

Women's Leadership in Senegal: Pedagogical and Feminist Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The article is based on my experience teaching women's leadership and entrepreneurship in the context of French-speaking Africa. We study three companies founded and managed by women in Senegal ("Femme Auto," "Taxi Sister," and "Sooretul," an e-commerce platform) through pedagogical and feminist approaches that include storytelling, culture, and ethics. Through this inquiry, we explore how students develop critical competencies that enable them to enhance their capacity to rethink issues pertaining to economic justice and inequalities, broaden their knowledge of the world, and become leaders and entrepreneurs sensitive to ethical concerns.

Through the testimonies of the Senegalese women entrepreneurs, we will argue that it is essential to conceive alternate economic rationales, inside and outside academia, that take real life experiences and the consequences of economic policy into consideration. We will also contend that this reconceptualization, which begins in the classroom, can only be achieved by humanizing the acquisition of business and economic principles through an acute understanding of language, culture and history and their effects on people to develop students' critical abilities as well as their senses of empathy.

INTRODUCTION

This study on women's leadership is based on my experience teaching business, economics, and culture in the context of French-speaking Africa. We will focus on three companies that are founded and managed by women in Senegal: Femme Auto, Taxi Sister, and Sooretul. We will specifically explore how students develop critical competencies that enable them to broaden their awareness of others through storytelling, enhance their capacity to rethink ethical issues pertaining to women's leadership and become more empathetic toward gender inequalities.

Achieving gender equality in the West African nation of 17 million people is a daunting project. Women are confronted with major hurdles that include multiple constraints and a lack of access to land, finance, and markets. Although the Senegalese government has ratified in recent decades a convention on the elimination of discrimination against women and a protocol on violence against women, the struggle for parity faces sociological realities embedded in a patriarchal and deeply religious society.

The website "female-rights.com" provides major insights in that regard. Concerning the female literacy rate, two-thirds of adult illiterates in Senegal are women. In the area of the labor force, the rate of participants among women is 28,56% and 61,9% for males. The gender gap is also significant in wages as, on average, men earn 82,9% more than women. Finally, 60% of women suffer from violence ("most of [Senegalese] women believe that a husband has the right to beat his wife if she has neglected her duties"), and 18% of girls below the age of 14 are still victims of

female genital mutilation.¹

The condition of Senegalese women has improved in recent years. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), “female-to-male employment ratio in Senegal increased from 0.46 to 0.60 between 2006 and 2011, and women are getting more education.”² However, Senegal’s patriarchal society still demands that women should care mainly for household duties and children, and many Senegalese women are still denied access to the labor market. From 1990 to 2019, female employment in the Senegalese labor force only increased from 32.92 to 35.12 percent.³

It is in this context of perpetual violation, which also includes polygamy and forced marriages, that the notion of women’s leadership takes on a significant importance for Senegalese women. Our aim is to reflect more deeply on the subject through our experience in the classroom.

WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP IN THE CLASSROOM

We would contend that liberal arts courses provide essential pathways through which students can enhance their reflection about the testimonies of Senegalese women entrepreneurs and conceive, through them, alternate business and economic rationales that consider real-life experiences.

One of the most urgent issues still confronting academia today is the perception that the humanities are unessential in the classroom. The number of graduating humanities majors, including foreign languages, philosophy and history, has been falling in the past decades, while the number of STEM-focused majors nearly quadrupled. Anne Dennon contends that “higher education increasingly prioritizes STEM and business over the humanities.”⁴ This shift calls into question the relevance of language courses and the ramifications of their reduced importance not only in academia but also for the well-being of society.

Researching women’s leadership and entrepreneurship in Senegal through foreign language and culture promotes students’ critical thinking and search for justice. Shifting his attention from purely theoretical issues to the realm of human praxis, French philosopher Jacques Derrida contended in one of his last publications that “the university should remain the ultimate place of critical resistance [and] thus be the place in which nothing is beyond question” (12). This reflection has pedagogical, economic, and political implications as the resistance the philosopher envisioned aimed at opposing “all the powers that limit the democracy to come” (13). In accordance with Derrida, Henry Giroux has called in his writings for a “critical pedagogy” through which students and faculty may respond to the demands of civic engagement. He underscored the necessity to

1 See <https://www.female-rights.com/senegal>.

2 See <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/SEN>.

3 See https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Senegal/Female_labor_force_participation/.

4 Dennon, Anne: “Colleges Cut Liberal Arts Majors Due to Covid 19”, January 13, 2021. See <https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/colleges-cut-liberal-arts-majors-covid-19/>.

“connect the acquisition of theoretical skills to the exercise of social power.”⁵

Exploring women’s leadership in Senegal, one of the poorest and gender-exclusive countries in the world, challenges students’ normative views about business and economics. Research demonstrates how female leaders promote inclusiveness, participation, and the sharing of information. It also reveals how they value the “human” side of individuals, how they are more sociable, cooperative, communicative, inclusive, and “generate high levels of empathy.”⁶ They inspire students and faculty in the humanities to be, in their own way, entrepreneurs. Students in the classroom uncover through their creative works and innovative thinking how reality can be transformed and reconceived.

From this point of view, business and economics students engage in critical reflections pertaining to poverty, inequality, and social justice. According to the University of Nebraska Office of Graduate Studies website, being an entrepreneur means to “think ahead [...] working across disciplines [and] developing transferable skills.”⁷ Therefore, it does not only mean starting a business, generating revenues, or capital gains. It also signifies, via the study of business and economics through worldwide culture, art, literature, ethics, and social sciences, imagining differently and in broader terms, being creative, and identifying new perspectives in a global context. Furthermore, it may also mean being innovative and thinking outside the box to explore issues facing humanity today, such as the environment, socio-economic inequality, violence, and poverty. STEM or business alone cannot examine or resolve world problems because they are intrinsically lacking the cross-cultural, ethical, and humanistic dimensions that only the study of real-life experience in the classroom can provide.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Coming to Clemson University, we transformed one of the two business courses offered in the French curriculum to focus entirely on the French-speaking world outside of France. Students began to study the socio-economic, cultural, societal, and political environments of Maghreb and sub-Saharan countries, among others. It is in this context that we approached issues pertaining to gender and entrepreneurship in these countries. Studying female entrepreneurs in West Africa through narratives, students deepen their knowledge about other cultures, assess the challenges faced by women in the workplace, and learn from stories of empowerment.

For example, *Femme Auto* is the first female garage in Senegal, a country where, as we have seen above, gender norms are being defied, and many women are still denied access to the labor

5 Henry Giroux, “The Attack on Higher education and the Necessity of Critical Pedagogy,” in Sheila L. Macrine, Ed. *Critical Pedagogy in Uncertain Times: Hopes and Possibilities*. New York: Palgrave, 2009, p. 12.

6 See <https://connectamericas.com/content/6-features-define-female-leadership-0>.

7 See <https://www.unl.edu/gradstudies/connections/learn-think-entrepreneur-0>.

market.⁸ Created by Ndeye Coumba MBou, the shop has existed since 2006 and now employs around ten mechanics, half of whom are women. Femme Auto works on the maintenance of diverse companies' and institutions' car fleets in a sector that is predominantly androcentric. According to its founder, a woman mechanic is hardly considered in the profession. MBou's aim in this context was to break boundaries, open the realm of possibilities for women: "Dès le départ, j'ai voulu un garage 100 % féminin pour montrer au monde entier que c'est un métier qui peut être exercé par une femme aussi bien qu'un homme." [I wanted a garage 100% feminine to show the entire world that it is a job for a woman as much as a man].⁹

Significantly, MBou explains how she repeatedly asked for but never received any assistance from her government or local authorities. It is with her own savings that she decided to open her garage shop in the suburbs of Dakar. Since few schools grant diplomas for women in the profession, she has not yet reached the objective of creating an exclusively female-operated business. On the other hand, she has succeeded in initiating a system of gender parity in which women can also be supervisors. Referring to herself, she explains how "la patronne veut que son garage soit un havre de tolérance dans lequel les deux sexes apprennent à travailler dans le respect mutuel" [The female boss wants her garage to be a haven of tolerance in which the two sexes learn to work in mutual respect] (Maillard).

Confronted by prejudices and faced with models and methods that are biased toward the masculine, MBou partakes in the creation of a community that is economically more gender-inclusive. She contradicts, through her actions, the laissez-faire notion that economics should operate outside of human control. From a theoretical and pedagogical standpoint, Julie Nelson, who has published extensively on economics and gender, contends that "the idea that economic systems are inanimate machines [...] has harmful effects."¹⁰ She argues in this respect that her field of study (economics) has been largely analyzed and understood through a logic that is masculine and, therefore, abstract and exclusive, while a feminine approach to the discipline would emphasize practicality and inclusion.

Feminists like Julie Nelson, Amartya Sen and Marilyn Waring challenge the notion that economics is a positive science, contending that the issues economists study and debate result from a belief system that is influenced by various ideological, cultural, or social factors. In this respect, economic research itself is founded on constructed narratives resulting from power relations. Coumba MBou and Nelson offer counter-narratives that undermine male-dominated economic

8 To watch the Femme Auto and Taxi Sister videos, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=e16ukHcFjck&feature=Playlist&p=A151939F787E2A9C&index=0&playnext=1>

9 Maillard, Matteo: "Un garage automobile de femmes démonte les préjugés au Sénégal." *Le Monde*, March 28, 2019. See https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/03/28/un-garage-automobile-de-femmes-demonte-les-prejuges-au-senegal_5442762_3212.html.

10 Julie A. Nelson. *Economics for Humans*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, p. 4

systems that put women at a disadvantage in both Western and non-Western societies. Given the inferior status of women in many societies, they both contend through practice and theory that gender, as well as the social conditioning of citizens, should be taken into account in economic analyses.

Femme Auto's counter-narrative, like the feminist opposition to mainstream economics, has major pedagogical ramifications pertaining to course content and students' understanding of women's leadership. The students have a broader understanding of what it means to be female in Senegal. They learn about the prejudices and inequalities women experience daily. Like French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, MBoup's gender parity system challenges the hypothetical *homo economicus*, which is mainly interested in the accumulation of wealth and the maximization of profit, to support *homo reciprocans* which privileges collective cooperation.

WHAT CAN A WOMAN DO?

Learning from the struggle of female entrepreneurs like Coumba MBoup in Senegal, students ponder how the question raised by Simone de Beauvoir ("What is a woman?") is still relevant today and leads to an additional crucial question associated with women's rights and freedom: "What can a woman do?" The second company we consider, "Taxi Sister," is a female taxi driver organization that epitomizes this question. It exemplifies how Senegalese female entrepreneurs are confronted with prejudice, ostracism, and masculinist views and expectations of women. The Taxi Sister project was started by the Senegalese government in 2007 to encourage female entrepreneurs. Ten women were initially offered the opportunity to obtain a driver's license, and there are today fifteen women taxi drivers in Dakar, a city of four million and fifteen thousand taxi drivers. Through her interview, taxi driver Mabelle Alssafa Gueye attests to the verbal abuse of which she is a victim, but she stresses at the same time the importance of not letting sexism and patriarchal values dictate what women can or cannot do in their careers.

The Taxi Sister project seeks to pull women out of poverty. According to the UN Human Development Index, Senegalese women fall behind men in development indicators. Less than 30 percent of adult women are literate, compared to 50 percent of men, and on average, women earn just over half the income men do.¹¹ As the Taxi Sister video (same as Femme Auto video link above, see footnote 8) demonstrates, the *Direction de l'Entrepreneuriat Féminin* [Department of Women's Entrepreneurship] based in Dakar is taking steps to combat stereotypes and defend women's rights. According to its director, Marème Cisse Thiam, several initiatives, including strategies of development and information sessions, are raising awareness among the population so that female taxi drivers may be respected.

Senegalese women entrepreneurs and workers are considered here in the context of global economics, including the French-speaking world situated in West Africa. During the last decade of the twentieth century, according to Oxfam International, about 1.3 billion people had at their disposal less than a dollar a day to survive; global income increased by an average of 2.5% per year while the actual number of poor people increased by more than 100 million; and the number of people living on less than \$2 a day was on the order of 2.8 billion.

11 See <http://hdr.undp.org/>.

More recent data from 2020 is no less alarming when it comes to gender inequality and lack of women's rights: "The world's 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60 percent of the planet's population [...]. The 22 richest men in the world have more wealth than all the women in Africa [...]. Women and girls put in 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work each day, a contribution to the global economy of at least \$10.8 trillion a year."¹²

In this context, the narratives featuring the courage and determination of women gain a broader significance. They contribute to humanizing economics and putting a human and more gender-focused face on globalization. At the same time, they demystify and deconstruct the discourses of mainstream economists that are only based on scientific and mathematical foundations.

The first two videos, focusing on *Femme Auto* and *Taxi Sister*, enable us to consider the impact the study of women's leadership can have on students majoring in business or economics, among others, by transforming their own narrative imagination. It fosters their critical ability to envision the socio-economic, ethical, and political ramifications of their studies. The two stories also broaden students' awareness so that they become better informed about social inequality worldwide, but also the need for women empowerment and alternative ways of conceiving of entrepreneurship and leadership.

CITIZENSHIP AND EMPATHY

The third video featuring *Sooretul*¹³ also introduces students to alternative economic rationales that consider people's real-life experiences and develop the students' sense of empathy. Launched in 2014, *Sooretul* is a Senegalese start-up devoted to helping women deliver their organic agricultural products to urban consumers. It promotes the work of women living hundreds of miles away from Dakar. According to Awa Caba, a Senegalese woman CEO and co-founder of *Sooretul*, the company advances rural women's economic empowerment through digital and mobile technologies, providing groups of women with new means to market their products such as material support, visibility, and access to an urban clientele. Most of the women working have no access to the technology or sales outlets needed to sell their products.¹⁴

The e-commerce platform also improves the traceability of the commodities, allowing customers to make their purchases online and have them delivered to their homes. The platform brings together more than 15,000 women working in the agricultural sector through a virtual local market. It responds to the demands of urban consumers who seek local, healthy, and quality-controlled products.

Pedagogically, when students learn from *Sooretul*'s mission and engage with the work of women in rural Senegal, they deepen their appreciation for what it means to be a female farmer with limited access to the market. They also measure the disastrous consequences of economic policies solely privileging big businesses and corporations in urban centers and ignoring small

12 See <https://www.oxfam.org/en>.

13 See <https://shop.sooretul.com/en/>.

14 To watch the *Sooretul* video, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmI45CpSFUc>.

entrepreneurs in peripheral areas.

Through the study of Sooterul, students also develop a capacity to listen to other people's stories, along with the burden it carries. According to Cathy Caruth, "our ability to listen to the trauma of others [...] is enabled by our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves."¹⁵ Hearing and learning from these stories implies inhabiting different subject positions and experiencing the stigmas associated with prejudice, poverty, and socio-economic injustice.

Students imagine new paths of understanding other socio-economic realities in different contexts and through empathetic intercession, thus reaching out toward the lives, works, and histories of others. According to Homi K. Bhabha, this ethical and political action "entails the imperative of giving voice to another person, place, or period and setting the stage in their interest and from their perspective."¹⁶ This action alludes to the necessary renewed encounter with and understanding of the other as the foundation of our humanity.

CONCLUSION

Studying the experience of female leaders and entrepreneurs in Senegal challenges and calls into question the pedagogical methods generally used in economics instruction, predominantly taught through mathematics and deprived of human or social consideration. It provides critical paths through which students can explore the works of feminist economists such as Julie Nelson and Marilyn Waring, who foreground the social construction of traditional economics and challenge the masculine-associated methods of its teaching. The Senegalese women's creative initiatives introduce a counter-discourse to normative socio-economic narratives and policies.

Senegalese female leaders shed light on the shortcomings and biases of economic rationales that promote growth at all costs, weaken the equal sharing of resources, and leave answers to the following questions incomplete and unsatisfactory: Who can access the market? For whose benefit? What constitutes economic growth? What does equal sharing among men and women mean, locally and globally? How can we reconcile economic growth with the preservation of the environment?

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