

## Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme (CEP)

### Organisation

Tostan

### Country

Current implementation in Senegal, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania and The Gambia. Previously also implemented in Burkina Faso and Somalia.

### Length of programme

Three years

### Supported by

Tostan has a wide range of institutional, private and individual supporters, and works with a number of partners including local government, and local, national and regional NGOs. At the core of Tostan's model is its partnership with Community Management Committees, local community-based organisations created and trained during the Community Empowerment Programme.

### Project summary

Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme (CEP) is a 30-month participant-centred human rights education programme. Implemented primarily in remote regions, it involves regular class sessions with adults and adolescents that introduce new information through a structured process of shared inquiry.

Class sessions are offered in African languages and are facilitated by trained and knowledgeable local staff. They draw on and honour existing positive cultural practices and local knowledge – such as songs, dance, plays and poetry – to engage participants, and to reinforce and contextualise new information. Content on human rights, democracy, problem solving, project management, health and hygiene, and literacy and numeracy is presented holistically and encourages participants to reflect on their own experiences.

In addition to the classes, Tostan establishes and trains a Community Management Committee (CMC), which ensures the sustainability of all development activities and facilitates community-led outreach strategies that engage programme participants in their own and neighbouring communities.

The CEP works to:

1. Encourage dialogue and deliberation among community members about the assumptions and beliefs that hold social norms in place within communities;

2. Facilitate processes through which community members can define and solve community problems, and design, undertake, evaluate and sustain new actions that they believe will help them reach personal and community goals;
  3. Encourage outreach activities whereby class participants and CMC members tap into existing social connections to create ever-widening networks for resource sharing and positive social norm change.
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## **What are the anticipated outcomes as identified in the *Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change?**

- Families, communities and young people are increasingly aware of the harmful impact of child marriage and alternatives available.
  - Families, communities and young people value alternative options to child marriage.
  - Families and communities prefer not to marry girls as children.
  - Men prefer not to marry girls who are still children.
  - Increased use of media to inform and support norm change to end child marriage.
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## **What are the key activities of the project?**

### **Human Rights Education**

In each community, two classes of 25 to 30 participants – one for adults and one for adolescents – meet three times per week for the duration of the programme. By holding separate classes for the two groups, Tostan ensure that both younger and older community members can participate and contribute comfortably in the classroom while gaining the tools and confidence to actively apply what they learn in their community.

The first sessions of the CEP ask participants to create a shared vision for the future of their community. This vision serves as the basis for exploring the implications and meanings of human rights, notably the human rights to survival, to education, to be free from all forms of violence, to marry the person of one's choice, as well as children's rights. In line with the programme's focus on community wellbeing, participants not only learn that they have these rights, but also about the responsibilities that they – men, women and children – have to ensure that the rights of every member of the community are respected. For example, during the session on the right to education, participants discuss the importance of girls' education, the role and responsibilities of parents in ensuring their children's education, and strategies for speaking out if they feel this right is not being respected.

The roles and responsibilities discussed in these sessions become concrete once participants begin applying the critical thinking and research skills learned during sessions on problem solving to issues in their own communities, for example, the health implications of child marriage and early pregnancy. Tostan's approach is participant-centred and not issue-driven, and so the precise content of classes depends on the participants' priorities. However, for issues that often arise in classes, such as child marriage, Tostan has prepared standardized information to present at critical junctures in the curriculum when participants express interest.

Having reimagined their social situations and relations to others, participants who have gone through the CEP are empowered to organise, speak out and take action to create their own pathways to deal with the specific factors in their communities that are hindering the total abandonment of issues such as child marriage or female genital cutting (FGC).

## Community Management Committees (CMCs)

CMCs are made up of 17 democratically-selected community members, 9 of whom must be women. Through these community meetings, Tostan seeks to ensure a balance in membership between those who already hold influence and those who have been traditionally marginalized, such as women and adolescents.

CMCs are trained in the management skills necessary to implement development projects. Since 2010, training has included the Child Protection Module, which helps to build consensus around human rights and children's rights, and to produce strategies for how the community can work together to address norms and practices that threaten their children's healthy development, including child marriage.

Following this training, CMCs establish Commissions for Child Protection, which lead these community-wide efforts and intervene directly in cases of child abuse.

## Social Mobilisation

In order to effect social change, individuals and communities must engage the diverse members of their large and complex social networks – men, women, parents, leaders and government – in open dialogue around the issues they face. Otherwise, any one individual or group within that network will be unlikely to adopt a new behaviour on their own, as others will be unaware of, surprised by, and often offended by the change if not first consulted.

Tostan engages these social networks in the education process through a social mobilisation strategy called *Organised Diffusion* whereby participants “adopt” learning partners and share programme topics with friends and family members and with the community at large. The community itself then “adopts” surrounding communities and family members in the diaspora. This sharing of information on topics such as girls' rights to education and the risks of early pregnancy is reinforced through awareness-raising activities, such as peaceful marches against child marriage and violence against women, and inter-village meetings where community members can discuss solutions to common problems. CMCs create social mobilisation teams of particularly dynamic community members who are trained by Tostan and visit neighbouring and intermarrying villages to discuss human rights-focused themes. Radio programmes broadcast in local languages disseminate educational information once a week in regions where Tostan implements its programme. These shows inform listeners of accomplishments and social mobilisation activities happening in their country, and generate further discussions in communities.

The dialogue and deliberation facilitated by these activities has brought about regional, national and even international consensus among interconnected social networks about the need to respect human rights. It has mobilised families and communities to choose to abandon child marriage, as highlighted during public declarations. News of these declarations, and the participation of non-declaring communities at these events, facilitate the flow of information through the broader social network and reinforce the movement for abandonment. The act of declaring also adds gravity to the communities' decision and fortifies their engagement to ensure adherence to it.

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## Has the project been evaluated?

Tostan's Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) department collects data on class participation, CMC efforts, social mobilisation, as well as indicators of governance, health, education, environment and economic growth (GESEE). Since all of these domains are interrelated and play a part in the wellbeing of community members, GESEE indicators help to ensure a holistic approach to monitoring.

Since 1997, through 97 public declarations, 7717 communities in Senegal, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali,

Mauritania, Somalia, Burkina Faso and The Gambia have declared their abandonment of child marriage along with other harmful practices such as FGC.

In 2016, Tostan's MERL department conducted a mid-term evaluation of the CEP's current implementation cycle in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Mauritania, finding:

- An increase in the percentage of participants who knew their human rights: from 9% to 77% in Guinea, 8% to 81% in Guinea-Bissau, 20% to 63% in Mali, and 14% to 85% in Mauritania;
- The number of participants in Tostan villages who could name at least two harmful consequences of child marriage was much higher than in respective control villages: 89% in Guinea, 86% in Guinea-Bissau, 90% in Mali and 89% in Mauritania, as opposed to 46%, 67%, 37% and 31%.
- An increase in the percentage of community members who felt that it would be unreasonable to stop sending a girl to school, at any age: from 73% to 85% in Guinea, 19% to 53% in Guinea-Bissau, 60% to 78% in Mali, 53% to 67% in Mauritania;
- An increase in shared parent decision-making, as opposed to one parent alone, as to whether children would be given away for marriage: from 28% to 51% in Guinea, 5% to 60% in Guinea-Bissau, 3% to 29% in Mali, 27% to 57% in Mauritania.

To see infographics representing these, and other, key results [click here](#).

A [2013 report](#) by the International Center for Research on Women and *Girls Not Brides* cites Tostan's CEP as a promising programme for the abandonment of child marriage.

To access the latest evaluations and research regarding Tostan's work [click here](#).

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## What have been the challenges in implementing the project and how were they overcome?

- The addition of information on women's rights during the CEP, although critical for sessions on health, caused backlash and distrust from men who felt excluded from these discussions, and led to the closing of several classes. The module was rewritten to include men's rights as well, and this new inclusive approach focusing on human rights with contextualised and specific information on their applicability to men, women and children led men to become fully engaged in the programme.
- Tostan had similar problems when running classes with only adult or adolescent participants. In communities where only young people participated, parents reacted negatively when their children contrasted their actions with the need to protect children's rights. In communities with only adult participants, girls were not exposed to the same content and discussions around FGC, and continued to support cutting. Tostan now runs two classes – one for each group – in each community where the CEP is implemented.
- Implementation of a shorter version of the CEP without its literacy component frustrated participants who desired more practical skills to better achieve the goals they defined during sessions. Tostan subsequently made a commitment to deliver the full three-year programme in every community.
- Social action for change, undertaken by participants in line with their vision for their communities, has sometimes been hindered by wider societal norms and beliefs. For example, local imam and village chief Demba Diawara realised that a decision by one community to abandon FGC would not be sustainable without abandonment in neighbouring and intermarrying communities. With his counsel, and tireless work visiting 347 communities to speak to them about the negative health consequences of FGC, Tostan developed its Organised Diffusion strategy.

## What factors were important in the success of the project?

### Community ownership is key

Tostan treats communities' own vision for their future as the reference point in class sessions spanning human rights, health, project management and literacy. Coming to discussions around child marriage through this organic process means that instead of being presented with abstract messages, participants are themselves making and expressing the links between the harms of this practice and how it hinders community wellbeing and respect for human rights. This ownership has been key for the acceptance of these ideas by the broader community and the process leading to a public declaration.

### Engage religious leaders

Tostan engages religious leaders in the social norm change process through membership in CMCs, and involvement in social mobilisation activities. To date, religious leaders have participated in sharing seminars on Islam, wellbeing and human rights. In this way, Tostan undertakes the deeply important work of discussing the values and beliefs that people hold. Through these activities, many religious leaders have come to appreciate the harmony between their religion and human rights, particularly the human right to be free from all forms of violence, and the human rights to health, education, to express oneself and have a voice, and to marry the person of one's choice.

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## What pieces of advice would you give other civil society organisations considering implementing a similar project?

1. **Think holistically and positively**, and realise that you should act as the community's partner in development. No matter the hardships they face, all communities have strengths and expertise that will serve them well in reaching their own goals.
  2. **Always act with respect**, no matter the subject in question. For example, Tostan never uses negative or shocking language – “eradicating” or “fighting against” child marriage – because we have found that fighting against tradition counters efforts toward actual abandonment. Tostan always uses words such as ‘abandoning’ child marriage in favour of the health of girls in their communities.
  3. **Work to understand the social dynamics** and realities in the context you are working in. While unpacking personal beliefs and limited options can be discouraging, dealing with these difficult questions is critical in bringing about social change to enhance wellbeing.
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Find out more about the work [Tostan](#) is doing by visiting their website. To watch a clip on Tostan's work in Mali [click here](#).

Tostan hosts international training courses on its human rights-based approach to community-led development in English and French at the Tostan Training Center in Senegal. To find out more about training content and dates [click here](#).