

Unemployment, Women, and Taxis:  
A Study of the Taxi-Sister Program in its Test Phase

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*To the families I made and the homes I found.*

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**ABSTRACT:**

In May of 2007, the Senegalese Ministry for Family and Female Entrepreneurship in collaboration with a private car dealership, Espace-Auto, announced plans for the Taxi-Sister program, which introduced ten women into the taxi driving profession. The first ten women, who hit the streets in September 2007, are considered a test-run for the program, as the Ministry seeks to expand women's roles in Senegalese society and presence in the economic sector. The program is considered to be both an effort to address women's poverty and to establish a feminine presence in professions formerly reserved for men.

This study attempts to describe how the program is structured, how it affects the women participating, and whether or not it can actually be considered an anti-poverty and female empowerment initiative, as it is framed by the Ministry. Additionally, I sought to determine what relationship the Taxi Sisters have with their male counterparts. Through field interviews with officials involved in the program, with taxi sisters, and with male taxi drivers, I attempted to gain insight into the program to answer these questions.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

### **Economic History of Senegal:**

To understand the place Taxi-Sister occupies in Senegalese politics and society it is necessary to first discuss the current sociopolitical and economic climate. In order to discuss current events however, it is important to understand a bit of the economic climate following the end of colonization.

Upon achieving independence in 1960, Senegal was poised as one of the most robust economies in Africa. President Leopold Sedar Senghor pushed the economy towards a regulated, state-controlled system, and throughout the 60s and early 70s Senegal was engaged in a “virtual neo-colonial relationship with France” which received nearly eighty percent of Senegalese exports (Miles-Doan, 1997). In the mid-70s, amidst attempts to diversify the economy away from the suffering mainstay of peanut crops, Senghor increased the presence of state-owned industries.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank both criticized Senegal’s economic structure and supported the idea of restructuring the economy to privatize industries. In December 1979, Prime Minister Abdou Diouf released a Five Year Economic Recovery Plan, which was instituted in 1980 with support from the IMF and World Bank. In 1980 Senegal signed onto a Structural Adjustment Loan with the World Bank, which stipulated the need to “mobilize more resources over the long term to raise

rates of economic growth and living standards, particularly for the poor” (Miles-Doan, 1997).

In 1981 Diouf became acting president under the Senegalese Constitution when Senghor stepped down from power. He implemented his Five Year Plan, which eventually became the structural adjustment policy for which his administration was known. Under this plan public sector funds were cut, which reduced social services, leading to the decline of education and health care throughout the country. Additionally, “cutbacks in government jobs...caused massive unemployment, while unemployment increased in the private sector as well due to import liberalization.” (Miles-Doan, 1997). These problems were accompanied by civil unrest in the capital, reflecting the dismal economic situation.

In 1994 Senegal capitulated to international and regional pressures by signing on to the devaluation of the CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine) franc by fifty percent. The CFA franc is a regional currency, and the devaluation was intended to improve the economies of the West African member states. The devaluation was expected to improve the Senegalese economy by expanding entrepreneurial activity, increasing exports, and increasing tourism within the country. The devaluation did raise tourism and increase exports by one hundred and seventeen percent, but unfortunately it had many negative effects on individuals in the country. The foreign debt doubled and cancelled out previous debt reductions, while prices within the country rose without increases in salary (Miles-Doan, 1997). The World Bank and USAID both regarded the devaluation as a

success, but the social problems under devaluation closely mimicked those from structural adjustment.

The presidential elections in 2000 focused primarily on issues of poverty, as people were angered by the forty years of the ruling Socialist Party and the policy of economic structural adjustment under incumbent President Abdou Diouf. Abdoulaye Wade swept to power during the runoff elections in a region where defeats of incumbents are rare (Vengroff and Magala 2001, 129). Wade promised to address the widespread poverty in Senegal during his first term, and to that end has implemented several programs (Polgreen, 30 November 2007). However, during the campaigns for the 2007 presidential elections, many citizens expressed dissatisfaction with what they viewed as a lack of change in their economic position. Abdoulaye Wade won in primary elections, but discontent continues to plague his administration in their second term.

This November, during the Independent Study Project (ISP) period, riots broke out in Dakar as union workers, students, and street vendors protested issues of unemployment and poverty. There were separate riots based on different government decisions, but both riots centered on the increasingly high cost of living. As the city watched the anger and violence unfold, it became increasingly clear that Wade's administration is struggling to fulfill his campaign promises to improve the economic lives of his people.

### **Feminization of Poverty:**

Internationally:

Globally there has been a feminization of poverty as women are left behind in education and professions are essentially closed off to them. In an address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2005, the Trade Union stated that youth generally face unemployment or work that is “insecure, precarious, intermittent, informal, and even dangerous...the employment prospects of young women job seekers are particularly bleak.” (UNI Global Union, 2005).

The state of feminized poverty globally is perhaps best summarized by the Trade Union report that,  
“550 million people in the world today are classified as the working poor, earning less than USD \$1 per day. Of this figure, 330 million, or 60% are women. In addition, 77.8 million women are unemployed, with the female unemployment rate higher than the male for the world as a whole. Decent jobs need to be created for 400 million women currently filling the ranks of the working poor and the unemployed if the increasing trend of the feminisation of poverty is to be reversed.”

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which works on issues of gender inequality in terms of economics, politics, and healthcare internationally, argues that addressing poverty generally is only feasible through helping women specifically. “Policy supporting women’s economic empowerment— from education to job training to child care to financial literacy to micro-finance and beyond— holds the potential for vast change, and fast change” (UNIFEM, 2007). By this argument, not only is reversing the trend of feminized poverty important to increase gender equality, but also to lessen poverty across all demographics.



Within Senegal:

In Senegal, unemployment is rampant, with estimates varying between forty and fifty percent, placing the country among the top ten highest unemployment rates in the world, alongside countries who have struggled against decades of civil war and instability. Women bear the brunt of the economic burden in Senegal, with incomes barely clearing half of men's (*IRIN News*, 2 November 2007).

During Wade's first term, the World Bank introduced a plan outlining a new strategy to combat poverty, called the Document de Stratégie de Réduction de la Pauvreté (DSRP). Within this document "vulnerable groups" were defined and marked as needing extra attention in terms of economic development. According to the DSRP, vulnerability is "*l'état de dénuement parfois dû à l'absence ou à la faiblesse de revenus et de ressources devant permettre de faire face aux besoins et qui expose l'individu à des risques parfois difficile à supporter*"<sup>1</sup> (DSRP 2002, 35). A revised version of the DSRP specifically notes that women's overexposure to poverty "*crée des conditions de vulnérabilité inversement proportionnelles à leur capacité à se défendre*"<sup>2</sup> (DSRP 2007). The document states "*C'est pour cette raison que la protection des groupes vulnérables*

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<sup>1</sup> The state of destitution sometimes due to the lack of revenues and resources needed to meet one's needs, can expose individuals to dangers, which are often difficult to stand (all quotes are translated by author).

<sup>2</sup> Creates conditions of vulnerability which are inversely proportional to their capacity to defend themselves.

*constitue le troisième pilier de la stratégie.”<sup>3</sup>*

In 2004 the IMF and the International Development Association (IDA) released a study of Senegal’s economic progress and goals for the coming year. The study found that while there are many positive economic indicators and “a marked reduction in poverty over the past ten years, the Report provides little information on policy initiatives targeting vulnerable groups.” (IMF and IDA 2004, sec. I.4). This failure to create social programs in keeping with the goals laid out in the DSRP is reflective of the growing political discontent within Senegal. As Wade’s first term came to an end, criticism of his administration’s shortcomings increased. He won the reelection in February 2007, but in the months following the election Senegalese have shown increasing anger at what is perceived as his mismanagement and political cronyism that ignores the problems faced by the majority of Senegalese.

### **Taxi-Sister Program and Structure:**

Within this framework, we can situate the Taxi-Sister program. The program is an anti-poverty initiative aimed at one specific, so-called vulnerable group: women. The Ministry claims that this program is a part of “*la vision du Chef de l’Etat par rapport à la promotion de la femme et la place centrale qu’elle doit occuper dans la société*”<sup>4</sup>

(Ministry of Family and Female Entrepreneurship 2007, 2). According to the DSRP, the

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<sup>3</sup> It is for these reasons that programs targeting vulnerable groups comprise the third pillar of the Wade administration’s fight against poverty.

<sup>4</sup> The President’s vision concerning the promotion of women and the central place that she must occupy in our society.

government must aid women to access new employment to better their lives, through the "*mise en place de fonds de promotion économique et de soutien aux activités des femmes*"<sup>5</sup> (DSRP 2007). Furthermore, the establishment of a highly-publicized program targeting this specific "vulnerable" group is interesting, as it seems to suggest an agreement by the Senegalese government with a social theory gaining ground, that the best way to address poverty is through programs to improve the lives of women (Seltzer, 2007). The plan was announced several months after the 2007 elections, and was heavily publicized as a Wade initiative to address women's poverty, unemployment, and exclusion from certain professions.

## **METHODOLOGY:**

The entirety of my research was conducted in Senegal's capital city, Dakar. As it is the capital, Dakar is the center of political power within Senegal; the ministries are located there, and it is where the Taxi-Sister program was started, with hopes of one day expanding to other cities. Every group working for the program there, meaning each person I wanted to interview in connection with the program is located there, requiring me to conduct my research in that city. Additionally, there are greater informational resources in Dakar, as it is the largest city, which was helpful during the research process.

My preliminary research was internet and archive based. I used the internet to find scholarly journals relating to poverty in Senegal and women's poverty

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<sup>5</sup> Use of economic program funds and the support of women's activities.

internationally— there are not many scholarly studies available online relating specifically to feminized poverty in Senegal. The internet was especially useful for finding recent newspaper and blog articles about the Taxi-Sister program, as it was widely discussed in Senegalese and international news within the last few months.

I also went to *Agence de la Statistique et de la Démographie*, an archival research center belonging to the Ministry of the Economy and Finances, that has statistical data relating specifically to Senegal. The majority of the information there is government records, which was helpful in my study. I used resources at *Statistique* to find official records and studies of poverty and social problems associated with poverty in Senegal. This was particularly useful, as the records at *Statistique* are frequently not available in other locations and cannot be found online.

To gain an insight into the inner workings of the program, I interviewed those involved with the Taxi-Sister program. I conducted interviews at the Ministry of Family and Female Entrepreneurship in Dakar, where I spoke with Awa Gueye, the head administrator overseeing the program, and with Cherif Karam, one of two directors of the program for the Ministry. I also conducted interviews at Espace-Auto with Ousmane Niang, who is the Program Assistant, Marketing Assistant, and supervisor to the Taxi Sisters.

I then conducted interviews with several of the Taxi Sisters. I was unable to interview several due to illness and one having an accident and being temporarily out of commission. Through these interviews, I attempted to glean a better understanding of

how the program works and its effect on the women who are a part of it. I wanted to conduct interviews with clients of the Taxi Sisters, but unfortunately during the time I spent with the women I never had the opportunity to speak with a client as I never saw one except in passing while I was in the middle of an interview.

There are several issues with the methodologies I used. Firstly, I likely received biased reports regarding the program, as everyone I spoke with is more likely to be overly optimistic about it. I therefore was not receiving information that was very critical of the program, either in terms of its goals, implementation, or results. I am not sure how I could not have found less biased information in the time allotted for the ISP, because there are not organized opposition groups to the project, nor has it really been studied thus far; therefore the people who are knowledgeable about the program are those who are directly involved with it.

As this program was only launched three months ago, this study is necessarily limited in its scope. This study can only examine the preliminary successes and issues of the program. However, this also makes this study unique, as it is the first in-depth examination of this government project. Therefore my role is to attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the program and its effect on the women involved than can already be ascertained from the articles and television news stories that covered its beginnings.

## **RESULTS:**

### **Program Structure:**

The Taxi-Sister program has four important financial key players. The first is the Ministry, who came up with the idea and approached Espace-Auto as a potential partner. Once they had agreed on the collaboration, they worked with Union des Institutions Mutuellistes de Crédit Communautaires d'Epargne et de Crédit (IMCEC), a microfinance lending institution, to create a financial plan for the program.

Once the women were selected, the Ministry purchased ten yellow Chery vehicles from Espace-Auto, through funds from the Fonds National de la Promotion de l'Entreprenariat Féminin (FNPEF). Once the women began working, they started monthly payments to the micro-lender who then reimburses the Ministry every three months. The women must pay off their 7 million CFA franc cars (approximately \$15,850 US dollars), plus an additional five percent annual interest, four percent of which goes to the micro-lender, and one percent of which pays the Ministry (Karam, 22 November 2007).

### **Ministry:**

According to the Ministry of Family and Female Entrepreneurship, the program's objectives are to fight against poverty and create new jobs for women (Gueye, 2007). The program was conceived because "*il est important de trouver les nouveaux métiers pour les femmes*"<sup>6</sup> (Gueye, 2007). As a part of the FNPEF, this program is merely one of

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to find new jobs for women.

many to come from this Ministry in an effort to increase the economic position of women in Senegalese society (IRIN News, 2 November 2007).

Once the contracts had been signed between the Ministry and Espace-Auto, an advertisement was placed in *L'Observateur* (a Senegalese newspaper) seeking women to become taxi drivers as a part of the new Taxi-Sister program. Each woman who called about the program filled out a form giving basic identification information, and those who fit the requirements were called for more extensive written and oral interviews. The Ministry decided that each woman must fit a set of basic criteria: she must be Senegalese, between the ages of twenty-five and forty, determined, and already possess her type B driver's license, the basic license granted to citizens. After further interviews, the Ministry selected ten women they believed to be the most compatible with the program. According to the Ministry, one of the important measures of compatibility was familial obligation, as women with husbands and children are less likely to be able to spend the long hours required by the taxi driving profession (Karam, 22 November 2007). The level of education attained was not considered in choosing the taxi sisters.

Once the ten women were selected, each had to go through months of training before they were ready to get behind the wheel. Together they took classes in self-defense, first aid, driving, and how to payback their loans. The Ministry helped them to get the necessary paperwork and car insurance, and the women took the written and practical driving exams to get their public transportation licenses to drive taxis. At the end of four months, each woman was prepared to drive her taxi, and on September 18,

the program was officially launched.

The Ministry proudly speaks of the Taxi-Sister program as a budding success that had no obstacles on the path to implementation. Karam admits that there are some people who disapprove of the program, but says that there are always people who are opposed to progress, and that overall he is very hopeful. He says that the program is a part of a greater push toward finding new economic positions for women, and that with this program the Sisters are no different from their male counterparts. They have the same job and are doing it just as well.

The Ministry does admit that there are some difficulties with some of the male taxi drivers, saying their relationship is “*un peu tendu. Les hommes sont un peu jaloux*”<sup>7</sup> (Karam, 22 November 2007).

### **Espace-Auto:**

The objectives for the program differ according to Espace-Auto. The primary reason for the program is to begin to replace the older taxis, modernize the taxi industry, and create a better image of urban transport in the capital (Niang, 2007). Their focus is predominantly on improving the industry, and not on empowering women, as evidenced by their next project in the works, Taxi Bleu, which will aid male taxi drivers in getting newer vehicles. For Espace-Auto, joining onto the program was simply a good business decision, as it offered the car dealership a high-profile, well-publicized way to sell ten

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<sup>7</sup> A little strained. The men are a little jealous.



cars.

Several years ago, Espace-Auto stopped selling European cars and switched to Chinese models. The Chinese vehicles are much less expensive, particularly after a decision was made by the Senegalese government to end the import of vehicles over five years old. As new European imports are extremely expensive—used European cars are frequently more expensive than new Chinese ones—the market has been more receptive of the new influx of Chinese vehicles. Since 2003, the rate of importation of Chinese vehicles has increased eighteen times (Miller, 28 August 2007, B1). Despite this good news for Espace-Auto, they have still had to struggle against a general distrust of Chinese goods among the Senegalese (Niang, 2007). Therefore, this program has been an opportunity for the car dealership to garner attention and promote their product in conjunction with an anti-poverty program.

Espace-Auto retains a much closer working relationship with the Taxi Sisters than does the Ministry; Ousmane Niang works for Espace-Auto as Marketing Assistant as well as Project Supervisor for the Taxi Sisters. He performs routine inspections to ensure that the cars are well maintained and that the women are paying off their cars on schedule. Perhaps due to the closer relationship, Niang is less optimistic than Karam, saying there are problems with some of the women. He did not wish to elaborate during our interview, but I later observed arguments between him and several of the women regarding how much they were working, as he thought it was not enough and they were

not making enough money. However, it was not possible for me to fully understand the dispute as it was in Wolof, and I could only understand certain words and phrases.

Generally in Dakar, taking a taxi is an exercise in bargaining. While the Taxi-Sisters are no exception to that rule, their pricing is slightly different from that of typical taxis (see Appendix). At the beginning of the program, Espace-Auto created a basic guideline for pricing costs from the hotels downtown to a number of neighborhoods in Dakar, based on distance and safety (Karam, 22 November 2007). The guideline was then approved by the Ministry and given to the women. These are not precisely set prices, as the women are free to bargain for either higher or lower fees, but are considered suggestions.

### **Taxi Sisters:**

The Taxi Sisters I spoke with agreed that the program's primary concerns are to decrease poverty and unemployment and to increase job prospects for women. The women I interviewed came from different backgrounds, but each has certain similarities. Each is able to speak French at least conversationally and can read; the majority of the women are unmarried, and none have children. Prior to applying to the program, they had varying interests, educations, and jobs, but now each is working in Dakar as a pioneer for women entering a male dominated profession.

Each drives a bright yellow car with "Taxi Sister" written on the hood and a large sign on top identifying the car as a part of the Taxi-Sister program in collaboration with

the Ministry of Family and Female Entrepreneurship. Originally, each taxi also was emblazoned with a large photo of President Wade on the rear window. However, the pictures were removed from the taxis when anti-government protests— which included car burnings— took place in November. The women feared that the pictures would be taken to mean they were “*ses taxis. Que nous sommes ses filles*”<sup>8</sup> (Top, 2007).

Sanou Top:

Top had been working as an accountant and secretary for nearly four years when she read in *L’Observateur* that the Ministry of Family and Female Entrepreneurship was searching for applicants for a new program working to introduce women into the taxi driving profession. She was frustrated at her work, feeling like she was not paid enough for her long hours, so she applied to the program with the hope of becoming her own boss.

As one of the ten women accepted, she went through the months of training to improve her driving and learn basic self-defense and first aid. With the help of the Ministry and Espace-Auto she got all of the necessary documentation to drive a taxi and open a checking account at the micro-lender. Since September she has been driving in the capital and says she couldn’t be any prouder.

The work is hard and her hours are long, but she says she earns a good living. According to Top, she earns about twenty to twenty-five thousand CFA francs per day (\$55), but sometimes as much as forty thousand (\$90). Top says her family was initially

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<sup>8</sup> His taxis. That we were his girls.

hesitant when she applied for the program as she had taken her Baccalaureate, and is educated for a better job. Her mother particularly was unhappy that she wanted to become a taxi driver, but now she says her whole family is proud of her for participating in this new and high-profile program.

Aissatou Goundiam:

For as long as she can remember, Goundiam has wanted to drive a taxi. When she saw the advertisement in *L'Observateur* and she told her husband she was applying, he wasn't at all surprised. She had always told him how much she wanted to become a taxi driver, and here was her chance.

Goundiam's schedule has changed since she became a taxi sister, and says "*j'ai pas beaucoup de temps à la maison. Je passe tout mon temps à travailler*"<sup>9</sup> (2007). Indeed, like the other, unmarried women, she arrives at the Hôtel Novotel at eight o'clock every morning and stays until eight o'clock each night. Her family and her husband support her working in spite of her long work hours.

Walimata Mamadou Samba:

Samba is the youngest of the Taxi Sisters, and the only one I interviewed who had never been previously employed. She received two degrees in mechanics but, when she finished with school, could not find a job, due to the difficult economic climate in Senegal. When she saw the advertisement in the newspaper, she was surprised; she'd never thought of women driving taxis before, but she thought she might as well apply.

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<sup>9</sup> I don't have a lot of time at home. I spend all my time at work.

After all, “it’s better than staying at home with nothing to do” (2007).

Samba says she is making a living as a taxi driver, but stresses that the work is difficult and the pay is not steady. Some days she earns twenty thousand CFA francs (\$45), and some days not enough to turn a profit after paying for gas and the loan. To make a profit, she must earn over fourteen thousand CFA francs, as she pays seven thousand (\$16) to the microfinance lender and almost seven thousand francs on ten liters of gas each day. The day I interviewed Samba, it was about one o’clock in the afternoon, and she had only earned one thousand CFA francs (just over \$2). Each woman I spoke with emphasized the difficulty of making a profit with these financial obligations. Like the other women, Samba’s family supports her in her newfound career. She says that in Senegal it is so hard to find work that if you can find a job, everyone will be supportive.

### **Relationship with Male Taxi Drivers:**

None of the sisters seem to have any hard feelings toward the male drivers; some even seem to have developed a close working relationship. They admit that some of the male drivers dislike them, but Top counters this idea, saying, “*j’ai beaucoup de respect [pour eux]. Ils sont mes amis. Vraiment, ce sont nos pères*”<sup>10</sup> (2007).

Male taxi drivers I spoke with agreed that the program is good for the women involved. None were angered by their new presence in the industry, but each was quick to point out the differences in their work. Two I spoke with drove nights— from about

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<sup>10</sup> I have a lot of respect for them. They are my friends. Really, they are our fathers

three in the afternoon until four or five in the morning— and they were proud of their work, saying that it's risky and the women can't do it. One man who has been driving taxis in Dakar for twenty years told me that it is no longer safe to drive at night and he doesn't work after about nine o'clock. He did, however, point out that the Taxi Sisters' work is still vastly different from his own, as they mostly take clients from the hotels.

### **General Results:**

Each taxi sister agreed on most points, such as having a good working relationship with her colleagues and the Ministry. A common sentiment throughout the interviews was the support they received from their families and friends in their new work. They each also impressed me with the danger involved in driving taxis, and assured me that the safety recommendations and precautions taken by the Ministry and Espace-Auto are necessary. Indeed, during the ISP period, a taxi driver was murdered outside of Touba, Senegal, sending a sharp reminder to taxi drivers throughout the country of the danger in their profession (Fall, 7 November 2007).

The women I interviewed told me they mostly work at the hotels. Some said they only pick up passengers at the hotel or those who called them for a ride, while others said they would sometimes pick up clients in the streets just like male drivers. It is not only safety concerns that keep the women from circulating and seeking out passengers however; their cars run on refined gasoline as opposed to the diesel that fuels the other

taxis in Senegal (Goundiam, 2007). Diesel is much cheaper than gasoline, so the Taxi Sisters cannot afford to drive around looking for a fare the way other taxi drivers do.

### **ANALYSIS:**

As a program, Taxi-Sister can be evaluated in terms of several objectives: introducing women to new professions and expanding their economic role, combating poverty and unemployment, and modernizing the taxi industry.

### **Expanding the Economic Role of Women:**

Overall, the project seems to be working in terms of its goal to increase job opportunities for women by expanding the professions that are open to them. A year ago few people ever would have thought of women driving taxis in Senegal, but thanks to the extremely public and well-publicized nature of this project, ideas regarding women in the transportation sector are beginning to change.

As outlined in the DSRP, in order to eradicate the inequalities and disadvantages faced by those categorized as “vulnerable,” government programs and monies must be expended. The Taxi-Sister program is one of the most visible programs to fulfill this goal, and it seems to be working. The minimum salary, or *Salaire Minimum Interprofessionnel Garantie* (SMIG), is just under fifty thousand CFA francs, or \$107, per month (Site officiel du gouvernement, 2007). While reported earnings varied from one Taxi Sister to another, most said they earn a profit of between two and ten thousand

CFA francs per day. Conservative estimates (a daily average of three thousand CFA francs) would then place their monthly earnings at approximately eighty-four thousand francs (\$187), well above the SMIG. Therefore, the economic aspect of this program can be deemed a success, as it is providing a solid income to women.

The project is also a part of a larger movement towards women's equality of job opportunity. Several other government initiatives have been taken, including introducing women into the police and armed forces for the first time. The Taxi-Sister program is of course a limited program right now as it is in its test phase, but when viewed within this context, the Taxi-Sister program seems to be making inroads into a previously male-dominated organization.

However, despite these positive steps, the program is only expanding the economic possibilities of a specific group of women— namely women without children. By using marital and familial status to select candidates, the Ministry is imposing its own beliefs regarding family values on private citizens' lives.

### **Poverty and Unemployment:**

In terms of being an anti-poverty and unemployment initiative, the program falls a little short. The women who are participating were not typically impoverished prior to becoming a taxi sister, and many were previously employed. Those I interviewed agreed they were better off than before, whether they had been previously employed or not, but none of those I spoke with had been living in the conditions of poverty that the DSRP



claims to target.

Additionally, aspects of the selection process created biases in the way women were selected. The program was advertised only through written media, meaning that unless someone else informed them of the opportunity, each woman applying was literate. Based on estimates from 2002, only 29.2 percent of Senegalese women are literate, compared to men's 51.1 percent (CIA World Factbook). As literacy is reflective of a minimum education level attained, it can be an indicator of economic status. Moreover, literacy is measured in French— rather than the national languages, of which Wolof is the most well known— which is not spoken by the majority of the population. By shaping the selection process so that only literate women are selected, the majority of women are excluded, and impoverished women have an even lower chance of participation.

Each woman who was pre-selected had to fill out a questionnaire as well as have two interviews at the Ministry. The questionnaires were in French; only one woman had trouble understanding the questions and was given help, but rather than demonstrating the openness of the program, this instead shows how the very beginning of the program— how the announcement was made— excluded a majority of women from even applying. The interviews were conducted in a mix of French and Wolof, as is commonly spoken in Dakar. As Wolof is the most spoken language in Senegal, and within Dakar it is by far the predominate national language, this would not pose a disadvantage to prospective taxi sisters based on ethnicity. Furthermore, it is essential to speak Wolof to drive a taxi in

Dakar, but it is not necessary to speak French as evidenced by the scores of male taxi drivers with essentially no French communication. Therefore, the structure of the interview process did not pose any obstacles for women to join the program; however, the advertisement method was discriminatory as shown by the pre-selected women's literacy.

The women were also required to have their primary driver's license, meaning that they had to have had access to a vehicle prior to their employment. Cars are not considered everyday items in Senegal, and access to vehicles also indicates a certain level of economic comfort. The Ministry is currently considering requiring future applicants to have both their type B license as well as their license for public transportation, which could further disadvantage women who do not have the time or means to take this exam without help from an organization such as the Ministry.

### **Modernizing the Taxi Industry:**

As far as the modernization of the taxi industry is concerned, the program's success is thus far limited. The Taxi Sisters undeniably drive far nicer and more reliable cars than their male counterparts, but there are only ten of them compared to the more than ten thousand men. It is important to note however, that the Taxi Sisters are stationed at upscale hotels with a largely foreign clientele, so their presence is aiding in the appearance of a more modern system of transportation in Dakar to tourists and foreign business interests. In this way, the women are strategically placed both for their own

safety concerns and the interests of Espace-Auto. With time, as the program expands and Taxi Blue is launched, the taxi industry will likely become more professional in appearance.

### **President Wade and Taxi-Sister:**

The program was launched at an important time politically for President Wade. While he won a second term easily in February of 2007, he also faced harsh criticism for failing to deliver on his earlier promises. A government commissioned study found that three out of four Senegalese households believe that the best way to relieve poverty is through the intervention of the state (Ministry of the Economy and Finances 2002, 27); thus the Taxi-Sister program was touted as a means to address poverty as defined in the DSRP, suggesting that Wade was now coming through with programs to aid citizens economically. By covering the rear window of the vehicles with a picture of Abdoulaye Wade and the phrase “*Taxi sister: en route pour la nouvelle vision de l’entrepreneuriat féminin dans le Second Mandat du Président,*”<sup>11</sup> the government was effectively trying to inextricably link the project with Wade in an attempt to reclaim lost citizen support. Unfortunately for Wade however, increasing unrest and explosive citizen riots in November caused the Taxi Sisters to remove the pictures. While the program retains widespread support among Senegalese, Wade’s popularity still appears to be suffering.

### **Discrimination and Sexism within Taxi-Sister:**

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<sup>11</sup> On the road to the new vision of female entrepreneurship in the President’s second term.

The decision to base selection partially on familial obligation is a controversial one. On the one hand, the hours are long and it is important to have a first group of women who will be able to dedicate their time to their jobs. Additionally, it is possible the project would have been less popular among Senegalese if the women had been mothers. The Ministry did not want the image of the program to be one of women who shirked their family responsibilities to join the workforce. However, by using this criteria to gauge an applicant's compatibility, the program essentially became a government sponsored endorsement for mothers to stay home. Working is a personal decision, and the application process for this program effectively stripped some women of the right to make that decision for themselves. Furthermore, this is a clearly sexist policy, as men would not be asked the same questions on an application. If such a program existed for men, the Ministry would not include these questions in the application process as, "*les obligations à la famille d'un homme ne sont pas le même que pour une femme. D'occuper les enfants ce n'est pas à lui*"<sup>12</sup> (Karam, 2 December 2007).

In the interviews I conducted at the Ministry and Espace-Auto, I spoke mostly with men who are involved with the projects. While speaking about the women, they nearly always referred to them as "*les filles*" or "girls." As each woman is between the ages of twenty-five and forty, it is clear that they could not be considered "girls," any more than one would refer to a man of that age bracket as a "boy." However, much as this terminology plagues American society, grown women are diminished in status with

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<sup>12</sup> Men's family obligations are not the same as women's. Taking care of children is not a man's job.

its use by the very organizations that seek to promote their economic interests.

Unfortunately these negative aspects of the Taxi-Sister program are emergent themes in many governmental efforts to improve the lives of Senegalese women. 2008 will mark the first time Senegalese women will be included in army battalions, but the three hundred women chosen were held to standards that differ from men's (*Agence France Presse*, 16 October 2007). No woman can join the army if she is married or has children, demonstrating again the government's willingness to impose its values on citizens.

The DSRP also echoes a certain negative terminology with respect to women, by placing all women in the "vulnerable" category. While it is admirable that the plan recognizes the unfair position women disproportionably occupy in Senegalese society, it could be considered counterproductive to term the entire gender as "vulnerable," which produces images of helpless women in need of rescue. While these instances of lingual marginalization do not nullify the benefits that programs and projects such as these bring to women, it is important to recognize the harm done in these passive ways as being as important, because of its subtle pervasion, as more overt forms of discrimination.

### **Sustainability of the Program:**

If the project continues as it is currently headed, it should likely expand beyond this original test program. The cost to the government is very low, as the cars are repaid with one percent annual interest. Both the Ministry and Espace-Auto have interest in

continuing the program, therefore it is unlikely one of them would pull their support. It is significant to note that this deal was brokered between two different groups, with two separate interests, but this program allowed each party to satisfy its own interests—whether political or economic— while creating a new social program.

The current Taxi Sisters each voiced concern over the cost of the cars, saying that it is difficult to pay them back. As the program is expanded, it could become more difficult for the women to make money, as the supply of taxi sisters will be greater. To mitigate this potential problem, it would be necessary for Espace-Auto to negotiate deals with other upscale hotels in Dakar so that the women would be more dispersed throughout the area.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

Overall, the Taxi-Sister program can be considered a positive step forward for women in Senegal. The women involved with the project all agree that they are better off financially than they were before becoming Taxi Sisters, and are satisfied with their choice to apply for the program. The issues of bias in selection in terms of literacy and familial status are problems that negatively affect the program's ability to deliver on its promises of fighting against feminized poverty, but the positive aspects of the program in terms of empowering women to seek new forms of employment should by no means be overlooked. As with all new programs, there are some problems in the test phase that should be worked out to better meet the original goals.

As this study took place so soon after the program's launch, there should be further studies to determine how well the program functions after the test phase ends. It

will be important to discover if the project expands, and if it seeks to improve upon the issues found with the preliminary group of women. Perhaps most importantly, after the program is better established, its impact upon women generally should be studied. As part of a movement to increase the role of women in the public sphere, it is vital to attempt a study discerning whether these types of programs are actually succeeding in their efforts to convince women of the possibility of working in male-dominated professions. As Senegal continues to work towards gender parity in the workplace, it will be important to note the role that programs such as Taxi-Sisters played.

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