

Talking Together About Change

Consulting with a Second 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 second community.

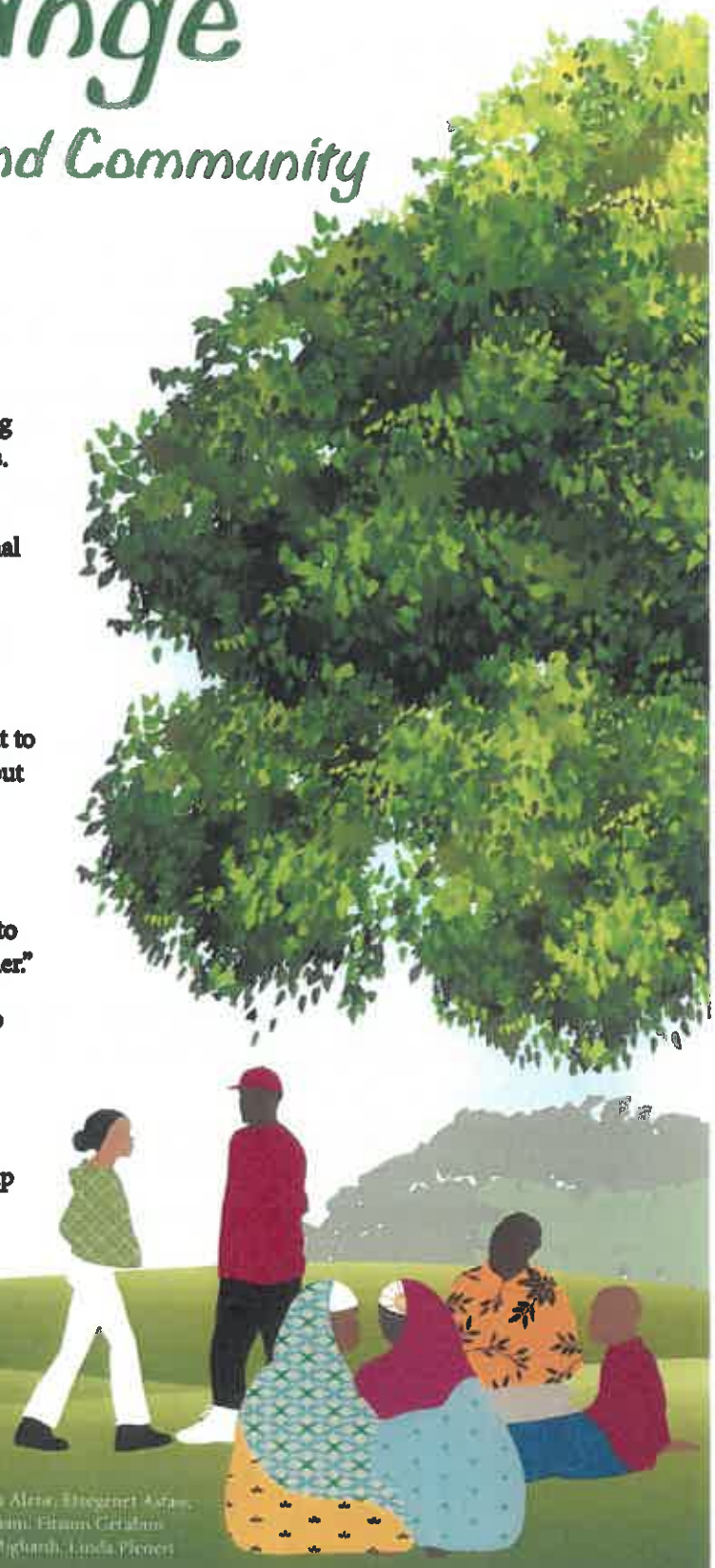
We started to work on women's health issues and traditional practices like female circumcision with one newcomer community. When that project was successful, we started to work with your community, because women from your community asked for this.

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 project is good," said one leader, "Especially with what happens with women. What we have to learn. Workshops are very good, [to] come and share together."

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.





How did we do the research?

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

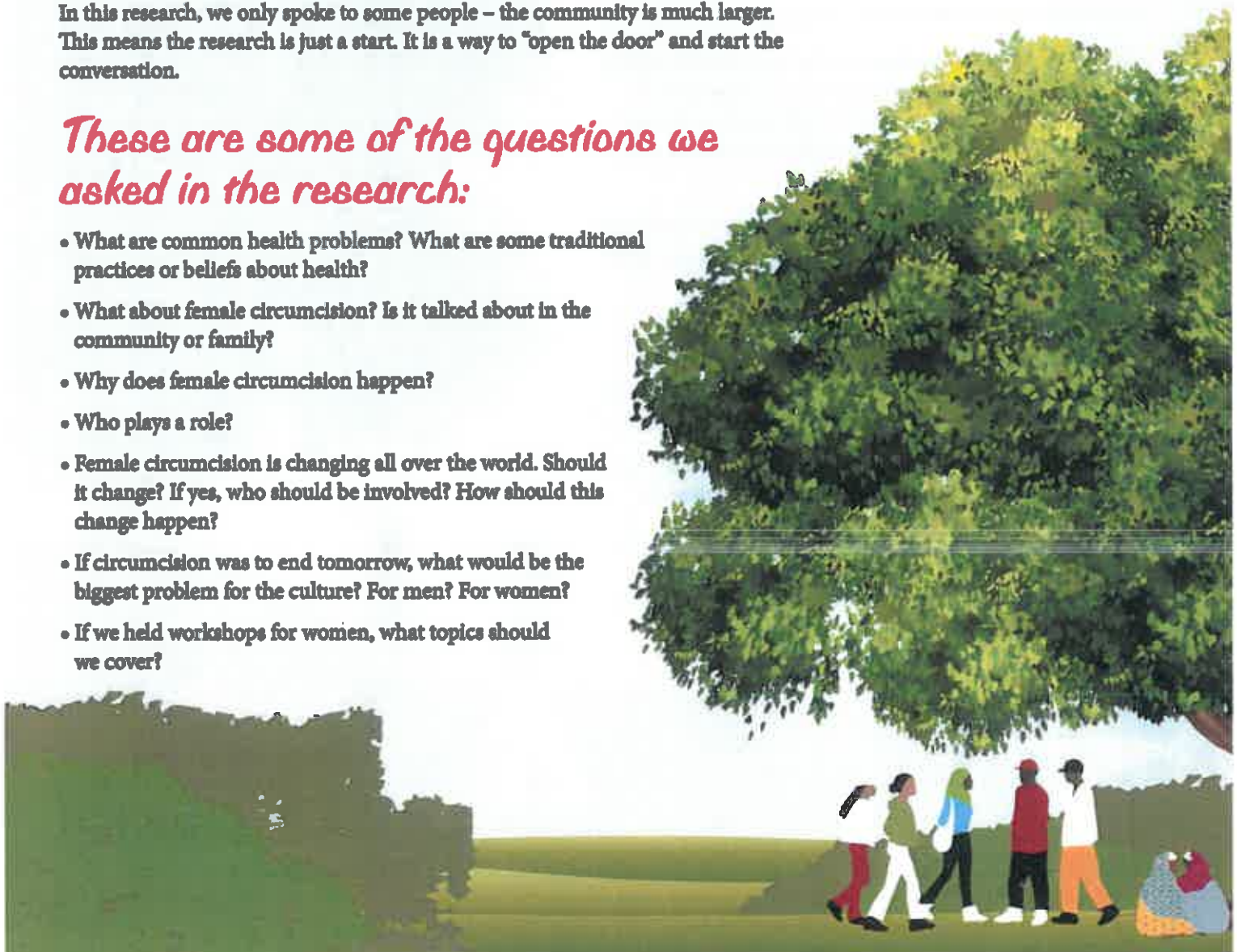
First we met with leaders, both men and women, to get their opinions and support. Then we held three focus groups with adults (discussion groups for research) - two groups with women, one with men. We also held a focus group each with young women and young men. In total, we spoke with 35 people from 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 circumcision was to end tomorrow, what would be the biggest problem for the culture? For men? For women?
- If we held workshops for women, what topics should we cover?





Is there communication about these issues?

Adult Women Said

"Sexuality is hardly discussed in the family, with children in [our] community. As children, we didn't know anything about period, what sex is, what to expect when we get married or have sex. It was a sign of decency not talking about this issue as children. We sometimes get a little information by talking to peers or from school."

"Yes, sometimes people talk about it. Some moms talk about the side effects of being circumcised."

Adult Men Said:

"Parents do not encourage these kinds of conversations, not helpful, it will arouse sexual interest. It is a taboo subject in the community especially not to be talked in front of the children."

Young Women Said:

"There is cultural influence when we compare back home to here. We don't talk about it in front of people back home. Youth have more voices here than back home."

"In my group (of friends) we talk about circumcision."

Young Men Said:

"In our culture we are reserved, we don't talk openly our private life like the Dr. Phil program. If we had such a program you would be able to hear many relationship issues. But we are reserved. They must speak to solve the issue."



Why does female circumcision happen?

Adult Women Said:

"To maximize chances of marriage: she will not have high sexual behaviour which might result in good behaviour and many proposals from men."

"Many problems happen to women. In our culture, girls have to be circumcised. When they are about 15, 16 they will be 'abducted' by a man who wished her to be his wife. If she is not circumcised earlier, her husband's family will perform the circumcision otherwise there would be no sexual intercourse ... It is so strange not to be circumcised. I know a lady who was never circumcised but married and had children. She was seen as a different creature in the community. A lot of finger pointing and whispering about her when we see her ... Circumcision is such a common practice."

"People say girls would misbehave (disobey parents, answer back, and will have difficult behaviours) if not circumcised."

Adult Men Said:

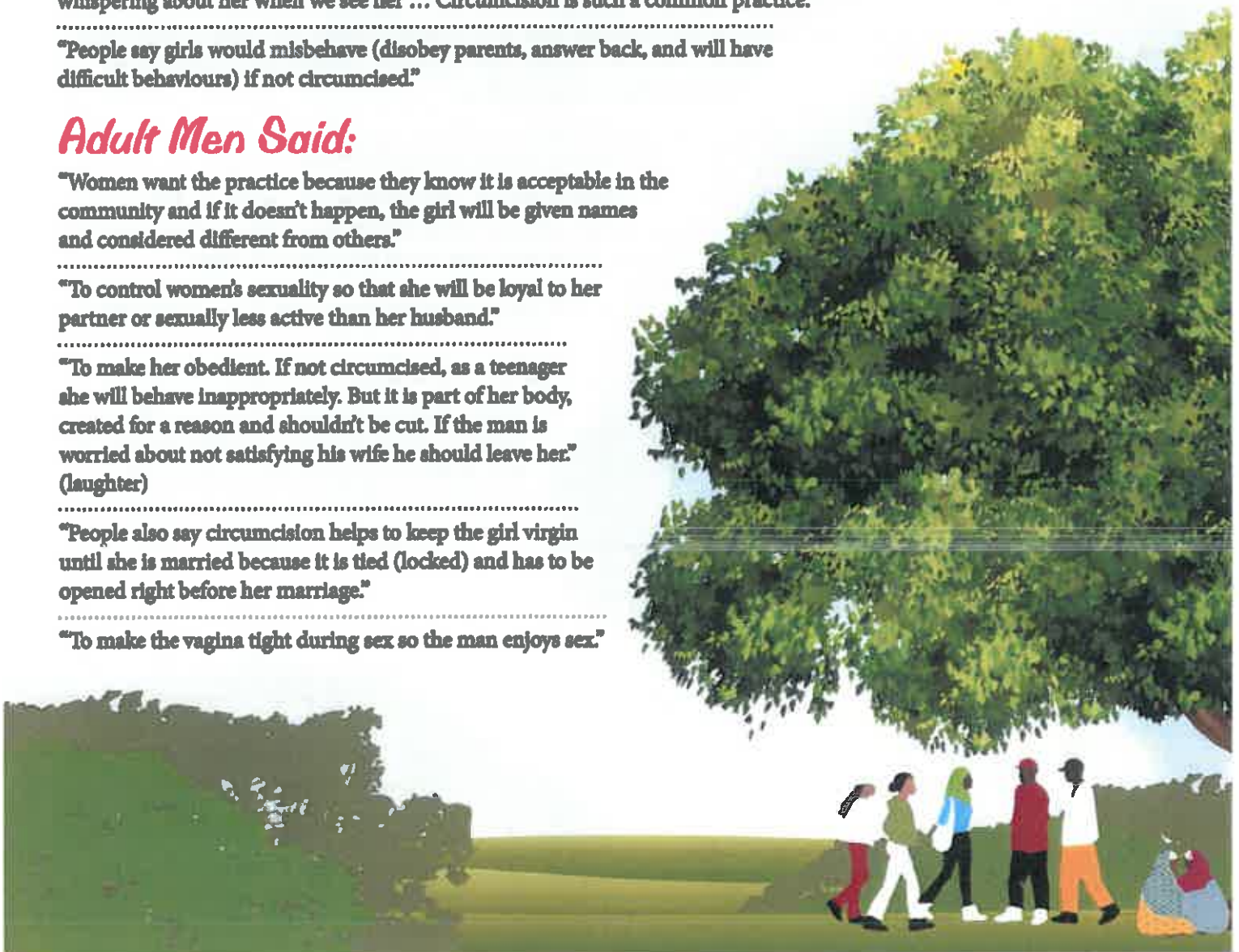
"Women want the practice because they know it is acceptable in the community and if it doesn't happen, the girl will be given names and considered different from others."

"To control women's sexuality so that she will be loyal to her partner or sexually less active than her husband."

"To make her obedient. If not circumcised, as a teenager she will behave inappropriately. But it is part of her body, created for a reason and shouldn't be cut. If the man is worried about not satisfying his wife he should leave her." (laughter)

"People also say circumcision helps to keep the girl virgin until she is married because it is tied (locked) and has to be opened right before her marriage."

"To make the vagina tight during sex so the man enjoys sex."





Young Women Said:

"Men believe that if circumcised, the woman's, 'engine dies quickly' ... if not circumcised the 'engine starts quickly,' she would warm up herself."

"Some families believe that she will be looking for men early in her life. Three years ago a friend of mine circumcised her nine year old daughter. She was a nurse and she told me that this will prevent her daughter from looking for men when she is too young. 'If not cut, the clitoris will touch her pants and facilitate sexual arousal.'"

"It is still being practiced in the rural parts of [home country] because they believe that women who are not circumcised will be wild, will break stuff."

"It is a cultural practice."

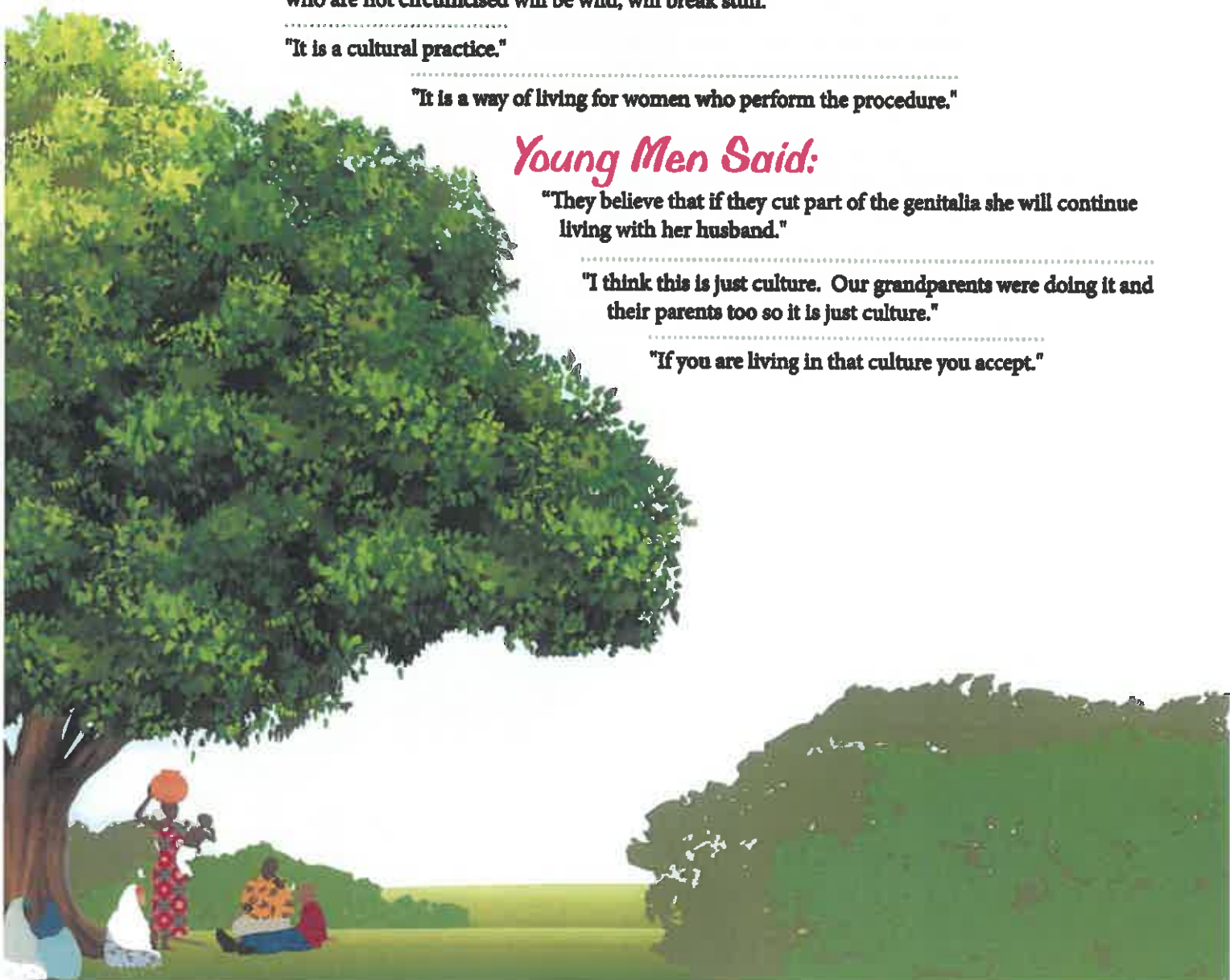
"It is a way of living for women who perform the procedure."

Young Men Said:

"They believe that if they cut part of the genitalia she will continue living with her husband."

"I think this is just culture. Our grandparents were doing it and their parents too so it is just culture."

"If you are living in that culture you accept."



Who plays a role?

Adult Women Said:

"In general men are informed about it but women are the ones who are directly involved."

"It is a women's tradition. Moms want to circumcise their girls. They feel responsible for raising a decent girl otherwise the mom would be the one to be insulted by the community when the girl misbehaves at a later age. They might say [an expression] to mean her parents must be 'rude ones.'"

Adult Men Said:

"Both parents decide the age ... Some girls get circumcised when ready to get married and others when 3-4 years old. Women make special kind of bread, drinks and other food for the ceremony. Friends and villagers come together, dance and party. Sometimes people camp around the girl's home for days ... Men mainly accompany; they are involved in the ceremony."

"Men have the same beliefs as women, but they are not that much involved (agreed by all). If a girl is not circumcised, the men wouldn't go crazy about it."

Young Women Said:

"Mother decides which day the circumcision will happen."

"The father has more voice in making the decision, the mother is more involved in the procedure."





Young Men Said:

"The father is the decision maker."

"I would say the father and the mother."

"Parents—father or mother and also the general family—uncles, aunts, grandparents, and relatives. In our culture everyone is the decision maker." (laughter)

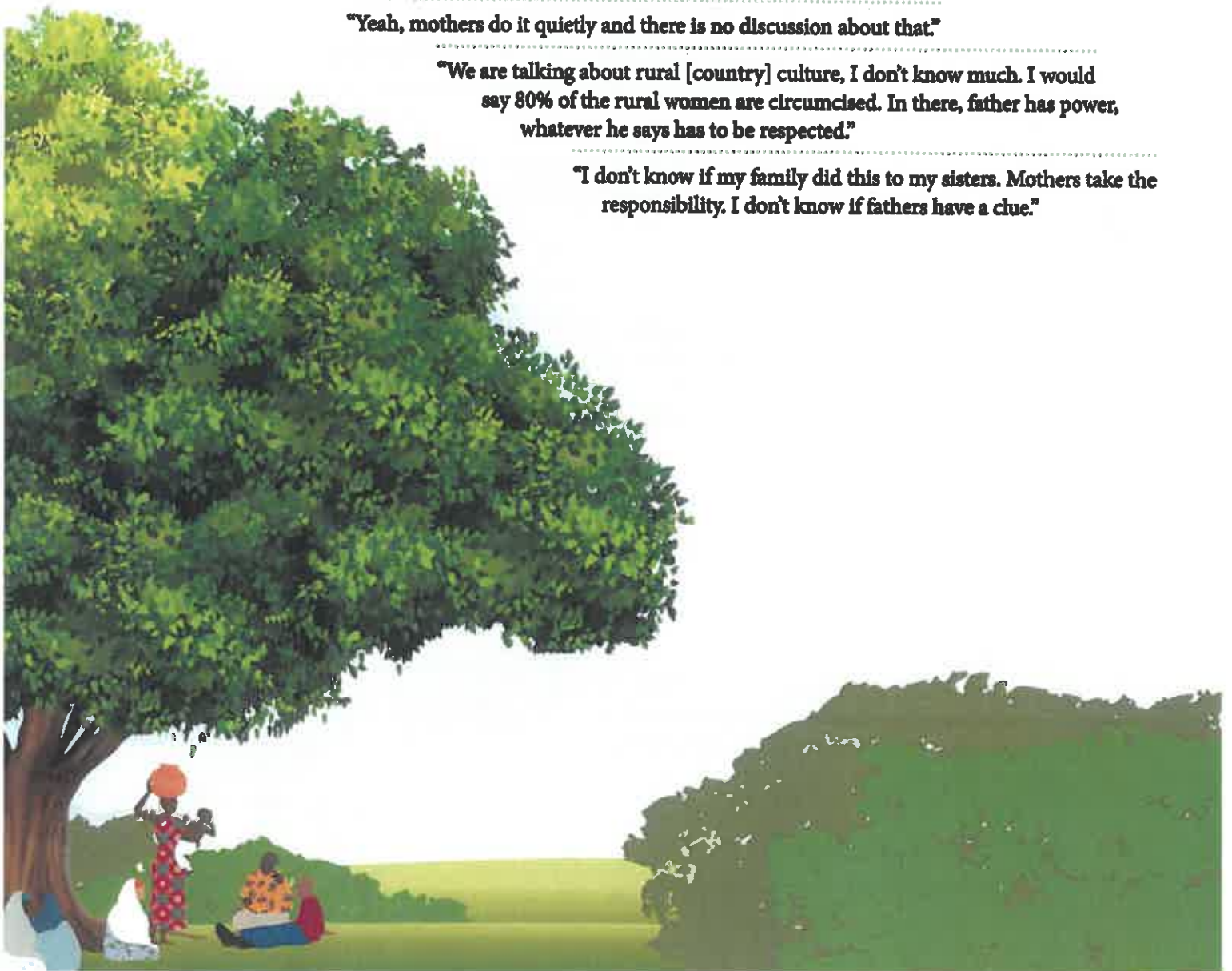
"If the father say no, the mother will not do it."

"I think mothers are the one who decide."

"Yeah, mothers do it quietly and there is no discussion about that."

"We are talking about rural [country] culture, I don't know much. I would say 80% of the rural women are circumcised. In there, father has power, whatever he says has to be respected."

"I don't know if my family did this to my sisters. Mothers take the responsibility. I don't know if fathers have a clue."



Can circumcision affect marriage and relationships?

Adult Women Said:

"Women become sexually insensitive which creates tension between the couples which in turn makes women unhappy in their marriage." (everybody nodding in support)

"Men do not want the practice. They run away looking for uncircumcised women. There are a lot of problems associated with this in the marriage: short marriage life, divorce, communication problems between couples."

Adult Men Said:

"She screams in pain [during sex] because she might have infection, or her body is so tight and [this] causes pain. This affects the psychology of the man in return. He will worry and not relax when thinking about sex."

"The girl who is uncircumcised is preferred by men because she is sexually active and compatible with the man, she takes initiative to have sex and be responsive during sex."

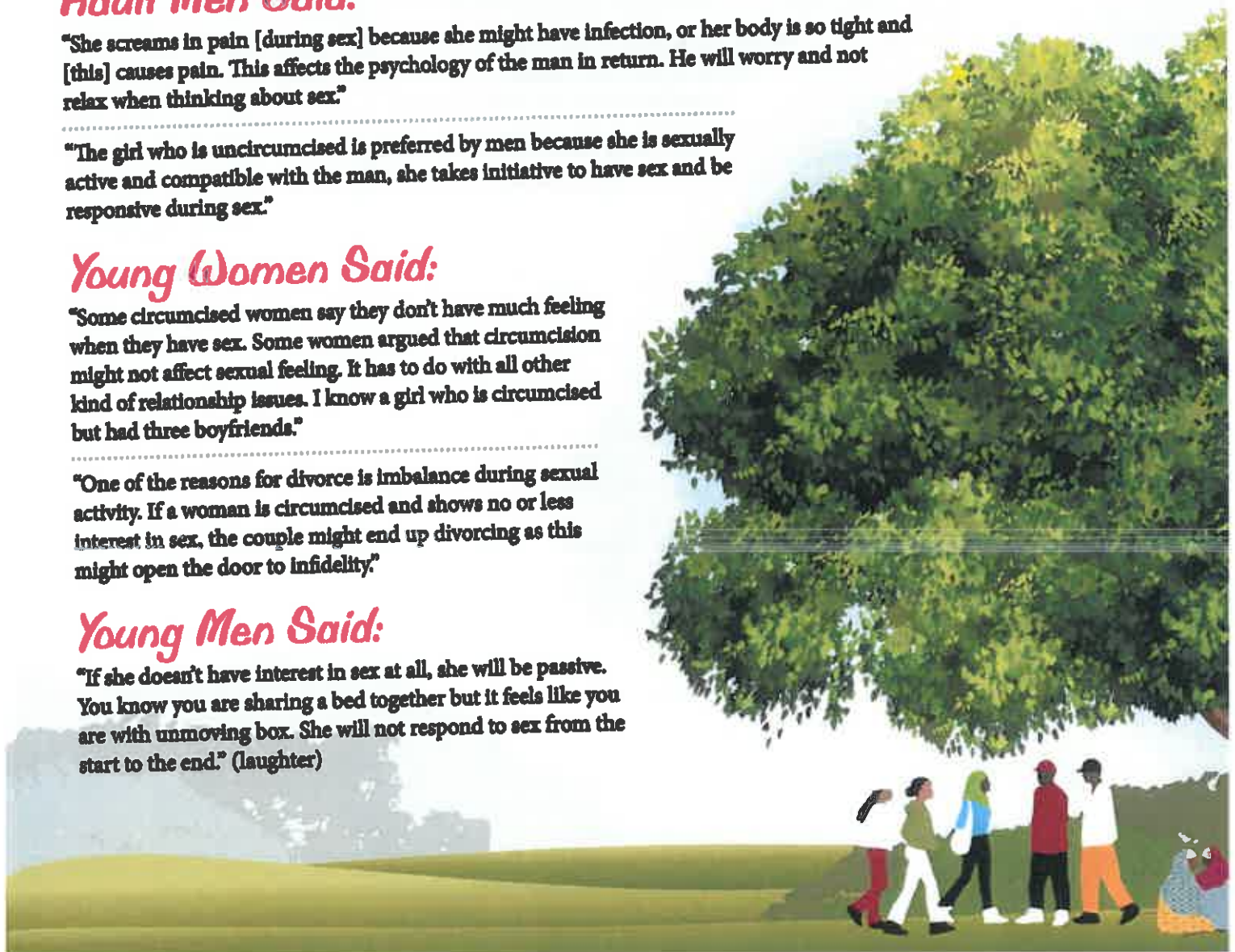
Young Women Said:

"Some circumcised women say they don't have much feeling when they have sex. Some women argued that circumcision might not affect sexual feeling. It has to do with all other kind of relationship issues. I know a girl who is circumcised but had three boyfriends."

"One of the reasons for divorce is imbalance during sexual activity. If a woman is circumcised and shows no or less interest in sex, the couple might end up divorcing as this might open the door to infidelity."

Young Men Said:

"If she doesn't have interest in sex at all, she will be passive. You know you are sharing a bed together but it feels like you are with unmoving box. She will not respond to sex from the start to the end." (laughter)





Does circumcision cause harm?

Adult Women Said:

"Frequent urinary tract infections."

"Fistula."

"Difficult during childbirth."

"It is a concern because the women who do the cutting usually use unsterilized sharp materials which is a risk factor for contracting HIV/AIDS, tetanus and other infections."

A Woman Leader Said:

"If the body is cut there is something missing. She will always miss some part that God has created for her. Psychologically she won't be equal to other women."

Adult Men Said:

"She won't be able to give birth. I saw a documentary about it. It is very painful."

Young Women Said:

"We should stop female circumcision because of side effects like death, infection."

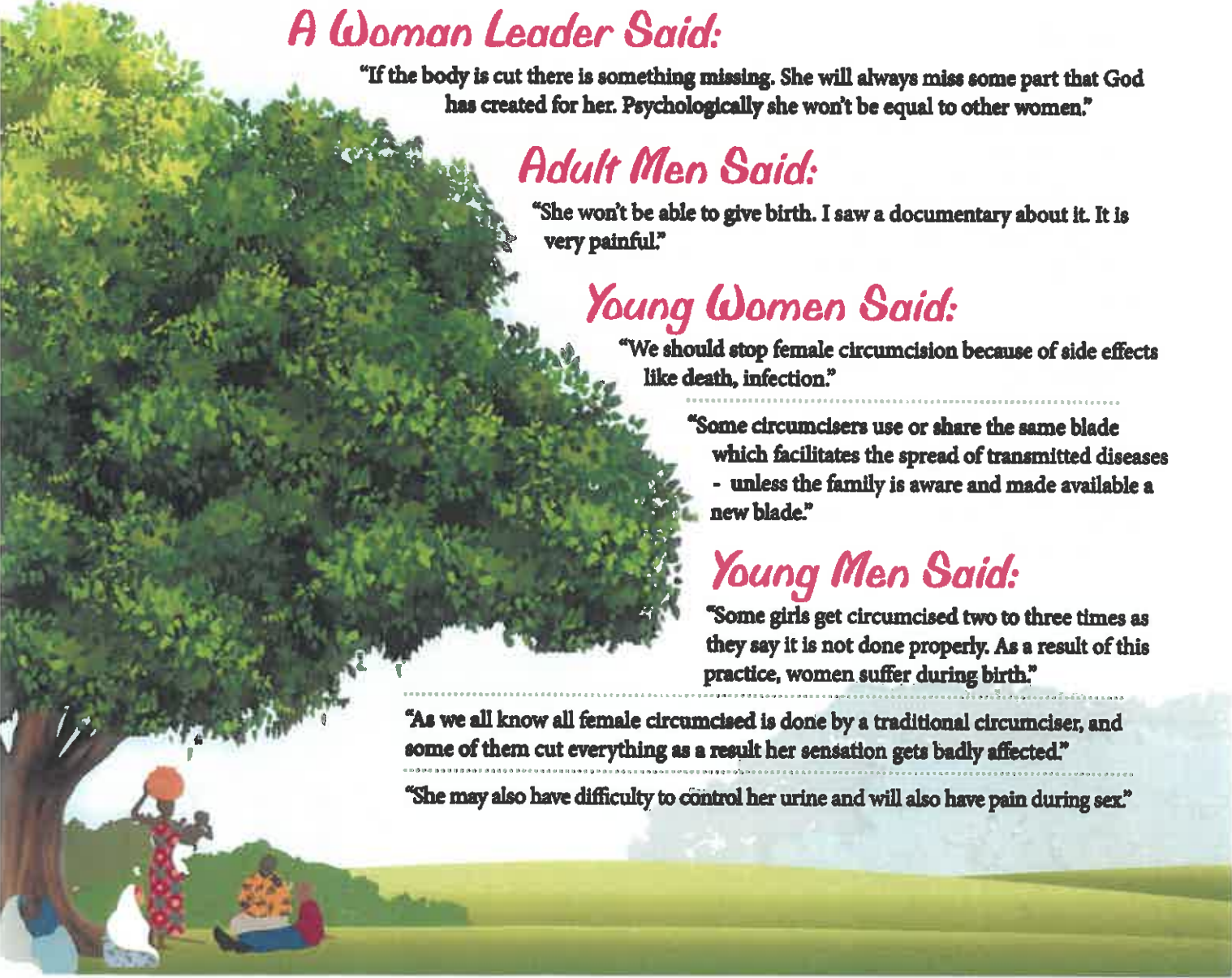
"Some circumcisers use or share the same blade which facilitates the spread of transmitted diseases - unless the family is aware and made available a new blade."

Young Men Said:

"Some girls get circumcised two to three times as they say it is not done properly. As a result of this practice, women suffer during birth."

"As we all know all female circumcised is done by a traditional circumciser, and some of them cut everything as a result her sensation gets badly affected."

"She may also have difficulty to control her urine and will also have pain during sex."





Are there changes back home?

Adult Women Said:

"We hear a lot about it [back home] from people, TV and radio. In Canada, from Oprah show. It discourages the practice. In [my country] a lot of education happening. My little sister is not circumcised as a result of education."

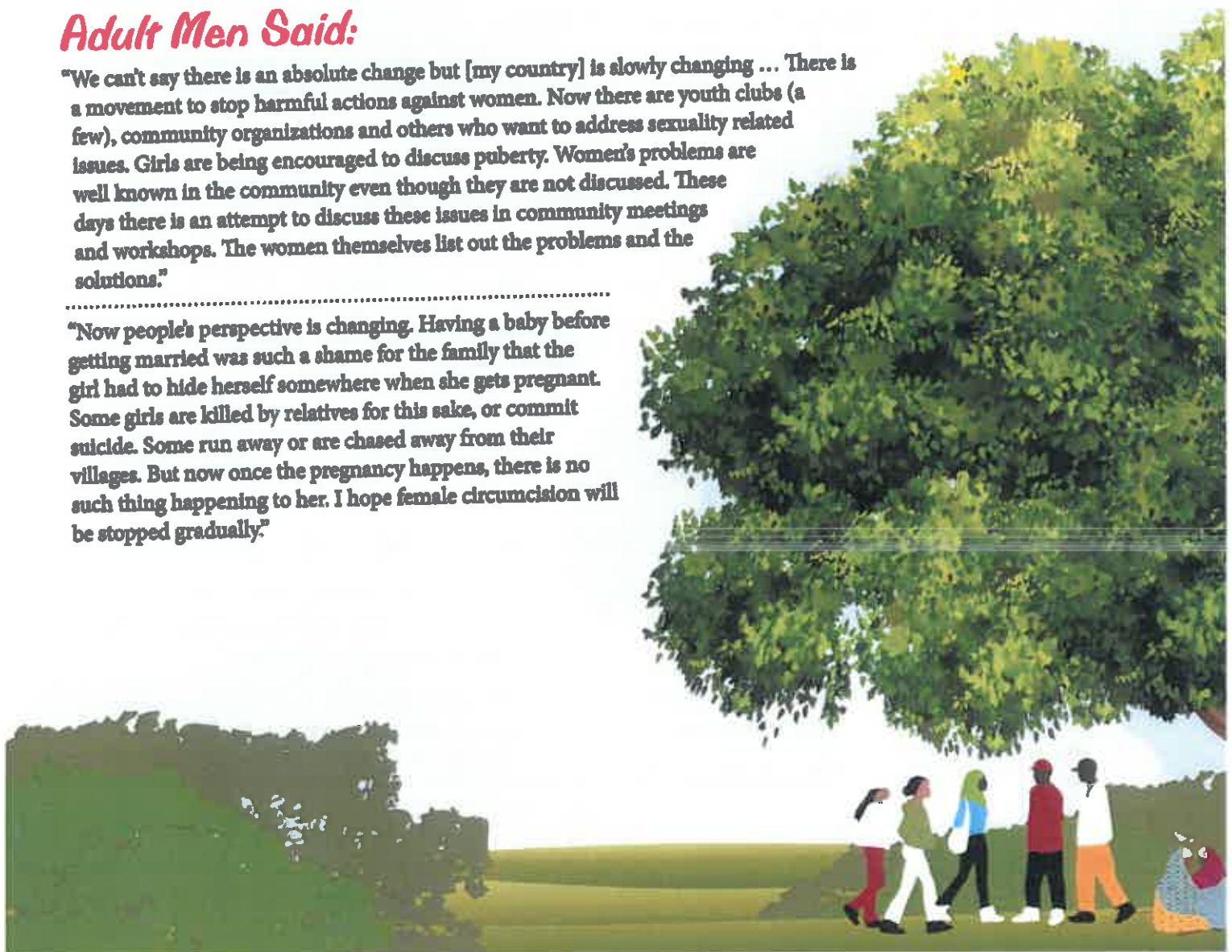
A Woman Leader Said:

"Back home it is difficult to talk, people don't change their mind, they continue. It is very bad, very difficult. I don't support that, but I don't get a chance to teach the community ... had many women die about that problem. It may change in [my country] for young women."

Adult Men Said:

"We can't say there is an absolute change but [my country] is slowly changing ... There is a movement to stop harmful actions against women. Now there are youth clubs (a few), community organizations and others who want to address sexuality related issues. Girls are being encouraged to discuss puberty. Women's problems are well known in the community even though they are not discussed. These days there is an attempt to discuss these issues in community meetings and workshops. The women themselves list out the problems and the solutions."

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"Now people's perspective is changing. Having a baby before getting married was such a shame for the family that the girl had to hide herself somewhere when she gets pregnant. Some girls are killed by relatives for this sake, or commit suicide. Some run away or are chased away from their villages. But now once the pregnancy happens, there is no such thing happening to her. I hope female circumcision will be stopped gradually."





Young Women Said:

"There is all kind of public education back home regarding hygiene, circumcision, cutting of the uvula, etc."

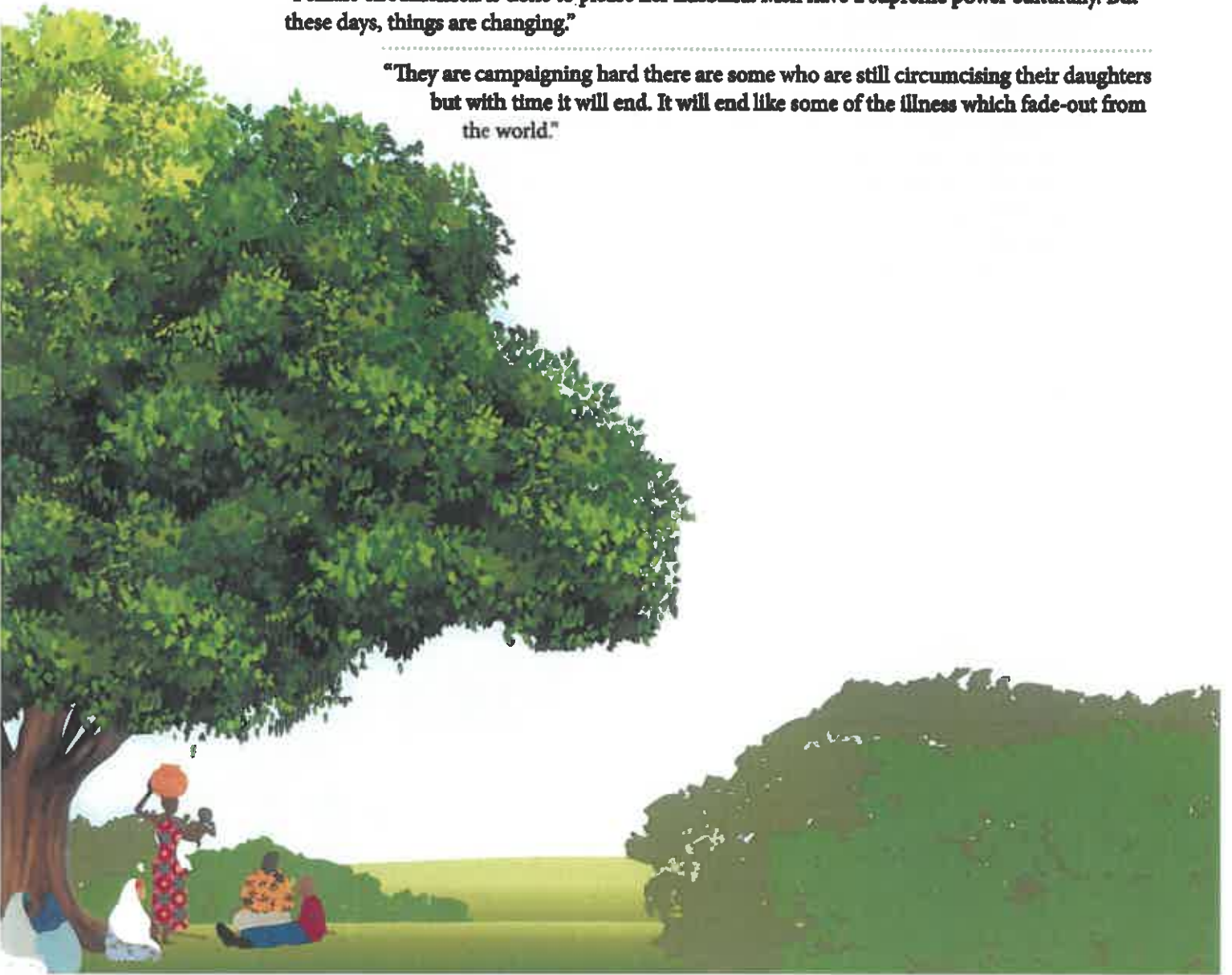
"It mainly happens in the rural area. It does not happen in the cities."

Young Men Said:

"These time people are not doing it, they stopped. Because she bleeds after circumcision."

"Female circumcision is done to please her husband. Men have a supreme power culturally. But these days, things are changing."

"They are campaigning hard there are some who are still circumcising their daughters but with time it will end. It will end like some of the illness which fade-out from the world."





Changes in Canada...

Adult Women Said:

"Some women say they are circumcised and [are] still functioning, nothing different about them. But others have painful experiences and do not want it to happen to their daughters. In Canada it is a serious crime and not done."

Women Leaders Said:

"We have to stop this situation in Canada. In our country it is difficult, but now there is a new generation."

"Men are already changing (referring to a story of a woman who chose not to circumcise her daughter and her husband being okay with that)."

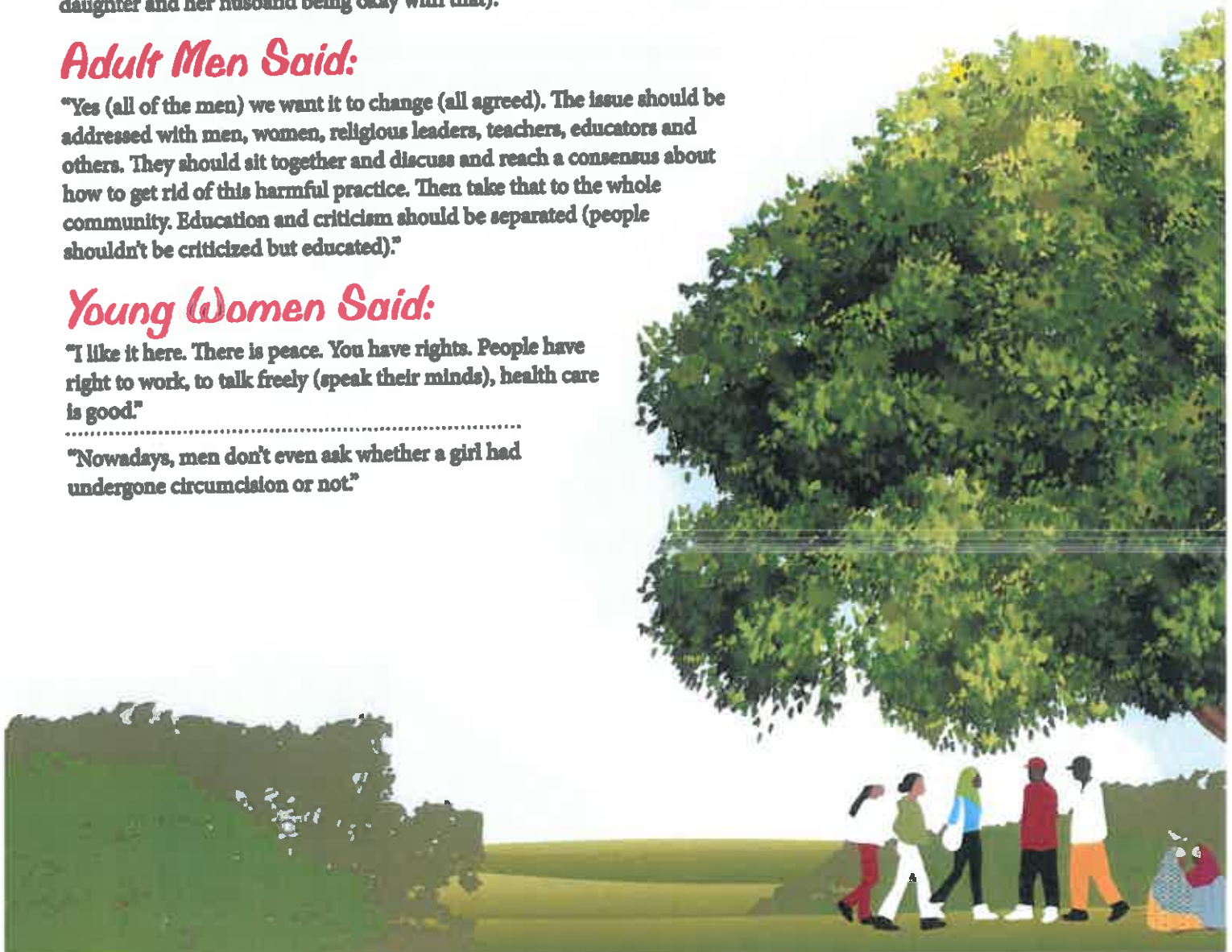
Adult Men Said:

"Yes (all of the men) we want it to change (all agreed). The issue should be addressed with men, women, religious leaders, teachers, educators and others. They should sit together and discuss and reach a consensus about how to get rid of this harmful practice. Then take that to the whole community. Education and criticism should be separated (people shouldn't be criticized but educated)."

Young Women Said:

"I like it here. There is peace. You have rights. People have right to work, to talk freely (speak their minds), health care is good."

"Nowadays, men don't even ask whether a girl had undergone circumcision or not."





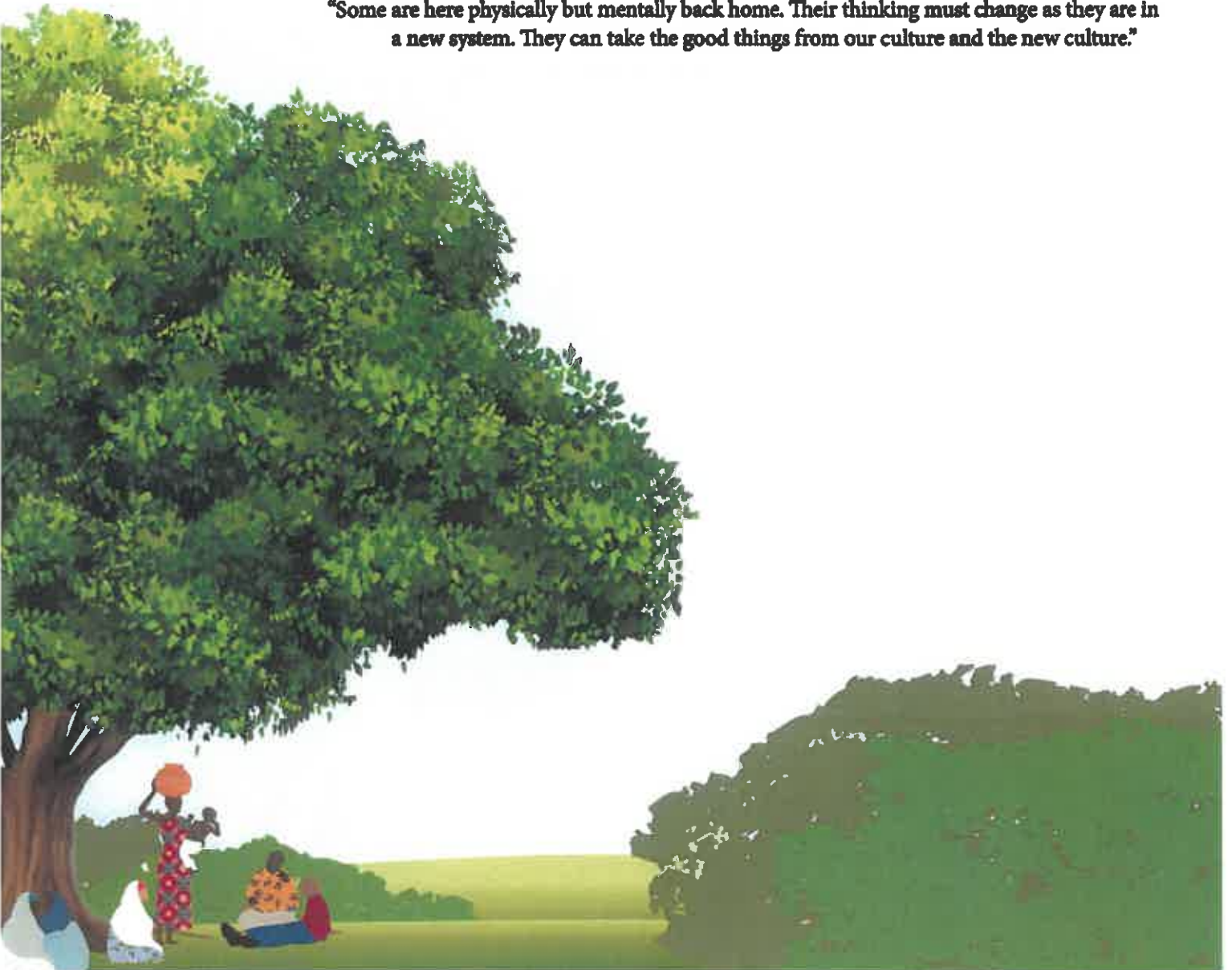
Young Men Said:

"Change is good for girls - it is a journey from darkness to brightness." (all agreed)

"The new generation is in contradiction with the old one. The old generation's thinking must be changed. The new thinking will be practiced when the old thinking is completely replaced. It should go away. Power is top-down. Father and mother mainly. Youth don't have a voice. They couldn't change anything in this kind of situation."

"If I say my ideas to the elders, they may tell me, you don't know much and they don't accept my ideas."

"Some are here physically but mentally back home. Their thinking must change as they are in a new system. They can take the good things from our culture and the new culture."



What is the role of religion?

Adult Women Said:

"From the Muslim perspective, the Quran doesn't say that (sanction circumcision), it is traditional culture, not by Quran."

Adult Men Said:

"It is not religiously required; some people say she has to be slightly circumcised but not mutilated."

"The Quran doesn't support this practice; it is currently being taught by religious leaders (that it is not supported in Quran). It is only a cultural practice. Changes are happening but it is just slow."

"Key messages [should] include that it is against Canadian law and that it is against Islamic law ... In [geographic area], there have been advances made where Imams have gone to villages to discuss change."

"For prayer purposes: as a sign of cleanness, she can't pray (in Islam) if she is not circumcised."

"The Quran requires circumcision." (arguments followed, yes and no)

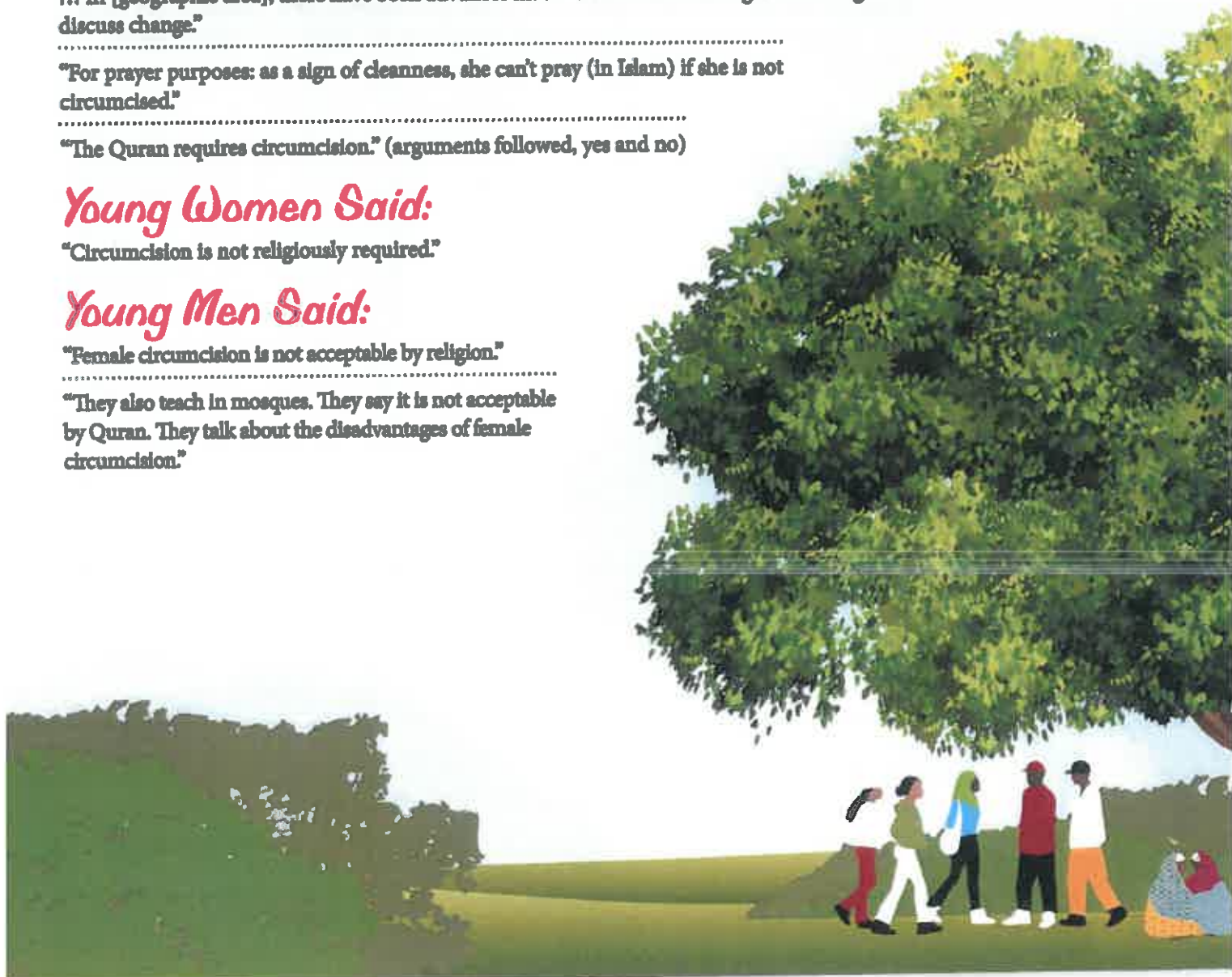
Young Women Said:


"Circumcision is not religiously required."

Young Men Said:

"Female circumcision is not acceptable by religion."

"They also teach in mosques. They say it is not acceptable by Quran. They talk about the disadvantages of female circumcision."

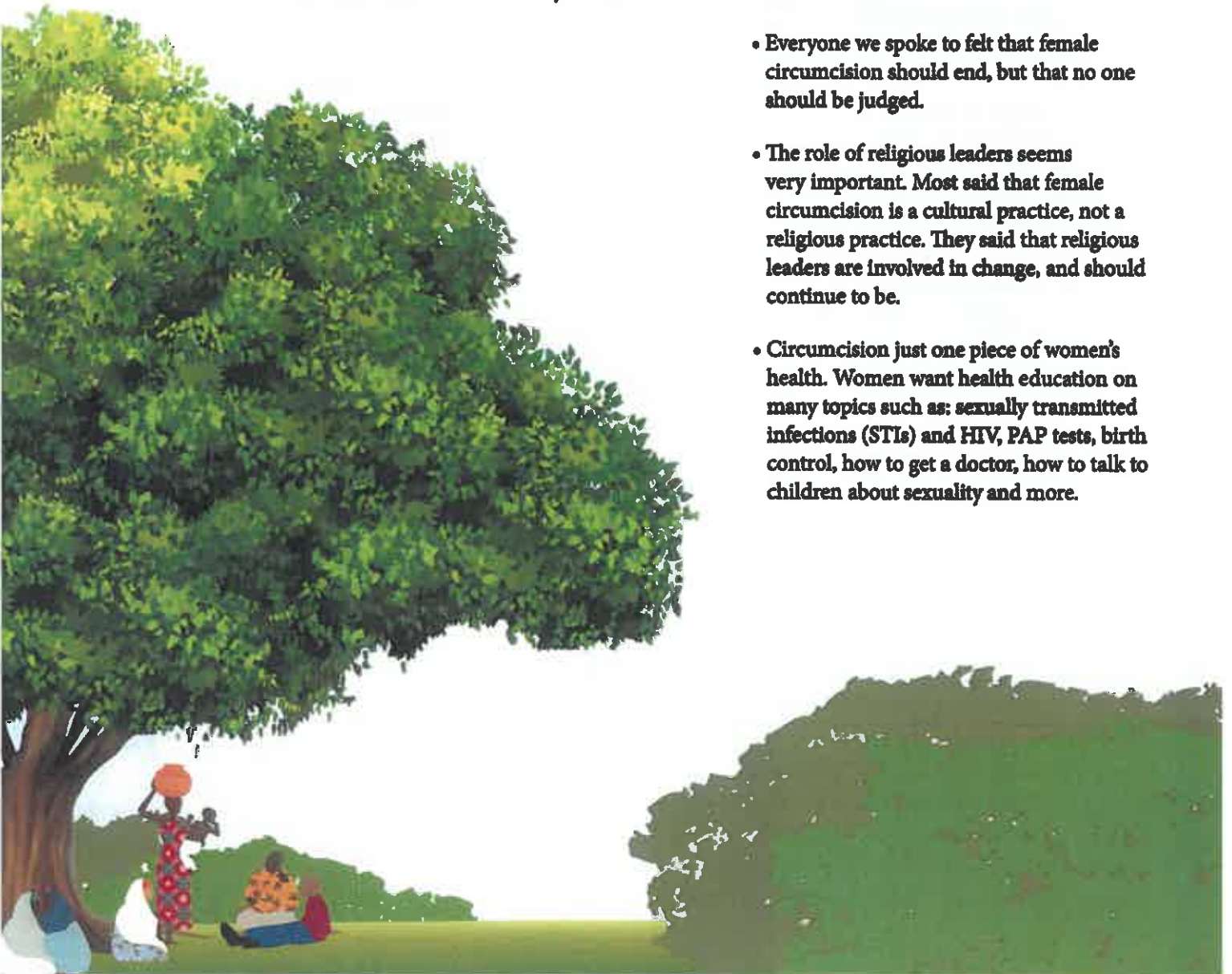




Some interesting things we learned in the research:

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:

- Although sexuality is a taboo subject, everyone we talked to seemed to know a lot about circumcision because of education and awareness back home. Everyone had a lot to say and in the focus groups people spoke a lot about sex, relationships, how men and women relate in a new society, and more.
- Some felt the community was ready to talk about circumcision openly. Some said that leaders and community members should get together, and make a plan for the community. Youth should be involved and have a voice—the young men felt they were often not heard.
- Everyone we spoke to felt that female circumcision should end, but that no one should be judged.
- The role of religious leaders seems very important. Most said that female circumcision is a cultural practice, not a religious practice. They said that religious leaders are involved in change, and should continue to be.
- Circumcision just one piece of women's health. Women want health education on many topics such as: sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV, PAP tests, birth control, how to get a doctor, how to talk to children about sexuality and more.



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.

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This booklet and the full report are available at: www.serc.mb.ca
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March 2014, Sexuality Education Resource Centre Manitoba, Inc.

This project was funded by grants from the Jewish Foundation of Manitoba and Manitoba Healthy Living and Seniors.

