Tostan is a non-governmental organization (NGO) which focuses on the empowerment of women and girls in The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, and Senegal for the cultural, social, and economic improvement of those in the area. The organization follows the women, culture, and development (WCD) paradigm which was envisioned by Kum-Kum Bhavnani, et. al. Tostan follows this WCD paradigm by empowering the women and girls to improve the lives in their area in ways that do not inhibit or diminish cultural practices or pedagogies.

The Tostan program empowers these women in a variety of avenues for meaningful social change and agency. The educational programs are led by “facilitators” of the same ethnic group as those being taught and speak the same languages; the facilitators also live in the village they are teaching for the 3 years of the program (Tostan). Bhavnani writes that, “A WCD perspective argues that to speak of ‘culture’ simultaneously with development encompasses … the everyday lived experience, practice, ideology, and politics of Third World Women, and thus may provide clearer ideas for a transformative development” (Bhavnani, Pg. 10). This lived experience is done so by the facilitators living with those of the village, getting to know them of a personal level as well on a teacher-student basis. These classes are where, “participants learn to read and write in their local languages, as well as basic math skills” and “draw[s] on modern nonformal education techniques as well as traditional African oral traditions like theater, storytelling, dance, artwork, song, and debate” (Tostan). These educational programs are all part of Community Empowerment Program (CEP) which is aimed at empowering the group to improve their lives in several ways. The programs that are run as part of the CEP are decided by a group known as Community Management Committees (CMC). The CMCs consist of 17 democratically elected members of the community with the minimum of 9 of which are women, creating a majority. This fits into one of the categories descripted in the WCD paradigm, that is programs initiated by the NGO, “have been initiated by women for women” (Bhavnani, Pg. 10). Bhavnani even mentions Tostan in their book as one of 3 prime examples of NGOs that follow the WCD paradigm, most notably their work in their attempt to eradicate female genital mutilation – a topic of which is covered in their education programs.

The WCD paradigm calls for, and Tostan follow through with, the idea of improvement without encroachment or stepping on metaphorical toes. A fantastic example of how they cope with and improve along with globalization while maintaining agency is the Tostan program Solar Power! Project. This project aims to bring sustainable electricity to rural areas by means of solar power. Tostan sponsors women to go to Barefoot College, located just outside of Tilonia, India to, “complete a six-month training program in solar electrical engineering” (Tostan) so they can install sustainable electricity for their selves and their community. Part of Tostan’s educational program is Mobile Phone for Literacy and Development, aimed at teaching the community phone literacy. Results from the program were positive as, “after just four months, 73 percent of the total sample reported being able to read the text messages they receive—up from nine percent at the start of the project” (Tostan). These programs meant to sponsor and empower the people in these areas, the majority of which are women, follow the WCD paradigm as Bhavnani would have it. Bhavnani writes, “My vision of WCD, then, is one where analysis can move flexibly between political economic macrostructures and local discourses and practices” (Bhavnani, Pg. 12). These programs for electrical engineering and phone literacy do not dismiss modernity and globalization but rather embrace it in a way that gives agency to the women spearheading the progress of their community.

Tostan follows the WCD paradigm by empowering the women in these areas to improve their lives in ways that do not inhibit or diminish cultural practices or pedagogies while giving further agency to the women of the areas. Bhavnani mentioned Tostan as an example of an NGO following the WCD paradigm for good reason – it establishes a fantastic balance of empowerment, agency creation, and assisted life improvement of girls and women in the areas affected.

Works Cited

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