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Maimouna Konate
Northern Illinois University, USA

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Experiences of Post-Colonial Women in Grassroots Organizations in Mali: The Case of “L’Association des Femmes Fabricantes de Savon, Koulikoro Plateau I” (AFFSKP) ¹, Mali

Maimouna Konaté
Northern Illinois University, USA

Abstract: This qualitative research conducted in Mali during June-August 2006 explored the perceptions of thirty-eight women of a grassroots organization named “Les Femmes Fabricantes de Savon de Koulikoro Plateau I.” This study examined the experiences of poor women in Mali and sought to include their voices as they told their stories.

Contextual Background

Mali is a male-dominated country located in West Africa with a population of about 13 million inhabitants. Although it is one of the most stable democracies in West Africa today, it also has one of the least developed economies. According to UNDP (2003) 70% of the population live on an income of US \$2 per day. Women are the majority of people living below the poverty line. Due to the impact of HIV/AIDS and infections related to it, life expectancy continues to decline in age from 51 in 2003 to 39 in 2005. Women are more vulnerable to HIV infections because of poverty related prostitution and female genital mutilation. Over 93% of all women in Mali have undergone this dehumanizing cultural practice (UNDP, 2003). A low literacy rate (46%) and limited access to health social services are major contributors to Mali’s underdevelopment. Although women represent 51% of Mali’s population, only 19% have attended primary schools and 8% secondary education. Less than 1% have received a university education (UNICEF, 2005). In Mali women’s access to employment is limited (US Dept. of State, 2005). Only 15% of all women are in the labor force, concentrated in traditional occupations such as teaching and nursing or working as unskilled laborers. Rural women are the most vulnerable to unemployment. In addition to their daily chores that consist of fetching water, collecting firewood in the bush, cooking, raising children, and caring for the elderly, rural women in Mali are engaged in subsistence farming with little access to land, live stocks and seeds, and technology. Men control cash crop farming with women providing most of the manual labor.

Islam is practiced by 90% of Mali’s population. Religious and local cultural values are indistinguishable in Mali. Men in Mali interpret Islam in ways that often deny women their basic human rights. Despite the efforts of the Malian government in reinforcing women’s equity the perpetuation of the marginalization of women continues. Malian women in general, and rural women in particular, have little say in the private and public spheres. They are victims of subordination, injustices, and often violence in the family.

Statement of the Problem

The countries of the Third World (Asia, Africa, and Latin America) face common problems such as poverty, illiteracy, religious oppression, and patriarchy. Most studies of women in the Third World “have been dominated by Women in Development (WID) approach

¹ Association of Women Producers of Soap, Koulikoro Plateau I”

to the study of women” (Parpart, 1996, p. 146). Little is known about rural women in the Third World, especially rural African women in their social and cultural context, their own concerns about their subordination and oppression, the way they understand the problems they face in their daily lives, how they cope with their problems, and what changes they believe will help to improve their living conditions. This study focused on poor marginalized women in Koulikoro.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how poor rural women in a grassroots organization in Koulikoro respond to their social context and their understanding of marginalization. The study also sought to understand if their participation in their organization has brought about transformation and empowerment.

Contribution of the Study

Although this study focuses on Mali there are parallelisms applicable to other Third World countries. The findings contribute to the knowledge of how women in the village level in post-colonial Third World, especially in Africa, can work toward their cognitive, psychological, economic, and political empowerment. I discovered in the field how grassroots organizations are important sites of learning for rural women. This study contributes to the developing knowledge of how women learned from an African Third World perspective.

Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

Freirean critical theory, feminist theory, transformative theory, and the empowerment framework influenced and informed this study. A combination of these different theoretical perspectives helped me to develop a grounded theory that is based on the experiences of poor rural women in Koulikoro, Mali.

Critical Theory

The experiences of Brazilians facing poverty and hunger during an economic depression and political oppression in the early 1900’s influenced Freire (1970) to examine thoroughly the Brazilian context. He believed that people have the capacity to understand their oppression, change it, and take control of their own lives. Critical theory is an important tool that helps the oppressed or the disadvantaged to question, critique, and oppose the hegemonic socio-economic and power dynamics (Merriam and Caffarella ((1999). It also helps people to develop their critical intelligence to question and interpret the world around them (Freire, 1970). Freire’s theory of critical and transformative education involving a dialogical process helps individuals, organizations, and the community to understand the importance of learning as an act of freedom, develop the capacity to look at the dominant institutions, and become more active and reflective in the creation and implementation of policies, decisions, and processes that affect their lives. Using Freirean critical framework, a group of Malian women came together to analyze their conditions through posing questions and critical reflection and worked for solving the problems they faced in their daily lives. With their consciousness raised the women broke silence, shared experiences, and worked together for their collective liberation.

Feminist Theory

I believe that the dominant feminist literature discusses feminism from the experiences of the women from the West. Sudarkana (1996) argued that feminism has always existed in

Africa because of the roles African women have played and continue to play in African history. She stated that there were a lot of queens in Africa and those women had equal rights with men in pre-colonial Africa. Western feminists are more concerned about sex and gender issues and equal opportunities (equal salary, equal domestic rights, and right to vote, etc.) as men. They view women's experiences only from their own limited perspectives and do not recognize the perspectives of women from non-Western societies. Because they value their own perspectives as the standard, they over-generalize their theories, which do not represent the global realities of women. Western women should listen to and be aware of cultural, social, and sexual differences and experiences of others. Ham-Garth (1994) thought that the dominant paradigm of Euro-American feminist theory and women's studies presented a feminism that obscured the historical collective experiences of Third World women, especially African women. She insisted that the voices of women from the African Diaspora must be heard. Using post-colonial Third World, especially African feminism, this paper highlights the insufficiency of Western feminism to explain the conditions and context of Third World women. Third World feminism also demonstrates that African women for example, especially Malian women, can make a big contribution to feminist discourse, for African women in general, and Malian women in particular, have their own theories of how women work together to achieve their liberation (Rushing, 1996).

Transformative Learning Theory

Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1997) have discussed transformative learning from different perspectives. On one hand, Mezirow viewed transformative learning from an individualistic, rational, and psychological perspective although he agreed that collective social action sometimes occurs. On the other hand, Freire argued that transformative learning is basically contextual, social-cultural, political, and liberating. While Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has its value for the individualistic societies of the West, Freire's theory is more relevant in the context of the Third World countries such as Mali where oppression, discrimination, illiteracy, and poverty are major concerns of the people. But none of the above literatures dealt with the African realities. Therefore, this study contributes to the development of knowledge by applying the above theories to the African context, especially the context of Mali.

Empowerment Theory

Stromquist (1995) argued that empowerment occurs at the cognitive, psychological, economic, and political levels. Cognitive empowerment results in the realization and acceptance of one's subordinate position. It deals with being able to critically review one's experiences. It encourages knowledge and understanding of the self and it recognizes the need to make choices which may not be the accepted norms for one's social and cultural expectations. Psychological empowerment results in self-confidence and self-worth. It discusses one's feelings and the belief that learners can change their situation enabling them to exercise control of their decision-making at personal and societal levels. Lack of financial autonomy is a major reason for the subordination of women, so economic independence should amount to varying degrees of increasing a woman's position in the family and in society. Political empowerment enables women to analyze their situations critically and politically leading to collective action for social change. Stromquist's theory of empowerment may be a good step, but it does not quite explain the social conditions of Third World women, especially African women. Stromquist contributed to our understanding of women's empowerment solely

from an individualistic western perspective. However, the individualistic view of empowerment does not apply to Third World women, and particularly African women, who operate more from a collaborative perspective. Sosibo (1999) attested that women working collectively as a community against forces that threaten to divide them empower them. Collective empowerment was espoused by Freire (1970) who argued against the existence of individual empowerment. He believed that empowerment is social and collective. Stromquist contributed to a comprehensive understanding of empowerment. However, as far as the post-colonial Third World, especially where African women are concerned, I believe that economic and political empowerment are the most important. This paper fills the gap in the literature by developing a grounded theory on post-colonial critical African feminist theory based on the empirical findings.

Research Design and Research Questions

This study employed a case study design. Case study was appropriate in this context because the focus was on the participants' perceptions and experiences and the way they made sense of their lives. The following questions informed the study:

1. What were the lived experiences of the women in their social context that promote marginalization?
2. How did the women describe their experiences with their grassroots organization?
3. How did the women experience transformation/?
4. What was the potential of women's participation in their families and their community?

Methods of Data Collection

The study used a qualitative case study methodology. Thirty-eight grassroots women with a two-year experience participated in the study. Data were collected by means of in-depth tape-recorded interviews, community dialogue, document analysis, and participant observation.

Findings

Based on the research questions this paper has four sets of findings. The first finding relates to the lived experiences of women in their social context. The second deals with the women's experiences with their grassroots organization, AFFSKP. The third presents the results regarding the personal and social transformation of the women after they worked with AFFSKP. The last one reveals the extent to which women became empowered to participate in their families and their community after working with AFFSKP.

1. Lived Experiences of Women in their Social context

Data indicated that customs and cultural values, illiteracy, poverty, the misinterpretation of Islam, and patriarchy were oppressive to the women, therefore, were the causes of their marginalization. However, most women were proud of their cultural values and believed that they should be preserved because they said that culture made them who they were.

2. Women's Experiences with their Organization

With their participation in AFFSKP the women became agents of change. They developed job skills and rebuilt their lives by helping one-another. Most participants expressed how disconnected and lonely they were before they joined the organization, and, by contrast, how significantly their lives had changed within their organization. They supported one

another, taught and learned from one another by working as a group and sharing experiences. They developed a cottage industry, soap making, which helped to satisfy their economic needs. Clearly, the AFFSKP as a social movement provided the primary learning site for rural women in Mali where they learned about equitable distribution of resources first-hand.

3. Personal and Social Transformation

Economic independence was a form of transformation that had occurred in the women. In the past women in Mali were the proprietaries of their husbands who provided for the needs of the family. This situation is changing, because men are no longer able to fulfill these expectations due to unemployment or other family issues. Those changes have elevated women's status within the family. The interviewees became breadwinners in their families, gained autonomy, and assumed some power, and it became difficult for the husbands to control the wives' lives.

4. Family and Community Participation

The participants attested that economic independence had empowered them with freedom to make decisions in their families as well as in their community and make informed decisions about their lives. They all expressed that money was the key to their freedom and that without it a person's choices are very limited. They confessed that there were role reversals in their families. Some husbands were willing to watch the children and do the household chores while their wives were out learning and making soap, a situation the women expressed had never happened before they joined their organization and started bringing money home. Their husbands became also supportive when the women had needs related to their income-generating projects. As to their involvement in politics, the participants felt that they were used by politicians for campaigning purposes during elections, for women have always been good at organizing and mentoring, but they never took advantage of the decision-making level, and the elites did not care about women's issues once they got elected.

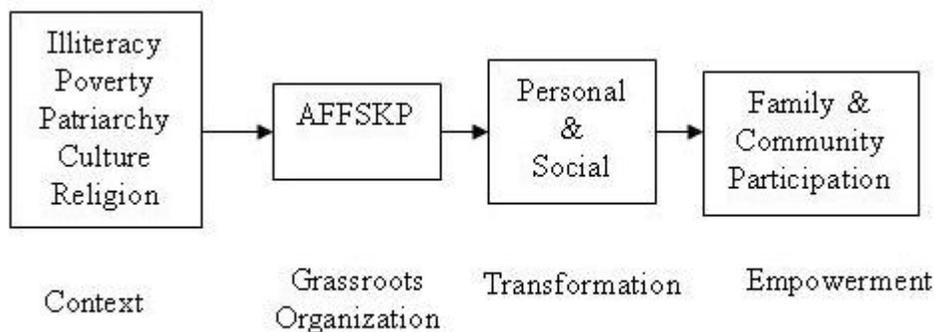


Figure 1. Participatory Democracy Model: Social Movement as a Learning Site

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

The issue of women in the Third World, especially rural women in Mali, is important to the field of adult education because it is imperative that adult educators understand the cultural and social issues of international research. Adult education should be context-based and adult educators should recognize the strengths of third World African women as community builders and leaders. Their life experiences must be featured as local knowledge in ways that bring cognitive, psychological, economic, and political empowerment to them by providing them

with skills that help them to be self-reliant and self-confident. This study provides evidence that the social movement is a learning site where participatory democracy benefits rural women who experience transformation as well as achieve empowerment not only at home but also in the community, at large.

Illiteracy of rural women is a big challenge that adult educators must face in order to facilitate women's empowerment in the Third World and especially in post-colonial Africa. Literacy training can play a significant role in the women's movement for social change in the Third World, for it is an important tool for conscientizing the poor or disadvantaged in support of organizing them to take action for their emancipation and development.

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