

# Tostan

Dignity for All



**“TODAY I SEE THAT WOMEN LEAD”**

How women became and came to see themselves as leaders in their communities, and Tostan’s role in the process

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**Dakar, Senegal  
July 2017**

## Acknowledgements

This project was made possible with generous funding from a Fulbright grant. I would like to thank in particular my extraordinary interviewer, interpreter and transcriber, Oumoul Debo Sow, and Diane Gillespie for her tireless advising and help with revisions. The fieldwork in this study would not have been possible without the efforts and coordination of Harouna Sy and Khadijah Sy as well our participants and their villages. Thank you as well to Moutarou Diallo and Doyen Sow for their help preparing for fieldwork and to Rémi Hoefsloot for his translation assistance. And to Molly Melching, Gannon Gillespie, Rose Diop, Abdul Aziz Sy, Boubacar Bakary Gueye and Bassirou Ndiaye for their time, support and help finding the necessary contacts and documents to make this project possible. Finally, I would like to thank Oumoul again as well the entire village of Sinthiou Saliou for taking care of me and helping me finish the interviews even with my freshly broken hand and concussion. I owe a great debt to everyone who helped me that final week in the field.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the rural conservative department of Goudiry in southeast Senegal, where the West African NGO Tostan implemented its Community Empowerment Program from 2013 to 2015, women were chosen or actually ran for and were elected to local political office and village leadership positions in record-breaking numbers. The election and appointment of so many female Tostan participants surprised Tostan. The experiences of the women hold promise for those who value women's increased political participation and are interested in increasing women's empowerment and leadership, especially in resource-poor areas in the global South.

This study examined how female Tostan participants in the Goudiry region came to be chosen for and/or chose to run for and hold leadership positions, including political offices. During semi-structured interviews, they discussed their experiences, tracing how they started in the CEP, advanced to being elected or chosen, and were, at the time of the interviews, carrying out the duties of their current positions. Using their descriptions, the author discovered a common pathway to leadership.

Before their educational experience with Tostan, women explained that their lives were highly circumscribed; they did not speak, except in the household, and they were confined to the home and immediate family compound. They described themselves as unconfident and uneducated. After their Tostan classes, they said that they could speak knowledgeably in public and travel, for example to meetings in their communities and outside them. Three major themes emerged in their descriptions of the process of their transformation: the development of speaking abilities (voice) led to their capacity to communicate effectively, especially with their husbands; the new knowledge they gained about health provided a socio-culturally safe arena in which they could demonstrate competence as they advocated for community wellbeing (agency); together, their demonstrated competencies in these areas increased their self-confidence as well as their trustworthiness in the eyes of their communities. Women identified being chosen for their current leadership positions as an important and emotional experience. Being chosen showed them that they had gained trust of others, which in turn bolstered their confidence.

This study found that Tostan's education in general developed key capacities in its participants that prepared them to take up new roles. Specifically, the ability to interact differently in intimate relationships and to gain the support of men were critical in the process of women's empowerment. The findings support the importance of holistic human rights based educational interventions for empowering women to become community and political leaders.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2014, 41 women from 55 very traditional, conservative villages in rural southeastern Senegal were elected to represent their villages as municipal counselors. All of these women were about a year into their participation in the Tostan Community Empowerment Program (CEP) when they were selected, which ran from 2013-2015 in the area. Most of these villages also had selected a woman to head the Community Management Committee (CMC) that Tostan establishes as part of the CEP. This sudden ascent of so many women into leadership positions in these communities surprised Tostan.

As a woman interested in gender, development, politics and the possibility of innovative and effective NGO intervention, I was eager to figure out how the women had entered the political arena. Furthermore, I felt that studying this phenomenon would be important to the general literature on female empowerment and women in leadership. The purpose of this study, then, was to understand the lived experiences of women who became political agents and leaders during or after their Tostan classes. I used their accounts of their experiences to create a model of the process of gaining agency and legitimacy as leaders. Their experiences and the resulting model can inform Tostan about the role the CEP played. The ongoing changes within the women and their communities, leading to the women's increased access to decision-making spaces, are part of a dynamic process of empowerment. In this process, Tostan provided new resources, namely, practical knowledge and interactive engagement.

Qualitative research is well suited to a study seeking to draw out lived experiences and understand a process. Grounded theory, a common method in qualitative data collection and analysis, emphasizes the voice of the participants in the study. Through interview questions, the researcher opens up dialogue so participants can express what is important *and* assign what is meaningful to them. One of the core ideas of grounded theory research is that researchers should not come in to the study armed with a theory, hoping to fill in the details and prove their prior convictions using their data. The goal is to construct theory from the data. I have not taken a purely grounded theory approach in this study; rather I have borrowed useful analytic elements of the methodology.

## 2 METHODS

This report is based on 33 interviews conducted over a two-month fieldwork period from December 2016 to January 2017 across 11 villages in the department of Goudiry in eastern central Senegal, 10 of which had undergone the Tostan CEP from 2013-2015. The communities in this study varied in size but are all ethnically and linguistically Pulaar.

## 2.1 Field sites and participants

Goudiry is a department, the seat of which is a city by the same name, within region Tambacounda. There is little official data on Goudiry, but as of the last census in 2013 the population was 114,846 people. Tambacounda is one of the poorer regions of Senegal; the poverty rate as of 2011 was 62.5 percent. Nearly 80 percent of women in Tambacounda are non-literate.<sup>1</sup>

Thirty-three interviews were conducted with ten men and 23 women from the villages of Léwa Diofulbé, Lorigidje, Talico Fulbé, Komoty, Banta Nani, Tambala, Dianké Mahkan, Sinthiou Saliou, Timbingfara, Boutougoufara and Béli Waamé Daka. Both men and women varied in age, the youngest being around 25 and the oldest in his seventies. Among the men, two were married to women we interviewed, one was a Village Chief, one a Mayor, three were municipal counselors, two the secretaries of their village CMC and one a community member who had been in France during the CEP. Among the women, eight were the coordinators of their community's CMC, 11 were municipal counselors and one was both the coordinator and counselor. Three of the women and three of the men interviewed lived in a village in which only women had participated in the CEP. In this same village I was able to attend and observe a meeting of all of the local municipal counselors from surrounding villages, including three counselors interviewed for this study, with the Mayor. We also spoke with two female facilitators, currently employed by Tostan, who had worked in two of the villages.

Timbingfara was not a Tostan village and the two women interviewed there had not participated in any Tostan-related programs. We had sought out a village that was accessible from one of the Tostan villages but had not participated in either the CEP or a declaration of any kind; ideally, I wanted to interview women in a village that had not been touched by Tostan but that still was located in the same area and populated by people of the same ethnic and cultural group. Finding such a village was a herculean task. We finally were able to identify Timbingfara, with the help of a CMC coordinator's husband and his brother. But even there, they had been considered for a Tostan program but turned it down and some residents had attended some health trainings in neighboring Tostan villages.

## 2.2 Interviewer and training

The interviewer, a Senegalese woman and a member of the same ethnic group as all of the participants, spoke both Pulaar, the language in which interviews were conducted, and French, the language into which she interpreted and transcribed all interviews. Pulaar is a rich language with many dialects even within Senegal, especially variable along geographic lines. The

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<sup>1</sup> "Tambacounda: Situation Economique et Sociale Régionale 2013," Agence National de la Statistique et de le Démographie: April 2015, <http://www.ansd.sn/ressources/ses/SES-Tamcounda-2013.pdf>.

interviewer was from the north but her late husband was from Guinea, where they speak a Pulaar closer to what is spoken in the south, so she had deep familiarity with the language. Since we stayed with families in the villages while conducting interviews, she had a chance to develop a rapport with community members and create a comfortable environment for interviews.

An experienced interviewer, she received special training for this research project. Specifically, she became familiar with the purpose of the research, the interview questions and the consent protocol. Upon arrival in Goudiry, she consulted with the local Tostan supervisor to test the questions, familiarize herself with the Tostan curriculum in Pulaar and check her translation of the questions against the language used by Tostan to discuss such concepts as human rights, goal setting and project implementation. This was especially important given the complexity of translating questions about human rights and aspirations into a language that is not built around discussing such abstract topics.

### 2.3 Procedure in the field

The Tostan regional staff, based in the town of Goudiry, helped us compile a list of Pulaar-speaking villages in the region with female municipal counselors and CMC coordinators and explained how to get from village to village. The Tostan staff did their best to alert the villages that researchers were coming, but with the pervasive lack of cellular service that generally was not possible. The villagers helped us organize transport and housing arrangements with village families once in the field. Upon arrival in each village, we went first to the home of the CMC coordinator to explain the project. The coordinator figured out where we should stay. We visited the Village Chief to explain the project again and, in keeping with the Senegalese *teranga* tradition, offered gifts of sugar, tea, and cola nuts (when available). We did the same at the home of the Imam. Host families were similarly gifted sugar and tea as well as compensated monetarily for food and lodging. The CMC coordinator or secretary usually managed finding the people we needed to interview and bringing them to us. In one case, in the village in which the men did not participate in the program, the sole man who had wanted to do so heard about the study and sought us out to be interviewed. A modified version of interview questions for male participants was used in his case.

All interviews were semi-structured and conducted in the participants' native Pulaar. In semi-structured interviews, the research creates a set of concepts related to the process being examined, in this case running for and being elected to political office. Each research participant was asked the same questions but there was leeway given to answers so that participants could share their relevant experiences. The metaphor of journey (steps taken on the road to leadership) framed the nature of the questions; this metaphor is common in Pulaar. To keep the research purpose clear and on topic, I was present for all interviews. In some cases, particularly with more spontaneous interviews with men, for example, interpretation was conducted simultaneously and I was part of the dialogue in the moment.

I am aware of the socio-cultural implications of my position as a white American researcher in this study. In designing it, I tried to remain cognizant of the possible effects of my presence, including how the interviewees and their kin would perceive me and how that perception might be reflected in their responses.

At the beginning of each interview, the assent protocol (a form of consent used with non-literate participants) was read to the participant who gave his or her consent verbally. They were assured that their participation was voluntary, that they could stop at any time and that their identities would remain anonymous. (I used pseudonyms in this report.) The interviewer explained the project and emphasized that while we would be asking questions about their Tostan experience, we were not working for Tostan, nor were we conducting an evaluation of the CEP, nor had we any power to bring the program back, a common desire. Certainly, despite these assurances and explanations, participants' psychological association with Tostan, stirred simply because we were asking questions about it, may have influenced their responses, creating biases in ways we cannot be aware of.

Individual interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes on average. After interviews that were not conducted with my real-time input, the interviewer used the tape recording of the interview to interpret it back to me so that I could determine if we needed to ask any follow up questions and be aware of the direction and shape the data were taking. This way, we could work together to modify questions to eliminate repetition and allow more space for areas on which interviewees were placing importance. This routine also allowed time to debrief, for me to note the participant's body language and the interviewer's observations of the participants' level of comfort and manner of speaking, for example. These field memos were later useful in my analysis. I could, for example, see that a given statement was made with conviction, tentatively or with humor.

## 2.4 A note on reflexivity and language

Interviews were conducted in Pulaar, and then transcribed into French. As I am writing this report in English, I coded my interview data in English and the quotations used here are my own translations. Moving the questions and data back and forth through three languages throughout the course of this study inevitably has consequences for the meanings of participant descriptions. Some nuances were likely lost in translation from Pulaar to French. Pulaar is a language rich in metaphor and idiom, and in such cases the interviewer/transcriber included the original Pulaar, a direct translation into French and a footnote of the colloquial meaning. In other cases, she included explanatory side notes for meanings not evident in the French translation. For example, when one woman mentioned that young girls were encouraged to maintain their dignity, she noted that in this context "dignity" almost certainly meant "virginity". Questions of French-English and English-French translation proved trying as well. Examples



include the difficulty of translating the word “empowerment” into French (though after extensive discussion and explanation of the term, the interviewer found that there was indeed a word for “empowerment” in Pulaar: *sembinde*).

My findings are further colored by the cultural context in which participants live. As an example, I was concerned that interviewees would be hesitant to make negative statements, especially about family members (for instance, expressing that their husband was supportive of their becoming a leader when perhaps he was resistant at first) or that they might downplay the obstacles they confronted because of the cultural importance of not complaining. However, participants across the board seemed to speak openly about resistance and obstacles. Humility and modesty are also important cornerstones of Pulaar culture and I suspect that, especially on the part of the women, their desire to appear humble may have influenced their answers. This study was also not conducted in a cultural context in which talking about oneself and reflecting on personal evolution is normal or expected. All of these elements of the cultural setting are further compounded by the potential desire of participants to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, perhaps thinking that I might be able to, as a foreigner or *toubab*, bring some sort of project or aid to their village. The socio-cultural lenses through which interviews were interpreted and through which I then interpreted the data further color my findings.

## 2.5 Data coding and analysis

During fieldwork, we collected over 19 hours of interviews, which translated into nearly 200 pages once transcribed. I then used the software QDA Miner to code the interviews. Coding in qualitative data analysis involves assigning short names to data segments in order to sort, categorize and identify themes for analysis. Using grounded theory methodology, interview data was first categorized thematically line-by-line. Through this process, I identified about 10 principle codes, which were then broken down into close to 50 sub-codes. I added and removed codes when such reorganization became appropriate. For example, “communication” was a code, which included sub-codes like “negotiation” and “marital communication”. Coding allowed me to compare and contrast related segments of different interviews. Using the variable function of the software, I was able to compare between, for example, only women, only men, or only coordinators. Eventually, three major crosscutting themes emerged: developing voice/communication, becoming trustworthy, and gaining/using knowledge about health. Analysis involved mapping out relationships between themes, complexities and meanings for different individuals and groups.

## 3 SENSITIZING CONCEPTS

While I did my best to make conscious choices not to review prior theory before conducting interviews and to allow the participants to guide the study through their contributions with the

aim of then generating an original analysis based on the themes that were the most heavily weighted by the participants themselves, it would be irresponsible to deny that I, as well as my interviewer and others who were consulted in the design of this project, do not bring any preconceptions to the work. Political science, development and gender studies, the disciplinary intersection where this study falls, is my area of study and interest and I therefore have ideas about the issues addressed here. To account for these, I have turned to the use of “sensitizing concepts”, common in studies that borrow from the grounded theory methodology. In her book *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, Kathy Charmaz describes the utility of “sensitizing concepts” as “points of departure to form interview questions, to look at data, to listen to interviewees, and to think analytically about the data.” She explains, “Grounded theorists use sensitizing concepts as tentative tools for developing their ideas about processes that they define in their data” and emphasizes that sensitizing concepts are “a place to *start* not to *end*.”<sup>2</sup>

The sensitizing concepts that are important to this study are empowerment and self-efficacy. Since I sought to draw out the women’s experiences in terms of a journey or a pathway and discover if and how they were empowered to take on the leadership roles they now hold, in the next section I define empowerment and outline it as a process. Self-efficacy plays a role in this process but is on its own an important theoretical framework for understanding how the women developed the confidence and legitimacy as leaders that were evident in interviews.

### 3.1 Empowerment

Any discussion of *empowerment* must recognize that the word is widely used, some argue overused, variably defined and often misunderstood. I will draw primarily from the work of Naila Kabeer here, defining empowerment in terms of her “three interrelated dimensions” of empowerment<sup>3</sup>:

|                  |           |              |
|------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Resources        | Agency    | Achievements |
| (Pre-conditions) | (Process) | (Outcomes)   |

She characterizes resources as constituting the context “through which agency is exercised;” and “the outcomes of agency” as “achievements”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Naila Kabeer, “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment,” *Development and Change* 30 (1999): 437.

<sup>4</sup> Naila Kabeer, “Gender equality and women’s empowerment: A critical analysis for the third millennium development goal,” *Gender and Development* 13, no.1 (2005): 14.

Malhotra et al. write that agency comprises “the ability to formulate strategic choices, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes.”<sup>5</sup> Kabeer defines agency as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them.” Her definition goes beyond agency as demonstrated through actions to “encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or ‘the power within’.”<sup>6</sup> Agency and empowerment are sometimes used interchangeably, but the important distinction must be made between agency, as defined above, and empowerment, which consists both of having agency and being aware of and able to exercise that agency.

In exercising agency, resources function as “enabling factors”. Kishor distinguishes resources as “potentially critical inputs to foster an empowerment process, rather than as part of empowerment itself.”<sup>7</sup> Kabeer provides an important qualification of Kishor’s “inputs”. She writes that resources can be material, relational or knowledge itself.<sup>8</sup> In other words, resources can be conceptualized as the conditions of a context (the resources *available* to women) or as inputs that catalyze empowerment. Agency, then, is both the use of resources and an individual’s critical reflection and perceptions of that use. Achievements are the results of the exercise of agency. Goldman and Little write, “Achievements can also be seen as resources for empowerment if empowerment is viewed as a process of sequential, and sometimes simultaneous stepping-stones—changes in one sphere leading to subsequent changes in other spheres.”<sup>9</sup>

As Goldman and Little point out, achievements are important in moving from having agency to being cognizant of it and able to critically exercise it. They serve in many cases as external proof of ability, engendering a context more suitable to empowerment, as well as internal proof of ability, fostering a perception of oneself as a capable and entitled actor.<sup>10</sup> Writing about the importance of an individual’s *perception* of their own capacity and entitlement, Rowlands asserts that empowerment is “more than simply opening up access to decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to

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<sup>5</sup> Anju Malhotra, Sidney Ruth Schuler and Carol Boender, “Measuring Women’s Empowerment as a variable in International Development,” (World Bank Workshop on Poverty and Gender: New Perspectives, 2002), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Kabeer, “Resources, Agency, Achievements,” 438.

<sup>7</sup> Sunita Kishor, “Empowerment of women in Egypt and links to the survival and health of their infants,” In *Women’s Empowerment and Demographic Processes: Moving Beyond Cairo*, edited by Harriet Presser and Gita Sen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Kabeer, “Resources, Agency, Achievements,” 437.

<sup>9</sup> Mara J Goldman and Jani S Little, “Innovative Grassroots NGOs and the Complex Processes of Women’s Empowerment: An Empirical Investigation from Northern Tanzania,” *World Development* 66 (2015): 763.

<sup>10</sup> Naila Kabeer, “Reflections on the measurement of women’s empowerment,” In *Discussing Women’s Empowerment – Theory and Practice*, Sida Studies No. 3 (Stockholm: Novum Grafiska AB, 2001); Malhotra et al., “Measuring Women’s Empowerment”; Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, (New York: Cambridge Press, 2000); Jo Rowlands, “Empowerment Examined,” *Development in Practice* 5, no.2 (1995):101-107; Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Gita Sen, “Women’s empowerment and human rights: The challenge to policy,” Paper presented at the Population Summit of the World’s Scientific Academies, 1993.

occupy that decision-making space.”<sup>11</sup> Goldman and Little too write that the “processes that lead individuals to believe they have the capabilities to make decisions” are integral to the process of empowerment itself.<sup>12</sup> They stipulate that empowerment involves “personal, relational, and collective processes, and includes changes in beliefs and attitudes as well as structural and material change.”<sup>13</sup>

### 3.1.1 Context and collectivity on the path to empowerment

Empowerment must always be considered in context. Cornwall and Edwards characterize empowerment as “a contextual, relational process” made up of “dynamic relationships and experiences.”<sup>14</sup> Kabeer writes, “How changes in women's resources will translate into changes in the choices they are able to make will depend, in part, on other aspects of the conditions in which they are making their choices.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the tools and resources available to women to “navigate and negotiate the difficulties they experience on their journeys”<sup>16</sup> and the way that they use them “will be influenced by the intersection of social relations and individual histories that form the vantage point from which they view...new possibilities.”<sup>17</sup>

Kabeer observes, “In a context where cultural values constrain women's ability to make strategic life choices, structural inequalities cannot be addressed by individuals alone.”<sup>18</sup> The importance of wider structural change in creating a context conducive to the empowerment of individual women, in any society but especially in traditionally patriarchal societies, is widely acknowledged. Collective empowerment can be the most effective vehicle for addressing such structural inequalities and inspiring collective action against gender inequality and for development as well as making space for individuals to exercise their agency.

Rowlands outlines three dimensions of empowerment: personal, “where empowerment is about developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalized oppression”; close relationships, “where empowerment is about developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationship and decisions made within it”; and collective, “where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rowlands, “Empowerment Examined,” 102.

<sup>12</sup> Goldman and Little, “Innovative Grassroots NGOS,” 763.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards, Introduction to *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development: Changing Women's Lives*, Edited by Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards (London & New York: Zed Books, 2014): 24.

<sup>15</sup> Kabeer, “Resources, Agency, Achievements,” 443.

<sup>16</sup> Cornwall and Edwards, Introduction to *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Kabeer, “Resources, Agency, Achievements,” 460.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Rowlands, “Empowerment Examined,” 103.

Some have noted a missing discussion in the literature on empowerment when it comes to the “close relationship” dimension and its importance to individual empowerment. Cornwall and Edwards point out that

Mainstream empowerment narratives tend to neglect relationships, focusing on individual women’s trajectories of self-improvement or on the bigger picture of society-wide economic change... Refocusing our attention on the relational dimensions of empowerment has substantial implications for how agencies and actors seeking to foster empowerment might better orient their efforts to generating the kind of empowering effects they wish to produce.<sup>20</sup>

Conceptualizing empowerment as equal to pure autonomy and independence ignores the possibility of empowerment being reached through interdependence.<sup>21</sup> In a context like the one in which this study is based where kinship and collectivity are deeply significant, reaching empowerment interdependently is not only a possibility but a necessity. Inner transformation is at the core of empowerment, but so is a transformation of the network of relationships in which an individual finds herself.

These concepts surrounding empowerment sharpened my analysis. Specifically, I examined what resources the women identified and how their relationships with men shaped their experiences. The ways in which relationships, marriages in particular, are significant in opening up spaces within which women can act and begin to exercise their agency is a central question.

### 3.2 Self-efficacy

We know that “inner transformation” and the way an individual perceives herself is critical to any process of empowerment, political or otherwise.<sup>22</sup> Malhotra et al. tie self-efficacy and empowerment to “the significance of the realization by individual women that they can be the agents of change in their own lives.”<sup>23</sup>

Self-efficacy, therefore, is an important concept when thinking about empowerment. Bandura defines self-efficacy as an individual or group’s belief in his/her/their capacity to “produce

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<sup>20</sup> Cornwall and Edwards, Introduction to *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development*, 21-22.

<sup>21</sup> Pavalavalli Govindasamy and Anju Malhotra, “Women’s position and family planning in Egypt,” *Studies in Family Planning* 27, no.6 (1996): 328-340; Naila Kabeer, “‘Money Can’t Buy Me Love’? Re-evaluating Gender, Credit and Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh,” IDS Discussion Paper 363, 1998; Malhotra et al., “Measuring Women’s Empowerment”; Anju Malhotra and Mark Mather, “Do schooling and work empower women in developing countries? Gender and domestic decisions in Sri Lanka,” *Sociological Forum* 12, no.4 (1997): 599-630.

<sup>22</sup> Kabeer, “Reflections on the measurement of women’s empowerment”; Malhotra et al., “Measuring Women’s Empowerment”; Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*; Rowlands, “Empowerment Examined”; Sen, *Development as Freedom*; Sen, “Women’s empowerment and human rights”.

<sup>23</sup> Malhotra et al., “Measuring Women’s Empowerment,” 9.

designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives.”<sup>24</sup> He outlines four sources of self-efficacy: “Mastery experiences”, in which first-hand personal or collective successes bolster the perception of self- or collective- efficacy; “social models” in which the “vicarious” experience of a similar individual or group’s success has a comparable effect; “social persuasion” in which individuals or groups are verbally persuaded that they are capable of success when faced with a given task or obstacle; and finally, an individual’s “somatic and emotional state”, or rather how an individual perceives that state, which influences the perception of personal efficacy.<sup>25</sup> Just as all four elements can bolster a sense of efficacy, they can also diminish it if failure occurs or if one perceives their somatic or emotional state to be a detriment to their ability to act effectively.

Bandura also differentiates between “personal agency” (self-efficacy), “proxy agency” (effectively persuading others to act) and “collective agency” (efficacy when acting as a group). In the context of this study, all three interplay throughout the women’s journeys. For example, when women become leaders, part of their role includes disseminating and explaining information in hopes of inspiring action, or exercising proxy agency. Effectively doing so then increases their sense of personal agency. This process fits within the framework of empowerment that we have roughly sketched out—exercising agency through the use of resources and then being affirmed by the resulting achievements— and could also be described as a “mastery experience”. Subsequently, the actions inspired by the women’s sensitization and mobilization efforts build collective agency and a sense of collective efficacy.

## 4 RESULTS

I have broken my findings down into three main sections: Section 4.1 is a brief discussion of life before the arrival of the CEP, Section 4.2 focuses on individual and collective transformations that began to take hold during the CEP and Section 4.3 concentrates on leadership outside of the classroom and after the departure of Tostan.

The women who were selected as coordinators as well as the women who were elected as municipal counselors came to be in these positions about a year into their participation in the CEP. Therefore, in Section 4.2, I will focus primarily on the women’s rise to leadership through the lens of themes that emerged from their descriptions: being recognized as trustworthy, being chosen by others and developing voice/communication skills/abilities. In Section 4.3, I will discuss the women’s leadership roles outside of or parallel to the classroom setting, which began during the CEP but have continued and grown since it ended.

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<sup>24</sup> Albert Bandura, “Self-efficacy” in *Encyclopedia of human behavior*, vol. 4 edited by V.S. Ramachandran (New York: Academic Press, 1994): 71-81.

<sup>25</sup> Bandura, “Self-efficacy”.

#### 4.1 Before their journey: an introduction to the symbolic and practical importance of mobility and meetings

Descriptions of mobility and calling and attending public meetings (and the interplay between them) were ubiquitous. I will address their importance throughout the discussion of my findings, but I would like to introduce the two concepts as defined by participants. The women's level of mobility and, by extension, their access to public space, often through participation in meetings, served as benchmarks along their journey. Immobility and exclusion from public meetings were features of their lives before participating in Tostan's program.

Most interview questions followed an extended metaphor of a journey, a familiar way of forming narrative in Pulaar. The interviewer asked the women to go back in time, before Tostan, before they became leaders, and describe what their lives were like, what challenges they faced, who they were. Of the 19 female leaders, ten of them identified immobility as either their state of being before "the beginning of their journey" or as a challenge they had been facing, or, in most cases, both. Most attributed their confinement to the home to the ideas about the role of women that they had grown up with and lived with. Staying home was a keystone of what they were taught as young girls about how a woman should comport herself. Maïmouna explained, "At the time, a young girl who moved about too much was seen badly; people did not take her seriously and they judged her."<sup>26</sup> Other women offered similar testimony to the social norms surrounding female movement, especially at a young age. Staying at home, and away from unrelated boys and men, was seen as integral to maintaining one's "dignity", or virginity, and therefore was important to the marriageability of a young girl.

Even once married, sociocultural restrictions on mobility remained. Fatou attributed her social reservations and inability to communicate effectively to what she described as the unfortunate condition of women whose husbands who do not allow them to leave the home, which prevents them from "coming out of their shells".<sup>27</sup> Khadija and Maïmouna described similar constraints:

Back then, women were confined to the home. Having to be limited to housework only, to not participate in any other activities, was hard.<sup>28</sup>

When I was younger, being a woman was hard, difficult. Women were reduced to staying at home. She went nowhere. She remained ignorant. Besides housework, she had no other activities.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Maïmouna, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Loridije, December 31, 2016, interview 3, transcript.

<sup>27</sup> Fatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Boutougoufara, January 12, 2017, interview 27, transcript.

<sup>28</sup> Khadija, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Talico Fulbé, January 2, 2017, interview 5, transcript.

<sup>29</sup> Maïmouna, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Loridije, December 31, 2016, interview 3, transcript.

Ignorance and immobility were often conflated in this way. Penda asked “Since I didn’t ever go anywhere, I knew nothing. How could I have been a leader?”<sup>30</sup> She attributed being “shy and reserved” in the past to “never going anywhere”.<sup>31</sup> Silèye explained that her life “yesterday” consisted exclusively of house and fieldwork and that her friends and family therefore saw her “as someone who did not know many things.” She said, “Before I talked to people with my eyes lowered...I saw myself as someone who knew nothing, who did not have much courage. Even if someone spoke to me, I was afraid to respond.”<sup>32</sup>

The women described their immobility in terms of confinement to the home as well as in terms of isolation from decision-making spaces, namely, meetings. Aïssatou explained, “I was confronted with challenges...like, staying at home only, I didn’t participate in meetings. I wasn’t called to attend any meetings...not being able to speak and take the floor is a problem.”<sup>33</sup> Cira expressed feeling left out as well, “I had problems because I didn’t ever go anywhere, I didn’t participate in anything...they didn’t remember me during meetings.”<sup>34</sup>

The women’s opportunities for movement were restricted to errands related to housework (such as going to the well) or attending important events (like a baptism or wedding). They had certain types of agency within their homes and related to event planning or village women’s groups, but they did not conceptualize these roles, as caregivers or hosts and planners, as leadership or as empowering. When asked if they could remember a time or event before they began the CEP that they felt was important to their development as a leader, only two women cited working with the other women in the village to create a garden, which had in both cases quickly fizzled because of a lack of water. Prior to the commencement of the CEP and the establishment of the CMC, there were very limited opportunities for the women to participate in public life or be efficacious.

## 4.2 On the path to leadership: Transformations taking hold over the course of the CEP

Not all of the female municipal counselors that were interviewed had “run” for office; that is, they did not present themselves for the position, campaign and win. With just two exceptions, the women had been chosen by their peers through a process that would be more accurately characterized as a community discussion than as an election. (I note that this was how the male municipal counselors in the villages were chosen as well). All of the women were chosen, or, in the two exceptional cases, ran for their positions about a year into the CEP. CMC coordinators’

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<sup>30</sup> Penda, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Loridije, December 30, 2016, interview 2, transcript.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Silèye, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Sinthiou Saliou, January 11, 2017, interview 25, transcript.

<sup>33</sup> Aïssatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Komoty, January 3, 2017, interview 9, transcript.



<sup>34</sup> Cira, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Sinthiou Saliou, January 11, 2017, interview 22, transcript.

appointment was part of the CEP itself, but municipal counselors were elected concurrently to, but not as a part of, the CEP.

Understanding the intricacies of how and why these women were chosen by their communities, for the most part without their intervention prior to the decision, is central to understanding their paths to leadership and empowerment. Therefore, the bulk of this section will be devoted to answering questions about their being selected. Before delving into that discussion, I will outline the curricular and pedagogical highlights of the CEP that female participants felt contributed most significantly to their evolution as leaders, both leading up to and since their election or appointment. This outline will provide context for the transformations that were already taking hold when the women were appointed/elected. I will return to the themes presented here throughout Section 4.3 as well.

#### *4.2.1 Curricular and pedagogical highlights*

It is important to note that, in most cases, the participants did not describe specific interactive experiences in the classroom. In broad strokes, they were able to attribute sweeping personal and communal changes to “studying in the Tostan program” but usually struggled to pinpoint specifics. For example, no one mentioned what activities they did in class to learn how to communicate diplomatically with their spouses, but almost every participant mentioned this as an outcome of the CEP. While a participant might not have listed human rights as a module that impacted her, she might use language such as “wherever a man is a woman can be” or “everyone must be treated fairly” which reflect that she likely internalized the content of the module, although she cannot recall the specifics of the class almost two years after the program (three years after covering democracy and human rights). A handful of participants did recall, when asked what elements of the class had the greatest impact on them, specific subject matter such as democracy, human rights and gender equality. Khadiatou said, “They taught us democracy; I paid a lot of attention to that. I understood that power is equality between men and women.”<sup>35</sup> However, for the most part, each individual module had become an indistinguishable part of a whole in the minds of the participants.

Health and public speaking are two notable exceptions. When asked which parts of the Tostan program were the most meaningful for them, specifically regarding their development as leaders, all of them cited health as either the singularly most important topic or as one out of a small list. Khadiatou, the coordinator of her village CMC and a municipal counselor also told us that the most important parts of the class in her development as a leader were “health, maternal health, vaccinations and democracy.”<sup>36</sup> Like many other women, she had detailed examples of what she had learned and how she was applying that knowledge:

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<sup>35</sup> Khadiatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Léwa Diofulbé, December 28, 2016, interview 1, transcript.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

I'm very interested in, when a child has diarrhea, knowing that he is becoming more and more dehydrated and how to help him, how to care for him. We learned to perform first aid until we can get them to the hospital, if the case gets worse...When we began the Tostan program, it was in that moment that we saw images of a clean environment and we knew that we cannot have good health without hygiene and cleanliness. We waited for the end of the windy period to do sweeping sessions and burn the trash to avoid bush fires...When I see that everything is clean around me, I am proud. During the rainy season, I cannot say that we have completely eradicated mosquitos, but there are far fewer and we have less mosquitos. There is less malaria...What really makes me happy [is that] before, very few people had birth certificates, but with the Tostan program and the help of the facilitator, today we have 51 children declared. We also have helped 22 adults get their birth certificates and many others to [obtain] their national identity cards..."<sup>1</sup>

While participants did not actually cite learning to speak in public as an impactful element of the class for them, public speaking came up repeatedly, and they made clear that it was in class that they had tried it for the first time and practiced. Female participants described in varying degrees of detail the slow evolution of their ability to speak in public and express themselves more generally, usually starting with being called up to answer questions by the facilitator and gradually becoming more comfortable until they were volunteering to speak in front of the whole group. Khadiatou said, "In the beginning, it was the facilitator who would tell us "do this" and "go write on the board". He did not ask me too much, but each time when I said something, people appreciated it. I answered many questions because sometimes the younger people did not understand."<sup>37</sup> The facilitator's patience, which was frequently mentioned, and affirmations (such as clapping for them when they spoke) were important to the women. When speaking to community members as well, the women were very encouraged by clapping and found those moments extremely memorable. Fanta said, "The first time I spoke in class, I got goose bumps. I was afraid, but the facilitator encouraged us by clapping."<sup>38</sup>

This narrative of gradually becoming comfortable with public speaking mirrors the larger narrative of the women's journeys to empowerment and legitimacy. Comfort speaking in class led to comfort speaking in public just as thinking, acting and organizing in the classroom led to thinking, acting and organizing outside the classroom.

#### *4.2.2 The transformational power of "being chosen" in a collectivist society*

It was obvious that the phenomenon of "being chosen" was a critical turning point on the women's paths to leadership and empowerment. Of the female leaders interviewed, 13 were chosen by others for their role, having never before considered becoming a leader; two were chosen by others but had considered becoming a leader or wanted the position they were

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Fanta, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Tambala, January 7, 2017, interview 18, transcript.

chosen for; three were chosen because of their affiliation with an established political party and their political activism during election season; and two presented themselves as candidates for the position. It is difficult to know if the Pulaar tendency towards extreme modesty led the women to downplay their role in assuming the position they currently hold. Conscious of this possibility, the interviewer did her best to draw out the details of how they came to their position.

‘Being chosen’ came up in interviews with male participants as well. I was curious to know what had pushed them to choose female leaders, either coordinators or counselors, for the first time. Mamadou told an interesting story about the sensitization campaign undertaken by the men who were participating in the class to explain to the other men in the village that “a man can lead, and a woman can also lead.”<sup>39</sup> He explained,

[The Tostan participants] preferred to choose a woman [as coordinator] because they are more flexible and more adept than men. The way that they care for their babies, the way that they sweet-talk and coax their husbands, these are qualities and virtues they have to lead and manage the community. Men do not know how to negotiate. They do not have diplomacy.<sup>40</sup>

In Mamadou’s explanation of their preference for a female coordinator, we begin to see the importance of negotiation and diplomatic speech. Their campaign was successful and the group chose a woman as coordinator. As CMC secretary, Mamadou is charged with “accompanying” the women, whose only educational experience was with Tostan, whereas Mamadou went to French school. It was common to have a young man like Mamadou in the secretary position— young men are most likely to be literate and numerate.

There is a parity law in Senegal as of 2010<sup>41</sup>, which applies to all fully or partially elective institutions in the country, but anecdotal evidence from participants and discussions prior to fieldwork indicate that this law is not universally followed or even known about in isolated rural villages like the ones discussed in this study. When asked why their community had selected a woman as the coordinator of the CMC and/or as a municipal counselor, both men and women identified their direct or indirect involvement with the Tostan program as the primary reason. The influence of the Tostan program on the men’s desire or willingness to chose or elect a female leader was multifaceted. Aside from the internalization of lessons about gender equality and democracy and the complex relational changes that began to take hold during the program, which are addressed in later sections, two men cited the simple fact that the facilitator was a woman as a factor that was influential in the evolution of their thinking regarding the status of women. They expressed that they saw the facilitator, who had come from afar, left her family

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<sup>39</sup> Mamdou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Tambala, January 7, 2017, interview 16, transcript.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> The text of Law ° 2010-11, passed on May 28, 2010, can be found here:  
<http://www.jo.gouv.sn/spip.php?article8213>.

even, to live in their community and teach them. They asked themselves, “Why can’t our women do that?” Mamadou said, “We saw that they had sent us a woman as our facilitator, she came from far away to teach us, [Tostan] and her family must have had confidence in her. We, too, we took this as a model and we said to ourselves that we trust our women too and we put them forward.”<sup>42</sup> He brought this up again as he recounted how they had approached men who were reticent about their wives participating in the program:

We talked to [the men] again about the example of the female facilitator who came here from very far, leaving her family and her parents to come and bring us knowledge. She is a woman, like our women, and if we want [our women] to become active and succeed in life, we have to trust them and give them responsibilities. It was like [the reticent men] understood little by little and came to reason.<sup>43</sup>

Both men and women identified similar qualities as important in the choice of leader as well. People spoke highly of “dynamism”, “patience”, “tolerance” and “bravery” as well as the ability to “withstand or endure a lot”, “maintain good relations”, “bring people together” and “express my/herself”. Besides these two factors in common, women<sup>44</sup> identified two other main reasons why they felt they had been chosen:

1. Their expressed desire for the position (in the cases of the two women mentioned at the beginning of this section);
2. Their involvement with a political party (in the cases of the three women mentioned at the beginning of this section).

Men identified three other reasons:

1. The advantageous position from which women are able to defend the interests of the *whole* community;
2. The fact that women are more sedentary, and therefore less likely to abandon the post to immigrate/emigrate or travel;
3. The parity law.

First, three men explained that a woman could better represent the interests of women and children, since they understand the condition of women and the needs of children. Additionally, other women would be more comfortable bringing their concerns to a female counselor. Abdou, for example, told us in an unrecorded conversation that in his village, before participating in the Tostan CEP, women holding positions of leadership would never have been possible, but that now they understand that “men cannot defend women’s interests, only women can” and that

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<sup>42</sup> Mamdou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Tambala, January 7, 2017, interview 16, transcript.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> I refer here to the female leaders and not to the female facilitators.

women “know what’s good for the family,” and therefore can and should have decision making power.<sup>45</sup>

Second, several men said that since women are less prone to travel or leave the village for work, and since their children and domestic duties tie them to their homes, they are more reliably available. A priori, this argument seems to contradict the empowering force of mobility for women, but the kind of mobility that women identified as empowering—attending meetings in nearby communities as well as their own, or visiting their friends on opposite sides of the village without an escort—does not include the sort of grander-scale mobility that might take women away from the village for extended periods of time, such as immigrating to France. So the perception of women as “more sedentary” as it concerns their appointment to leadership positions works in complement with their increased mobility, and the accompanying space for empowerment, on a more localized scale.

Both facilitators also identified women’s availability as an important consideration in the choice of a female leader. Awa, the facilitator who had previously worked in Dianké Mahkan, explained, “In the communities, the women are more sedentary, and the men move around a lot; they travel, they immigrate and if they name them [to leadership positions], they might leave their post at any time.”<sup>46</sup> Ardo said, “We thought that to reduce absences a woman would be better, since men move around a lot, traveling, working elsewhere, participating in ceremonies, etc. Women are less mobile, they stick around more, so they will be better for managing the needs of the community.”<sup>47</sup> Several of the women also identified their “availability” as a factor that contributed to their rise as a leader.

Finally, the parity law was mentioned in passing by two men, but did not seem to hold particular significance in their reasoning. In one case, Moutarou, the Mayor of his village, explained the law briefly as one of several reasons and in another case the law was cited quickly as an afterthought.

#### 4.2.2.1 *‘Being chosen’ as a turning point*

Since almost all of the women were chosen for their positions without having ever thought about the possibility that they might become a leader someday, many of them expressed that at the time they felt very nervous, even afraid. If they expressed this sentiment during the interview, the interviewer asked what gave them the strength to accept and continue anyway. Besides their faith that Allah would help them fulfill their duties, they all cited the same thing: the confidence that people must have had in them to choose them for such an important role. Every woman, even those who did not express that they felt anxious about becoming a leader at

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<sup>45</sup> Abdou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Talico Fulbé, December 31, 2016, conversation 1, notes.

<sup>46</sup> Awa, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Goudiry, January 16, 2017, interview 31, transcript.

<sup>47</sup> Ardo, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Sinthiou Saliou, January 10, 2017, interview 21, transcript.

first, including the two that presented themselves for the positions, spoke of the happiness and pride they felt when they realized that everyone had enough confidence and trust in them to choose or elect them. They made statements such as, “I was moved”; “I couldn’t say anything; I was happy”; “I will never forget it”; and to [the Tostan participants who chose her], “I will remain grateful my whole life.”<sup>48</sup>

Many cited the moment they were chosen as the moment they realized their voices had importance, and they could have power:

It was the moment where I was chosen [as counselor] and there was a meeting. I was called for the meeting and in that moment I felt that my voice is important.<sup>49</sup>

The day when we met to choose a coordinator, and they were all in agreement to choose me out of everyone in attendance, that day, I knew my voice was important.<sup>50</sup>

When I was chosen by the PCR and the whole community, during a visit by our *Sous-Prefet*, after the PCR’s welcome speech, the Imam and the village chief...asked me to take the floor and to welcome [the *Sous-Prefet*] in the name of all of the women of the village. That day I felt that my voice was important.<sup>51</sup>

The moment of “being chosen” was one of extraordinary validation for all of the women, serving as a source of “social persuasion”, as outlined in Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy. Simply “being chosen” played a role in persuading the women that they might in fact be capable actors.

#### 4.2.2.2 *The narrative arc of “being chosen”*

Because I had not studied, even for [the counselor position] I did not campaign. It was others who chose me because they appreciated my qualities...I was happy [to be chosen]. I am young and everyone agreed to choose me. It’s a great honor and I will do everything I can to carry out the duties entrusted to me.<sup>52</sup>

Let us unpack Fatima’s above statement, which, while brief and simple, follows the typical narrative arc of “being chosen”.

Most of the women placed great symbolic significance on having studied. Others started their stories like Fatima had, saying that at the beginning of their journey they had thought, “Me?

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<sup>48</sup> Mariama, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Dianké Mahkan, January 9, 2017, interview 19, transcript.

<sup>49</sup> Salimata, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Béli Waamé Daka, January 4, 2017, interview 28, transcript.

<sup>50</sup> Khadija, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Talico Fulbé, January 2, 2017, interview 5, transcript.

<sup>51</sup> Soulé, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Dianké Mahkan, January 9, 2017, interview 20, transcript.

<sup>52</sup> Fatima, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Komoty, January 3, 2017, interview 8, transcript.

Someone who has never studied, how could I lead?”<sup>53</sup> Even if they could not list the subjects they had studied in detail, they talked about themselves in binaries defined by having studied or not, delineating their perception of themselves along these lines.

Across the board, women who expressed that until they were chosen they could never have imagined themselves as leaders justified this with their lack of having studied or lack of knowledge (which went hand in hand with having studied or not). When asked *why* they were chosen, those same women identified their having studied as one of the reasons. For example, Silèye told us, “Studying in the program was important in my evolution, since if you do not have knowledge you cannot lead. It is because I learned and acquired knowledge that people had confidence in me to chose me as counselor.”<sup>54</sup> She had earlier described herself as “someone who knew nothing, who did not have much courage.” Now, she says that she “cannot say that I know everything, but in any case I know some things” and that she is able to “speak loudly, and people clap”.<sup>55</sup>

Fatima’s language about others’ appreciation of her “qualities” is also typical. This, like many other turns of phrases that were common across interviews, especially among the women, reflects the instinct for modesty and the use of others as a vehicle to describe oneself. When asked how she would have described herself as a young woman Aïcha said simply, “I cannot describe myself; it is others who know how I am; it is others who can describe me.”<sup>56</sup> Aïcha’s struggle to talk about herself in the first person was common. When the question was rephrased to allow participants to talk about themselves through the eyes of their kin, they could answer readily. Their descriptions of qualities that *other people* appreciated in them indicated what qualities *they* appreciated in *themselves*. They used others as a proxy for talking about themselves in other ways as well, using “we” when they were in fact talking about something they personally had done and answering questions about themselves by explaining how their family or friends felt about the action.

Other women, like Fatima, placed great importance on the will of other people when describing their journey to leadership. When asked if she thought at the time that she was chosen as coordinator that she was capable of leading, Khadija answered, “I had thought about it, but I knew that the choice depends on everyone else, they have to have confidence in your qualities. I thought I had the necessary qualities to be chosen.”<sup>57</sup> Aminata said that she did not think she was capable of leading until she was chosen because she “knew that everything depends on the people who choose.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Penda, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Loridije, December 30, 2016, interview 2, transcript.

<sup>54</sup> Silèye, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Sinthiou Saliou, January 11, 2017, interview 25, transcript.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Aïcha, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Banta Nani, January 6, 2017, interview 14, transcript.

<sup>57</sup> Khadija, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Talico Fulbé, January 2, 2017, interview 5, transcript.

<sup>58</sup> Aminata, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Talico Fulbé, January 2, 2017, interview 4, transcript.



Deference to the choice of others was important to the husbands of female leaders as well. In many cases, the husbands, who must be consulted before their wives can accept the position (I address this in Section 4.2.3), were inspired to give their wives permission because they deeply valued their peers' choice. Baaba, a village chief whose wife is a municipal counselor, told us, "When the people chose, they chose the best. I accepted [that she be elected counselor] because I have confidence in her intelligence, her capacity, her devotion and her engagement for the interests of the village."<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the pride and validation of being chosen, women also expressed that this support from their husbands gave them the courage to accept the position. Fatou said that she accepted the coordinator position because she felt pride in being chosen and the weight of the moral imperative to lead and not disappoint those who had confidence in her, but also because she knew she would have the support and approval of her husband.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, Fatima, like Fatou and all of the other women, expressed a strong moral imperative that she felt following her nomination to her position. The trust and confidence implicit in the choice of a certain community member for an important leadership role such as CMC coordinator or municipal counselor were empowering and energizing for the women and also gave them a moral mandate.

#### *4.2.2.3 Overcoming resistance*

Husbands and male community members were not always supportive as was the case for Fatou. Ardo, whose wife is the coordinator of their village CMC, explained that the other women who had been considered for the position his wife now holds had turned it down. He said, "They knew that their husbands are jealous and won't accept and let them become active." He attributed the husbands' reticence to "ignorance," saying, "because of ignorance, they interpret the activities of a woman outside of her household badly."<sup>61</sup>

In the rather unique case of Khadiatou, one of the two women who presented themselves and campaigned, her husband was in France when she was running for office and she was having some trouble with her in-laws. They even called her husband to tell him that she was doing "bad things" and must be stopped. She explained how she overcame this obstacle over the course of one phone call:

I talked to my husband, and I convinced him by explaining the advantages of the program and its importance for the village. Luckily, he understood me and he supported me. Then I

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<sup>59</sup> Baaba, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Komoty, January 4, 2017, interview 11, transcript.

<sup>60</sup> Fatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Boutougoufara, January 12, 2017, interview 27, transcript.

<sup>61</sup> Ardo, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Sinthiou Saliou, January 10, 2017, interview 21, transcript.

discussed with the community; I sensitized people and they understood in the end that I was committed to the development activities of the village.<sup>62</sup>

After this conversation, her husband instructed his family to allow her to continue her political activities and to support her. Other women used their new skills to lobby for their positions and support as well. They said,

I know certain men wanted a male coordinator and not a female coordinator, but I played diplomat with them and they came to reason.

We sensitized our husbands, we negotiated with them, they understood without a problem and they accepted to include us, to allow us to participate in meetings.

There was some opposition [after I was chosen]...I continue to play diplomat with them. I discuss, and I exchange with them. Some have come to reason, but others remain stubborn.

In many of the women's statements about this, we see examples of self-efficacy. The descriptions of their employment of negotiation and diplomacy demonstrate their agency as well as their cognizance of that agency. The women could clearly identify a positive outcome from something they had done using a skill of theirs, in this case the ability to negotiate diplomatically. Take the following statements: "I spoke until people understood"<sup>63</sup> and "Everything we do, we pass through [the village chief] first to ask for his permission, if he accepts and authorizes, we execute. And if it is not all clear to him, we explain to him until he understands. When he understands, he accepts,"<sup>64</sup> In each description, "explaining" is the task and "understanding" is the success. Khadiatou said, "Me, all I can do is talk to everyone; it's up to them to understand and accept."<sup>65</sup> So, when people do understand or are convinced, it is a success that reinforces the woman's sense of self-efficacy (through what Bandura would call a "mastery experience").

#### *4.2.3 Legitimization starts at home: trustworthiness and communication on the path to leadership*

This study shows that one of Tostan's most important contributions along the women's path to leadership and empowerment was giving them the tools to communicate and express themselves, which fostered ameliorated relationships and increased others' trust in them, especially in the home. Once legitimized at home, the women can turn outward toward the community. When choosing leaders, implicated community members look to the husbands and

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<sup>62</sup> Khadiatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Léwa Diofulbé, December 28, 2016, interview 1, transcript.

<sup>63</sup> Soulé, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Dianké Mahkan, January 9, 2017, interview 20, transcript.

<sup>64</sup> Khadiatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Léwa Diofulbé, December 28, 2016, interview 1, transcript.

<sup>65</sup> Khadiatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Léwa Diofulbé, December 28, 2016, interview 1, transcript.

families for affirmation of the potential they see in certain women. With the increased trust and harmony at home produced by Tostan's modules on the subject, most husbands feel comfortable and excited to vouch for their wives as well as to give them their blessing to take on a leadership role. In turn, women's confidence in their husbands support gives them courage and emboldens them to accept the position.

#### 4.2.3.1 *The importance of male permission*

Several male participants explained the process of selecting or electing a female leader:

When they put [my wife] forward for [the coordinator position], she accepted with reservation, telling them that she must first consult with her husband. She came and told me, and I gave her my permission, as I know that all knowledge is useful...When she delivered the news, they asked everyone if they were in agreement that she should be chosen as the coordinator and they all accepted.<sup>66</sup>

We [in the Tostan class] talked to her about [becoming the coordinator]. She accepted and she asked us to wait that she first discuss it with her husband. He didn't come to [Tostan] class. She told him, he gave his permission, and then he came and joined the group. Everyone was in agreement about the choice, so that's how she became the coordinator.<sup>67</sup>

In their explanations the importance of both male permission and collective decision-making are evident. The necessity of male permission was not diminished by the emancipatory effects of learning about gender equality and women's rights, among other topics, in the CEP. The men and women who talked about the importance of getting the blessing of one's husband before accepting a leadership position also talked about gender equality and of the importance of women's representation. They did not talk specifically, however, about husbands seeking the permission of wives in the context of leadership appointments. Whereas to a Western mind, a woman getting permission to lead from her husband might seem backwards or submissive, to the minds of participants it was unrelated to women's emancipation and had everything to do with harmony in the community. Husbands who were unsupportive and would not consent to their wives becoming leaders were seen as the problem, not the practice of seeking consent itself. The fact that the women continue to ask their husbands for consent is not a sign that the community has not changed; the fact that their husbands now support them most of the time is an example of how it *has* changed. Those changes have been integrated into the community and existing culture, rather than female leaders having to move outside of their context to exercise their agency.

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<sup>66</sup> Ardo, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Sinthiou Saliou, January 10, 2017, interview 21, transcript.

<sup>67</sup> Mamadou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Béli Waamé Daka, January 13, 2017, interview 29, transcript.

Collective decision-making was very important in all of the communities where interviews were conducted, not only in electing leaders. Women had only recently been let in to this process. Before, the leadership of the community was entirely male, occasionally with an auxiliary women's group, led by women, but which had little to no authority. The female leaders in this study are the first in their communities to hold positions of leadership that include responsibility outside of a small group of women. In many cases there was resistance. Since legitimacy for both men and women derives from the home, the confidence of a husband in his wife was crucial. The husband is seen as the authority on the wife's qualifications and trustworthiness. Moussa told us,

When we come to an agreement on the women [for a leadership position] based on their qualities and good behavior that we have witnessed, if their husband approves that confirms our hopes and our expectations. This confidence [from the husband] is very important in community life.<sup>68</sup>

He continued, "We all know each other, when choosing someone to defend your interests, to represent you with dignity, you have to choose someone you trust."<sup>69</sup> Pape also said, "When you understand someone and you trust them, you can agree to put her forward."<sup>70</sup> Baaba stressed a similar point, "They are brave and we know we can count on them. If we hand power to people, it is because we trust them. They are our women, we know them and we know what they are capable of."<sup>71</sup>

Here Baaba brings up an important question: that of capacity. When asked how he knew what the women were capable of, he said,

They execute all of the tasks that fall to them and take initiatives to advance activities concerning our village. A while ago, they themselves cut some wood to fence off their garden to protect their gardening activities. They requested the support of the Mayor, who helped them map out and widen the roads and the paths of the village. They are constantly sweeping in and around the village.<sup>72</sup>

Mamadou told us that it was the women's application of the lessons on health and hygiene that alerted him to their capacity. He was very impressed with how the women had internalized what they learned.

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<sup>68</sup> Moussa, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Dianké Mahkan, January 9, 2017, interview 30, transcript.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Pape, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Talico Fulbé, January 2, 2017, interview 7, transcript.

<sup>71</sup> Baaba, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Komoty, January 4, 2017, interview 11, transcript.

<sup>72</sup> Baaba, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Komoty, January 4, 2017, interview 11, transcript.

The women participated actively throughout the Tostan program; they participate effectively in all of the activities. When there are village clean ups, they mobilize themselves and complete their tasks. They look after the hygiene and cleanliness in and around the homes. They really understood the topics we covered in class and they apply them in everyday life. If we have an activity or an event in the village, the men and the women, we consult and we take decisions together. <sup>73</sup>

Health came up again and again as an example of a way that the women were applying what they had learned, or how they were having a positive effect on the village. I will return to this point about health in Section 4.3.2 to discuss how questions of health provided a vehicle for women to prove their capacities to themselves and their villages. But for husbands specifically, improved communication was the most important proof of their wives' capacities and trustworthiness, which made them comfortable affirming those capacities for the rest of the village.

#### 4.2.3.2 *Marital communication*

Aïcha told us that "relationships between husband and wife have become more tender and peaceful; there is less oppression in the household. All this thanks to good communication, exchange of ideas, sharing of information and taking decisions together." <sup>74</sup> Lamine summarized eloquently the connection between communication and trust: "When there is communication, there is understanding, and when there is understanding, there is harmony and that gives birth to balance and trust." <sup>75</sup>

All of the male participants elevated communication and getting along with their wives above everything else they told us. It was clear that this outcome of the CEP and its effect in their community, more harmonious marriages, was both most obvious and most meaningful to them. Mamadou's and Issa's answers to the question about the biggest change in their community are typical:

Communication is better now. There is greater respect between husbands and wives. They can discuss discretely, peacefully, understand each other and make decisions together. After [the women's] participation in the Tostan program, they became mature and responsible. <sup>76</sup>

[The positive changes] are because the women learned in class how to behave at home, with their husbands, what the role of a woman is in the family. Before, there was no

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<sup>73</sup> Mamadou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Béli Waamé Daka, January 13, 2017, interview 29, transcript.

<sup>74</sup> Aïcha, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Banta Nani, January 6, 2017, interview 14, transcript.

<sup>75</sup> Lamine, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Komoty, January 4, 2017, interview 13, transcript.

<sup>76</sup> Mamadou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Béli Waamé Daka, January 13, 2017, interview 29, transcript.

communication between husband and wife. Besides intercourse, they did not speak to each other for most of the day. But since [the women] began attending the [Tostan] classes, we have seen very positive changes. Now we discuss, we joke with our wives, we communicate perfectly, we make decisions together...it was a lack of communication that was the origin of many disagreements.<sup>77</sup>

Moussa also told us that the women and men had learned how to behave and communicate in the class and that while women changed a lot over the course of the CEP, “Men have also changed. Before women could not go to see a male friend without having problems with her husband, but now thanks to [Tostan] men also have changed their mentality. They have a different vision of women. They have learned to trust their wives.”<sup>78</sup>

Several men used communicating about where they would be going during the day, as opposed to just leaving home in the morning without informing their spouses, to describe the difference in the state of affairs pre- and post- Tostan’s modules on communication and living in communion. Lamine, for example, said, “Before, there were always quarrels between husband and wife. The wives went out without telling their husbands. The men did the same thing.”<sup>79</sup> Trust in their wives was also indicated by their willingness to allow their wives increased mobility, including inviting them to attend meetings or agreeing to allow them to attend. In some villages, the men decided to start inviting the women and in others the women asked to be allowed to participate and men acquiesced, apparently without hesitation in either case.

Such amelioration of day-to-day interactions appeared to be what demonstrated most powerfully to the men that not only could their wives be their partners in running the household and making decisions, they had the capacity to learn and evolve and, most importantly, to *think*.

The women took note of these changes as well. As husbands were discovering their wives as agents and partners for the first time and learning to trust them, wives were feeling listened to for the first time and discovering their voices.

Now I discuss with my children and my husband more easily. Now I know how to bring things up. I express myself better with my family.<sup>80</sup>

Communication changed a lot. Before there was no consideration for what I was saying. Now I discuss household issues with my husband; we plan together to manage our family well. With my children and all of the members of the family communication has evolved,

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<sup>77</sup> Issa, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Talico Fulbé, January 2, 2017, interview 6, transcript.

<sup>78</sup> Moussa, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Dianké Mahkan, January 9, 2017, interview 30, transcript.

<sup>79</sup> Lamine, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Komoty, January 4, 2017, interview 13, transcript.

<sup>80</sup> Fatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Boutougoufara, January 12, 2017, interview 27, transcript.

they listen to me, they understand me and they obey me when I give them examples of what I learned in class [with Tostan].<sup>81</sup>

Since I speak and I get along with my husband, I speak and I get along with my family. It is in those moments that I know my voice has importance.<sup>82</sup>

Now, I speak with [my family] with greater ease, I speak peacefully, I do not speak with anger. When I talk to my husband, I know how to negotiate to tell him what I want to tell him. I speak to him gently. Now, with my kids I discuss, I explain, I advise, but I do not hit. With the rest of the family too, I talk, I discuss nicely, even if someone did me wrong, it is within my abilities to get over it and forgive.<sup>83</sup>

We asked the women what advice they would give to women aspiring to be leaders in their community or get involved with politics. Many said they would advise such women to, for example, “get along with their families, to discuss with them, to forge good relationships with them.”<sup>84</sup> And “to organize first with their husbands and their children, to take their decisions with their families.”<sup>85</sup>

In sum, improved marital communication and relationships opened up space for women to take on leadership roles in two ways. First, it was of critical importance for husbands in learning to trust their wives, making them more willing to vouch for their trustworthiness to the community and also to give them permission to lead when chosen. Improved communication and relationships were also important first steps for many women in finding their voices. Their homes provided fertile testing grounds for their newfound communication skills and their successes with their husbands, children and families were critical to building self-confidence and seeing themselves as agents with opinions and thoughts that mattered.

### 4.3 “Today I see that women lead”: Leadership outside the classroom and after Tostan

It is difficult to find a clear line in the women’s narrative where Tostan left the community, as the women’s leadership activities began in the middle of the CEP and have continued since. Many of the activities described in this section were happening concurrently to the final year of the CEP. In this section, I will first return to the themes of mobility and meetings as they had evolved and as they relate as well to sensitization and information dissemination and then discuss the importance of health on the pathway to empowerment.

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<sup>81</sup> Cira, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Sinthiou Saliou, January 11, 2017, interview 22, transcript.

<sup>82</sup> Aïssatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Komoty, January 3, 2017, interview 9, transcript.

<sup>83</sup> Khadiatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Léwa Diofulbé, December 28, 2016, interview 1, transcript.

<sup>84</sup> Asa, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Komoty, January 4, 2017, interview 12, transcript.

<sup>85</sup> Aïssatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Komoty, January 3, 2017, interview 9, transcript.

As the women moved towards leadership, they became more mobile, attending meetings in their own villages and later in neighboring villages or even in Goudiry. The practical implications of such changes set aside, the symbolism was clearly powerful for the women and was instrumental in changing the way they conceived of their roles in their communities and households. Silèye, like all of the women, had described her role “yesterday” as one entirely external to her: doing housework, looking beautiful, keeping her husband happy. Her vision of her new role is of a thinking person, taking an active role as an agent of development. She described this new role, not just for her but for all women: “Today, I see that women lead; they go to meetings to represent their communities. They take the floor in public, they say and do things that are useful for their communities and for the whole country.”<sup>86</sup> Khadiatou similarly said that whereas before she thought that her role as a woman was limited to “cooking, pounding cereals, fetching water and doing laundry,” now “my ideas have changed a lot. I am thinking about how to move forward and help my community develop.”<sup>87</sup>

Increased mobility and access to meetings preceded shifts in women’s “self-understanding”. Empowerment theory emphasizes a “complex reciprocal relationship between women’s “self-understanding” and “capacity for self-expression” and their access to and control over material resources.”<sup>88</sup> Once women could leave the home to participate in classes and community development activities, they began to see themselves differently. Both the education and the activities are non-material resources, but these experiences become essential to women leaders as they take up issues that involve more physical materials, such as building materials or medicine.

#### 4.3.1 Meetings as resources: information, sensitization and self-efficacy

Cira described the first meeting she attended as a municipal counselor, citing it as the moment that “she knew her voice was important” because whereas before she felt forgotten and left behind when her husband was called to meetings without her, now

When I tell the Mayor that we needed something in the village, he listens and he transmits my request to the administrative authorities. He tells them that the counselor said that they need this or that thing in the village and if they accept the request, it’s a gain for the whole community.<sup>89</sup>

Like Cira, other women conceived of meetings as revolving doors of knowledge; women described both bringing their knowledge, of the needs of their village for example, to meetings, and taking away new knowledge, perhaps about health or hygiene. In either case, attending a

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<sup>86</sup> Silèye, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Sinthiou Saliou, January 11, 2017, interview 25, transcript.

<sup>87</sup> Khadiatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Léwa Diofulbé, December 28, 2016, interview 1, transcript.

<sup>88</sup> Cornwall and Edwards, Introduction to *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development*, 5; Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (London: Verso, 1994).

<sup>89</sup> Cira, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Sinthiou Saliou, January 11, 2017, interview 22, transcript.



meeting was conceived of as a way to serve the community. Broadly, the two primary elements of the women's roles as leaders were information dissemination and representing the community interests. Both coordinators and counselors described the dissemination of various types of information as one of their principal roles:

I am the coordinator, I am the head. It is to me that they give information and I transmit to the whole community. When I have information, I call everyone together at the home of the village chief and I transmit the information. <sup>90</sup>

All information passes through me and I am in charge of transmitting it to everyone. <sup>91</sup>

Information comes to me first and I share with people. If there is information or activities to do, I delegate someone to inform people and I call a meeting at which we share the information, we note the ideas and we take decisions together. <sup>92</sup>

I work with another female and male counselor...we meet with everyone at the home of the village chief, we share information and we distribute the tasks. <sup>93</sup>

The women's work with information, primarily in the form of dissemination and explaining to the community, is a clear example of self-efficacy. The women also conceived of the very act of bringing information (sensitization) and explaining things to people as success, because it demonstrated to them that they were capable of understanding to the point of being able to explain to someone else. Soda described her role as counselor:

I attend meetings and I express myself. I am called upon to explain, to sensitize about certain illnesses, such as AIDS or Ebola. There are counselors who do not know how to express themselves, and they cannot explain anything to anyone; but me, I have studied, I express myself well, and I explain things clearly. <sup>94</sup>

For all of the participants, sensitization was itself an end, so sensitizing and bringing information gave the women a sense of pride and happiness. They recognized sensitization as a pre-requisite for mobilization.

I am proud to be able to sensitize and mobilize people in my village to act together in the common interest of the village." <sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Khadiatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Léwa Diofulbé, December 28, 2016, interview 1, transcript.

<sup>91</sup> Penda, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Loridaje, December 30, 2016, interview 2, transcript.

<sup>92</sup> Bineta, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Tambala, January 7, 2017, interview 17, transcript.

<sup>93</sup> Raby, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Timbingfara, January 11, 2017, interview 23, transcript.

<sup>94</sup> Soda was one of two women who had gone to French primary school; Soda, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Timbingfara, January 11, 2017, interview 24, transcript.

<sup>95</sup> Aïcha, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Banta Nani, January 6, 2017, interview 14, transcript.

I am proud of sensitization, because when I speak to people, they listen, they understand me and they obey me and it makes me happy that the communication goes well.<sup>96</sup>

Both women and men also described representing the interests of the community as the duty of a good leader. The platform they identified for the praxis of this defense of community interests was meetings. Defending and representing the interests of the community was the role of the leader, using their voice in a meeting their vehicle, and bringing some sort of concrete gain back the ultimate goal. The more gains the leader brought back, the more legitimized she was in the eyes of her community or constituents. This requires certain skills, as Moussa described,

If you chose someone who does not know how to express themselves in public, who cannot speak to your needs, this person can bring nothing to the community. If a person does not know how to express her needs, defend the interests of the community, she cannot bring benefits to help the community.<sup>97</sup>

Most often, the types of meetings, external to the CEP or CMC, that the women were attending, and therefore the type of information that they were disseminating, were health-related. The community interests that they defend often have to do with bringing a clinic or health or sanitary supplies to their village. Just as the women had identified health as the most important thing they learned in class, health also figured prominently into their roles as coordinators and especially as counselors.

#### 4.3.2 *The role of health in women's political leadership*

Generally, the gender needs that must be addressed in order for women to live dignified lives, equal to their male peers, can be divided into two categories; practical and strategic.<sup>98</sup> Practical gender needs might include such things as women's health, earning a living or providing for a family. Strategic gender needs address more complex, structural elements of a society such as social norms, land ownership or sexual autonomy. A cyclical relationship exists between addressing the two types of needs; addressing practical gender needs serves as a way for women to prove their skills, knowledge and capacity for action to both themselves and their communities. The resulting feeling of self-efficacy and pride is empowering for the women and their actions and achievements prove their capacity to men, making them more inclined to be supportive and engage with women in addressing strategic gender needs. Addressing those strategic gender needs then makes it easier to address other practical gender needs.

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<sup>96</sup> Mariama, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Dianké Mahkan, January 9, 2017, interview 19, transcript.

<sup>97</sup> Moussa, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Dianké Mahkan, January 9, 2017, interview 30, transcript.

<sup>98</sup> Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without emancipation? Women's interests, state and revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies* 11, no.2 (1985): 227-254; Karen Monkman et al., "The transformatory potential of a village empowerment program: The Tostan replication in Mali," *Women's Studies International Forum* 30 (2007): 454; Caroline O. N. Moser, "Gender planning in the third world: Meeting practical and strategic gender needs," *World Development* 17 (1989): 1799-1825.

Health, hygiene and cleanliness are practical gender needs. The village of Komoty, the only village in which the men refused to attend the Tostan class, provides an interesting example of the practical/strategic gender needs interplay. The three men interviewed in Komoty all told us that despite the men not attending class, behavior on the part of both genders had changed. The Mayor, Moutarou, confirmed this but added,

The women, when they come back from class, they share everything that they have learned with everyone, they explain it very well, but I know that not everything is followed to the letter. Convincing men of certain points still needs to be done, it is hard...it is hard to make people understand when they do not want to.<sup>99</sup>

We found that even more than a year after the end of the CEP some men remained reticent regarding subjects such as women's rights and gender equality—both of which, as social norms, would fall into the category of strategic gender needs. However, they were all extremely enthusiastic about the developments in communication, health and sanitation—which are practical gender needs—that had come out of the classes their wives and female relatives attended.<sup>100</sup>

Komoty provides a potent example of how health can be used as an entry point for women into both the public space and as a starting point for dialogue and action regarding more complex subjects. Women are also buoyed by what they see as concrete achievements. They are engaged in cycle of capacity building leading to a greater sense of self-efficacy, in turn inspiring them to take on more daunting tasks.

It was clear that health played a vital role in this cycle. Most women cited health-related achievements, including cleaning up the village, making sure women go to the clinic for pre- and post- natal visits and getting children their vaccines and birth certificates, as their proudest accomplishments in their new roles. All of these successes contributed to the women's increased sense of self-efficacy.

As a platform for exercising their voices, knowledge about health was incredibly valuable. The municipal counselors' roles are often ill defined, if they are defined at all, and Mayors often give them no responsibilities other than calling them to meet, usually to vote on budgetary matters. Next to managing information coming into the village, most of the female counselors take on health as their primary role. Maimouna said, "I am mostly in charge of taking care of women's

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<sup>99</sup> Moutarou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow and Kyla Korvne, Komoty, January 3, 2017, interview 10, transcript.

<sup>100</sup> The example of Komoty suggests that in villages where men did not attend the program, progress on practical gender needs is about equal to those villages where they did attend, but the same might not be true for strategic gender needs, although this question did not figure into this study and confirming this theory would therefore require an entirely separate study.

health. I did not study [medicine], I am not a doctor, but I take the initiative to accompany women throughout their pregnancy all the way to the hospital when they give birth.”<sup>101</sup>

Speaking up and trying to get a dispensary or clinic in their village during meetings with the Mayor and local bureaucracy also figured prominently in their roles as representatives of their village. I witnessed this first hand at the meeting I attended of the municipal counselors in the village of Komoty. Fanta explained that the first time she spoke in public outside of her Tostan class was in her first meeting of municipal counselors:

When someone is sick, or when a woman has to give birth, we have to bring them to Bani or to another clinic. Our roads are not good and we don't have means of transportation. We are exposed to all sorts of danger and risks, anything can happen [while trying to get to Bani]. I asked for help getting a dispensary and a nurse so that if a woman must give birth, she gives birth in the village, if someone is sick, he is cared for in the village, if a child needs a vaccine, he is vaccinated in the village.<sup>102</sup>

Even more important to the women than bringing health concerns up in meetings with political superiors, and common to both coordinators and counselors, was bringing health resources and knowledge back into their villages. Maïmouna recalled the first time she felt her voice had importance:

It was upon my return from our hygiene training, I called a meeting and I passed along all the information. I spoke to everyone about cleanliness and the installation and maintenance of latrine toilets. Everyone listened to me with attention and they really appreciated what I was saying.<sup>103</sup>

Statements like this were common: she learns something about health or receives some sort of handout and then calls a meeting and people listen and appreciate the knowledge she is bringing. Both the women and the men talked extensively about sensitization and its importance and characterized it as one of the central roles of the coordinators and counselors, especially as it concerns health issues. The sense of accomplishment the women felt simply because they were traveling, attending meetings, and learning is compounded by the warm reception from their community. This is a clear example of self-efficacy at play and illustrates the points made regarding the dissemination of information as well.

Health constituted the bulk of not only their duties but their goals as well, both for coordinators and counselors. The majority of their proudest moments and achievements also had to do with health. From start to finish, their vision of the future, the role they envisioned for themselves in achieving it and the steps they had taken so far all tended to revolve around health, with their

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<sup>101</sup> Maïmouna, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Loridije, December 31, 2016, interview 3, transcript.

<sup>102</sup> Fanta, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Tambala, January 7, 2017, interview 18, transcript.

<sup>103</sup> Maïmouna, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Loridije, December 31, 2016, interview 3, transcript.

other new skills employed to support the achievement of their health-related goals. The work they were doing in the health sector is reinforcing their skills all the time, as well legitimizing them in the eyes of their families and communities. Most importantly, it is changing the way they see themselves, from isolated keepers of the home to actors engaged in working towards the well being of their families and communities.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of their journeys, the women were hardly able to leave their homes and felt left out from public decision-making spaces. By the time of interviews, they were not only attending meetings but calling and leading them. One municipal counselor told us:

What makes me most happy, what makes me especially proud, is that today in the village if I say night, it is night and if I say day, it is day. I mean that I can call on the people of my village at any moment and at any time. They will all be there and all will act together with me.<sup>104</sup>

This study has documented the transformation that occurred between these two stark states of being: from confinement to the home to having the power to assemble and direct people. I have focused especially on the role that various modules in the Tostan CEP played in catalyzing this transformation. Let us briefly return to empowerment and situate the role of Tostan in the theory.

Through the prism of Kabeer's "three interrelated dimensions" of empowerment—resources (pre-conditions), agency (process), and achievements (outcomes)—NGOs are best conceptualized as facilitators of "the resources needed for agency to be actualized."<sup>105</sup> Cornwall and Edwards capture the essence of the role of an NGO in the process of empowerment, using the metaphor of "a journey along pathways that can be travelled individually or together with others":

The work of external actors and interventions, then, may be conceived not as "empowering women"—empowerment is not something that is "done to" women but is done by them for themselves—but as clearing some of the obstacles from the path, providing signposts, stiles, bridges, sustenance and company for those making these journeys.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Khadiatou, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Léwa Diofulbé, December 28, 2016, interview 1, transcript.

<sup>105</sup> Goldman and Little, "Innovative Grassroots NGOS," 763; Kabeer, *Reversed Realities*, 261; Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements," 437.

<sup>106</sup> Cornwall and Edwards, Introduction to *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development*, 7.

This would be an appropriate characterization of Tostan's role in the journeys outlined in this study. Their contribution to the empowerment of the female leaders in Goudiry was principally through the provision of non-material resources—for example, communication skills developed throughout the course of classes in human rights, democracy and other subjects and knowledge about health. Lessons about communication facilitated improved relationships at home; community members look to husbands for confirmation of their wives trustworthiness and capacity, which the husbands feel more assured of thanks to improved communication in the household. Being able to effectively communicate with their husbands and families helped begin to develop the women's sense of voice. Their application of lessons about health, be it organizing village clean ups or making sure parents get birth certificates for their children, served as further proof that they were indeed capable actors, to both the community and the women themselves. Health was often an impetus to call and attend meetings, at which the women could exercise their voices, use their new speaking and communication skills outside the home and build a sense of self-efficacy.

The interview questionnaires did not investigate the meaning of human rights education to participants, in part because it has emerged as a catalyst for social change in other studies. Rather the questions asked participants to discuss the ways that what they learned in their classes helped them to become leaders. In their answers they almost unanimously connected their ability to speak in different contexts (the right to have a voice and the responsibility to use it), the ability to advocate for better health in the community (the right to health care and to accurate information about healthcare and the responsibility to act on it), and their running for or accepting being chosen for leadership positions (the right to run for political office and the responsibility to step up and take a public role). These different rights were interactive and synergistic: the more women practiced speaking, the more confident they became; the more new and accurate information they had about health, the more they wanted to share with others; the more they shared with others information that improved the wellbeing of the community, the more they were trusted and could be chosen as representatives.

This study has shown that relationships between men and women are of essential importance to female empowerment and leadership. Empowerment is derived from changes in the individual, but those changes cannot take hold if there is no change in their sociocultural context. By letting the women guide the focus of the interviews based on what was important to them in the CEP, the model I have created reflects the importance of elements of the CEP that are less often thought of as directly linked to female political empowerment—marital communication and health. It is clear from this model that a holistic approach to empowering women is necessary; women's status and role in society cannot be addressed in isolation.

Silèye told us, "In the past we said 'if I was a man, I would...' but in our time all that a man can do, a woman can do also. I don't regret my woman's path." But, she adds, if she could do it all

again, she would have put herself forward as a candidate of her own volition instead of waiting to be chosen, “because every citizen has the right to elect and be elected.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Silèye, interview by Oumoul Debo Sow, Sinthiou Saliou, January 11, 2017, interview 25, transcript.

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