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Transformative Learning on the Desert's Edge: The Tostan FGM Program in Senegal, Mali and the Sudan

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Keywords: Empowerment, transformative learning, female genital mutilation

Abstract: This paper examines strategies of the Tostan Village Empowerment Program in Senegal for promoting abandonment of female genital mutilation as an example of transformative learning; and it draws lessons for the refinement of that theory.

Female genital cutting (FGC) or female genital mutilation (FGM)--less accurately termed "female circumcision"--is a centuries-old cultural practice in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and in a few contiguous areas of the Muslim world, such as Egypt and Yemen. Inaccurately identified with Islam, FGM is not sanctioned by the Koran. It has also spread in recent years via migration to the Far East, Europe, and North America. It is estimated that over 130 million women and girls worldwide have undergone the procedure, and two million more are subjected to it each year (Population Reference Bureau, 2001).

FGM involves partial or total removal of the female external genitalia and is usually performed on prepubescent girls aged four to twelve as part of their rites of passage. In Senegal and Mali it is sometimes performed on baby girls as young as one month old (Melching, 2005). FGM is practised for a variety of social and cultural reasons:

The ritual cutting is often an integral part of ceremonies . . . in which girls are feted and showered with presents and their families are honoured. . . . The ritual serves as an act of socialization into cultural values and an important connection to family, community, and earlier generations. At the heart of all this is rendering a woman marriageable, which is important in societies where women get their support from male family members, especially husbands. . . . The practice [of FGM] is perceived as an act of love for daughters. . . . Because of strong adherence to these traditions, many women who say they disapprove of FGM still submit themselves and their daughters to the practice (Population Reference Bureau, 2001, pg. 66).

The health consequences of this practice can be severe, though they are seldom connected in the popular mind with FGM. Around 5% of girls die after the procedure, principally from blood loss, trauma or attendant infection (Mackie, 1999). Longer-term effects include painful sexual relations and increased difficulty with childbirth and menstruation. International health agencies have condemned the practice for some time, stigmatised its practitioners and promoted its "eradication" -- all to little apparent avail. Among the few successful strategies for combating FGM has been an approach developed by "Tostan," a rural village empowerment program that originated in Senegal.

Breaking Out of the Egg

The Tostan program got underway in the late 1980s as an attempt to devise nonformal education and literacy offerings for rural Senegalese women that were grounded in their own

perception of problems and based on their own learning styles. The word *tostan* itself is Wolof for “breakthrough” or “coming out of the egg.” The Tostan program did not at first explicitly target FGM, but it adopted this emphasis when a number of local women participants named it as the priority problem that they wished to address. In Senegal, FGM is practiced among about 50 percent of the population. Only a very small proportion of the country’s dominant ethnic group, the Wolof, observe the custom; but the practice is widespread among some of the other main groups in the country -- including the Pulaar, the Bambara and the Mandinka -- and it has been adopted by fragments of the Serer and Diola peoples as well.

The success of the program is due in no small part to the personal and social transformation that has accompanied new learning in the course of the Tostan experience. Data on the process and results of the Tostan program offer an opportunity to examine the potentials of transformative learning in West African culture and the linkages between nonformal education and social change from the bottom up. We examine this experience from a triple conceptual perspective:

1. First and foremost comes the framework of transformative learning (e.g. Mezirow, 2000; Schugurensky, 2002), though transformative learning in a very different cultural setting from the one to which those ideas were originally, and have been mostly, applied.
2. Second is the issue of the role of nonformal adult education in promoting and supporting such radical change (e.g. Closson, 2002; LaBelle, 2000).
3. Finally, attention must also be given to the role that foreign-funded NGOs do and can play in helping propagate such a movement and to the upsides and downsides of their intervention (e.g. Miraftab, 2004).

Our data comes from documentation about the Tostan experience, both published and grey literature; from personal interviews with Tostan staff; from first-hand experience with Tostan programming in Senegal, Mali and Sudan; and from the evaluation of the Mali and Sudan replications that we conducted over the course of two years (2001-2003). (Other aspects of the same research are reported in Easton, Monkman, & Miles, 2003).

Program Design and Development

The Tostan program itself grew in large part out of the rural education activities of an American woman, Molly Melching, who had been living in Senegal since the 1970s and had acquired fluency in the principal African language of the country – Wolof – and experience in promoting women’s development. With Senegalese colleagues and support from American friends, she began in the mid-1980s to develop a program for rural women of the country’s central agricultural basin based on a combination of Wolof-language literacy, practical problem-solving methodologies and an African version of “women’s ways of knowing.” Except where local custom intervened, men as well as women were welcome to participate. Initial modules included, besides literacy, problem-solving methodologies and units on issues like environmental preservation, micro-credit, human rights and women’s health and sexuality.

That latter topic, in fact, elicited intense interest among participants and broke all attendance records for the program. Instruction and discussion of the subject had some unanticipated consequences, however. Women in one village of the Thies region decided at the end of their own course that the local problem they most wanted to address was... elimination of FGM. They managed to rally their husbands and the village hierarchy behind them to pledge that no young girl from that community would ever again be subjected to the practice. And then the movement started to spread on its own. Two other villages joined suit. The Islamic imam in one

of the two – Kër Simbara -- was initially sceptical; but after talking with women in his own family he realized how little he knew and resolved to lend support.

The Imam had in fact some good advice to offer. He reminded the women that they lived in a culture of strong family networks and relationships. If the movement was to bear fruit, it was not enough for a group or a village to decide to change matters on its own. Each would need to gain the adherence of its whole intermarrying community spread across the immediate region. The women concurred and asked two of their group – the former circumciser of Kër Simbara and a young mother – to accompany the Imam on foot around the ten remaining villages that comprised their “clan.” They explained to women there what they wanted to do -- and why -- and solicited their own stories and feelings. That round-robin had aspects recalling the “speak bitterness” campaign in revolutionary China. Women expressed and shared – many for the first time – their own experience with FGM. When it was over, the decision was unanimous throughout the thirteen communities: never again; and it was formalized in the “Diabougou Declaration” of February 15, 1998 when representatives of all thirteen met to state their resolve.

Melching admits, “It caught us by surprise.” (Melching, 2005) Tostan’s role was basically to support, and then to amplify, the initiative that the women themselves had taken. The news spread rapidly by word of mouth and the movement began to hop from one region of the country to another – to the Casamance in the south, to the coastal regions and later to the north as well, among those ethnic groups that practiced FGM. In the Sine Saloum region where communities are separated by coastal waterways, women undertook to paddle from one island to another in order to talk matters out. Something very new was underway.

The shape and approach that emerged from this locally-inspired strategy was different in some important ways from previous international attempts to deal with FGC. For one thing, it was collective rather than individual in focus: its strength lay in women discovering together the common burdens that they shared and taking the initiative to renounce them. At the same time, it was not combative. The Ker Simbara Imam counselled participants from the outset to blame no one, never to insult tradition or imply that practitioners were evil and not to talk of “eradication.” It was rather a question of women – and their families -- deciding on the basis of their experience to abandon a practice that no longer met their needs.

Growth and Dissemination

Since that time, the FGM program has grown and evolved along three essential axes. On the ground, coverage and adherence within Senegal have increased notably. Organizationally, Tostan has obtained major backing for further support of the campaign and has made it one of the cornerstones of its own publicity. And internationally, the FGM program has now been introduced into five other African countries. A brief look at the movement’s recent career will help to highlight key facets and results of the methodology.

On The Ground

The movement has continued to grow within Senegal. By the end of 2005, it had reached over 1500 villages with one form of programming or another and was still operating in 400 of these. (Tostan, 2006). Just over 1000 communities had declared against FGM. Government attitudes have varied between tolerance and support. After the Diabougou Declaration, then-President Abdou Diouf, who belonged to an ethnic group – the Wolof -- that did not practice FGM, came out strongly in favor of the movement. In some ways, this was gratifying, but it started a bandwagon effect that could have had dire consequences. A number of legislators

proposed a measure to outlaw and criminalize the practice of FGM. Tostan personnel and village participants felt constrained to lobby actively against it: this was not the way to go.

Organizationally

Tostan itself incorporated as a non-profit organization in the United States, not Senegal, in 1991 and has garnered the bulk of its support from varieties of international funding: UNICEF, SIDA, USAID, the Banyan Tree, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, plus individual donors. The FGM program has been popular with aid agencies. At the same time, Tostan has received an increasing dosage of international acclaim, starting with a feature article in *Le Monde* in October 1997, followed by visits from then-President Clinton and his wife, recognition as an exemplary program by UNESCO and the World Health Organization and commendations from the British Parliament and the European Union. In fact, Molly Melching made a trip around Europe and to the United Nations with the two wayfaring apostles of Kër Simbara: the elderly Imam and the veteran circumciser, who spoke in multiple international venues (Melching, 2005).

This “extra-territoriality” has not always proved popular within Senegal, notably in the national NGO community, which tends to see Tostan as something of an American implant with access to kinds of support that it cannot get. Tostan has in some instances implemented its programs through local or regional NGOs – and of course tries, as one objective, to assist local people in creating their own organizations – but has generally reverted to more direct administration due to dissatisfaction with outsourcing arrangements.

Internationally

Pilot projects have been launched in Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso and Guinea and a new effort is being undertaken at present in Somalia. Significantly, these are all countries where FGM is *majority*, not minority, practice – affecting, for example, more than 95% of the population in Mali and Somalia. The Mali and Sudan projects did not get beyond the pilot phase, due to lack of continuation funding, though initial efforts were largely successful. In Burkina Faso, over 20 villages completed the program and renounced FGM; and in Guinea, with support from USAID, the program has been piloted in 350 communities (Tostan, 2006).

Analysis and Interpretation

Tostan evaluates its own programs and publishes yearly reports, but there has been relatively little in the way of formal outside assessment of its processes and outcomes, excepting the work done by funding agencies to determine eligibility for support. One follow-up evaluation performed by a team from the Senegalese Ministry of Education on eight village programs in the Diakonia region suggested strong retention of lessons learned and continued enthusiasm for the projects that Tostan had helped set in motion. We ourselves carried out a three-year evaluation of replicated and adapted programs in Mali and the Sudan, which were both hampered by particular logistic and political obstacles yet likewise were met with considerable enthusiasm. Yet even without more full-dress assessment, the experience and the publicized results – summarized above – suggest interesting theoretical and tactical implications. These may be classed under the three “lenses” of interpretation proposed earlier.

Transformative Learning Theory

Though the term “transformative learning” has not been used, to the authors’ knowledge, in Tostan documents or presentations, the experience of participants fits that framework quite

well, with some particular characteristics that themselves offer new insight. Women in the program definitely learn to see their lived experience in new ways and develop new meaning frames for the future – and many of them have acted upon those reconstructed understandings in a very courageous manner. Though there clearly are common traits, transformative learning within Tostan is at the same time rather different from the kind originally portrayed in the western literature, exemplified by American women returning to school and the workforce.¹ To begin with, transformation in Tostan is as much a collective and as an individual process. It builds and is built on social consensus to a considerable degree.

It is also difficult to separate the transformative FGM methodology from either the rest of the Tostan approach – with its problem-solving orientation and its emphasis on human rights and assumption of new governance and credit management responsibilities – or from the condition of the social environment in which the program takes place. In the former regard, the Mali and Sudan projects essentially tried to implement a “trimmed down” version of the Village Empowerment Program, reduced to human rights and FGM. Women in the various centers were engaged and intrigued, but there was less additional substance to sustain and carry the new participant community in the phase of application. At the same time, the complexion of the FGM problem and the process necessary to address it turned out – no great surprise – to be substantially different in countries where FGM was majority or near-universal practice as compared to one, like Senegal, where practicing groups are in the minority, and in regions with a less “liberal” political order than the one there.

Nonformal Education

Nonformal education has been the vehicle for Tostan’s Village Empowerment Program, and the VEP both matches and breaks with prevalent models in interesting ways. Literacy remains an ingredient but is no longer put first: it gets its sense as women begin to make their own plans, launch their own activities and manage their own affairs. The form of the program has in fact evolved from a more literacy-centered approach to one framed around problem-solving and, more recently, to an experience that begins with the topic of human rights. Tostan certainly played a prominent role in the “privatization” of educational service delivery that was characteristic of the 1980s and 1990s in developing countries and has exhibited much of the flexibility and inventiveness that are one of that movement’s key virtues. At the same time, it is presently if haltingly engaged in the decentralization of NGO initiative and the devolution of key responsibilities to sub-national organizations and local community-based associations.

Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)

Despite its local origins, of course, Tostan is an international NGO, and by now an increasingly prominent one. No small amount of ink has been devoted to highlighting the shortcomings as well as the virtues of these development actors. Though many NGOs are among the champions of sustainable development and the stakeholders most likely to endorse adaptation of programs to local conditions, they are at the same time criticized with increasing frequency as “Trojan horses of development” that participate in undermining the State and in the privatization of development, on terms that are finally disadvantageous to local interests. Neither side of this broad brush seems entirely to fit the Tostan case. Rather its situation holds both possibilities in

¹ In fact, of course, the TL literature has grown and expanded to a major extent since then, with applications and explorations in the lives of professionals, of incarcerated adults, of ABE students and of people who are HIV positive.

tension, as perhaps do many similar NGOs – and it seems so far to have succeeded in giving the first the upper hand. In any case, the issue serves to illustrate the fact that the identity and challenges faced by the agent of adult education cannot be left out of the gestalt of transformative learning any more than those other elements already cited.

Conclusions: What Have We Learned? What Questions Remain?

What does the Tostan example teach us about transformational learning under circumstances very different from those – albeit increasingly various – that are generally associated with the literature on the topic? Several points bear summarization:

1. Transformation in this program has an important collective dimension, not just as a consequence of African culture but due to circumstances where space for individual change cannot be achieved without the critical mass necessary to make space for social change. Here others are in a sense treated as part of one's own identity.
2. In the Tostan model, the consensus necessary to change is accomplished in a non-combative manner – by walking or kayaking, if need be! As a West African proverb puts it, "Friendship is on foot."
3. The environment is very much part of the equation. What kind of transformation can be achieved and expressed depends not so much on material wealth as it does on social and political latitude available -- but it may in turn provide some of the energy needed to widen those limits.
4. The process is itself highly motivating and has contributed to inverting the way in which adult basic education is carried out. Now things begin with human rights and move on to the creation of new local organizations, picking up literacy as relevant to this momentum. In fact, empowering and "conscientizing" women's programs like Tostan turn out to contain within their process and structure some of that critical element so much lacking from most NFE endeavours: "post-literacy," or adequate provision for the application of lessons learned. When the lessons learned are new understandings of oneself and one's cultural tradition, there is – at first, anyway – no lack of application possibilities.

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