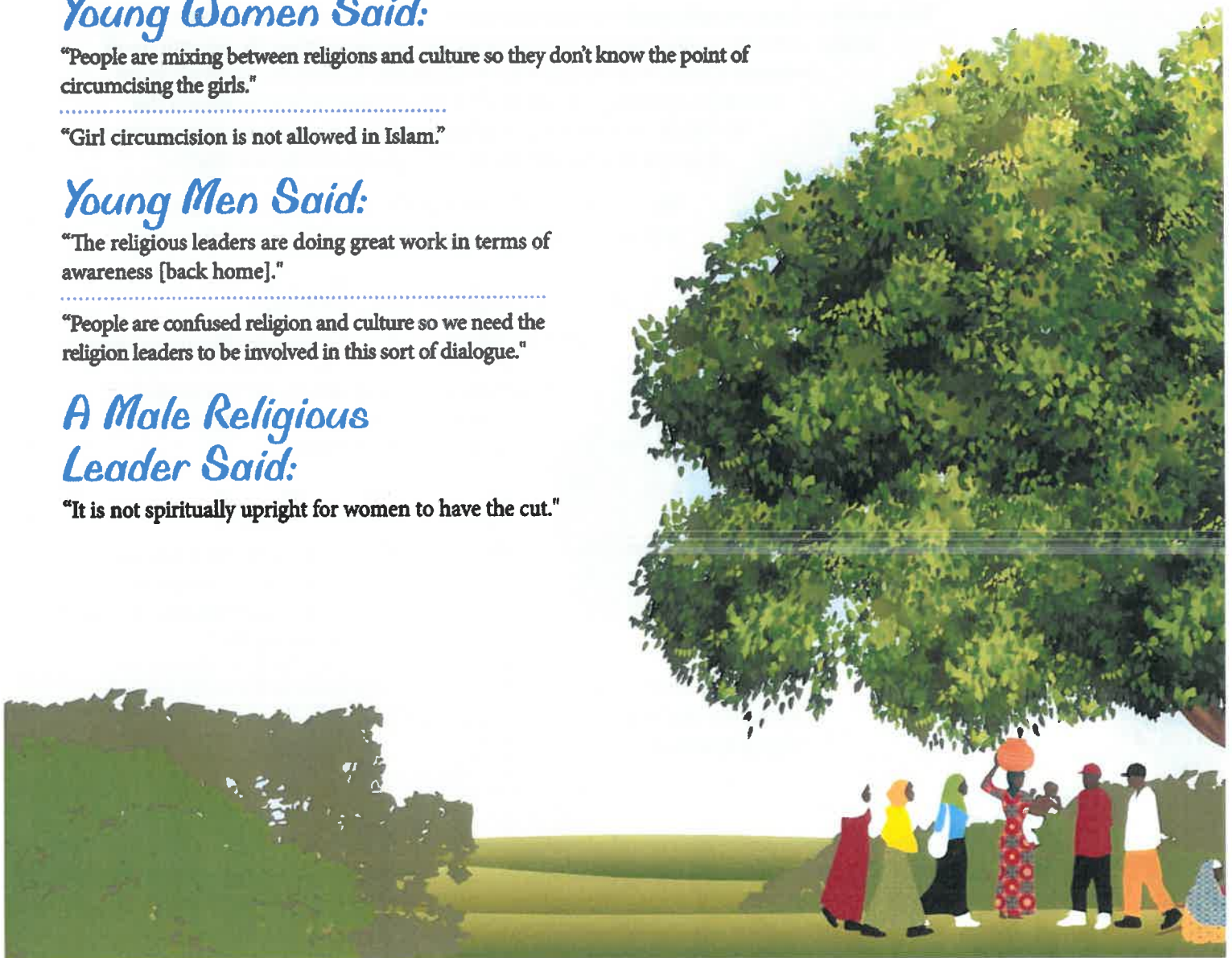
## Young Men Said:

"The religious leaders are doing great work in terms of awareness [back home]."

"People are confused religion and culture so we need the religion leaders to be involved in this sort of dialogue."

## A Male Religious Leader Said:

"It is not spiritually upright for women to have the cut."



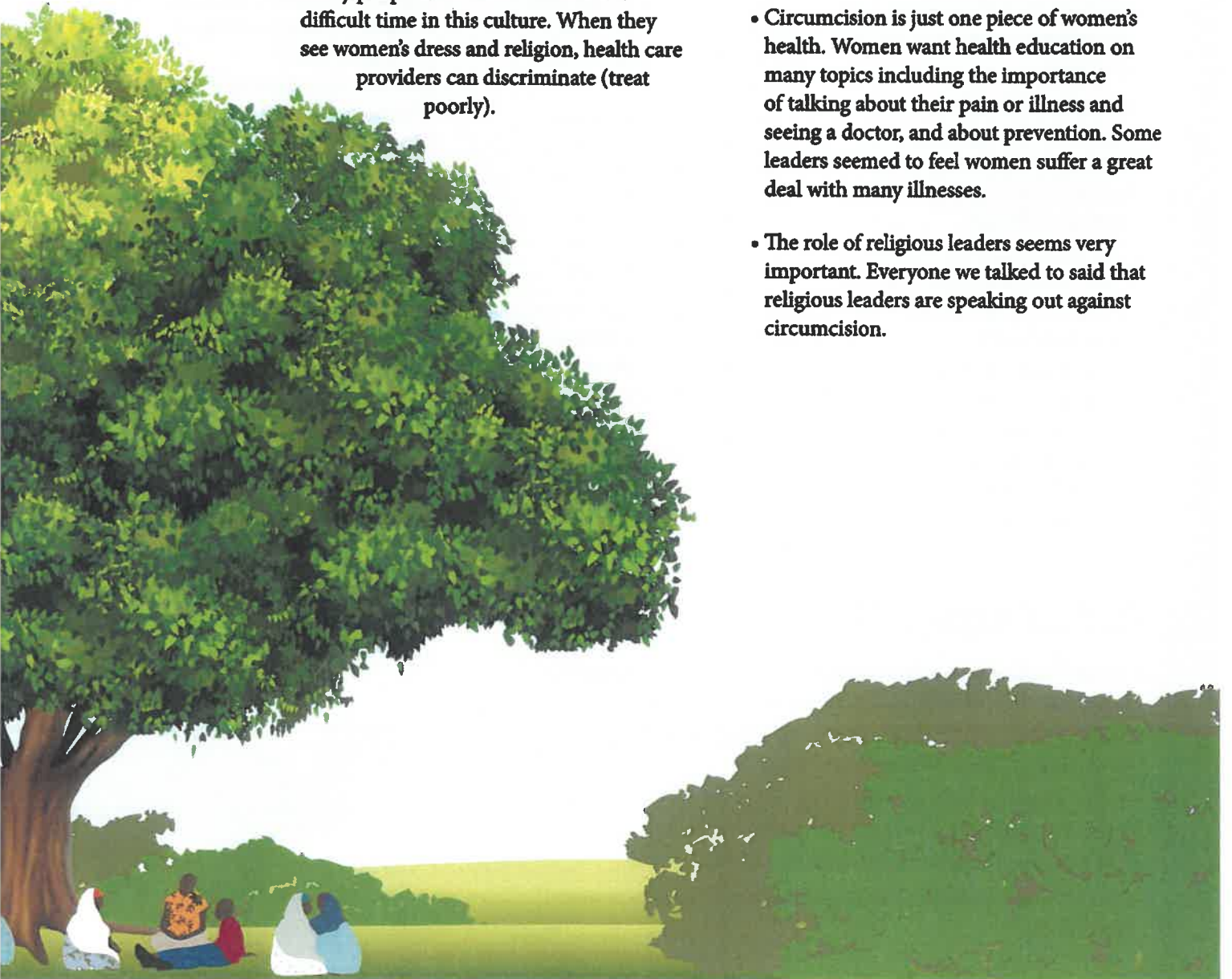




## Some interesting things we learned in the research:

**When you talk** to a small group of people in the community, it's a way of starting the conversation. Here is what we found:

- Most women (but not all) felt that circumcision was harmful. All the male leaders said it had to end and that it was harmful. Most youth, both male and female, also believed that it was harmful.
- Many people said that women have a difficult time in this culture. When they see women's dress and religion, health care providers can discriminate (treat poorly).
- One leader said, about women, that we should "teach them their rights."
- Some young women said circumcision is a form of discrimination and that parents do not have the right to circumcise them.
- Circumcision is just one piece of women's health. Women want health education on many topics including the importance of talking about their pain or illness and seeing a doctor, and about prevention. Some leaders seemed to feel women suffer a great deal with many illnesses.
- The role of religious leaders seems very important. Everyone we talked to said that religious leaders are speaking out against circumcision.





# 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 204-788-8585."
- 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.

Contact Simret Daniel, Project Facilitator, for more information:  
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This booklet and the full report are available at: [www.serc.mb.ca](http://www.serc.mb.ca)  
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