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The story of the 'now-women': changing gender norms in rural West Africa.

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Abstract. This paper offers a qualitative investigation of how human rights education sessions, embedded in a multi-faceted intervention, helped members of a rural community challenge unequitable gender norms that hindered women's political participation. Methods included semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation. Results show a change in women's political participation and community members' descriptions of women's potential. Three features of the intervention contributed to this change: 1) its pedagogical approach; 2) its substantive content; and 3) the engagement of men and women together. Conclusions call for interventions that facilitate sustained dialogue between men and women to achieve greater gender equity.

Keywords: Gender and Diversity; NGOs; Aid effectiveness; Education; Sub-Saharan Africa.

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The 'now-women' take the floor: how community dialogue helped women and men abandon

unequitable gender norms in a rural village in West Africa.

Introduction

Gender equity is both a goal in itself and a means to achieve greater global health and

basic human rights. It is one of the sustainable development goals (number six). Its premise,

equality between men and women, is the very foundational idea on which human rights are

grounded (Bhalotra & Rawlings, 2011; Osmani & Sen, 2003; Gita Sen & Mukherjee, 2014). It

has been suggested that to achieve greater gender equity in low and mid-income countries, we

need to find strategies to help women and men challenge harmful gender norms, particularly

norms limiting women's participation in the local decision-making processes (Alim, 2009;

Hanmer & Klugman, 2015; Jewkes, Flood, & Lang, 2015; Wegs, Creanga, Galavotti, &

Wamalwa, 2016). An argument has recently been put forward for intervention strategies that

engage men and women together (Jewkes et al., 2015). Working with men alone is considered

ineffective, as it can result in strengthening benevolent sexism, with men believing they need to

protect or defend women. This might reduce the "symptoms" of gender inequity (violence

against women, for instance) but doesn't eradicate its root cause: people's beliefs of men and

women not scoring equally on the social rank (Bosson, Parrott, Swan, Kuchynka, & Schramm,

2015; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Working with women alone can be similarly ineffective; increasing

women's capacity to resist unjust gender norms might generate a backlash and possibly greater

oppression, potentially increasing women's future compliance with those norms (Cislaghi, in

press; Edström, Hassink, Shahrokh, & Stern, 2015).

This paper responds to this call for strategies that engage men and women in

renegotiating unequitable gender norms. Its purpose is to offer a case study of how a human

rights education programme helped participants renegotiate inequitable gender norms that restricted women's access to political decision-making in one village in West Africa. Analysing qualitative evidence collected in rural Senegal, I argue that sustained interventions that engage men and women in a generative dialogue on the nature of their relations can help them recognize and address existing problems in the dominant system of gender norms. I look in particular at how the NGO Tostan used nonformal human rights education to facilitate generative dialogue in Galle Toubaaco, a small village in rural Senegal. I analyse how, after the first six months of the programme (that in total lasts three years), gender norms regulating access to political decision-making began to relax.

This paper focuses specifically on how gender norms hindered women's political participation in Galle Toubaaco. This begs the question of whether looking at gender is sufficient to understand the factors that shape people's political participation. Gender intersects with other important factors – such as people's social status, age, and access to material resources – to affect political decision-making as well as men's and women's rights and freedom more generally. A gender analysis is hence just part of what needs to be done to assess gender-transformative interventions. Dworkin, Fleming, and Colvin (2015), for instance, called for integrating an intersectional perspective to understand differences between masculinities enacted by men of different classes, ages, races, and other social identities and locations. This paper focuses on gender for three reasons. The first is that the population in the small village of Galle Toubaaco was fairly homogenous; only three families lived in the village and very little difference among community members existed in terms of, for instance, ethnicity, language, culture, nationality, and religion. The second reason is that gender differences emerged from the data as the most critical factor affecting people's political participation in the decision-making

process, even though economic differences did play a role in participation in village meetings as well. For instance, being a woman was a much stronger deterrent to participation than being poor. The third and final reason for focusing on gender is that, due to the salience of gender norms across cultural and social contexts (e.g. Wood & Eagly, 2010), it is particularly important for practitioners to understand how interventions can help people challenge and renegotiate them. Such learnings will help practitioners and communities protect and promote women's and men's rights and wellbeing globally (G. Sen & Östlin, 2008).

In the pages that follow, I first define gender norms and give an overview of the human rights education classes in the Tostan programme. In the second section I describe briefly the methods used for data collection and analysis. Results uncover the ways in which research participants described women's political participation before the Tostan programme and six months after its beginning. This section also looks at what in the programme facilitated that change. Finally, conclusions draw key lessons for practitioners.

Gender norms

Most scholars agree that the key difference between sex and gender is that the first is biologically determined while the second is socially constructed (e.g. Nussbaum, 2000; Oakley, 2015). Even though gender is a multidimensional term covering a wide range of social constructs, general consensus exists in the literature that "gender" includes norms, beliefs, and roles that people associate with masculine and feminine, and that influence men's and women's actions by shaping relations of power between them (Ryle, 2015)**.** Gender is something that people "do" in their daily interactions and practices: the way one dresses up, speaks, sits, and relates to others (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Recently, Heise and Cislaghi (Under Review) suggested an understanding of gender as having four dimensions: identity, roles, norms, and

practices. In this paper, I particularly look at gender norms. Even though the term gender norms has been used in the last two decades in various ways (Heise & Cislaghi, Under Review), here I use it to describe people's beliefs about typical and appropriate behaviours for men and women, using terminology emerging from social norms research in social psychology (Chung & Rimal, 2016). Gender norms can have a powerful influence on one's behaviour in several ways, including in ways that can hinder people's freedom and threaten the protection of their human rights. For instance, if a woman believes that women in her village don't typically speak during meetings and that they would be disapproved for doing so, she might herself refrain from doing that (Jewkes et al., 2015). However, changing norms can be challenging: people comply with norms because they internalize them (as they learn them through socialization), because those norms contribute to their sense of identity and belonging, and because they try to avoid social punishment for non-compliance (Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015). Given these difficulties with changing gender norms, the Tostan programme is an interesting case for its success in helping participants lead change in gender-related practices sustained by local gender norms, as discussed in the next section (Cislaghi, Gillespie, & Mackie, 2015; Easton, Monkman, & Miles, 2009; Mbaye, 2007).

Transformative human rights education in Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme

Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme (CEP) aims to help members of rural African communities enact community projects to identify and achieve collective development priorities. The programme, that lasts three years in total, begins with six months of human rights education. The applicability of human rights in the non-western world has been long debated: some believe that human rights are universal and can be brought to any country in the world,

while others suggest that human rights are a western product and do not have cross-cultural validity (see for instance Donnelly, 2003). Some commentators have suggested instead that human rights principles have cross-cultural validity when they are critically looked at and translated by cultural insiders within local cultural understanding and values (Cislaghi, 2016; Merry, 2006). Scholars who studied transformative human rights education (THRED) have argued that it has the potential to facilitate that process of contextualisation, presenting human rights as a curriculum for critical examination. In a recent review of successful approaches to THRED, Bajaj, Cislaghi, and Mackie (2016) have identified five principles of transformative human rights education [See Table 1].

[Insert Table 1 here]

THRED approaches draw from the seminal work of Paulo Freire (1970) a progressive pedagogue who saw the task of education as liberating participants from the oppression of hegemonic norms and cultural beliefs. He argued that transformative educational process should help participants identify problems in their context and deliberate on possible socio-political solutions. Instead of "depositing" knowledge into participants' heads (a process Freire called "banking" education), liberatory education should help participants imagine new possible social actions and realities. "Problem-posing" pedagogy, as Freire called it, would help oppressors and oppressed find conciliatory solutions to common social dilemmas, liberating both from the oppression of unequal norms and cultural worldviews.

Tostan's CEP makes large use of THRED strategies and Freirian pedagogy. The programme was originally created by a team of Senegalese practitioners and pedagogues who then adapted it over time following the success stories they observed in the communities that participated in it (Gillespie & Melching, 2010). Between 1990 and 2000, the NGO integrated

into the CEP new modules on democracy, human rights and women's health. These new modules were found to be transformative as they helped participants achieve community organization and social actions resulting in sustainable improvements in the lives of all community members (Easton et al., 2009; Gillespie & Melching, 2010). As mentioned earlier, even though the NGO is known for their success in facilitating community abandonment of female genital cutting (also referred to in the literature as "female genital mutilation") (CRDH, 2010; Diop, Moreau, & Benga, 2008; Easton et al., 2009; Gillespie & Melching, 2010; Mackie & LeJeune, 2009; Mackie, Moneti, Shakya, & Denny, 2015), various other community changes have been reported after the CEP. Many of these changes are evidence of increased gender equity, including, to cite a few examples, more equal access to healthcare, reduced domestic violence, increased women's mobility, and increased acceptability of women accessing revenue-generating activities (Cislaghi, Gillespie, & Mackie, 2016; Diop et al., 2004; Diop et al., 2008; Gillespie & Melching, 2010; Kuenzi, 2005).

The CEP lasts 30 months and has three components, all implemented in each participating village. The first is the education sessions or, as Tostan calls them, the classes. Two cohorts of 25 to 50 participants each—one for adults and one for adolescents—meet three times a week for the duration of the CEP. The classes are taught in local languages and are organized in two modules. The first module – that lasts 12 months – is called the *Kobi* and includes sessions on democracy, human rights, hygiene, and health. The second module, the *Aawde*, runs for about two years and offers classes of literacy and mathematics, as well as small-project management training. The classes are delivered by a Tostan facilitator who lives in the rural community for the duration of the programme. The village provides, at their own expense, food and shelter for the facilitator (Easton et al., 2009).

The second component of the CEP is the training of a Community Management Committee (CMC), formed at the onset of the CEP. The CMC is the operational arm of the programme: it creates action plans for community improvement based on class participants' vision and aspirations. The third and final component of the CEP is the "organized diffusion" of the new knowledge. Each participant is required to "adopt" a non-participating member of the village and share with them the new knowledge acquired in class. Participants also organize community awareness-raising events in their own village, as well as in the surrounding villages. Using the methods detailed in the next section, I studied the effect of the human rights education classes in the first six months of the CEP on gender norms in one relatively small (ca. 300 people) village in rural Senegal: Galle Toubaaco.

Methods

In 2010, I carried out semi-structured interviews with 16 community members of Galle Toubaaco. The interviews were conducted in Fulfulde (participants' language) with the help of a female interpreter. Sampling criteria included gender (men and women), age (younger and older members of the community), and participation in the programme (half of the sample participating and the other half not participating in the classes). In total, I carried out 16 semi-structured interviews at three different points in time – before, during, and after the THRED classes – for a total of 48 interviews. I also conducted ethnographic observations of classes themselves and the daily life in the community. During the six months of the THRED, I observed fourteen classes. Although the facilitators and participants spoke Fulfulde in class, a language that I lacked fluency in, the interpreter helped with live translations and, when she was not in the village, the French-speaking facilitator helped me make sense of what had happened after each class.

A Fulfulde-English speaker translated and transcribed the data. He also checked my interpreter's live translation, signalling imprecisions and enhancing its reliability. I followed grounded methods for data coding and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). I first broke data into codes; this process, called "open coding", requires researchers to assign a code to meaningful words, segments, or sentences. The second step was "axial coding": I gathered codes with similar characteristics under subcategories. Various categories emerged from this process. This paper looks in particular at the categories concerned with decision-making and gender norms, while the full account of my ethnographic work is reported elsewhere (REFERENCE ANONYMISED).

Galle Toubaaco at the arrival of the CEP

Galle Toubaaco is at about 60 km from the closest major urban centre and about 400 km from the capital, Dakar. At the time of the fieldwork, most people in the village survived by herding cows and/or cultivating land, which was mostly owned (and inherited) by men. The village was difficult to reach and remote (20 km from the closest main road). Accessing health services could be particularly challenging: the nearest, small, health facility was 15 kilometres away (about three hours by horse, the main means of transportation in the village). Participants mentioned that this distance was particularly disadvantageous to pregnant women. Their husbands would only allow them to go to the hospital once the labour started, which would often result in serious consequences for the health of both the mother and the baby. In the village there were two wells, but three of the six families living in the village possessed a private tap. Once again, female participants described this as inconvenient for women: even though having water at home relieved them of the chore of going to the well, they lacked access to a key space where women could gather and discuss without the men. At the time of fieldwork, 318 community

members lived in Galle Toubaaco, 192 males and 136 females; more than half of them were aged under 18.

Fulani Tostan staff members had approached the community in late 2009 to investigate their potential interest in participating in the CEP. They were welcomed by the village chief and others summoned by him. They explained the content, duration, and conditions of the programme, including that: 1) both men and women were expected to participate; 2) that community members would need to provide food and lodging for the facilitator; and 3) that community members were expected to provide a classroom. Village leaders accepted the hosting of the CEP mostly because they were convinced by what they had heard elsewhere about it; that is, they had been convinced by the credibility of the organisation.

Several (about 60) community members joined the classes. All participating women I interviewed had had to obtain permission from their husbands in order to participate. Not every man whose wife was interested in the programme, however, allowed her to participate; the most traditional and conservative were particularly resistant. Initial resistance changed as the classes unfolded. Towards the end of fieldwork, I interviewed one woman who hadn't participated, and also her husband. They said they were somewhat regretful of not having participated in the classes because they could now see the benefits coming from them. Another man, who had warily allowed his wife to participate, mentioned that – by the time of the interview – he had abandoned his initial hesitations: the programme had increased dialogue and trust between him and with his wife, and had made life easier for the entire family.

The fact that Tostan did not require the participation of the women living in the most traditional household might be, in itself, a possible reason for the success of programme. Rather than targeting the most conservative community members, the Tostan programme worked with

those who were already motivated to improve life in their village, helping them to devise

strategies to achieve the change they envisioned. These strategies included the organized

diffusion of the human rights knowledge mentioned earlier: participants in the classes were

invited to reach out themselves to the most conservative members of their village and share their

own understandings of this new knowledge as well as their motivation for change. The results of

this process are documented in the next sections.

Gender norms and women's public role prior to the programme

Before the CEP, participants described the public sphere as being accessible to male

elders only. Women might have had indirect strategies to make their voice heard, potentially at

the household level, but no participants mentioned them. Some men were particularly influential;

for instance, one participant said, "Apart from the Chief and the Imam, Mady [another man] is

the only other decision-maker in the village." In the four village meetings I observed before the

beginning of programme, the men did all of the talking. The only exception was one female

elder, who spoke once. But she was an exception. In the interviews, participants mentioned that

women did not contribute to any decision. For example, one female participant said, "the men

are the ones who make the decisions in the village." Gender norms regulating typical and

appropriate behaviour for women excluded leadership; one man, for instance, commented very

powerfully that "It is always a man who commands a woman here" – that is, male leadership is

typical – and that "A man should always be the head of the decision-making not a woman" – that

is, male leadership is socially *appropriate*. Even though participants mentioned that there were

no explicit rules against women's participation in village meetings ("When meetings are held

men and women are free to talk, anyone who has something to say can speak", said one man)

they still believed that didn't happen. Asked the reason for that, they hesitated, and eventually

referred to the fact that things had simply always been that way: "We grew up like this and saw that women don't talk in meetings", said one woman; and one young man said, "Men tend to make most of the decisions because women […] are afraid to speak because they are women". Importantly, before the programme started, participants didn't see women's lack of participation as problematic. One man, for instance, said that "The fact that men take decisions and not women is not a problem … this is the way we have done things for many years and it works for us." It wasn't only the men who held this view: women did not identify their lack of participation in the village public life as a problem either. One woman, for instance, said, "Men will always make decisions instead of women." And another one imagined change only as a function of existing gender norms assigning power to men: "[To help women participate in decision-making,] we will ask the men to work hard and allow everyone to have a voice." Inequitable gender norms were deeply engrained in participants' lives in ways that hid their problematic nature. Over time, the programme helped participants use the human rights curriculum to problematize their relationships. Through sustained weekly interactions facilitated by the human rights education sessions, participants assigned new meanings to existing interactions. They identified existing problems in their local reality such as, for instance, the lack of women's participation in the local political decision-making. With time and through the weekly sessions, they started to address these problems and new norms emerged, to the point that the language participants used to describe women changed too. The women who were unsettling existing norms, not aligning with previous norms regulating political participation, were now greeted by participants as the "now-women".

Unsettling the norm: the now-women take the floor

When the Tostan classes began, women were not used to speaking in public. About six months after, almost all women participating in class where contributing actively to the discussions. Three things contributed to that change. The first was the participatory pedagogy used by the facilitator. Over time, he helped them join in the discussions that were initially dominated by the relatively few men present in class. For instance, he invited participating women to report on their group's work, to share their opinion about the human-rights drawings that he showed to the class, to comment on the theatre skits that took place during the sessions, or to be actors in the skits themselves.

The second factor contributing to a change in women's participation was that, in class, participants identified as a problem the fact that some were not exercising their newly-developed public speaking skills in the local decision-making process. In the THRED sessions, they looked critically at the right to political participation and the right to freedom of expression. They discussed the values of those rights in their context, and looked at the extent to which those rights were realised in their village. As they identified women's lack of participation in the decision-making process as problematic, they started to discuss potential solutions.

Thirdly, women's public speaking skills increased because the process detailed above was equipping them with the self-confidence (both as individuals and as a group) they needed to speak in public. As the classes unfolded, women saw other participants (both men and women) listening and agreeing with them, and developed the self-confidence and public speaking skills necessary to voice their opinions. At the same time, the classes were creating a space where participants could build mutual trust and understanding. In other words, not only were participants increasing their self-confidence, they were also strengthening their capacity as a

group to support each other in the classroom and beyond. After the first three months of the classes, one woman reflected on her experience, saying that: "Before, women did not get together because of all their work, but with the class we see each other every day and we talk to each other and have more confidence. So, when there is a meeting and we are all there, we are not afraid to speak".

Two months later, six months after the beginning of the programme, men reported witnessing a great change in what women were doing and in the way others saw them. The core group of participants in class (both the women who spoke out and the men who listened to them) entered the public space of the village meetings, challenging existing gender norms around women's participation in decision-making. One man, for instance, said that: "Since the Tostan classes started, women have been getting involved more and more [in village meetings]. I think they are … gaining more confidence in themselves". And one woman, reflecting proudly on her newly-acquired public-speaking skill, commented: "Now when I have something to say in meetings I get up and say what I have to say where before I could not do that".

Not only women's participation changed; the words that research participants used to describe them changed as well. A new conceptual category emerged consistently from the data in how participants, mostly unconsciously, referred to these women: the *now-women*. The now-women embodied a new way of being, one that was surprising and yet accepted by men in the village. Asked to describe men's and women's lives in their village as they observed it, again and again they began their sentences with "now (the) women..." One man, for instance said: "Now women have gained a lot more influence in the decision-making within the family and the men understand it is important for the women to speak out loud." Not only was this man reporting on a change in what women did, but also a change in what he believed men now found acceptable.

Gender norms regulating typical and acceptable roles for women were being challenged by the new ways of being a woman, which also included public speaking. Another man, for instance, said, "now meetings are great … everybody seems to speak a lot more, express themselves better, especially the women". For yet another, "now when there is a meeting … everyone speaks, especially the women". And another, "now the women talk just as much as the men, they are not shy anymore".

The change in gender norms regulating political participation didn't happen as a result of one or two champions of change: it required a great number of women to behave differently in front of others, and for those others (both men and women) to accept their new behaviour. Community members in Galle Toubaaco had possibly witnessed one or two women participating to public discussions before; most likely the elder women. However, seeing many women now voicing their opinion, both young and old, challenged how these community members understood (and spoke about) women's roles in the community. As one man put it: "Women have changed a lot… now they know how to behave and speak in public." This man, as other cited before, referred to women in general and not to a specific woman. Participants' narrative thus demonstrates the emergence of new beliefs of typical women's behaviour, rather than the inclusion of new exceptions to old gender norms.

Women were accessing the public space and demanding participation in the political decision-making processes. Even though some man had participated in the classes, other did not. How did men react to that change in the normative equilibrium that happened when the now-women took the floor?

The opportunity for conciliatory normative change

Data do not show men's resistance to women's increased participation in the political processes. The normative change was a conciliatory, rather than conflictual, process. There might be many reasons for that. For one, the change in the norm regulating access to public decision-making did not happen in isolation. The deeper cultural models of what it meant to be a man and woman, and of their places in the community, stretched to include new understandings of their equality. In the THRED sessions, participants assigned new meanings to the concept of equality between men and women as they related it to their experiences of life in their village. After the programme, asked about the most interesting learnings from the classes, one woman mentioned equality between men and women. Asked why she thought men and women to be equal, she explained that: "They are equal because in the village they both strive to provide for the family. The men work to support the family and the women work to support the family." A young woman, who hadn't been allowed by her husband to participate in the classes, observed that "The men may have been a little smarter before, but with the Tostan classes now women have gotten smart too. Now women are much smarter."

Men also observed this change and reflected on it: their belief about women's intellectual capacities was being challenged. A man, for instance, said: "Now women have gained confidence and have realised they have a right to speak in these meetings and it is in all our interest that men and women speak … women say very interesting things". In addition to reflecting on how women's participation in the meeting was interesting for him personally, this man also revealed the belief that women's improved participation in the meetings was beneficial for everyone.

The conciliatory process started in the classroom, where the Tostan's facilitator set the scene for reciprocal understanding between men and women, helped men recognise the positive

contribution that women made and could make to life in the community. Another man commented that: "Now women are able to speak their minds and that made me very happy." Men's comments suggest they believed that women's increased power did not threaten the power men enjoyed. Obviously, things could have gone in the opposite direction, and women's empowerment could have generated significant resistance on the men's part. As Freire (1970) mentioned, when the oppressed voice their suffering, oppressors can feel threatened or attacked, including by the guilt coming with the realisation of their oppressive actions, responding with further, or even increased, aggression. Tostan's THRED classes instead created a safe space where men and women could share their concerns empathically, and find new ways of being for both: as women changed, men changed. One woman said, for instance, "Now men respect the women a lot more … They recognise all the work women do". In one of the first classes I observed, the facilitator asked participants to state their vision for the future of their community. As the classes continued, the facilitator referred participants back to the vision they had developed in the early sessions: what did they need to do to get there? The discussion expanded traditional values of working together to include equitable participation in the political decision-making process. That changed what men and women in class considered acceptable; for example, women actively participating in village meetings. As women started to participate in the public fora, then, many community members witnessed that women were speaking out more and that the men who participated in class approved of them doing so.

This *liberatory* process took time, and certainly some members remained attached to traditional views of women's roles in the community. At the end of the THRED classes, for instance, a non-participating young woman from a strongly patriarchal family mentioned that her husband would still not involve her in family decision-making. Not only that, she said, "if he

tells me to stop doing something I will stop, but … I do make decisions at home too. If I make a decision I need to first check that's OK with my husband , because he brought me here so I have to respect him as my husband." Even this woman, however, was witnessing the change in the village, and new models of being were becoming available to her. In the same interview she said, "I am surprised because I didn't know the women in our village could talk like that in front of everyone."

Three effective strategies of the CEP

What drove this change in gender norms? I identified ten key features of the Tostan programme that achieved change. These are described in greater detailed elsewhere (REFERENCE ANONYMISED). Below, I discuss three of these features that are particularly relevant for this paper.

The pedagogical approach of the HRE programme

Tostan's participatory pedagogy helped participants rehearse new roles in class, roles of speakers, teachers of others, and community activists, for instance. As their voice in class expanded, participants used their new skills to discuss the problems that mattered to them as well as the possible socio-political solutions. The democratic participation that the facilitator encouraged in the classroom ensured that participants could develop mutual understandings, trust, and respect. Participants recognised their mutual human condition and learned to appreciate and protect their own as well as other people's rights and dignity. The generative dialogue happening in the classroom was of great value and made a difference to women's partaking in the decision-making process. Because people could debate and discuss their own and others' living conditions as men and women, they could also identify the problematic implications of existing gender norms for women's political participation.

The substantive content of the THRED programme

Human rights education is often said to be problematic because it can be culturally imperialist, promoting western worldviews and values (Bajaj et al., 2016). Tostan avoided the risk by presenting the human rights curriculum as a critical journey that participants could steer and reflect upon. The relatively abstract human rights content was grounded within participants' life in their community. That knowledge was then used to look critically at their life, understanding its value and its opportunities for improvement. Rather than imposing new cultural models on participants, the human rights curriculum offered a new critical perspective through which they could reflect on their lives. One woman, for instance, said "the classes reinforced my belief that I was doing the right thing all along." Building on existing cultural values, the classes offered an opportunity for people to look at their collective behaviour and engage in an investigation of how that behaviour would contribute to their vision for their future.

The process of coinvestigation between men and women

There were more women than men in the class, but the presence of the men was dramatically important for three reasons. First, women could address their concerns to men, learn how they respond to those and engage in meaningful conversations that women could then replicate outside the classroom. Women who did not have their husbands in class learned about men's worries and concerns, and about the ways in which they could be convinced or reassured. Women then re-enacted the same conversations in the household, with their husband, modelling the discussions that happened in class. The presence of men was also important because it helped women recognise their needs and concerns as a group. Freire (1970) mentioned that problem-posing education can uncover new perspective on the collective identity of the group when members of the group face dialogue with members of different groups. In the discussion with

members of another group (the men), women had the opportunity to see themselves as a

community, and look for mutual support. Finally, men who participated in the programme

facilitated women's work outside the classroom; these men were publicly approving women's

actions during village meetings, in front of other non-participating men who witnessed this

approval as a new emerging norm.

Limitations

Qualitative researchers are often requested to defend the limited generalizability of their

results. My findings are not representative of all villages that went through the CEP, and the

village where I conducted research might have been a fortuitous exception. Another qualitative

research conducted in similar villages reported on encouraging results in terms of gender equity,

with gender norms relaxing to allow greater freedom to women (REFERENCE

ANONYMISED). The purpose of this research is not to demonstrate the effectiveness of the

Tostan programme; rather, its value lies in its model exemplifying how gender norms can change

in the field and how that change can lead to more equal participation in local decision-making

processes.

Another potential limitation is that I conducted these interviews myself. As a white man in

a rural African village, all sorts of social bias might have influenced what participants said as

well as my interpretation of what they said. But I spent a relatively extended amount of time in

the village: I have myself observed the changes that participants reported and had the opportunity

to establish good relations with many of them. Due to this developing relationship, participants

became comfortable about expressing more controversial views and, for example, to voice

criticism of the NGO or other community members.

Finally, in this paper, I have looked exclusively at the ways in which the Tostan

programme affected women's participation in the public decision-making. The case studied in

this paper offers reflections on how the programme was able to help people challenge unjust

gender norms, and to specifically increase participation in the local political decision-making

process. But decisions are made elsewhere too, including, for instance, at the household level.

An analysis of the decision-making happening at the household level is however offered

elsewhere (REFERENCE ANONYMISED), while here I focused on public political decision-

making. Even accepting these limitations, this research contributes to the emerging body of

literature on culturally-sensitive models of development that help participants build upon their

existing worldviews to change together unequal gender norms.

Conclusion

This paper offered qualitative evidence suggesting that culturally-relevant interventions

that generate dialogue among men and women can help them achieve collaborative social

transformation, bringing about more equitable norms and increase women's access to the

political decision-making processes. This approach speaks against the increasing tendency to

demand from NGOs that they achieve social change in a short amount of time, and with limited

resources. Not only does change in gender-norms require sustained interaction between men and

women, but it also requires a deep understanding of the cultural setting that can only be

developed through both research of the local social cultural context and dialogue with cultural

insiders. When implemented from the bottom-up, human rights education can unlock new

understandings of self and others, and help participants re-imagine existing relationships and

power dynamics, ultimately promoting equitable gender norms, as in the case of the norm

regulating political participation investigated in this paper. Practitioners should explore further

its transformative potential and share it on accessible platforms, such as *Development in*

Practice, increasing our collective understanding of how we can help men and women achieve

greater gender equity globally.

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Table 1. Five principles of Transformative Human Rights Education (Source: Bajaj et al., 2016)

Goal of THRED	Transformative Human Rights Education endeavors to awaken people's critical consciousness on human rights and to promote their collaborative realization.
THRED Pedagogy	Transformative Human Rights Education engages participants and educators in collaborative learning about their social reality through entertaining, experiential, and participatory methods.
THRED Educational contexts	Transformative Human Rights Education encompasses different education settings.
THRED approach	Transformative Human Rights Education helps people contextualize global ethics within local values and understandings of the world, fostering human solidarity through human rights.
THRED as a process	Transformative Human Rights Education gives people access to possible new ways of being.