



Guinea Bissau (Fula)¹: Analysis of CMC Focus Groups

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BACKGROUND

Tostan's 2016-2022 Strategic Engagement Plan (SEP) sets out a clear vision to bring human rights-based education and community-based approaches to new levels of depth, quality and scale for positive social change and increased well-being among rural resource-poor populations in West Africa. The Breakthrough Generation (BG) Initiative was a central part of this effort. Through the BG, Tostan implemented its flagship Community Empowerment Program (CEP) in 148 villages in four West African countries: 30 in Gambia, 40 in Guinea, 38 in Guinea-Bissau, and 40 in Mali from October 2017 to September 2020.

Tostan undertook the evaluation of the BG using mixed methods. It sampled 20% of the villages in each country and undertook baseline and endline studies using standardized questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. The quantitative data informed a set of indicators on governance, education, health, the environment, and economic empowerment, with specific attention to changes in social norms relating to harmful practices, including female genital cutting (FGC) and child marriage. Analysis to date of the quantitative data examined the results especially among class participants and among adopted learners with whom class participants share their classroom experiences as part of the CEP strategy of “organized diffusion”.

The analysis of qualitative data was critical for triangulating and interpreting the quantitative data. It was also essential for gaining additional understanding into how the well-being results were reached by the communities as a result of the program. Importantly, it also provides more systematic evidence than was previously available indicating that the communities of all four program countries follow the same pathway to

¹Only the transcriptions identified as Fula were translatable into English, so this report is an analysis only of partial data collected from Guinea Bissau.

reach the results of improved well-being. This is of critical importance for sharing the model with other organizations and development actors interested in adopting essential elements of the Tostan model to strengthen their capacity to promote community well-being.

A team of external experts, working in collaboration with Tostan’s Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Research staff,² analyzed the qualitative data (110 focus group and/or interview transcripts). A primary objective of the analysis was to assess the effectiveness of the Community Management Committees (CMCs)³. These are elected and trained bodies of 17 representatives from the communities, of which at least nine are women, that are established at the onset of the Tostan Program. The CMCs consult regularly with participants in the Tostan classes and frequently, some members overlap. Given Tostan’s community-led approach and its participatory methodology, the CMC is a lynchpin for leading, nurturing and supporting the activities and changes that the class members set in motion during their participation in the class. It is also the structure that is left in place when the program ends. It ensures the continuation and sustainability of well-being initiatives undertaken or planned.

The analysis provided evidence well beyond the role and effectiveness of the CMCs. In exploring the validity of the claims CMC members made regarding the well-being results they helped to generate, major evidence emerged regarding the perceptions and opinions of community members as well as leaders and officials regarding what well-being results were reached and – importantly – regarding the ways in which they were reached.

The team prepared a separate report for each of the four countries. Each country report details the themes that emerged from CMC and Tostan class participant descriptions of their activities during the three-year implementation of the CEP and from individuals not directly involved with the classes or the CMC, including local leaders, public officials and service providers.⁴ The reports also confirm the findings of surveys that collected quantitative data in these same communities at the end of the CEP.⁵

At the onset of the Tostan program, the community elects a Community Management Committee (CMC), a group of 17 people, including at least 9 women. This committee, which Tostan trains:

- communicates with the Tostan class and various groups and leaders within the community and its neighboring communities;

² Diane Gillespie, PhD, Tostan volunteer, assisted by Kyla Korvne and Tilly Ruback conducted the analysis, and they co-authored the country reports. Disclosure: Diane Gillespie is a sibling of Molly Melching, Creative Director, Tostan; she received no monetary compensation for this project.

³ A description of Community Management Committees can be found in each of the reports and at Tostan.org.

⁴ Country reports are available upon request.

⁵ The summary results can be found here <https://tostan.org/resources/evaluations-research/>

- coordinates class activities with local and regional officials as well as various organizational leaders who support community activities;
- works with class members as they identify their vision for the future;
- helps build on community strengths and finds solutions to problems identified by the class;
- establishes fora for community activities meant to spread the class experience to the rest of the community;
- organizes activities aimed at improving well-being, such as village cleaning; and
- helps resolve conflicts or situations that are at odds with decisions reached, including those relating to ending violence and harmful practices.

Given Tostan’s community-led approach and participatory methodology, the CMC is a lynchpin for leading, nurturing and supporting the changes that communities set in motion. It is also the structure that is left in place when the program ends and that is responsible for supporting the continuation and sustainability of the initiatives undertaken. During the program, when possible, they reach out to neighboring communities to share what they are learning. [These communities are called “adopted communities”.]

Tostan’s Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) staff administered surveys and conducted focus groups/individual interviews in a representative sample of communities at the end of the Community Empowerment Program.

The purpose of the qualitative component of the evaluation with members of the CMCs was to:

- provide a space and opportunity for the CMC members to reflect on their Tostan education and make meaning of their experiences;
- check the descriptions of CMC members by analyzing the descriptions of those working with the CMC (class participants and community leaders/officials) and those affected indirectly by CMC activities (nonparticipants in class or adopted learners);
- elicit descriptive data about their experiences so that Tostan can learn about program effectiveness;
- provide an explanatory context for the quantitative data that was being collected at the same time;
- and increase staff capacity in conducting qualitative inquiry.

METHOD

MERL used a structured interview protocol for the CMC focus groups. Interviewers were Tostan supervisors who spoke the same language as interviewees, but were not from or

working in the communities being interviewed. Interviewers asked the CMC groups:

- what their favorite activity was;
- how they engaged people in their activities;
- how they engaged local authorities in their activities;
- what had surprised them in the encounters with people inside/outside their communities;
- whether they had faced resistance and what strategies they had used to manage it;
- what changes in their own communities they found most important;
- and what changes they found most important in their adopted communities.

For the interviews with community leaders, those leaders were asked about changes that they witnessed in their communities and about their own participation in CMC activities. For the focus groups conducted separately with men and women, members were asked about Tostan and their understanding of Tostan's work and/or about their participation in any CMC activities. They were also presented three scenarios on corporal punishment, child marriage, and Female Genital Cutting (FGC). Each scenario concerned someone in the community considering whether to carry out the practice: a mother hitting a child to discipline the child for disrespecting her grandmother, a father considering marrying his 14 year old daughter and a mother considering cutting her daughter. In each scenario, members are asked what they think, what members of their community would think and what they would do, if anything.

Interviewers were instructed to encourage participants to expand answers for details and rationale related to new beliefs and/or practices and to encourage all members to participate. At no time did any interviewers contradict or intervene when participants spoke.

In Guinea Bissau, CMC focus groups were held in four Fula communities. In two of those communities, an individual interview with a leader was conducted and two focus groups conducted, one with men and one with women. In a third community, focus groups were conducted with women and men but no community leaders were interviewed. In a fourth community, an individual interview and one male focus group were conducted.

Because members of the adopted communities were not interviewed, it was impossible to assess the activities carried out in those communities.

The three researchers analyzing the data collected by Tostan staff are familiar with Tostan but are not staff members. A Senegalese Tostan MERL staff member provided the cultural context when uncertainties arose in the descriptions. Our aim was to privilege the voices of those participating in the evaluation.

We anonymized the data for this report.

A SENSITIZING CONCEPT: SOCIAL NORM THEORY

Data from the baseline study undertaken by Tostan prior to implementing the CEP in Guinea Bissau indicated the presence of harmful practices. Given its history with working in communities since 1991, its current Theory of Change and research on the program, Tostan recognizes that corporal punishment of children and female genital cutting (FGC) can be practices governed by social norms-- with corresponding collective beliefs about what community members expect of each other. (See: https://www.tostan.org/wp-content/uploads/Cislaghi2019_Article_ChangingSocialNormsTheImportant-1.pdf) Under certain conditions, the practice of child marriage can also be so upheld. Social norms theory helps to guide Tostan's work in the field even as what happens in the field informs the application of the theory. Researchers crafted an interview questionnaire with social norms theory in mind; specifically, Tostan asked CMC members about their experiences with efforts to raise awareness with community members beyond the class on the harmful consequences of child marriage, FGC, and physical punishment of children.

Social norms frequently operate invisibly. They are implicit rules of behavior based on beliefs held by most members in a community. If they are to change, they need to be made visible to the community at large and evaluated in a neutral way through provision of accurate information and a space for values deliberation—both of which Tostan provides and integrates into its educational curriculum and pedagogy. As the class deliberates and decides to change past practices, the CMC, having benefited from training from Tostan, sets up activities that help to inform the community at large and their neighboring or closely connected communities in a process called organized diffusion. CMC members share new information and any new actions that participants in the Tostan program decide (on their own) to undertake to align their new understandings about health and wellbeing with their existing practices.

At all stages, those participating in the organized diffusion activities must be able to reach decisions autonomously as they are presented with factual information about physical punishment, child marriage and FGC and given time to discuss that information with their classmates and people in their communities. In addition, they hear the stories that emerge, often for the first time, from within the community, of harms caused by past practices. What was invisible becomes more visible during discussions, both in classes and in community meetings held by the CMC. What also becomes visible is that a portion of the community is committed to ending the harmful practices. For participants to take actions to end harmful practices, a significant portion of a community and of its intra-marrying communities must decide to abandon these practices; otherwise, individuals who stop the practice will be perceived by others to be, for example, “bad” or “incompetent” parents and in some cases, will be attacked and/or scorned by their communities. Because social norms are embedded in everyday/ordinary experience, people need time to consider new information. Tostan's educational program begins with visioning exercises, followed by information about democracy and human rights and

responsibilities, which are discussed in-depth in classes three times a week over a five-month period. Given a commitment to a democratic process, coercing people to change is not conceived as an option by the CMCs.

Tostan believes that enhanced relational capabilities, acquired during the CEP, provide the basis for the process of respectful discussion and increasing coalescence of a group committed to abandoning harmful practices. Specifically, collaborative endeavors, respectful engagement with others, neighborliness, mutual understanding, and sharing of information in a non-judgmental fashion are critical for undertaking the collective action that increases community well-being. Without such social cohesion, sustainable social change is not possible.

The improved relationships are characterized by new-found respect. Respect for traditional authority of men and older community members remains and is not usurped, while respect extends to women and youth in unprecedented ways. Women and youth participate in mixed gender community meetings for the first time. They take on new roles in the community and on the CMC and participate in and influence decisions. Violence, especially against women and children, decreases.

The CMC's role becomes key for the abandonment of harmful practices and the promotion of well-being if communities are to create sustainable change over time. The program lasts for 30 months, after which the CMC must take the lead in continuing to promote social change. Tostan's questions were designed to evaluate the effectiveness of CMCs given social norms theory, which is also embedded in Tostan's Theory of Change.

Evidence of the Effectiveness of Tostan's Theory of Change in Focus Group Descriptions

Tostan's theory of change assumes that the implementation of the program will take place in resource-poor communities. The descriptions in Guinea Bissau's transcriptions indicate that such conditions existed in the communities (e.g., poor roads, inaccessible and ineffective health centers and public schools, unhealthy environmental conditions).

Although the interviews did not ask focus group participants to articulate a view of how community change takes place, many did. The fact that participants spontaneously articulated their understanding of how change occurred, in alignment with Tostan's Theory of Change, provides a certain kind of evidence for the effectiveness of their CMC education/training. For example, several participants said that their community had conducted cleanings. Linking that change to better health, which several participants did, would be a learning outcome, but linking it to strengthening the community and its well-being and development indicates that they understand themselves as engaged in a longer-term process of change.

Neighborliness was not common before Tostan; community members lacked the ability to assess offers from outsiders and fell prey to their scams; FGC and child marriage were common practices; physical violence was part of everyday life. Reasons given for establishing new practices were accurate⁶ and their reasoning process was linked to the emergence of new practices. The CMC's role is to engage both class and community members who are not in the class in further deliberations and to provide opportunities for communities to imagine and practice actions that will better align new understandings, say, about health, with their behaviors. As noted above, given their shared commitment to democratic values, resistance cannot be met through coercive means; rather it must be met with further dialogue. Several CMC members said that they approached resistance through patience, communication and information sharing in a process they call *sensitization*⁷ or awareness raising.

The quotations below indicate what changes occurred and the bold type highlights how it occurred. [GB=Guinea Bissau; CMC=community management committee; MFG=male focus group; FFG=female focus group; I=interview with community leader].⁸

What pushed us to integrate the activities here in Community M, since the advent of Tostan, is to **have seen and heard innovative know-how** ignored until then. We now understand how the human individual should behave in his environment and how to sensitize his fellow human beings **in order to associate them with the community effort**. Certainly, **people saw us cleaning the roads, the health post and the mosques and holding meetings**. We formed committees to enter houses and urge the sick to be taken to the hospital for treatment. And **this created a sense of satisfaction and attracted a lot of support**. (GB, Maf, CMC)

If social conflicts end up in the hands of the judicial authority, it is linked to the lack of interactive communication within the community. ... And so [by attending Friday meetings in the mosque], confrontations between members will be controlled. When people don't meet, they can't cultivate love for each other. This is the reason why, in our Quranic school, the behavior has changed since the first steps of Tostan. Because **people cannot love each other if they do not exchange affinities**. (GB, Cut, CMC)

At the beginning of the Tostan school, some people were not very convinced, but thanks to **our actions of cleanliness** and many other achievements, people have realized that this program is a good thing. That's why many people have **joined the movement thanks to the hygiene and cleanliness actions**.

⁶ In this report by the term *accurate* we mean in line with the information taught in the Tostan classes.

⁷ *Sensitization* is the term used by translators from national languages into French and then into English. Difficult to translate into English, it is a term that describes the approach that class participants and CMC members take to inform others about what they have learned in their classes. It means reaching out to people, providing information respectfully, sharing personal experiences, and explaining why their own behavior has changed. It does not include coercion or forcefulness.

⁸ We note that the interview and focus group transcripts were rich with details. Participants gave explanations in their answers to interview questions that showed how they integrated what they had learned into their thinking and behavior. The selected quotations are a small sample of what we could have presented to illustrate change and how it happened.

With Tostan we have benefited from what we never thought we would get before. The gains are priceless because **joining forces with Tostan means enjoying a new and positive consciousness. And with that comes a more fulfilling brotherly bond.** All those who have benefited from Tostan training acquire a previously unknown advantage. Because **one treats the other with equal dignity. The teachings received from Tostan forge the individual conscience into a human and responsible conscience.** (GB, Cut, CMC)

These changes [being described by participants in the focus group about Tostan] are very enriching because, before, **relations were dull in the village; but all that is over. Now it is feelings of brotherhood, of fruitful mixing and proximity that is cultivated.** Today the quarrels have faded: you will not see a woman chastise her daughter or the father hit his child. And all this is the result of a successful sensitization; and it has pushed those who were not studying to come and join us in the classes. (GB, Maf, CMC)

Thus, we draw up a calendar that will **allow an official to participate.** Whether it is the administrative authority, the village chief or the Imam, **we discuss with them in order to harmonize and establish a consensual calendar before the order is given. And they give us their favorable opinions to participate since we work for the social progress of the village.** (Ga Mam, CMC)

In the past, it was rare to see a man and a woman sitting side by side to make a decision; in fact, it didn't even exist. However, nowadays it has become a routine to see us together. **Any decision nowadays requires the presence and massive participation of women who do not let themselves be dominated. And there is no meeting organized in our region without the Tostan group being asked to participate and give its opinion. In the past, we women were hardly involved in the decisions taken.** Even less in the men's meetings. Once **I was beaten by my husband** for going out for Tostan activities. But since he started participating, **he encourages me and compliments me and prays that the program will go ahead.** (GB, GaMam, CMC)

I used to be very afraid to express my opinion in a mixed audience. Because I had stage fright. Now **I know how to speak in an assembly without being afraid** of the other person's gaze. **I have achieved this feat today, but at the time I didn't dare to do it out of fear. I like it very much and I am very proud of it.** (GB, MaF, CMC)

At the time, only men were invited to the meetings, but not women, because they were discriminated against. However, the meetings are now mixed and everyone is free to give their opinion. It is no longer a question of accepting that only so-and-so will have the right to speak, and the other will not. **So everyone**

declares their opinion when we meet and adopts the most relevant ideas. (GB, Sin, CMC)

The change is felt even in the form of decision making, since **in the past men made the decisions for women. Now men and women sit down to make a joint decision in a concerted manner.** (GB, Sin, CMC)

But today **everyone has understood the harm (of FGC) because people have seen the negative factors with their own eyes.** Tostan, UNICEF and the United Nations have made pleas in this sense. They have stated that female genital cutting is a bad practice for the health of the girl, and **we have been eyewitnesses.** Today it has become a banned practice. And **you will no longer see parents subjecting their daughters to excision, because everyone knows that their health comes first.** (GB, Cut, CMC)

Initially **we were doing house calls to make fathers and mothers aware of child abuse** and that **this is a bad practice.** (GB, GaM, CMC)

Early marriage was an established practice, but **nowadays it tends to disappear because the population has been well sensitized.** (GB, GaM, CMC)

The following are themes that emerged from our analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts. Themes are common ideas or topics that become evident during close reading of the texts. We begin each thematic section with a brief description of the claims made by the CMCs and then provide evidence from individual interviews with leaders/officials and nonparticipant focus group members about the trustworthiness of the claims.

Theme 1: Community Engagement

CMC participants actively engaged with their communities and their adopted neighboring communities, as agents and facilitators of positive change for improved well-being. They described their approaches as inclusive and respectful.

The CMCs in Guinea Bissau reported carrying out activities with their communities and described how they engaged the community members and how they deployed village leaders and local authorities in supporting their activities. New activities included: community cleanings, improved hygiene, some mentions of supporting children in school, women's prenatal visits, and going to health clinics when sick. Several also mentioned the community bank, noting the transparency around its operations.

The focus groups with nonparticipants in the program and the interviews with community leaders confirmed the claims made by CMCs: "I have heard their actions are positive and effective" (MFG, GaMam, GB). Another male focus group member added, "Their achievements are positive and obvious" (GB, GaMam, MFG).

One female focus group member said, “When [class] participants come back to us, they explain the course and the topics to the uninitiated. They organize awareness campaigns, cleanliness campaigns and meetings as well” (GB, WFG, GaMam).

A man from another community said,

And these CMC/class members, each one has his friend and whoever understands the purpose of the modules shares [that knowledge] with his friend. Or a member can have two friends to whom he explains what Tostan teaches but especially the basis of its action. To do this, the members go around the village from door to door, even in the neighboring towns. (GB, Cut, MFG)

Another man from a third community said,

We find [the class members/CMC members] giving a speech that shakes the conscience and makes the common sense awaken. And these are dispositions and qualities that are not easy to acquire. It is a matter of cleaning the whole village completely as well as its access roads. And if you go into the village, you realize that cleanliness gives it the dignity of a village in the true sense of the word. We hear people say such things about the members of the management committee. Also, each member makes considerable efforts to convince his relatives to join the actions of Tostan. This increases the mobilization and boosts the strategy of the Tostanians to move forward. (GB, Sint, MFG)

This respondent’s metaphor illustrates the value that many focus group participants saw in the CMC activities:

We used to live in difficulties. We were like in hermetically sealed rooms, where you are afraid to enter for fear of finding a snake. And so we decided to open the door, and to our great surprise we found gold. (GB, Cut, MFG)

The gold might be a metaphor for the community’s ability to carry out activities that create a healthy environment.

Several noted that the activities of the CMC had diminished corruption. One male focus group member said,

The changes are visible, since in the past we members of the village received funding on behalf of the community that evaporated in the hands of a few people. Today, money is only disbursed for an investment that is known in advance. Like buying commercial products for resale: cloth, chickens, etc. And it is money to be paid back after the sale operations of course. (GB, Cut, MFG)

Another nonparticipant said that they were better able to manage finances.

I can say that Tostan has inspired me to learn. Before, after I harvested my crop, I didn't do an evaluation. I would take my harvest and put it directly into the granary. Now I make assessments: millet covers my food needs for five months. The rice

lasts three months for the household food. And this calculation coincides with the arrival of the agricultural campaign. And during this campaign I can sell up to ten bags of cereals that will allow me to start construction and settle other needs. And I want to say that this is an efficient method of Tostan, without which I would still be in the whirlpool. (MFG, Cut, GB)

Focus group members also described activities related to what they learned about reinforcing schooling and “about the rights that are enshrined in the law, such as the right to health, the right to life, the right to expression and the right to information. They also learned a mechanism for conflict resolution” (GB, Sint, WFG).

Theme 2: Newfound and Strengthened Community Solidarity

CMC members stated that their communities were more cohesive and much less violent. Generally, CMC members commented that peace and understanding has been brought to their village.

The focus group and individual interviews provided ample evidence of this effect of CMC activities: “I can say that it is this group, called the CMC, that succeeded in deconstructing the chronic misunderstanding to restore healthy relations of conviviality within our community. ... We see people sitting together laughing or playing their favorite games (GB, GaMam, WFG). “Tostan taught us to join in community synergy” (GB, Cut, MFG). “The CMC was able to unify all the members of the village so that the people weave strong bonds of belonging and cordial fraternity” (GB, GaMam, WFG).

The following quotation from a community leader emphasizes that the new, closer social relationships, reinforced by Tostan’s program, were necessary for effective community action:

I have understood well. Since the establishment of the Tostan school in our locality, I have a feeling of pride, because what I have seen is satisfactory. ... The Tostan school, through [its emphasis on] the Portuguese language and our values inherited from our customs [has] an ultimate goal: to unite as one [community] in order to work for society towards a healthy and fulfilled life. And this is what I have seen from this school that unites the bonds of brotherhood in the village, and that is why its contribution is very significant. It is a school that greatly supports the capabilities of my village, especially since the people of the village were scattered before. But since this school exists, Tostan supports us with an organization that reunites and creates a synergy of all accompanied by know-how and cleanliness. (GB, Maf, leader)

Later in his interview, he again emphasized the importance of the link between close relationships formed during the Tostan program and actions undertaken that promoted well-being in the community as a whole:

We can say that here in Guinea Bissau it is this focal point that we lacked compared to the old classical school. Because in the past it was the ancestral traditions that prevailed; then it was Islam, and then the colonizers. But that never got the better of the deeply rooted customs. However, with the arrival of Tostan in Guinea Bissau, I have never received so much satisfaction since independence. The organization of Tostan can be likened to an assembly. In the past, the Canton chiefs called the Bissau assembly with the governor to discuss the activities to be carried out in the country. It is in this same assembly that the members of parliament argued and spent all their time bickering because they do not understand each other. As soon as we were summoned to Tostan, and things were said and done about the execution of the program, I said to myself that this is what it means to be of good faith, to be close to one's constituents, and that it is by this process that one recognizes a blessed action, that this is what is called an action of total selflessness completely devoted to a community cause for progress. (GB, Maf, leader)

While the leader spoke of more general abilities of community members to communication and collaborate, a female focus group member described a personal change:

The thing that changed the most about me was that, at first, I was impulsive. If you gave me a look, it would end in a fight. But since I've been in Tostan's classes, my temperament has changed. A person can start ranting in front of me without me yelling at them, because I'm in the middle of something. This state of mind has finally affected my cleanliness and my understanding of things. (GB, Cut, WFG)

Others said that they learned new communication skills:

They taught us to meet to establish strategies and actions in a collegial way. They taught us how to work together as a family without coercing members by force and without exclusively emphasizing one's status as head of the family. They taught us to nurture and strengthen the bonds of fraternal cohabitation within the household as well as with the immediate neighbor. (GB, Cut, MFG)

The communications skills were then picked up by others:

From the way they are organized and behave, people have come to see that this is indeed an impetus for a closer bond of brotherhood. So everyone imitated them in their approach; and it spread everywhere. (GB, Sint, WFG)

Many said that conflicts could be resolved now:

For example, when a conflict arises between two parties, the CMC reacts by finding a permanent conciliatory solution. They canvass the belligerents for reconciliation until the grudges are extinguished. Even if some of the bad feelings have not completely disappeared, they have drastically decreased in intensity. (GB, Cut, MFG)

One leader said, “[Another change from the past is] the fact that a quarrel between spouses is now banished from our customs” (GB, Maf, Village Chief). A leader from another community confirmed that “In the past, couples would quarrel and go to court. However, in the last three years, this phenomenon has decreased a lot” (GB, Sint, Imam).

Several interview and focus group participants said “interactive communication” had replaced violence: “Acts of violence against others have faded away nowadays. Because interactive communication is now the norm to build consensus between two parties so that we understand each other (GB, Sint, WFG). The relational work occurred between everyone in the community. One woman said, “At first, young people and adults did not share the same seat. But the learners managed to connect with them and harmonize our mutual relationships. Today we have become familiar and united as one” (GB, GaMam, WFG).

In sum, one leader said,

I remained two months in a row in my village without being solicited for the least conflict, neither fight nor insulting exchange. Therefore, the one through whom the change has come must be a blessed person. So this informal school of Tostan has a blessed content, and it is me who certifies it to you. (GB, Maf, Village chief)

Theme 3: Women Empowerment -- Increased Voice and Agency

Women have a voice not just in the family but also in more public venues, such as community meetings, and they conduct awareness raising activities, working visibly as leaders to advance well-being in the community.

The interviews and focus groups conducted with those not participating in the program directly generally confirm the CMC’s claims. A woman said, “Since the program has been in place, the women have become very good at expressing their opinions to the decision-making body in an inclusive manner” (GB, Sint, WFG). A man said, “What is significant is that an adult woman, who was previously illiterate and uneducated, is now able to read, write, and discuss previously unknown topics in front of the astonished young students” (GB, GaMam, MFG).

It is also important to note that the robust participation of both participant/non-participant women and female CMC members in the focus groups is itself an illustration of their ability to express ideas and opinions in a setting unfamiliar to them. One of the CMC focus groups was all women. In the other three CMC focus groups, in which the gender of the speaker was not identified, turn taking was the norm; everyone spoke. In two of the communities in which (nonparticipant) men’s and women’s focus groups were held, women spoke more words in their focus groups than did men.

Those not directly participating in the program learned to speak in public without fear from those who participated in it.

Before, we women were shy and afraid to go in front of a group of men. With the arrival of Tostan, even though I am not one of the learners, I realized that if you learn, you understand quickly. But if you haven't learned, it is difficult to understand certain things. So those who attend the classes give us little initiations. (GB, GaMam, WFG)

Women were no longer fearful in front of authority figures:

We used to be afraid to speak publicly. But now we do it without any complexes in front of the village chief and the competent authority; we denounce everything that is wrong. And the village chief is in sync with us since he wanted to benefit from support in order to change things. Well, things have indeed changed. (GB, GaMam, WFG)

When a woman had to speak in public, her feet used to get tangled up because of stage fright. But now the woman dares to stand in the middle of a mixed crowd expressing her opinions. And so no woman is afraid to speak in public anymore. (GB, GaMam, WFG)

What has changed here is remarkable because in the past only men were allowed to attend meetings. Women were not allowed to attend. However, since the teachings of Tostan have become widespread, women participate in the meetings and decision-making bodies of the community. I used to be afraid to express my opinion in public, but now I do it in a mixed audience without any stage fright. (GB, Sint, WFG, Sint)

Women noted that they were more free from violence and more able to negotiate with their husbands and health care workers:

It is because we are no longer battered women, and we are given money to go to the hospital. In the past, we were systematically beaten when we asked for money. We were told: 'I don't have any money; it is better for you to sell your rooster for your hospital care.' However, today we don't have a chicken to sell, but we receive money as soon as we reach out to the husband. In addition, the health workers at the hospital treat us well because the members of the CMC intervene by talking to them. In any case, behavioral changes are a reality around here. (GB, Cut, WFG)

Since Tostan set foot in our community, our way of life has changed. Because I used to accompany my husband to pick mahogany nuts, up to twenty bags. And he would sell them without saying a word to me and come back and sit in front of me. But now he is obliged to tell me: 'I had to collect a sum of so much for the sale of the mahogany nuts. And for the rice, so much money is left over.' Before, this mentality did not exist, but since Tostan has been with us, people have changed and adopted new ways of doing things. (GB, Cut, WFG)

A man described his wife's economic empowerment:

I can say that the changes are not just about the business side. In my house, my wives who have made a profit have done so only for themselves. The same is true for the young people and myself. The women had sold their peanut harvest and collected the money with which they bought clothes and shoes, which constitutes a significant added value. Now both of us have become as we should be in relation to each other. (GB, Cut, MFG)

Finally, women can advocate successfully to keep their children in school.

Children now learn at school. Before, when you dared to want your child to go to school, you were told, "That child will never learn in school!" So you were there with your child who brought you problems every day. But now we are fearless in urging our children to learn to the highest level in school. (GB, GaMam, WFG)

Women specifically advocated for girl's education:

Among the significant changes is the fact that previously men refused to allow their daughters to attend school; only boys were favored. And when the studies did not work out for the boys, they were made to work in timber. The girl was strictly in charge of the household chores since she hardly went to school; or else she had to finish the household chores and arrive at school late. And the teacher refused to let a late student in. (GB, GaMam, WFG)

We didn't value our daughters' education ... But today, the parent must enroll his daughter in school so that she can succeed in her field. This is why many girls fail and leave school because of their parents' attitude. Even if you have to pay for your daughter to go to school, you have to do it. (GB, GaMam, WFG)

Theme 4: Significantly Improved Health and Hygiene

CMC participants demonstrated their ability to take new actions based on accurate knowledge about health and hygiene and to explain its importance for community well-being.

Echoing the CMC descriptions of the community, a man said, "In the past, our alleys were often littered with garbage to the point that people felt disgusted to go out at night" (GB, Cut, MFG).

All focus groups mentioned village cleaning as an important activity, and both male and female focus groups and interviews with community leaders affirmed that the health effects were visible and valued. They mentioned the benefits of new stoves, latrines, hand washing, prenatal visits and vaccinations, among others. One woman said,

In the past I did not wash myself with soap after I had a bowel movement, because I had fixed ideas. But now I wash my hands well with soap. I clean my space properly after doing the laundry. I clean my children too; I rinse them well with soap and water when they come home. (GB, Cut, WFG)

Another woman said,

Our kitchens for the most part were blackened with smoke and filth; now consciences have been shaken to the core, and that's why these old habits [around cleanliness] have been abandoned. (GB, GaMam, WFG)

Participants discussed, especially, pre- and post-natal care of their children:

In the past, when I was pregnant, I didn't go to the hospital, but with the arrival of Tostan, I always hear that they urge pregnant women to go to the health services. And the CMC members go around the villages shouting the slogan when the mothers don't show up at the health post: "Come and get your children vaccinated. Come and get your children vaccinated!" In the past we did not know this. (GB, Cut WFG)

What has changed here is not to be underestimated. In the past, when the wife was ill and wanted to go to the doctor, she was told curtly that there was no money. The pregnant woman was kept in her room until she gave birth, and she was served drinking herbal tea and therapeutic leaves. ... These past practices are over. (GB, Sint, WFG)

About cleaning, interview and focus group participants said similar things: "We have cleanliness activities throughout the village ... we have toilets ... and we use soap to wash our hands and ourselves" (GB, Cut, Village Chief). A focus group member described paths that in the past were "strewn with thorns and garbage" and were now "clean" (GB, Cut, WFG).

Theme 5: Abandonment or Decrease of FGC, Child Marriage and Corporal Punishment

CMCs and participants declared that their communities had abandoned FGC, corporal punishment, and child marriage or that those practices had decreased. All communities said that they had been practicing FGC, child marriage, and corporal punishment before Tostan.

In addition to CMC members, many leaders and non-participating men and women said that now they would try to intervene and try to prevent these activities from happening. Two of the leaders confirmed the CMCs' claims. There were some indications of resistance in the focus groups, but not many. In one case, a woman said that FGC could be practiced as it is an ancient custom. The other discrepancies arose when the participants were asked what others in the community would say about the practices.

Most expressed satisfaction with the reduction of child marriage, FGC, and corporal punishment. This woman discusses "archaic practices" and a community leader discusses voluntary abandonment of them:

Many things that we did not know before, we have experienced today. We can say that many archaic practices [FGC and child marriage] have been forgotten thanks to the action of Tostan. We have grasped the Tostan program, and we have made it our own. Therefore, we can say that we are proud of these teachings because we have measured their impact. (GB, Cut, WFG)

Here in this village during the last three years, we can say that people clearly discern today what they could hardly see in the past. Now everyone is in complete agreement against these practices [FGC, child marriage]; and people are abandoning them voluntarily and not for fear of reprisals. Everything that is banned by common sense is abandoned. (GB, Sint, leader)

Corporal Punishment

A few participants noted that some in the community would hit the daughter who is the subject of the case used during the interview. (She disrespected her grandmother.) But most argued against hitting the daughter as a form of discipline. A village leader said, “In the last three years, the trend is downward, there has been no increase in violence against children or women (GB, Sint, leader). This leader also said,

Tostan had set up this community management committee to look after the children. Previously, the village chief did not react when a child was punished in front of him. However, nowadays, thanks to Tostan's action, the punishment is immediately stopped when the village chief intervenes. And the members of the CMC also prohibit brutality in the whole village. As a result, violation of children's rights is now a thing of the past. (GB, Cut, leader).

When asked what others would think if Penda (the mother) did not hit her daughter, one woman said,

Penda's attitude of not punishing her daughter is linked to the influential action of the CMC members who eventually persuaded Penda to spare her daughter from corporal punishment. Thus, Penda decided to establish an interactive conversation with her daughter to straighten her out from unwanted behavior. In addition, Penda was won over by the participants' newfound awareness, which resonated well with the masses. (GB, GaMam, WFG)

Overall, given the recognition that corporal punishment was commonplace before the Tostan Program began, the CMC's awareness raising reached into the community in ways that led nonparticipating members to try and avoid physical punishment.

Child Marriage

The focus group and interview participants supported the CMC's claims that child marriage had been abandoned or greatly reduced. A village leader said, “We can say that it has become an epiphenomenon that is practiced less and less. This is to say that

forcing is over. ... And this is what Islam recommends” (GB, Maf, leader). A leader from another community said, “The trend is downward, because previously, at fifteen years old, girls are given in marriage” (GB, Sint, leader).

A few members of the focus groups had a caveat: if the young girl didn’t want to study, then she should be married.

When asked to say what people in their community would say about a father giving his daughter in marriage at an early age, focus group members said people would say that schooling does not benefit a girl. But the members rebutted that argument:

People in the village will say that her father does not have enough to feed his household and that is why she gives her daughter to a man to marry. Others, on the other hand, will say that early marriage is a better asset. However, marriage at this age is not a good thing. (GB, Sint, WFG)

Only one man said that some people “would like the village custom to be perpetuated” (GB, GaMam, MFG). Another, from this same focus group, said, “I can say, for this particular case, there are few or none that I know of. That a girl is taken out of school to be given in marriage--it does not exist in our village” (GB, GaMam, MFG). A leader said, “Forced marriage did exist in the past, but since Tostan has been in our village, things have changed” (GB, Cut, Leader).

In sum, these nonparticipants in the Tostan program consider child marriage harmful and worth abandoning.

Female Genital Cutting

The CMC stated that FGC had been abandoned or was decreasing, a remarkable change given how embedded the practice was in the communities. This leader describes his experience:

In the past, our village organized a festival that brought together all the surrounding villages as far as Bafara and even Bissau. When I subjected my daughter to excision, all my friends were invited. Abundant meals were served, and substantial resources were spent. However, we gave up this practice because all our rice stock went into the feast.

When describing the practice later, this same leader said,

That's right, there are no longer many cases and for the past five years the practice has been decreasing thanks to the action of Tostan. In the past it was a big party that was organized in honor of the girl, but nowadays people rarely do it, and it is done in secret. (GB, Cut, leader)

Of note, focus group members said that they thought and that others thought that Tostan was only about ending FGC, an understanding that changed after they saw what the members of the class and the CMC had done to improve the well-being of the community.

In one focus group, two women supported the practice. Interestingly, this same focus group gave the most compelling reasons to abandon FGC. (See below for the reasoning in each case).

Finally, a community leader said, “For the adopted villages, the only thing that remains is the circumcision of boys, but for girls it is completely forgotten” (GB, Maf, leader).

Theme 6: Accurate Reasoning for Abandonment of FGC, Child Marriage and Corporal Punishment

All focus participants who supported abandonment of harmful practices gave accurate and relevant reasons for abandoning child marriage and violence against children. That two who supported FGC or were unsure about abandoning it is an indication that the CMC’s awareness raising had reached almost everyone in the communities.

Corporal Punishment

On the dangers of corporal punishment, focus group members gave psychological, social and physical reasons why hitting is harmful. Some talked about children’s rights. A woman said, “Because hitting the child can result in accidental injury” (GB, Sint, WFG). A woman from another focus group said, “People will say that the mother [who doesn’t hit her daughter] has resolutely turned against the habits and customs that do not educate; [the mother who is hitting her daughter’s] approach is only based on torture” (GB, GaMam, WFG).

Describing the psychological effects of corporal punishments, a male focus group member said,

What this lady did by hitting her daughter for her bad temper towards her grandmother is not a good thing. Because she will have destabilized the child’s mind by her act and because the child will always be invaded by fear when she is near her grandmother. (GB, Sint, MFG)

Take the exchange in this men’s focus group touches on physical and psychological harm:

A4: We hear that children should not be bullied, let alone punished. To educate a child requires establishing an interactive communication with him to inculcate wise attitudes. And the child also enjoys rights in the same way as the others.

....

A4: It has been said that when a child makes a mistake, it is not necessary to subject him to corporal punishment that may cause injury. He can be punished

without going overboard to avoid injury. But the best thing is to give him wise words and reminders.

....

A1: On the other hand, if the child is subjected to corporal punishment, then his mind may be destabilized afterwards. The child will eventually develop a fear in front of his mother or there will be a lack of closeness between him and his mother. These are the consequences of scaring children. (GB, Sint, MFG)

A female focus group member gave a social reason:

Choosing a gentle educational approach to touch her sensitivities will lead her to adopt a wise attitude. In this way, the mother will have helped her daughter to be able to live respectfully with the people in the house and the neighborhood from now on. (GB, Sint, WFG)

A male focus group member suggested alternatives to hitting the daughter:

If the mother is unable to correct her daughter's behavior by talking to her, she can find another person close to her who can lecture her daughter to sober her up. And if the girl persists, the mother can alert a group of adults to sensitize the girl to change her attitude. But if despite all these interventions the girl does not change, then she should know that her name will be sullied in the village. (GB, GaMam, MFG)

The few that said that “some in the community” might support the mother hitting her daughter gave no reasons for continuing this practice. All the respondents in this study argued accurately for the abandonment of corporal punishment--along multiple dimensions.

Child Marriage

Of all of the harmful practices, focus group participants and interviewees gave the most extensive reasoning for abandoning child marriage, citing physical risks of early pregnancy, the educational loss from withdrawing the girl from school, and limiting her capabilities as an individual and as a member of her family and community. Recall that a father is considering marrying his 14 year-old daughter and focus group members are asked if he should do that. Every focus group (and individual interviewees who addressed child marriage) had accurate information. Two members of focus groups said that if the daughter did not stay in school, she should be married.

On physical risks, respondents were clear and accurate. For example, a community leader said,

But as Tostan taught so well: a girl can only be married when she reaches the generally accepted age requirement. Thus, when she becomes pregnant, she will be able to give birth without any major difficulty by vaginal delivery. On the other

hand, if my daughter was married too young, I fear that she would lose her life and her baby during the delivery. (GB, Maf, leader)

Another woman said,

People who have seen that the girl is still small should advise the mother. If the girl joins the bridal chamber after the wedding with her immature age and underdeveloped body, then she runs a great risk to her health. Or even death and her mother will be overwhelmed by grief. (GB, Cut, WFG)

Others talked about the girl's potential as a human being as well as the risks. A woman said, "For me, marrying a girl at this age is not a good thing, because the spirit of the girl reaches fullness only from twenty and more; there are real risks and difficulties" (GB, Sint, WFG).

Others talked about the physical complications of early pregnancy, the loss of the girl's potential as a human being, especially through terminating her education. As one leader said, "Giving a girl unfit for marriage by forcing her to marry is akin to interrupting the life of a human person" (GB, Maf, leader). Yet another female focus group member said, combining multiple losses:

If her parents marry her at 14, then they will have broken her whole dream of becoming someone. We, because we did not learn in school, there was no opposition to the custom. However, today the school is increasingly asserting the strength of the acquired knowledge. A pregnancy at fourteen years old foretells complications at the time of the delivery: and that would be an unheard-of loss because they will have prevented her from studying and will have sacrificed her life. (GB, Sint, WFG)

Several noted the advantages of keeping the daughter in school, especially to her family. One woman said:

You see that your daughter is studying, so we have never been to school, so let our children continue their education. If our children study, they will be able to benefit later on from the knowledge that school offers them in order to support their children and us grandparents too. (GB, Sint, WFG)

A male focus group member also talked about how the father's daughter's education benefit him too:

If the father no longer gives his daughter away in marriage and is determined to let her continue her education, it is possible that his attitude will pay off beyond his expectations. Encouraging his daughter to go to school may open up unexpected opportunities for her later on that will benefit her. And he might think that if he had given his daughter away in marriage, he would never have gained such value from his daughter. (GB, Maf, MFG)

Another female focus group member echoed this educational benefit:

In fact, you can have a daughter, but she does not belong to you alone. Because when she succeeds, her usefulness will also be beneficial to others, so let your daughter study. Nobody knows today from whom the success will come; the boy and the girl are on the same foot. You can expect success from the boy, but it will also come from your daughter, especially since both have the same rights. (GB, GaMam, WFG)

In addition to the woman just quoted, a few men linked the daughter's right to an education with the right to marry someone of her choice. A leader similarly said:

Previously, our children were abused because the father gave his daughter to so-and-so to marry her off willingly or by force. Nowadays, the girl only marries the man she loves. Moreover, they are no longer given in marriage at the age of fourteen because they are vulnerable at that age. Therefore, they are left to study at school so that they can grow and find their happiness. This is why when the head of the household wants to force his daughter into marriage, the wife refuses, since women have now assimilated the teachings received from Tostan. What was once valid is no longer valid today. The girl and the young man talk to each other first, and if they love each other and are willing, then they can get married when the girl is twenty. I have a fifteen year old daughter who is not married because she is currently studying. And I can say that we owe all this new awareness to Tostan. (GB, Cut, leader)

Another male focus group member said that child marriage is a crime:

A fourteen year-old girl should not be given in marriage. It is a crime to violate the girl's rights. Since the girl was still studying, he had to let her continue her studies. Otherwise, if the case goes to court, he will be arrested and may even end up in jail. (GB, GaMam, MFG)

In sum, the reasons given across focus groups and interviews supports the CMC's claims that child marriage has greatly decreased. Many of the reasons for abandonment included multidimensional harms--including girls' rights to education, to health, to marry someone of one's choice and to reach one's capacities as a human being.

Female Genital Cutting

We have included all the misunderstandings surrounding FGC because they are important as background in understanding the deeply entrenched nature of this practice. These comments also enhance the trustworthiness of the sample, as members felt free to express their ideas both supporting or not supporting abandonment. Recall that the focus groups were asked to say if a mother should cut her daughter.

Each focus group had members who could accurately describe the dangers of FGC--physical, psychological, and social.

One woman said that if the mother cut her daughter, "she may lose a lot of blood during the operation; and that is an unnecessary risk" (GB, GaMam, WFG). Yet another talked about infection as "the cutter uses the same knife for all her candidates, while some of

them may have a transmissible disease” (GB, GaMam, WFG). And another said that the cut daughter “may face constraining difficulties during childbirth” (GB GaMam, WFG).

One woman discussed both the physical danger and the psychological trauma:

[Cutting her daughter] could have led to a hemorrhage that could even lead to death. And since she did not make the mistake of subjecting her daughter to excision, we can deduce that she saved her from the horrors of this practice. (GB, Cut WFG)

The following exchange (GB, Sint, WFG) contains some confusions about FGC:

R5: It is possible that the child has a disease that, if she is cut, will get worse and will end up causing her enormous difficulties. On the other hand, there are other girls for whom, when they are not cut, the disease will not abandon them; and this is quite possible.

Interviewer: Do you think that if a girl is cut that it can cause complications?

R6: There are some for whom this practice causes difficulties.

R6 : There are sickly girls who, if they are cut, will never, ever recover. On the other hand, there are some who, if they are cut, are really fulfilled.

R5: It may be that the girl is in a bad way because of her innumerable tortuous outings [perhaps a reference to sexual promiscuity or mental health issues] and will only keep calm when she is cut. It is also possible that the girl's sickliness will only be resolved when she is excised.

R7: There are some girls who, when subjected to cutting, will not be restored.

One participant in this same group noted the dangers: “The reason the mother refuses to cut her daughter is because she would like to spare her daughter from certain diseases related to the practice itself” (GB, Sint, WFG).

A few members in the focus groups supported the practice. One man said, “If she is old enough to be cut, I don't see the problem since it is an inherited tradition; and it is said that even religion does not forbid this practice” (GB, GaMam, MFG). In another group, several women supported the mother's decision to cut her daughter: “Since the mother has decided to subject her daughter to cutting, she enjoys this right since it is a practice that she has inherited” (GB, Sint, WFG). And another woman from this same group said, “As far as her daughter is concerned, in my opinion FGC is a worthy and beneficial act for her. Because one can only follow the customs and traditions left to us by our elders” (GB, Sint, WFG).

In the following exchange from that community's women's focus group, note that, in addition to tradition, ethnicity is central to their commitment to the practice:

R6: This custom pre-exists our birth.

R6: By choice or by force, we must submit to tradition, at least for the Peul people. For the other ethnic groups, I don't know.

R1: If the girl is in good health, the mother could cut her; but if she is sickly, it is up to her to decide whether or not to follow the tradition. However, for us, the practice of excision remains our custom.

R5: In our community, it is said that the girl must be subjected to excision to truly enjoy her femininity and openness. I don't know if this practice is done in other ethnic groups or not. In any case, the girls who are not subjected to this practice in our community are a tiny fraction.

R6: If she does not cut her daughter, people may think that they have joined forces, because the Fulani do not give in easily to innovative ideas.

When the interviewer asks if they have heard about the complications related to FGC, one woman said, "We did hear that speech" (GB, Sint, WFG).

Interestingly, two of the members of this group said that the mother could not cut her daughter without support from the community: "If the woman gets up without consulting her husband or the people in the community to cut, she could not do it. Because she is not in tune with the members of the house" (GB, Sint, WGF).

In other focus groups, members brought up the illegality of FGC: "I believe that if the girl is subjected to excision, people will have nothing to reproach [the mother who cuts her daughter] for--as long as the State is not informed. But if informed, she will be arrested and imprisoned (GB, GaMam, MFG). Note how the logic develops in the following exchange:

R5: The mother would think that the people who came to her house were against this practice because they showed her their disapproval. But it is not these people who no longer want this practice, but the state itself that has prohibited it and criminalized it. Yet it is a custom that we have inherited, but if its practice has been abolished, then it becomes punishable as a crime. So, it would be better if the mother would join the position of the people of her community by reconsidering her decision.

R3: If she wants to go ahead with her daughter's excision, people may lecture her that she risks bringing problems to the whole village. Because the mother cannot make this decision alone. If she pursues her desire alone and the problem breaks out, the entire village will be affected, including the cutter.

Interviewer: What would cause her to withdraw from cutting?

R?: It would be the people of the village who convinced her to withdraw, but if it were up to the cutter, she would have done so already. But the people understood the devastation caused by this practice and came to her side to dissuade her. As a result, she withdrew because of the pressure exerted on her by members of her community. (GB, GaMam, MFG)

The pressure from the community surfaced in another focus group, along with the recognition that the practice must be hidden:

The members of the CMC have banned excision throughout the village. Even if it has to be done, it is done in absolute anonymity, without attracting attention, even though it is a forbidden practice. (GB, Cut, leader)

Those who choose not to cut will face reactions without community support:

Her companions will recognize her attachment to the sacredness of our culture. If she has to be the only person to break a custom, it will be heavy to bear. Even if it is two people, it requires consultation and agreement first. But one person cannot bend a belief, that is senseless. (GB, Sint, WFG)

The two other women's focus groups were unequivocal in their commitment to help the mother not cut her daughter. They stated that they should not cut her daughter "because it has become formally prohibited and because it has harmful health effects. ... In the past we didn't understand, but now we understand the harm we are doing to our girls" (GB, Cut, WFG.)

And men in another focus group also agreed:

Cutting the girl ... I don't see the point of it since it is an abandoned practice that has become forbidden nowadays. If it was in the old days, it could not be hindered, but today it is totally banned from our customs. Because it is a practice that involves complications. (GB, GaMam, MFG)

The CMC did not force people to abandon these practices. They only made the community aware until they realized that this is a sadly obvious reality. And the communities joined them; and I know what I am saying, responsibly. (GB, GaMam, MFG)

Two aspects of the nonparticipants' discussions stand out: the lingering belief in the practice as central to ethnicity on the part of one woman's focus group and the assertiveness of most of the men that the practice is abandoned or declining.

The freedom with which the two women discussed their belief in FGC also affirmed that the interviews were deemed a safe place to answer questions honestly.

For all three practices, CMCs, community leaders and nonparticipant focus group members said that these harmful practices were entrenched in the communities before Tostan's program began. The CMCs were confident that the practices were, if not abandoned, decreasing and, with a few exceptions, the nonparticipating community leaders and members of all but one focus group confirmed this claim. Most importantly, those not in the classes or on the CMCs could give reasons why they thought abandonment was in their own best interest and in the interest of their families and communities.

Theme 7: Partnerships with Local Leaders and Public Officials

The interviewers did not ask questions about working with local leaders, so the descriptions of those interactions are lacking. One community leader who was interviewed was not involved much with Tostan but saw its beneficial effects; another discussed a gathering organized by Tostan but it was unclear how the CMC participated in organizing it. As noted below, one community leader's interview did give evidence of working collaboratively on various projects.

The CMCs mainly discussed their efforts to bring members of their own communities on board, which was effortful as they all said there was resistance to the Tostan program from within the community (see next theme). This required sustained efforts, visible to all throughout the community. They modeled actions that created a more healthful environment. As one CMC member said:

At the beginning of the Tostan school, some people were not very convinced, but thanks to our actions of cleanliness and many other achievements, people have realized that this program is a good thing. That's why many people have joined the movement, thanks to the hygiene and cleanliness actions (GB, Sint, CMC).

A community leader confirmed that it was difficult to get the people in his community to be involved:

In the past we lived, but we lacked something because despite all our efforts it was like pounding in an empty mortar. If you have to expect to grind with only one person, you will get tired of it. But if there are two or even three people pounding, the grain will be ground quickly. It is in the same way that I have been supported in my village. I am not talking about politics; I am only testifying to the deepest part of me because I have gone beyond the political framework. (GB, Maf, leader)

Theme 8: Resistance Strategies: Dialogue, Nonjudgmental Information Sharing, Hard Work

All CMCs reported some resistance, mostly within their communities, at the beginning of the program and said they tried to use dialogue to persuade and convince (but not coerce) community members who resist.

The CMCs reported that the resistance was overcome through hard work, both in taking actions to clean the environment and in raising awareness about healthful practices that would increase community well-being.

Their outreach, then, involved physical work, as well as sharing information. Take, for example, what a CMC member said about trying to get through to resistant neighbors:

You could see people you didn't even talk to, you didn't really connect with them, but you went out of your way to sweep up their unsanitary space and take the garbage away. We didn't have that kind of behavior before the program came along. So on clean-up days, we would sweep up to our neighbor's front door, with whom we were not on speaking terms, and who had little regard for the act we were doing. (GB, Cut, CMC)

That claim was widely supported. For example, in almost all focus groups one can find statements such as this: "We can say that these [Tostan] learnings are very important, since any space that was unsanitary has been cleaned up and made clean thanks to the influence of these classes" (GB, Cut, WFG).

Misinformation about Tostan affected early participation. About the misinformation, one woman in a non-participant focus group said that, for example, people said that "Tostan's teachings were an attack on religious faith. In other words: that girls should not be circumcised and that prayer would be forbidden" (GB, Sint, WFG). Another from her focus group said,

I am not a participant, but I was hearing a lot of talk that Tostan's actions are not healthy which is why many would not attend their classes. However, we have now realized that things are different from the rumors that were spread. Because our village used to be overrun by dirtiness, but it has become clean and tidy now. (GB, Sint, WFG)

And yet another from the same focus group said,

In addition, many people treated the CMC with contempt at the beginning for this program, but they finally joined the ranks of the participants. So these people appreciated the work that was being done in front of them; they were motivated to join us in the work. This resulted in a feeling of satisfaction for the whole village. Thus Tostan has contributed by offering us original teachings, healthier attitudes towards ourselves and our fellow men. (GB, Sint, WFG)

The men from this community also reported resistance. One man said,

It seems that people had heard unfavorable reports about Tostan long before it was established in the village. However, they later expressed their regret at having initially refused to participate in the program when they saw the accomplishments made. Considering all the communities that have welcomed the Tostan program, they have been enriched by the progress recorded and the know-how acquired. And the villages that declined the program have bitterly regretted their refusal since they have seen the achievements: cordial understanding acquired within these communities and the enterprises set up with ... agricultural projects whose harvests generate profits that are deposited in the banks. Or [they have seen] repayable loans granted to needy people to make their activities bear fruit without any constraint. All these achievements come from Tostan. (GB, Sint, MFG)

And another man explained how he handled resistance:

It is because I went to the center and saw the finesse [skillfulness] and the know-how that Tostan instills in the learners [that I could support the CMC]. Then I went and found the one who despised Tostan by gradually getting him to understand. So I asked him if he had previously reached this threshold of finesse [skillfulness]: he replied with a negative. And so I advised him to join the school because it helps our conscience to see more clearly by the light of knowledge. He said to me, 'How do I get into the school?' So I advised him to see a CMC member to express his desire to join. (GB, MFG, Sint)

And a man from another community echoed what others said:

We heard that if Tostan set foot in our village, first of all, our girls will no longer be subjected to excision and that whoever breaks this law and is caught by Tostan, it is in prison that he will die. As for Tostan's coming here, we were frightened that it would turn into a nightmare because we were disunited. These are the echoes that we heard about the actions of Tostan. At the beginning of the start-up activities, some of the people participating shied away and gave up, but this concerned few people because there were not many. ... Then we realized that Tostan was not as it had been described. Tostan's action brings about the strengthening of fraternity whose links were severed. In all its actions, Tostan advocates for positive values of progress and encourages us to share them. (MFG, Cut, GB)

Limitations

Although the interviews and focus groups contained rich descriptions of program's effects on the lives of those who directly participated, witnessed activities, or changed their own behavior, it was difficult to assess the CMCs' claims about their activities in their adopted communities and in some cases within the communities themselves because data was limited. Still, the explanations given provide an in-depth look at the thinking behind newly abandoned harmful practices and new healthy ones.

Insights from the Interviews/Focus Groups for Understanding Quantitative Data

The qualitative results reinforce the survey results. All communities noted that the prevalence of harmful practices was high at the onset of the program. In the qualitative data, there was indication that some members of these communities are still practicing, but they are not doing so publicly or with a celebration. Almost all interviewees and focus group participants thought that the practice had been abandoned or had rapidly decreased. The survey results show similar results; namely, a reversal in attitudes: at baseline, 80% of survey respondents said that their family members would approve of FGC, 78% of child marriage and 59% of corporal punishment. At endline, those changed significantly, to 5% approval of FGC, 6% of child marriage and 6% of corporal punishment. The respondents who said they would intervene in these harmful practices also

increased significantly, from 6% to 66% for FGC, from 6% to 63% for child marriage and from 9% to 63% for corporal punishment.

Interviewees and focus group participants claimed repeatedly that women participated in decision making and in the private and public sphere in the community. The survey results confirm this expanded role for women; the results showed that women expressing their ideas at community meetings increased from 34% to 93% of participants and to 90% of adopted learners. Making joint decisions about birth spacing and sending children to school had similar significant increases.

The CMCs report their activities to MERL at the end of the program. They reported a significant number of activities around cleaning the village (e.g., 260 environmental activities and monthly village cleaning activity in each of the 40 villages) and that is reflected in the qualitative data: frequent mentions and detailed descriptions of new cleanliness and hygiene efforts. The lack of activities reported around governance (e.g., birth registration) and health (e.g., vaccination) mirrors the lack of mentions and descriptions in the qualitative data about their importance.