Knowledge and dignity for girls and women

Changing beliefs and social behaviour at community level is slow and often hard won. It can only be fostered through a full dialogue that involves and engages all community members and their extended family networks. Working with 20 selected communities in the Goudiry region, Tostan’s programme is going to ignite this dialogue through its innovative Community Empowerment Programme. This holistic educational model provides a positive environment and the tools necessary for communities to discuss and evaluate their current social practices, roles and relations and empowers them to address their own development priorities with regard to governance, education, health, the environment and economic growth.

**DURATION**: 2016-2018  
**CHALLENGE**: Women’s social and economic development  
**COUNTRY**: Senegal  
**PARTNER**: Tostan

CONTEXT
The remote and traditionalist Goudiry department in the south-eastern region of Tambacounda is one of Senegal’s most challenged areas. Its key development indicators are among the lowest in the country. Women and girls face particularly harsh realities: 85% prevalence of female genital cutting, critically high maternal and infant mortality, early marriage and very low educational opportunities and health services (only one health centre for over 65,000 individuals).

ACTION
At the core of Tostan’s grassroots work is an informal education programme, taught in national languages to women, men, girls and boys who live in rural and remote villages in Senegal and
have had little or no formal education. For three years, participants debate cross-cutting themes of democracy, human rights, health, and child protection, and learn basic literacy and numeracy.

Over time, the programme activates a deep dialogue within the local community and its surrounding social network, mobilising and empowering people to not only reconsider deeply-entrenched practices and social norms (such as female genital cutting or child marriage), but to identify local needs and find community specific solutions.

Tostán’s work in 20 communities in the Goudiry department aims at improving girls’ and women’s lives, equipping them with the capacity for democratic leadership and collective change. Actions planned include:

- A three-year education programme, with classes three times per week, for 1,000 women, men, girls and boys who have had little or no formal education.
- The selection and training of 20 facilitators and 5 supervisors, who come from the same region as the participants and speak their language. Their role is crucial for the effective progress of the programme: they live in the village during the three-year program and they draw on informal educational techniques and traditional African oral traditions (like storytelling, dance or theatre) to ensure information during classes is presented in relevant and engaging ways.
- The training of 340 Community Management Committee members (180 of them women). The committees, comprised of 17 democratically-elected members each, provide leadership for community initiatives and exemplify an inclusive and participatory form of governance. They lead the community to identify specific needs and organise a wide range of activities to support community health, wellbeing and administration, including clean-up days, the distribution of mosquito nets, vaccination campaigns, the construction and use of latrines, and the acquisition of birth certificates for children. Each committee receives an $800 grant to set up a micro-loan fund, rotated credit or a community project in accordance with the needs identified by the community itself.
- Activities promoting social mobilisation, such as information seminars with local authorities and community leaders, weekly radio campaigns, inter-village meetings, exchange visits and youth caravans, which contribute to raising awareness of children’s and women’s rights with community members, surrounding communities and local authorities.

EXPECTED RESULTS

- 1,000 people have strengthened their knowledge and are committed to human rights, democratic governance, collective action, problem-solving, hygiene, health, child protection, and small project management. They are empowered to identify local issues and implement community specific solutions.
- Having received multiple trainings and continuous supervision, the 20 Community Management Committees are able to lead community development initiatives, manage...
financial resources and act effectively in the interest of their communities. They are autonomous actors for the development of the local economy.

- Approximately 12,000 girls, women, men and boys benefit indirectly from the programme, thanks to Tostan’s strategic outreach approach known as “organised diffusion”, which commits each class participant to ‘adopting’ at least one friend or family member with whom to continuously share the knowledge and skills acquired through the programme.

- At community level, at least 3 inter-village seminars led by Community Management Committees to promote the dissemination of new knowledge and attitudes from community to community.

**LONG-TERM STRATEGY**

The Tostan programme is designed to build community capacity at all levels. At the individual level, it empowers participants to be agents of change in their own lives. At the community level, it recognises communities as experts in their own needs and provides inputs and practical skills training that enable communities to meet those needs. Tostan simultaneously connects communities with resources and partners that invest in their development projects and ensure sustainability. The 20 communities targeted in the programme are part of the 150 communities Tostan is planning to reach through its Generational Change in Three Years Campaign, a collaborative regional funding model designed to reach 1.6 million people across West Africa.