

Senegalese Women Remake Their Culture

Although for decades the capital of French West Africa, Senegal, like other countries of the Sahel, remains predominantly rural. And while 62 percent of the people reside in rural areas, more than 85 percent of the wealth is in urban centers. As in many countries, disadvantage accumulates at the level of women and girls. In 1995, female literacy countrywide was just over half the rate for men (23 percent compared to 44 percent), and the discrepancy was still greater in rural areas. TOSTAN, literally means “breaking out of the egg” in Wolof, the language spoken by the majority of Senegal’s 7.9 million people and is among a number of innovative rural development and women’s education initiatives that are addressing the problem at its source. It offers an 18-month learning program that combines basic education in national languages with practical development issues, and provides rural people with the resources to improve their standard of living while fostering increased confidence in their way of life. More than literacy, this breakthrough program offers participants the tools to tackle such community issues as health, hygiene and the environment. The program uses six modules that link literacy to life skills in a highly participatory process of problem solving. TOSTAN successfully sustains the link between basic education and rural development, giving adult learners not only literacy and numeracy skills in their national languages but the means to understand and solve local problems.

Several years ago, the TOSTAN NGO responded to the solicitations of village authorities in Malicounda who had seen the impact of its training programs on women in neighboring communities and helped this Bambara community of west central Senegal to create its own center. The program placed special emphasis on the identification and resolution of common problems, and one of the last training modules in the series addressed issues of women’s health and sexuality. Its popularity among rural women participants broke all records. Shortly after completing their training, the newly literate women of Malicounda decided that the problem they wished to address was the custom of female circumcision — a longstanding pattern in the Bambara/Mandigue and Pulaar communities. By informing themselves on practices elsewhere and on the effects of circumcision on girls’ health and sexual life, they developed an arsenal of arguments that eventually convinced the village

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council to abolish the practice officially. In the months May to July 1997 — the traditional period for genital cutting on young girls — no such operations were performed in Malicounda for the first time in the community's history.

TOSTAN and UNICEF supported the women by organizing a visit from twenty Senegalese journalists to interview them about their stand. The women performed a play for the visitors to illustrate the reasons why they had made this decision and the arguments they had used with other villagers. The visit brought publicity to the issue, but also attracted some threatening comments and criticism from surrounding communities of the same ethnic group. Saddened but basically undaunted, the group from Malicounda decided to organize a delegation to two neighboring villages to convince women there of the importance of a local decision to abolish genital mutilation.

In one of these — the community of Ngerin Bambara — women who had just completed the Tostan program decided to endorse the “oath of Malicounda.” The President of their

Women's Association, herself the daughter of a traditional circumciser, said that her own daughter had hemorrhaged seriously during the operation and that it was time to change.

Inhabitants of the second community, Ker Simbara, decided that they could not put a stop to the practice without consulting kin in a whole network of neighboring villages. So for a period of eight weeks, two men who had taken part in the TOSTAN program — one a TOSTAN facilitator and the other a 66 year-old Imam (a senior Muslim priest)— traveled from village to village to discuss the negative effects of female circumcision with local people. The men originally had feared that they would be chased out of many of the communities. Instead they discovered that the news of Malicounda opened doors and hearts, and they heard shocking stories from women, speaking out for the first time about what they had experienced.

The men returned convinced of the importance of what they had heard and what they were doing. They assisted the women of Malicounda, Ngerin and Ker Simbara in organizing a intervillage conference in Diabougou for all those interested. In February 1998, three representatives — the village chief and two women representatives — from thirteen different villages met for two days to discuss the problem and formulated the “Diabougou Declaration,” an engagement on the part of 8,000 villagers to cease henceforth genital circumcision of girls.

Word of this initiative next traveled to the Casamance region of southern Senegal, where another group of villages — these all of Pulaar lineage, an ethnic group practicing genital circumcision on 88 percent of girls — banded together for a similar conference and declaration. Their conference was attended by representatives from 18 communities, by health workers and by the highly respected Imam of Medina Cherif, who assured the women that the Muslim religion does not require girls' circumcision and guarantees women's rights to health and human dignity. Many women spoke of the harm wrought by this practice. One lamented the death of her two girls following the operation; and a traditional “cutter” admitted that a girl had died in her village the year before. Other women spoke of problems at childbirth and of painful sexual relationships. The group concluded their meeting by issuing their own declaration renouncing the practice.

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The initiative has continued to spread. Early in the process, President Abdou Diouf of Senegal himself proposed the "Oath of Malicounda" as a model for national adoption. On the heels of the meetings in the Casamance, women in the St. Louis region of Senegal are now preparing for an inter-village convocation of their own, to be held in February 1999.

The sort of "active learning" promoted among women by the TOSTAN program in Senegal seems to have resulted in far-reaching cultural change. Elements that contribute to TOSTAN's successful impact in education and sustainable development are further examined below.

Issues

Cultural roots. Combined with the use of national languages, a deep valuing of African culture is the foundation of TOSTAN's educational program, exemplifying the practical and profound relationship between culture and education.

National languages. Although French is Senegal's official language, the government has increasingly encouraged the use of national languages in literacy programs, recognizing that learning is easier and more effective in the affective domain of one's own tongue and is likely to facilitate the transition to international languages. Learning in the mother tongue inspires pride, empowering women to speak up in their homes and communities; and pride of place, encouraging men to invest in their community rather than migrate to the cities. As well, it eliminates the dissonance that children educated solely in French often feel within the village household, thereby facilitating intergenerational communication and solidarity.

Problem solving is the program's backbone and provides a strong motivator for literacy acquisition. Skills taught in this five-step process include (i) identifying and analyzing the problem; (ii) studying adapted solutions based on available financial, material and human resources, as well as the time factor; (iii) planning the solution: what needs to be accomplished? when do the steps have to be completed? who is responsible? what human, material and financial resources are necessary? what are the possible obstacles? (iv) implementing the solution; and (v) evaluating the results: Did we solve the problem?

Participation. TOSTAN was developed with villagers in a highly participative ten-year process. Curricular modules were based on the stories, proverbs, songs, and cultural traditions of each place gathered by traveling from village to village, listening and recording the oral tradition. The instructional method maintains a participatory approach and learners often involve their family and the community in the process of problem-solving.

Women. With a female illiteracy rate in 1990 of 74.9 percent, women are the least-educated group in Senegal. Women particularly have been benefiting from TOSTAN's whole language approach that begins with concrete, relevant experiences from their daily lives rather than abstractions. TOSTAN has become a training ground for leadership as women gain confidence, begin to identify problems such as the retrieval of water, and start to make changes in their communities. Yet men are not excluded: nearly one-third of the participants are male, and – as the story of Ker Simbara illustrates – they may take many of the initiatives critical to alleviating the burdens that women bear.

Process of developing approaches

Besides the participatory processes mentioned, learners were also involved in the development of the contents of the program through a method of testing, dialogue and feedback. This was costly at the start but ultimately proved cost-effective due to the success rate of adaptation by other NGOs. Basic education, a UNESCO brochure on TOSTAN points out, "strikes a deeper chord in peoples lives than a straightforward literacy project...Understanding how each module will contribute to changing their lives and environment is a powerful motivating factor for learners". The problem-solving process is basic to the TOSTAN approach and easily adapted to varied environments.

Problems Encountered

In 1987 there were no basic education programs in national languages in Senegal, and two government ministries shared responsibility for literacy programs which often floundered. Existing programs were little connected to practical life and

functioned in a non-literate environment, where skills learned and not practiced were soon lost. The TOSTAN basic education program addressed another basic problem, boredom, by relating literacy to community and personal life and developing attractive materials from local concerns. Finding qualified facilitators was not easy at the outset, and there was resistance from participants to the idea of paying the facilitators from local resources. They preferred to use that money for materials or classroom construction. TOSTAN graduates are now themselves trained to be facilitators and provide the bulk of staffing.

Solutions and Conclusions

The problem-solving skills presented in the first module are used throughout the following modules, which deal successively with hygiene activities, uses of oral rehydration therapy and vaccinations, financial and material management skills, management of human resources, and feasibility studies and income-generating projects. Using these skills, women participants have started a number of small businesses. The TOSTAN methodology has also been used to reach out-of-school children with a curriculum that covers reading, writing, math, problem solving, health and hygiene, nutrition, family management, children's rights, history, geography, education for peace, leadership skills and group dynamics. Using the participatory approach, adolescents learn to produce their own texts.

The UNESCO flyer on TOSTAN draws an apt conclusion: "The availability of a comprehensive program that offers participants problem-solving tools and deals with the crucial problems of health, hygiene, and the environment is an asset for many regions of Africa faced with high illiteracy rates, especially among women. More focus needs to be put on implementing these well-studied and tested programs rather than developing new ones...TOSTAN has shown that individuals without any formal education, from villages with minimal resources, can improve their lives and environment through a solid program leading to greater autonomy and self-sufficiency."

This article is based on research conducted by Senegalese researchers with the support and technical supervision of Peter Easton, Associate Professor, Graduate Studies in Adult Education, Florida State University, and with the active collaboration of the concerned African communities. The research was carried out under the joint aegis of the Club du Sahel/OECD, the CILSS and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).