

Complexity of African Women's Empowerment: Case study of "Linguers" from Walo

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Abstract: The article argues the effectiveness of policies regarding African women's empowerment programs. It focuses on social norms barriers, particularly the patriarchy. The paper's main objective is to highlight the people's side of change in the women's empowerment processes. The experimentation was done through the case study of the "Women-Action-Development" organization, from the Walo region in Mauritania. The article used the exploratory research method due to the lack of relevant data on the target population. The comparison between the results of the two distinct leadership styles, presented in the article, showed a significant gap in favor of the leadership that used emotional intelligence in its approach. In fact, a difference was made in both quantitative and qualitative performances. Besides, the case study revealed alarming behaviors among members of the organization, called "Linguers". The analysis of the global result has allowed the formulation of a general hypothesis, which affirmed that traditional feminist leadership has a deficiency in influence capacity to overcome barriers to African women's empowerment. In addition, five specific hypotheses were deducted from the comment on observed behaviors. They are related to the effect of positive emotion on changing attitudes, the attractiveness of intrinsic motivation based on values, the impact of gender discrimination on the mindset of women who are victims of a patriarchal system, and the power of focused communication in social behavioral change. In sum, the article sets the foundation of a feminist leadership that promotes the use of positive psychology variables to ensure African women's empowerment with regard to the particularities of their respective social norms.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, Feminist leadership, Linguer of Walo, Patriarchy, Behavioral change.

Digital Object Identifier (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7578842>



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1. Introduction

The issue of women's empowerment is progressively being a central point in the African countries development policies. Still, the vision of public authorities and other key actors of empowerment have not yet been translated into concrete actions. Therefore, scholars support different theses that triggered the expected results, including the patriarchy. Al-Balola & Idrees-Ibrahima (2017) define patriarchy as a mode of social organization in which men are favored over women who are deemed to perform less important roles. These authors confirm the predominance of patriarchal systems in Africa while pointing out the divergence of opinions on its origin. On the one hand, Mianda (2019) reflects the thoughts of those who consider that African societies are founded in patriarchal norms which are characterized by values that discriminate against women. This scholar recognizes the complexity of African women's status that abides by different social norms which vary from societies, geographical positions, and socio-economic configurations. On the other hand, Ndiaye (2008) argues that the large adoption of the patriarchal systems in Africa is the consequence of Islamic and Christian teachings as well as the legacy of a colonial legislation that is not beneficial to women.

In response to such obstacles, women's empowerment strategies often incorporate a transformative behavioral change in their agenda. Melta, Sharma, and Maheshwari (2014) report that change initiatives have in general a clear vision but the setback lies in the lack of relevant information pertaining to the characteristics of the target populations. For these authors, change is a difficult exercise that requires emotional intelligence allowing connection and establishment of a trustful relationship with beneficiaries.

Consequently, how should feminist leadership address the issue of social behavioral changes and overcome barriers to African Women's empowerment? In this paper, the case study of the "Linguers" from the *Walo* region in Mauritania, shows the preliminary steps of a complex empowerment process targeting women who live in a patriarchal society where customs are sacred.

2. Objective

The main objective of the paper is to highlight the importance of people's side of change in women's empowerment initiatives. In pursuing this objective, a particular attention will be paid to the uncertainties related to social behavioral change.

3. Definition of key concepts

- Empowerment: "The ability of women to make strategic decisions about their own lives and to access the resources necessary to ensure their independence and contribute to their well-being and the prosperity of their country" (Benlabbah, 2022).
- Walo: *Etymologically, Walo is a geographical term that designates farming in floodplain areas alongside the Senegal River in Western Africa* (Wikipedia, 2022). The inhabitants of Walo surroundings are called Walo-Walo. This community is mainly composed of members belonging to the Wolof ethnic group. In addition, Walo is the given name of the ancient kingdom ruled by the Walo-Walo community between the 13th and 19th centuries.
- Linguer: It is the translation of the Wolof word "Lingeer" which was a title in the ancient kingdom of Walo. Generally, this title was given to the king's mother, sister, aunt, female

matrilateral cousin or daughter. Also, members of the organization targeted in the current case study carried the name Linguers.

- Feminist leadership: A leadership style that aims to overcome barriers to women's empowerment that have been set by the patriarchy (Ndjebet, 2021).

4. Context of Walo-Walo Women

In the ancient kingdom of Walo (1287-1855), primitive social norms were based on a matrilineal system. This society was organized into clans based on the maternal lineage; these practices continued until the Islamic and western colonial conquests that influenced the transformation of old norms into patriarchal systems (Barry, 1985). Two main periods emphasize the process of social norms transformation in the Walo region. The first period covers the length of the kingdom of Walo from its creation to the date of the colonial conquest. Then follows the period extended from the colonization phase to independence days.

4.1. From 1287 to 1855: Valorization of women's roles

Back in the history of Walo, women performed active roles in the governance of the kingdom as preeminent actors. According to Serbin and Randrianmonjy (2015), women belonging to the ruling family of the Kingdom of Walo had the privilege to acquire economic autonomy and hold senior leadership positions.

At the socio-political setting, women were represented in the sphere of the decision-making process of the kingdom. Some women are listed among the *Brak*¹ (king) with total accountability for power, including commander in chief of the armed forces and signatory of international treaties.

Weichert (2013) reports that the Linguer (Queen) in Walo played the role of political advisor to the *Brak* that allowed her to defend a personal position when it comes to take important decisions involving the kingdom. To some extent, the Linguer could legally and morally represent the Kingdom. For instance, this author states that the Linguer Queen, named Faati Yamar, had signed a treaty with the colonial administration in 1819. This occurred when the ruling *Brak* went abroad for personal reasons. In the same talking, Serbin (2004) narrates the tragedy of "*Talatay Nder*"² which happened on a Tuesday of November 1819, under the authority of the above-mentioned Linguer Queen; when enemy troops surrounded the city of *Nder*, most of the women who were present that day gathered in a large hut and set on grassfire to commit a collective suicide; by doing so, they transmitted to the future generations a message of honor and courage, taking stand rather than choosing captivity and enslavement.

General Faidherbe (1886) went further in the leadership of Walo-Walo Women. He states that "*The chief of the Walo bore the title of Brak; but, about sixty years ago, two princesses of the royal family, Djimbot and then Ndété-Yalla, her sister, seized the power*". Regarding the last Linguer Princess, Serbin and Randrianmonjy (2015) report that she seized power after noticing the inability of the reigning *Brak* to defend the interests of the kingdom against colonial troops. These authors quote the letter that Queen Ndété-Yalla wrote to the governor of Saint-Louis in 1847. She expressed herself in the following

¹ Brak: It is the title given to the king in the kingdom of Walo.

² Talatay Nder: Wolof expression that means "Tuesday of Nder". It symbolizes the collective suicide of Walo-Walo women in the city of Nder which was the capital of the kingdom at that time.

message: "We have not harmed anyone. This country belongs to us and it is up to us to lead it. Saint-Louis belongs to the governor, the kingdom of Cayor belongs to the Damel and the Walo belongs to the Brak. Let each one governs his country as he wants it. »

In the socio-economic setting, Walo-Walo women had equal privileges as men according to their social status. The Linguers were autonomous in the management of the economic domains placed under their authority. In addition, women were well known for their particular interest in leading the organization of social events.

The Linguer Queen was the head of all the women living in the kingdom; she was influential in the handling of the country's business affairs; her span of authority covered several villages; the inhabitants of such localities were bound to cultivate her fields and pay her taxes (Stride and Ifeka, 1971).

The matrilineal mode of organization of the kingdom conferred women the right to inherit land; besides the economic activities, women were the main animators of marriages, baby-showers, circumcision celebrations and *gamou*³ ceremonies, which were renown in the Walo-Walo society (Barry, 1985).

4.2. From 1855 to Present: Deterioration of Women's status

The conquest of the kingdom of Walo marked the dislocation of its settlement and the break out of the social contract. Over time, social norms have been transformed by the influence of Islamic and Western civilizations. Further, the region of the Senegal River Delta was hit by natural disasters that destroyed the socio-economic foundation of the Walo region, particularly the floodplain farming (called Walo). Today, the Walo region is one of the poorest rural zones in Mauritania. Regardless of these conditions, Walo-Walo women attach high interest to the tradition of their ancestors and perpetuate it in their own ways.

When the two riparian countries of the Senegal River gained independence, the inhabitants of Walo found themselves separated between Senegal and Mauritania. To this day, the members of this community share practically the same culture and customs. However, the matrilineal system changed into a radical patriarchy.

Sall and Thioune (2012) transcribe the testimonies of women who describe their perception of gender discrimination in the Walo region as follow:

Here in Walo, the woman must always stay at home and must not, under any circumstances, participate in meetings in which men participate, because women must not speak in front of men. We must inform men of women's decisions because we do not want other women to have more "baraka"⁴ than we do. Here, it is up to men to determine the social success of the woman and the children as long as the woman is docile and obeys to the orders of her husband.

In addition to the patriarchal system, the Walo region experienced severe droughts during the 1970s. Wall (2021) describes the damages of the droughts by quoting an *Atlantic Monthly* article that compares the consequences of the disaster with those of biblical calamities.

³ Gamou: Night dedicated to religious songs and conferences

⁴ Baraka: it is an Arabic word that means blessing.

Bruckmann (2018) argues that the 1970s droughts aggravated poverty in Walo and caused a massive rural exodus to urban areas; in response to this crisis, a cross-border organization was initiated for the creation of two hydroelectric dams (Manantali and Diama). This author mentions that the policy supporting the construction of the dams favored the promotion of irrigated rice cultivation in detriment of floodplain cultivation, which was the brand of the Walo region; unfortunately, the expected results on behavioral change had not been achieved due to the high production costs and the deficiency noted on people's side of change; as a result, there has been a wave of structural emigration affecting both men and women. Emigrants chose to abandon their land in order to seek work elsewhere to financially support the family members left behind.

Indeed, the vision of the political authorities was to achieve food autonomy through irrigated rice cultivation. However, the program of transforming traditional farmers into modern ones has worsened the living conditions of the inhabitants of Walo.

Regarding living conditions in Walo, Cheibani (2020) states that the index of poverty among rural farmers in Mauritania is 64%, this rate makes them the poorest socio-economic group in the country. Therefore, this percentage provides some clues about the deplorable situation of rural people in Mauritania including Walo-Walo women, even though they have water and arable land.

Challenged by the burden of poverty, Walo-Walo women learned to work together to ensure minimum subsistence. In the various Walo villages, women are generally organized through farming cooperatives to exploit fields allocated by male rulers. Vegetable farming is the main economic activity of Walo-Walo women but the transformation of agricultural and fisheries products is a complementary activity. For immigrant women who live in urban areas, domestic and retail work are their main activities. Nowadays, the Walo-Walo community counts increasingly educated women that hold office jobs and even engaging in entrepreneurship.

It is quite certain that the only remaining Walo tradition as per today is the celebration of social events, such as weddings, baby-showers and *gamous* (religious gatherings). Therefore, these events are highly valued to the point of incarnating a divine dimension. Social events represent the umbilical cord linking the glorious past and the critical present of the Walo populations. Women lead the organization and animation of social events. Each woman of the community abides by the ritual of the celebrations when one tour arrives. Even the poorest families are not spared from social pressure. The woman that hosts the ritual generally seeks out help to honor herself, taking out loans to cover expenses is the usual common solution. In most cases, the honor of an entire family is at stake. Thus, solidarity is observed between all members of the extended family. In general, men provide financial support for the huge expenditures.

The atmosphere of the celebrations does not show any sign of poverty. To be prepared for these occasions, women make periodic cuts from their incomes through a traditional saving called *tontine*⁵. All categories of social status participate in this form of saving, no matter the level of poverty. The invitation to the ceremonies is open to relatives, neighbors, onlookers, and others. Giant cooking pots are lined up in the open-air street. The provision in food quantities depends on the unforeseen arrivals. Brand new banknotes are distributed whenever the griots perform poetic songs recalling the glory of ancestors. Therefore, women express generally overwhelming emotions that lead to uncontrolled

⁵ Tontine: It consists of gathering a number of people, generally women, who commit to make periodic and equal money deposit, in order to give randomly the collected amount to one of the members.

dancing under the harmonized rhythm of drums. The nights of the event are usually devoted to delivering gifts to honor the mother of the organizer but she voluntarily redistributes all received gifts to the family members of the married couple and others.

In contrast, the living conditions in the days following the celebrations are worse than regular ones. These days, organizers struggle to solve survival problems and the harassment of eventual creditors. Though, people involved do not express any signs of regret, they rather feel relieved for fulfilling their social duties.

Briefly, the above-described context reflects the characteristics of the target population discussed in the case study related to the empowerment of Walo-Walo women. First of all, the following sections will present the key preliminary steps of the process including the initial project launch under the leadership of the founders and changes occurred after receiving external technical support. Another section will focus on commenting on the main observed behaviors. Finally, hypotheses will be generated in accordance with the research method that is used.

5. Research Methodology

The article adopts an exploratory research method, which consists of generating hypotheses from the analysis of the facts observed among the target population, particularly the management team members of the Women-Action-Development organization.

All data are collected from unstructured interviews related to ordinary exchange activities and group coaching as well as mentoring in leadership and management.

With regard to the lack of sufficient data on the characteristics of the specific target population, the context was completed by the empirical knowledge of the author who naturally observed the behaviors of the community's members over forty years.

6. Major steps of the women's empowerment project launch

The initiation stage of the project for the empowerment of Walo-Walo women had many ramifications that affected the commitment of the founding members. The majority of the target population responded positively to the shared vision but there were some conflicting goals between the leadership and beneficiaries.

6.1. Step 1: Vision and Leadership

On June 7th, 2021, the Mauritanian government officially launched the activities of the second phase of the "Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend Project" (SWEDD) under the sponsorship of the First Lady. This event was the alarming call that inspired the idea of creating the initiative called: "*JIGGEN JEF SUQALIKU*", a Wolof expression which is translated as "Women-Action-Development" (WAD). Four retired women from the Walo-Walo community discussed and set the vision of the initiative. They aimed to help Walo-Walo women benefit from the national empowerment project. At the brainstorming stage, the founding members agreed to create a microfinance institution as a pathway to empower women of their community.

The four founders distinguish themselves from the majority of the target population by their social status. They possessed the following profiles: Retired High School Teacher and Member of the Regional Council of Nouakchott (Capital City), Retired Senior Public Health Technician and Member of the Mauritanian High Social and Economic Council, Retired Customs and Vice-President of the Mauritanian Union of Women Entrepreneurs and Retailers, and finally, Retired Assistant Technical Professor in Health and Former President of the Association of Mauritanian Nurses.

6.2. Step 2: The penetration strategy

At the beginning, the leadership of WAD decided to work directly with women's cooperatives that existed in the different localities of the Walo region in Mauritania. The leadership identified 25 potential cooperatives that could facilitate the cooptation of members.

The recruitment campaign consisted of inviting the representatives of the cooperatives to participate in online meetings via the WhatsApp application. Face-to-face meetings were occasionally held to make decisions that involved women who accepted the vision.

Before implementing the strategy, the founders built a team extended to newly recruited members. That team was composed of 32 members of whom there were 28 new ones. It played the role of a temporary executive board.

6.3. Step 3: Strategy execution

The representatives of the 25 target cooperatives responded positively to the shared vision. After numerous meetings with representatives, the executive board estimated at 2405 the total number of potential members affiliated to women's cooperatives.

The first tensions appeared when the board required a financial contribution for both individual members and cooperatives. This condition provoked a cascade of withdrawals that ended up to seven cooperatives out of the 25 (28%) and 137 women (6% of the total target), including the rest of the board members.

Following the disappointments, a series of meetings were held with women who accepted the financial conditions to discuss the contribution rates. The negotiations started from 1000 MRU (27.74 \$) for the individual contribution, payable once, to 100 MRU (2.77\$) per month during one year, meaning a total share of 1200 MRU (33. 29 \$) per member. In addition to this amount, the participants agreed to set a membership fee of which they convene at 50 MRU (1. 39 \$), making a total individual contribution of 1250 MRU (34. 67 \$) per member. Regarding the cooperatives, the subscription fee was fixed at 500 MRU (13. 87 \$). Some voices claimed to raise additional funds among members on a volunteer basis in order to cover operating expenses needs. In response, 26 members offered each a donation of 1000 MRU (27.74 \$), making a total of 721.24 \$.

After about a year of collecting membership fees and share payments, the board office registered only five women who honored their total individual commitment (34,67 \$), which means a recovery rate of 4% out of the number of members. As for the seven cooperatives, their fees were fully paid.

6.4. Step 4: Mindset of the leadership

The leadership did not expect the disagreement that led to the disengagement of many potential members. The disruption negatively affected the leadership's hope to achieve its vision. The level of motivation was too low for reaching out to new other members. In addition, leaders were unable to maintain the commitment of women who accepted the financial terms. Hence, there was no alternative in sight for reverting the situation.

6.5. Step 5: The opportunity

In mid-May 2022, one of the founding members met with the author of the current article in a demotivating posture. During this meeting, the author had the opportunity to listen to the whole story before offering his help. The only condition was to be given the occasion to speak with the temporary board members in the presence of the representatives of the initial cooperatives. Following the acceptance of the benevolent offering, an extraordinary general assembly was held on June 4th, 2022.

7. Technical support

By chance, the WAD initiative received technical support that reverted the situation. The main expectation from the new collaboration was to rebuild trust between the leadership and potential beneficiaries of the empowerment project. The technical assistance allowed the leadership to intensively resume activities as well as achieving results that were beyond founders' prospects. Along with the success, common behaviors were observed among women as consequences of change uncertainties or stretch goals.

7.1. Rebuilding trust relationship

More than forty women were present at the extraordinary general assembly. The interventions of both opposed parties (board members and dissidents) could be assimilated to affirmative defense rather than an open discussion intended to restore the broken trust. The attitudes of the protagonists allowed the author to get his first impression on the leadership style of the top management team.

7.1.1 Affirmative defense of the executive board

The interventions of the board members are summarized as follow:

- Argumentation justifying the need for Walo-Walo women to be empowered;
- Shared successful experiences that are comparable to the empowerment project;
- Provided arguments to justify why members did not honor their financial commitments. They argued the high cost of living and supported that members were in financial hardship;

7.1.2 Affirmative defense of the dissidents

The women who did not accept the financial obligations defend the following major points:

- Denunciation of the required financial conditions for the effective membership without taking into account their difficult economic situation;

- Shared bad experiences they had with some non-governmental organizations and individuals that have taken money from them without ever honored their promises to finance projects. Therefore, they could not trust any other organizations that asks money for help;
- Expression of availability to join again the initiative if exempted from making financial contributions.

7.1.3 The guest's intervention

A special attention was paid to the guest because of his masculine gender which symbolized the patriarchy and the fact of being the initiator of the meeting. The guest's intervention was structured around the following points:

- Legitimacy: Presented his profile and educational background;
- Vision: Reminded the importance of women's empowerment for current and future generations of the Walo-Walo community;
- Emotional connection: Told a common story that caught both protagonists' attentions. He recalled the collective suicide of their ancestors who chose to honor their descendants instead of being captured and transformed into slaves. The development of this story was interrupted by heads nodding and fingers snapping to magnify participants' contentment;
- Raised awareness: compared the empowerment project with the celebration of social events of which they never hesitated to spend huge amounts of money without getting-off the vicious circle of chronic poverty.

In his conclusion, the guest directly announced the new contribution he thought appropriate for the project with regard to the capabilities of Walo-Walo women. The suggested amount for a share was set at 2 000 MRU (55.48 \$), to be paid individually within one month, instead of the previous amount of 2.77 \$ per month. Despite the fact that the financial conditions were the main cause of the disagreement, there was no objection to the guest's challenge. The participants' comments concerned the one-month period that they considered too short for the mobilization of the amount. They supported their claim by using the coincidence of the fixed deadline with the Muslim's feast of sacrifice as an excuse. Finally, the talks resulted in a consensus of two-month for the persons that were present at the meeting and three months for potential members who did not attend it. In sum, the new financial conditions were unanimously adopted. The deadline for the latest payment was set for August 31st, 2022 at midnight. During this meeting, the participants agreed to set an additional subscription fee of 100 MRU (2.77 \$) and to restrict memberships to individuals only, meaning to abandon the cooperative approach.

The success of the extraordinary general meeting marked the beginning of a new journey for the empowerment initiative. From that date, the guest was accepted as a volunteer consultant with the assignment to provide technical assistance for the next steps of the process.

7.2. The roadmap

After a period of two weeks, the consultant held a meeting with the board members to discuss and adopt the new proposed roadmap.

The approved version of the roadmap included twelve main activities of the Phase I of the WAD development process. They were planned from June 16th to September 30th, 2022. The roadmap

contained, among others, the following activities: drafting the basic policies, defining an organizational structure, elaborating a strategy, organizing a constituent general assembly, and obtain the temporary authorization receipt (Appendix 1).

7.3. Phase I Key Achievements

As of September 30th, 2022, the members who were renamed after "Linguers" achieved all twelve planned activities in time and budget. The major accomplishments include:

- Subscription of 489 members at the deadline date (08/31/2022 at midnight). Each member paid the total share amount of 55.48 \$, considering that the initial share was increased by 67%;
- Organization of the constituent general assembly on September 30th, 2022. The program of this meeting included 18 timed activities that were performed in 03h40 mn while it was planned for four hours (Appendix 2). There were 202 participants who attended the meeting in-person and 22 others joined online;
- The General Assembly adopted the organizational chart, elected the official management team members, and approved the statutes and the code of conducts;
- Mobilization of enough external funds to cover operational expenses. The amount corresponding to the total shares was placed in a particular banking account as well as membership fees;
- Acquisition of the temporary authorization receipt after submission of the required documents. According to Mauritanian law No. 2021/004, the final receipt is obtained within a maximum of 60 days from the date of submission if there is no particular objection.

7.4. Uncertainties

During the four-month period of collaboration, the consultant noted many common behaviors among the Linguers including the following major points:

- Performance in meeting management: The rapid adaptation to the techniques of managing meetings was the first observed *quick win*. The Linguers demonstrated a capacity to comply their behaviors with the rigor in timing. Previously, meetings were not structured or controlled. Also, the adopted decisions were not formalized in writing. From the third meeting under the mentoring of the consultant, the leadership began to improve the quality of handling meetings and gained later a total autonomy in this domain. The successful organization of the constituent general assembly (without the involvement of the consultant on the day of the meeting) may indicate the level ownership of the Linguers to practices in time management.
- Apparent issue of active listening: It was shown on a recurrent basis that the Linguer who was accountable for a given task likely asked redundant questions that were answered at least twice in group meetings or just sought an excuse to distance herself to the assigned responsibility. The same behavior was also observed among women who were contacted by a third person seeking clarification on a given topic that was sufficiently treated in group meetings. Several members

of the board repeatedly reported facing difficulties to convey perceived messages to candidates during mass recruitment meetings.

- Attachment to the tradition: The participation of board members to external social events was non-negotiable. Linguers used to decline involvement in any activity of the WAD initiative as long as one of their relatives organized baby-shower, wedding or mourning ceremonies. Regardless of the importance of a meeting or the task assigned to one Linguer, the priority was always given to social events against any other commitments. For this reason, several meetings were postponed because of dates coinciding with social celebrations.
- Inter-group performance: More than 60% of new members were registered in the last week of the subscription deadline. Those days, board members were overwhelmed. The pressure on board members increased on the last day of closure. The volume of individual subscription varied from persons' affiliations to former cooperatives or villages of origin.

8. Perspectives of the initiative

At the end of Phase I, the board members expressed a regain in confidence and determination to pursue the goal of empowering Walo-Walo women. The month of October was dedicated to the rule of "after-action-review" before engaging in Phase II, which was scheduled to start on November 1st, 2022. The Phase III is the most important and critical stage in which the economic empowerment agenda would be implemented as well as the transformation of social attitudes.

The Phase II covered the period from November 1st to December 31st, 2022. Concerning the financial conditions for this Phase, the individual share remained the same but an amount of 200 MRU (5.5 \$) was added to the membership fee, meaning an increase of 200%. This decision was unanimously taken as an extra charge for late-comers. In the month of October, the subscription desk registered on the waiting list over hundred candidates willing to become Linguers.

The three main objectives of Phase II were to:

- Recruit 2000 new Linguers under the reviewed financial conditions;
- Obtain the official agreement of the WAD initiative;
- Establish branches of the organization in all target locations;

As for Phase III, the starting date was scheduled for January 1st, 2023. This last phase corresponds to the effective operationalization of the activities of the WAD initiative. The main objectives of this phase are:

- Create a microfinance institution authorizing loan and money deposit operations that are open to the public as well as the Linguers;
- Deliver training sessions on financial education and personal development;
- Develop projects and mobilize funding.

The leadership challenges for Phases II and III are:

- Help the top management reach their full potential in leadership and managerial practices;
- Identify potential partners for the microfinance institution;
- Help the Linguers adopt behaviors that are suitable for their empowerment.

9. Discussion

The comparison between the current social status of the Walo-Walo women and the status of their ancestors from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries shows a progressive regression caused by external factors. In the past, the social organization in Walo was based on a matrilineal system that provided women socio-political and socio-economic advantages. Further, Walo inhabitants swapped, willy-nilly, their matrilineal system for a radical patriarchy. However, women are still attached to the glorious past of their ancestors through the tradition of celebrating social events. The mixture of old and new social norms created social beliefs that can be considered either as opportunity or threat to women's empowerment depending on the leadership style one adopts for the transformative change.

Walo-Walo women work hard for their survival but they can spend more than their earnings to satisfy social demands, such as weddings, baby-showers, and others. This tendency to be willing to spend without limit is another obstacle to Linguers' economic empowerment.

In fact, social norms can compromise or facilitate women's empowerment depending on the direct or indirect influence they have on the change process (Gholipour, A. Rahimian, A. Mirzamani, A. & Zehtabi, M., 2010). Under these circumstances, two factors are analyzed below in order to deduct hypotheses for future in-depth research that would confirm the assumptions.

9.1. Group dynamics

This section focuses on the interpretation of observed attitudes that resulted from the interactions between Linguers during the pre-and post-collaboration periods as well as the behaviors observed among different social groups that interacted with the management team members.

Two distinct periods of leadership and performance marked the preliminary stages of Linguers' empowerment process. At the beginning, the majority of the target population expressed a high intention to join the WAD initiative but only 6% of the potential members accepted the financial conditions. Also, only 4% of Linguers honored their commitment for the yearly contribution which was broken into quite small monthly payments. During the second stage, corresponding to the technical support provided by the consultant, the number of members reached 489 in three months compared to 137 members in the first stage which lasted about one year. Paradoxically, all members that registered in the second period fully paid the financial obligations in a shorter time and with a higher amount, the initial share amount that caused the conflict was increased by 67%.

Since the target population remained the same, the change in attitude among potential members is attributed to the influence of the consultant. Also, the variations in the membership numbers by affiliation to former cooperatives and villages are attributed to the interpersonal influence capacities of leaders of the respective social groups. These tendencies are consistent with the group dynamics approach of the social influence network theory. Friedkin and Johnsen (2011) state that individual attitude change within a social group is caused by members' personality traits based on three abilities: influence capacity, interpersonal influence, and the attitude shown in particular circumstances.

Considering that leadership is all about influence (Maxwell, 2007), leaders have the primary role to provoke attitudinal change within a social group. This implies that it is expected from leaders to understand the mindsets of social group members and to be prepared for overcoming behavioral

obstacles. In the case study, the mindsets of the target population were shaped by social norms in the Walo region. Despite the prejudgments of first potential Linguers on the reliability of the empowerment project, the first attempt of WAD founders did not take into consideration their feelings and beliefs. However, the consultant made the difference by expressing empathy to both parties. His approach facilitated women's change in attitude. Therefore, the general hypothesis that derived from the overall results is:

- The deficient performance in African women's empowerment is contingent on the influence capacity of feminist leadership.

The comparison between the influence capacities of the leadership of WAD initiative and the consultant, during the pre- and post- technical support periods, shows that the consultant's leadership style was more likely to influence the attitudes of the target population than the other one. At the extraordinary general assembly, the protagonists were mainly focused on their respective concerns. That predisposition deepened the gap between the two parties and emphasized the existence of tangible obstacles. On the other hand, the consultant focused his communication on the positive aspects by recalling their common beliefs and values. Therefore, he created an emotional and positive connection that blinded the difficult financial conditions which were the source of dissension. Consequently, the following two specific hypotheses are generated from these affirmations:

- 1st hypothesis: The influence capacity is proportional to the capacity of emotional connectivity;
- 2nd hypothesis: Intrinsic motivation based on values is more attractive than extrinsic motivation based on social and/or financial pressure.

9.2. Change management

The main purpose of this section is to provide an explanation to the motive of social behavioral change by discussing the facts observed among the Linguers during their adaptation process to the internal regulations of the WAD initiative.

The idea behind empowerment is to help women get rid of a state of subordination for embracing a state of independence, in other words, to provoke change in women's fixed mindset toward a growth mindset. This challenge involves a behavioral change that is not easy to succeed. Ely (2003) says that most people resist change even if the expected results are in their benefits. According to this author, resistance to change is caused by the fear to deal with uncertainties and risks.

When it comes to change management, the leadership of WAD initiative faced two main challenges. First, the leadership was entitled to persuade the Walo-Walo women to adhere to the vision of empowerment and help them take ownership of the new shared values (Appendix 3). Then, the leadership committed to empower Walo-Walo women, which meant helping the Linguers to adapt to new social behaviors that are aligned with the spirit of economic empowerment. In both cases, women were expected to change their habits.

According to Scheun (2012), organizational change is complex because of the involvement of human factors; it requires the adoption of new behaviors, using new tools, compliance with new processes, and adaptation to new values. This author argues that the difference in personality traits between individuals explain the fact that some people are more likely to embark quickly on change than others who may take longer to commit or completely reject the change vision; even among individuals who approve the idea of change, the level of ownership varies from person to person.

The members of the executive board of WAD initiative were constrained to take new responsibilities and to comply with internal policy as well as working processes. In this context, one of the major identified difficulties was the apparent issue of active listening among the Linguers. The root cause of the lack of active listening is attributable to the effects of patriarchy on Walo-Walo women. Is it worth listening if one's opinion does not count or the person's sacrifices are not valued in a society? If the answer to this question is no, then patriarchal societies are more likely to harm women's senses of listening such as Linguers' case. The specific hypothesis generated from this assumption is:

- 1st hypothesis: In the long term, gender discrimination creates a psychological trauma affecting self-confidence and the sense of listening.

Moreover, the global context of the case study shows that Walo-Walo women continue to give importance to the tradition through the celebration of social events. Although, this tradition evolved toward practices that are not aligned with the norms and standards of economic women's empowerment. However, the belief in ancestral values is a given opportunity to accelerate the transformative social behavioral change if the change agent knows how to connect with the beneficiaries. In such a case, the transformation process would pass through change of perception of target people's beliefs and values. The specific hypothesis deducted from this assumption is:

- 2nd hypothesis: Repetitive communication focused on recalling shared values and positive attitude provokes change in mindset.

10. Conclusion

The case study of the Linguers from the Walo region in Mauritania showed that the empowerment process initiated by the founders of the so named "Women-Action-Development" organization, was more complex than they could imagine. The founders faced obstacles that can be classified into two main categories of sources related to people's side of change. On the one hand, there is the impact of patriarchy and the attachment to ancestral values. On the other hand, there is the influence capacity of the leadership and its ability to manage behavioral change. However, the external technical support allowed the leadership of the organization to overcome major obstacles and achieve outstanding performances within a period of four months. Besides the positive results, some compelling behaviors were observed among the target population. They particularly include a phenomenon concerning group dynamics and the likely loss of self-confidence and active listening that are attributed to the consequences of patriarchal norms on gender discrimination. One general hypothesis and four specific hypotheses were generated from the commented results. The objective of the formulation of hypotheses is to conduct or inspire future in-depth studies that would test the validity of existing theories on the Walo-Walo society or define new theories. The case study shows that the success of African women's empowerment can depend largely on the quality of feminist leadership. The uncertainties related to the particularities of each society as well as the challenges regarding the people's side of change make the process of African women's empowerment more complex. The case study provided the opportunity to experiment a leadership style that uses the variables of positive psychology to achieve better results. In the perspective, the challenge of WAD initiative to recruit 2000 new Linguers in the Phase II, of the preliminary steps of the empowerment process, would certainly provide more inputs about the efficacy of the promoted leadership style.

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Appendix 1: Business Recovery Roadmap⁶

| No | Activities | Comments | Responsible | Schedule |
|----|--|--|-------------|------------------|
| 1 | Designate a meeting reporter | The person is responsible for drafting the report of each meeting until the General Assembly. | | End of October |
| 2 | Designate a permanent place for meetings and specify the frequency of meetings | Bureau meetings are held twice a month. Start time is set at 18:00 | | Early July |
| 3 | Designate a committee accountable for proposing drafts on major policies | The work of this committee is limited to draft statutes and the code of conduct. | | End of July |
| 4 | Appoint a fund-raising committee to cover operating expenses | This committee is in charge of listing potential donors and take necessary step to mobilize funds. | | End of August |
| 5 | Define the legal form of the organization | It consists of choosing the type of organization on the basis of the recommendations made by the consultant | | Mid-August |
| 6 | Elaborate an organizational chart | It consists of submitting a proposal for a structural organization allowing the fluidity of information and efficiency in the work | | End of June |
| 7 | Develop a market penetration strategy including a communication plan | It consists of drafting a strategy to raise awareness among potential members and accelerate the rate of membership. | | End of July |
| 8 | Elaborate a policy for face-to-face and WhatsApp meetings | It consists of drafting a policy that regulates meetings and WhatsApp forums, in order to anticipate risks | | End of June |
| 9 | Designate focal points for each potential branches of the organization | It concerns the internal networking of the organization | | End of July |
| 10 | Organize the Constituent General Assembly | The constituent assembly is required by law | | End of September |
| 11 | Officially elect an official management team and propose members of the Elderly and Disciplinary Council | The general assembly will elect members through an open vote | | End of September |
| 12 | Appoint a commission to follow up the agreement process with the public authorities | This commission is entitled to collect required information and papers as well as submitting the notarized documents. | | End of September |

⁶ The consultant assists the persons and commissions responsible in the performance of the assigned tasks

Appendix 2: Program of the Constituent General Assembly

25 SEPTEMBER 2022 AT HOTEL AZALAI MARHABA

| Timetables | Activities | Responsible |
|-------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| 16:30-17:00 | Welcoming, registration and installation of participants | Chair of the welcome Subcommittee |
| 17:00-17:10 | Presentation of the program and protocol of the assembly agenda | Moderator |
| 17:10-17:15 | Quranic recital | Linguer |
| 17:15-17:30 | Poem recital followed by Bakh (griot poetic song) | Linguer |
| 17:30-17:45 | Presentation of the Walo-Walo Women's Context and the Perspectives of the WAD Initiative | Linguer |
| 17:45-18:15 | Presentation of the statutes and code of conducts drafts | Member of policy committee |
| 18:30-18:40 | Presentation of the geographical locations where are chosen the members of the Elderly and Disciplinary Council | Linguer, managing network |
| 18:40-19:00 | Individual presentation of the nominated members of the Elderly and Disciplinary Council | Linguer managing network |
| 19:00-19:20 | Withdrawal of candidates for the presidency and vice-presidents' election/Deliberation for the approbation of nominees to the Elderly and Discipline Council (EDC) | Moderator/Singer |
| 19:20-19:35 | Break | |
| 19:35-19:50 | Withdrawal and conclave of the appointed EDC members /Presentation of the Linguer's charter commitment followed by Signatures | Moderator |
| 19:50-20:05 | Installation of the members of the Elderly and Disciplinary Council followed by a word from their President | Moderator / President EDC |
| 20:05-20:20 | Presentation of the candidates for the positions of President and the two Vice-Presidents | President EDC |
| 20:20-20:40 | Withdrawal of candidates/ Vote of the general assembly | President EDC |
| 20:40-20:45 | Transmission of the Linguers' charter bearing signatures to the new President-elect/ (Griot song) | President EDC/ Linguer Singer |
| 20:45-20:55 | Speech of the President-elect | President-elect |
| 20:55-21:00 | Presentation of the official top management team | President-elect |
| 21:00 | Closing remark and Family photo | Moderator |

Appendix 3: Linguers' Charter of Commitments

- I pledge to bear the title of Linguer with pride and humility;
- I pledge to abide by all texts and rules of Jiggen Jef Suqaliku Initiative (Women-Action-Development);
- I am committed to embody the values JOM, NGOR and LIGUEY (Sacrifice, Dignity, and Work)
- I pledge to perpetuate a positive image of the WAD Initiative;
- I am committed to adopting new behaviors that will help me achieve the financial autonomy I dreamed about;
- I pledge to express solidarity with all Linguers;
- I am committed to contributing to the development of my community in the limit of my possibilities.