



SWEDD in Action: Promoting women's full potential

Putting a face to those transforming
the lives of vulnerable girls
and women



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transforming the lives of
vulnerable girls and women



Benin



Burkina Faso



Cameroon



Chad



Côte d'Ivoire



Guinea



Mali



Mauritania



Niger

Written by
Sabine Cessou

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PREFACE



Over the past decade, sub-Saharan African countries have made considerable progress in promoting gender equality and enabling women to access social, political and economic opportunities. More and more girls have access to schooling, and women are increasingly playing a role in decision-making bodies and the economy.

However, greater empowerment of women and girls is needed to support development efforts and ensure the continent's social and economic transformation. According to recent estimates, Africa's current population of 1.4 billion will rise to 2.5 billion in 2050. This rapid population growth, which is closely linked to high fertility rates (particularly among adolescent girls) risks exposing the region to higher poverty rates, reduced investment in human capital, high unemployment or underemployment (particularly among young women), increased pressure on natural environments, climatic vulnerability, economic migration and heightened risks of instability.

When women, especially adolescent girls, are equipped with the skills they need to thrive in social and economic circles, they can contribute more to their families' well-being and to their communities' and countries' development. This opens the door to a demographic dividend. By funding the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project, we wanted to support a regional dynamic that helps participating countries and regional institutions to implement a pragmatic, holistic approach that embraces all dimensions of women's empowerment: education, training, safe spaces, access to health services and economic activities, and an enabling environment, including legal frameworks that protect girls and support their empowerment.

After nine years of implementation, SWEDD has established itself as a transformative project that has leveraged various partnerships to change its beneficiaries' lives. For example, over 400,000 girls have improved their life skills and sexual health knowledge; more than 1 million girls have received at least one schooling intervention; 10,800 midwives have been trained in a regionally harmonized programme for services tailored to adolescent girls and community distribution of family planning products; close to 140,000 women have been reached by economic empowerment initiatives; and nearly 15,000 religious leaders are committed to actively promoting the empowerment of women and girls. The creation of multiple regional peer networks has helped attract the support of various national and regional interest groups. Beyond the numbers, SWEDD has helped countries adopt budgeting practices that incorporate the demographic dividend. It has also integrated gender-based violence into its activities.

These satisfactory results urge us to continue our efforts. We must keep strengthening actions to empower adolescent girls and young women in order to accelerate Africa's demographic transition. Women's economic participation and control of productive assets, supported by their health and education and an enabling environment, can accelerate development, help overcome poverty, reduce inequality and improve children's nutrition, health and schooling.

The World Bank remains committed to building on SWEDD's achievements to help accelerate Africa's social and economic transformation.

Ms Boutheina Guermazi,

Director for Regional Integration for Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa at the World Bank

FOREWORD



In the nine countries covered by the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project, women account for over half the population. Sustainable development studies carried out in these countries underline the importance of women's contribution in resolving population, peace and security issues. SWEDD is a regional initiative launched in 2015 by countries, funded by the World Bank and technically supported by the West African Health Organization (WAHO) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). SWEDD sees women and girls as the driving force behind the demographic dividend. This initiative aims to empower women and adolescent girls in order to accelerate the demographic transition in West and Central Africa.

Its main targets are teenagers and young women at risk of marriage, dropping out of school and early pregnancy. The SWEDD Project improves their life skills, their knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights, strengthens their school retention until at least secondary school, and expands their economic opportunities. It improves access to reproductive health products and also to qualified health workers, and it advocates for political commitment to the demographic dividend.

The project ran for four years from 2015, in six countries – Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania and Niger – and demonstrated persuasive outcomes at review stage. In 2019, Benin joined the network of SWEDD countries, which was extended to include Cameroon and Guinea with the funding of the second phase of the Project (2020-2024). In 2023, a new era begins with SWEDD+, which welcomes three new countries, namely Gambia, Senegal and Togo, who are committed to the same dynamic, convinced that SWEDD interventions, led by national expertise and thought out and organized in partnership with country authorities and civil society, offer adequate responses to gender inequalities and women's empowerment.

Many of the actions carried out as part of the SWEDD Project have helped to change lives for the better. This book, *Le SWEDD en Action - Promouvoir le plein potentiel des femmes (SWEDD in Action - Promoting Women's Full Potential)*, bears witness to this, with concrete testimonials from women and men involved in or benefiting from the project. Each, in their own way, underline the effectiveness of SWEDD. Some of the women who speak here have benefited from training, scholarships and support for their professionalization or organization into cooperatives. They were taken to safe spaces, informed about their rights, kept in school or went back to school with second-chance schools.

Many of them have active roles in civil society or business and are also well-known ambassadors of the Stronger Together campaign. Launched in 2020 to sustain the achievements of the SWEDD project during the COVID-19 pandemic, the campaign focuses on "Girls' education and women's leadership".

The paths taken by these women role models, as well as the men actively involved in the SWEDD project – whether they are religious leaders, mentors or members of the Husbands' Clubs – all have one thing in common: pushing boundaries in their respective communities to change living conditions for girls and women. SWEDD is committed to shining a spotlight on them, as an inspiration to future generations but also because they embody – better than any technical reports and statistics – the achievements, progress and hopes that exist throughout the Sahel, despite the insecurity experienced by the region.

Mr Abdessalam Ould Mohamed Saleh

Chairman of the SWEDD Regional Steering Committee
Minister of the Economy and Sustainable Development of Mauritania

INTRODUCTION



Through 54 portraits of young girls, women and men living in the project areas of the Sahel's Women Empowerment and Demographic Dividend (SWEDD) project, this book entitled SWEDD in Action - Promoting Women's Full Potential aims to pay tribute, first and foremost, to the women beneficiaries, role models and those who support the project to promote a transformative approach to gender. In addition to these female faces, this book also reveals the men, who are primarily concerned by the objectives and values defended by SWEDD.

This is also the hallmark of a project that is country-driven, financed by the World Bank and technically supported by the West African Health Organisation (WAHO) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The project stands out for its integrated approach based on the "four Es": Enhance, Educate, Empower, Employ.

In other words, improve access to health services, educate, empower and employ. These are all catalysts whose combined effects help to create the conditions to facilitate the realisation of the potential of adolescent girls and young women to become economically active citizens in the life of their country.

This book documents the impact of the SWEDD project in a lively and concrete way, through life trajectories, marked by significant progress in certain indicators. Between 2015 and 2023, contraceptive prevalence rose from 9% to 17.5% in the SWEDD countries, and the net enrolment rate for girls rose from 19% to 28.4% in secondary education.

Between 2019 and 2023, the school retention rate for adolescent girls rose from 87.1% in 2019 to 96% in 2023, an increase of 9% at regional level. The number of new contraceptive users rose from 236,278 to 903,504 in 2023.

This White Paper invites you to meet young girls from Chad, Benin and Mali, who are being helped to learn trades considered to be "masculine", such as painting, electricity and photography. It gives a voice to health workers, particularly midwives, on the central role they play in their communities.

The book also demonstrates the extraordinary vitality of the Sahel's community network, from Mauritania to Chad, via Cameroon, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali and looks back at the careers of a number of inspiring personalities, committed to the cause of empowering women in all its forms and who have risen to positions of responsibility in various fields, including traditional chieftaincies in northern Cameroon.

Sharing experience and reflecting on good practice, innovative approaches and concrete actions are at the heart of the SWEDD project. The SWEDD project, it should be remembered, embraces one of the primary vocations of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA): to put an end to harmful practices such as child marriages, forced marriages and domestic violence and female genital mutilation, and to guarantee access to sexual and reproductive health services, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the ICPD (International Conference on Population and Development).

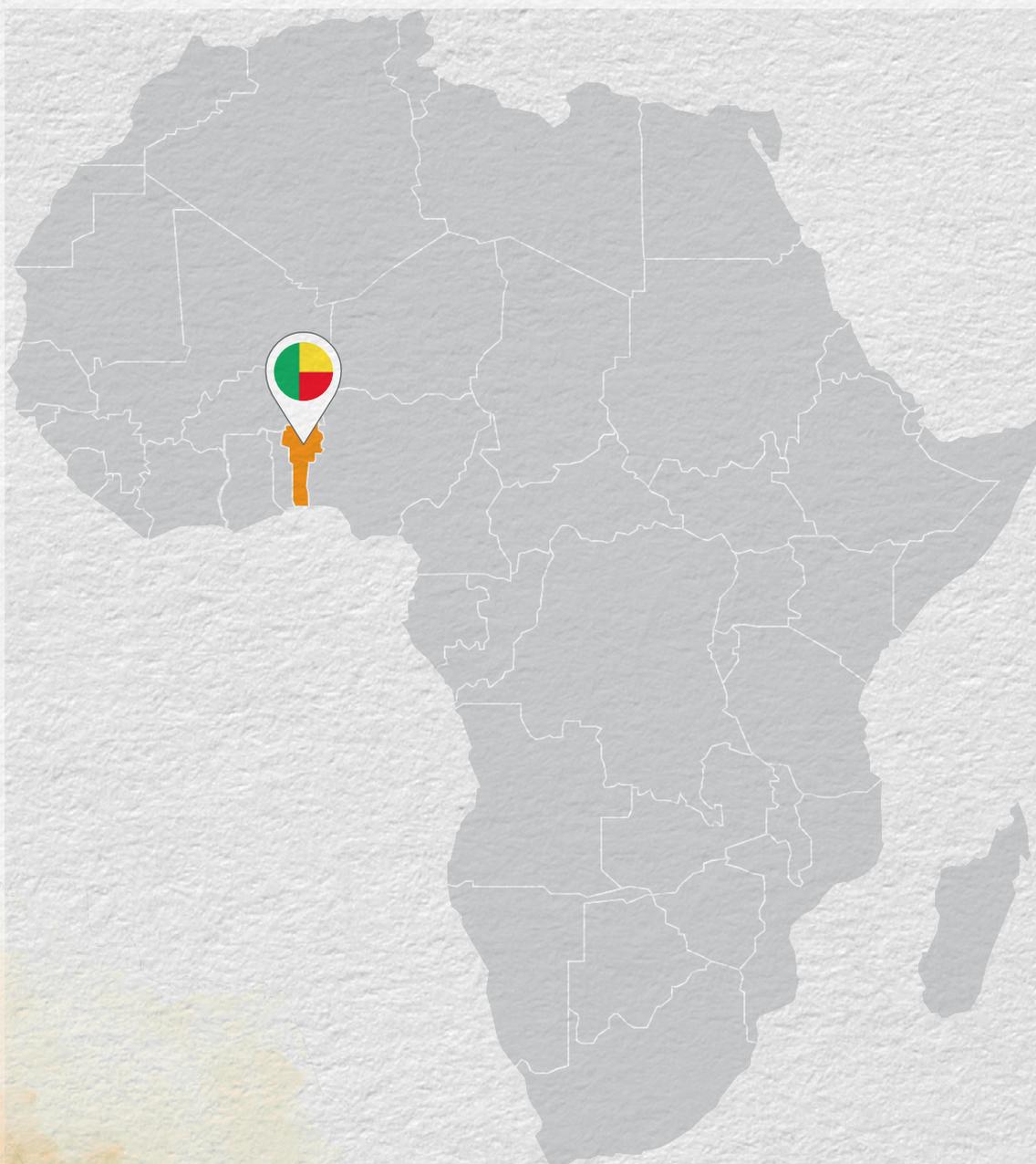
Finally, as mentioned above, this document highlights the importance of involving boys and men in transforming the social norms that can hinder women's full participation in sustainable development. Despite the constraints of patriarchy, many men have made this goal their vocation, with great success.

Their paths and choices deserve to be applauded.

Dr Sennen Hounton,

Director, Regional Office for West and Central Africa, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

Benin





Hermine Boni

Nineteen-year-old Hermine was able to continue her studies in electrical engineering at the Lycée Technique de Natitingou in 2022, thanks to a grant from the SWEDD project. The support is enabling her to approach the future with great ambition.

One of 14 children from a farming family, Hermine describes her enrolment on a technical course as a “miracle”. Since fourth grade, she has been passionate about electricity. After passing her *brevet* (end-of-school exams) in 2021 in Natitingou, the town in northern Benin where she lives with her family, she enrolled to study electrical engineering at a technical high school. However, problems arose when her father fell ill and was hospitalized, which put a strain on the family budget.

Despite this, Hermine continued to attend classes. One day, while she was writing an essay, the school bursar walked into her classroom to ask her to pay the school fees. “Since the start of the school year, I’d been feeling ashamed. As a rule, new students must pay the first instalment before the start of the course.”

Not knowing which way to turn, she could not bring herself to stop going to class. Morning and evening, she continued the long walk to and from school. Once there, she avoided the bursar by hiding behind her classmates whenever she spotted him. While her parents were asking her to return to general education, where the fees are lower, she found out that SWEDD scholarships were available to support girls in technical subjects. The support from SWEDD is designed to boost girls’ employability by encouraging them to take up careers usually pursued by men. “I felt happy again and I quickly applied for the scholarship. To my delight, I was accepted. I’m grateful to the SWEDD project, which let me hold my head high and study how I wanted to.”

Relieved and confident, she is now preparing for her *certificat d’aptitude professionnelle* (vocational qualification) and looking forward to a bright future, in which she could well see herself becoming director of the Beninese Electric Power Company or even Minister for Energy. Her message for the Stronger Together campaign: “A girl with a diploma in technical education and with vocational training is an asset for development. So let’s invest in her.”

“I was able to study electrical engineering as I wanted, thanks to a SWEDD scholarship”



Senami Mariette Atolou

A SWEDD safe space for girls project mentor, Senami also works as a community outreach worker at a health centre and at a social promotion centre in Cotonou. Her mission is to empower women and give them better access to sexual and reproductive health care.

Senami, 46, has made her way in the voluntary sector thanks to her strength of character. When she became pregnant as an adolescent, her father threw her out, and she was later abandoned by her husband. But that has not stopped her from raising her four children with dignity. “I fell down and I got back up stronger,” she sums up, ready to set an example for the girls she seeks to protect.

A former general secretary of the Fifadji Hounto neighbourhood development association from 2015 to 2019, she served as a community development facilitator for the beneficiaries of the Support to Communes and Communities for the Expansion of Social Services (ACCESS) project run by the Benin authorities. She was also a mediator for the Community-managed Decentralized Services Project (CDSP) between 2015 and 2017.

A community outreach worker in the fourth arrondissement of Akpapa 2, a district of Cotonou,

she has been working since 2022 as a SWEDD project mentor in a safe space for vulnerable girls. “Once girls have been identified in the neighbourhoods, they are invited to attend three months of training in life skills and sexual and reproductive health, so they can get to know their bodies and their rights.”

With a colleague, she is monitoring the second cohort of the SWEDD project – 62 girls divided into two groups. All of the girls have either never been to school or have dropped out. The girls attend two hours of guidance and two hours of training each week, during which the messages are conveyed in a light-hearted way, through sketches and songs. “We haven’t seen any absences,” says Senami. “The girls attend and they find the sessions stimulating, even when they’re feeling discouraged.”

Guidance can also be provided on an individual basis, placing the mentor in the position of confidante. “The relationship I build with them means they see me as a mother and helps to guide them and restore their confidence. Their difficulties often stem from a lack of dialogue with their parents. I try to talk to the parents to make them understand that a girl who has reached puberty should be considered a friend, not an enemy.”

“My relationship with young girls helps me to guide them”

Another recurring problem is that parents cannot afford to pay the fees that tradespeople charge for apprenticeships in sewing or hairdressing, which lead to a diploma after four years. The safe spaces also enable beneficiaries to learn basics arithmetic and saving. “I teach the girls not to expect anything from others and to save money themselves, by distinguishing between needs and desires: you can give up certain desires to save money and pay for your own training, which costs between 150,000 and 200,000 CFA francs here.” Senami often uses her own story to motivate the girls.

“I don’t think I would have become pregnant as a teenager if I’d had the opportunity to receive the advice provided by the SWEDD project,” she concludes.



Solange Mèhou Houédanou

Solange, 47, a businesswoman elected to parliament in February 2023, is a member of the Benin Chamber of Commerce and Industry and an ambassador for the SWEDD project's Stronger Together campaign. In 2016 she founded the Union des femmes entreprenantes et solidaires du Bénin (UFES-Bénin), an NGO that provides training for women planning to set up small businesses, and in 2018 she launched an agrifood processing company that employs around 60 women.

As director of Sol des Anges, the company she founded in 1999, Solange imports frozen poultry and fish, vegetable oils and other foodstuffs. She has gradually built up a national distribution network, establishing herself as a successful woman in the private sector.

"I ask men to free women and to place trust in them"

Wanting to share her experience and to promote women's empowerment, in 2016 she founded the NGO UFES-Bénin in her commune of Allada, located in the department of Atlantique in the south of the country. Her aim is to help women that want to set up SMEs. "Today, the organization brings together more than 720 women, who receive advice on entrepreneurship, mostly in trade and crafts. We help them to access finance through banks, NGOs, development partners, microfinance organizations and mutual aid."

Women's empowerment is close to her heart for three reasons, she explains:

"I ask men to free women and to place trust in them so they can contribute to the family economy, the household's needs. The emancipation of women is an important issue that still needs to be fought for. Lastly, I'd like to share my experience to help women grow and develop."

With this in mind, in 2018 she launched Sol des Anges Agro Business, a local food processing company. "This company employs around 60 women to farm poultry and make pineapple juice. They are trained and their salaries enable them to save up to become self-sufficient, and replicate the model for themselves."

She was elected Member of Parliament in the legislative elections in her constituency in January 2023, after campaigning, in part, on women and their place in society. "We're going to work on laws to protect women and adolescents, and prioritize keeping girls in school," she assures us. "Many of them are discouraged from studying during the school year, by adults and sometimes their own teachers."

Her message: "A woman can make something with her hands and contribute not only to her family's needs, but also to the local and national economy. There is a place for us and we have to organize ourselves to earn it."



Huguette Akplogan Dossa

President of the Benin Chapter of the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN-Benin), launched in 2017 after the New York forum organized by UN-Women and the African Union (AU), Huguette is also an ambassador for the Stronger Together campaign. This civil society figure has founded several organizations to defend women's rights and provide them with capacity-building with a view to empowerment.

Huguette joined forces with her “sisters” when she went to university. In fact, in 1993, at the age of 24, she founded Les Sœurs Unies à l’œuvre [Sisters United in Action], which pooled the small resources of a group of young women to donate food to orphanages.

After a diploma in management, accounting and finance, she obtained a degree in adult development and education in Ouagadougou, before returning to Benin for a Master’s in organizational and project management. “I already had a taste of managing projects on the ground,” she explains, “having worked for the Belgian NGO Solidarité Mondiale [World Solidarity]. I had attended a training course for women in palm oil production in the Mono region, supported by the Belgian Embassy. An expert from Côte d’Ivoire came to help them develop plantain production. These developments revitalized the local market.”

In 1994, Les Sœurs Unies à l’œuvre launched an HIV/AIDS prevention programme and microcredit projects for women in the southern, central and northern regions. Women earn income from drying grated cassava to make gari, a paste used as a staple food, to become self-sufficient in food. “We gave them access to solar energy, which enabled them to diversify into making ice cubes and recharging phones for the whole village,” recalls Huguette.

Her achievements continued during the 2000s. In 2004, she launched the Benin branch of Business Professional Women (BPW), affiliated with the Geneva-based international NGO of the same name. From 2005 to 2011, she was the national coordinator of the Social Watch Benin network, which brings together over 300 civil society organizations to provide citizen oversight of public action.

She founded the African Network on the Right to Food (ANoRF) in 2008, then became a member of the Economic and Social Council of Benin (2009–2014) and managed the travel agency Emeraude Tours (2008–2018). In 2017, she won a competition organized by the NGO Femmes Engagées pour le Développement [Women Committed to Development – FED-ONG], which made her a “Peace Lady”. That same year, the government sent her to represent Benin at the forum in New York organized by UN-Women and the AU. The event aimed to inspire women leaders across Africa to take on the African Agenda 2063, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

“Women must be the driving force behind their own development”

At the end of the forum, the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) was launched. Under her presidency, the Benin Chapter was founded in February 2020 to promote women’s leadership in sociopolitical circles. Among the barriers to be overcome, Huguette mentions the mindsets of the women themselves: “We have to help them understand that they must be the driving force behind their own development, rather than always expecting others to do everything. They can get together and work to break down the constraints they face.”



Daagbo Hounon Houna II

His Majesty “Dada, King of the Seas and Oceans”, supreme spiritual leader of the Vodun religion, has chaired the national platform of religious organizations for health, peace, security and development in Benin (PNSR-PS/B) since 2018. Founded in 2017, this organization brings together indigenous, Christian and Muslim religions. SWEDD helps it share messages on education, health and women’s empowerment.

Daagbo Hounon Houna II, based in Ouidah, succeeded his father in 2004 as the leader of *Vodun Hwendo*, a religion widely practiced in Benin. Some 11 per cent of the population identify as followers, but the actual figure is higher as some Christians continue to practise it unofficially. Vodun extends into neighbouring southern Nigeria and Togo, as well as Haiti, Cuba and Brazil, where it has evolved in various forms among the descendants of victims of the transatlantic slave trade.

From 2013 to 2016, the Vodun leader’s association – called Elossé, short for Elossé wé man dandan gonan égbé in the Fon language (meaning “It is essential to be educated, for education always brings enlightenment”) – took part in a Netherlands-funded campaign to promote health and combat gender-based violence.

“Seeing our achievements, partners wanted our religious and indigenous organizations to pool their efforts.” This led to the PNSR-PS/B being created, bringing together representatives from Benin’s three religious movements. His Majesty has chaired the platform since 2018, and was reappointed in January 2023 for a further four years.

The population listens attentively to everything the king says. “I wish for Vodun to regain its noble status, and we must work together tolerantly and peacefully to ensure that the population, and especially vulnerable people, consider health and education as moral duties. All children are born equal, and since girls are capable of doing the same things as boys, there should be no discrimination. Since 1997, the Vodun community has been holding seminars on girls’ education, which is good for the nation’s well-being.”

“Education always brings enlightenment”

With the demographic boom in young people in Benin, as elsewhere in Africa, this religious leader believes that his generation is “duty-bound to prepare the next generation, by focusing on the education of children, especially girls. We tell girls not to let themselves be discouraged. Education is the mother of all success.”



Izi Cherif Inoussa

Izi, imam at the Cococodji mosque and a retired mathematics teacher, is in charge of finance and accounting at the national platform of religious organizations for health, peace, security and development in Benin (PNSR-PS/B). He is also a focal point under the Ouagadougou Partnership for the Alliance des Religieux de l'Afrique de l'Ouest [Alliance of West African Religious Leaders – ARAO], and works to empower women and improve their access to health care.

As the father of two college-educated daughters, Izi likes to set an example. “Today, my eldest daughter is head of human resources at a company in London, and my youngest is a branch manager at a bank in Benin. It is entirely logical that an educated girl can become an independent woman, with the resources to support herself and contribute to household expenses, instead of being reliant on her husband.”

In his preaching, the imam emphasizes microfinance tools. “Women from the mosque have started to organize themselves into tontines to support each other,” he explains. He advocates for the principle of female leadership, and in his role as a religious leader has surrounded himself with women, including the mosque’s project manager and corporate secretary.

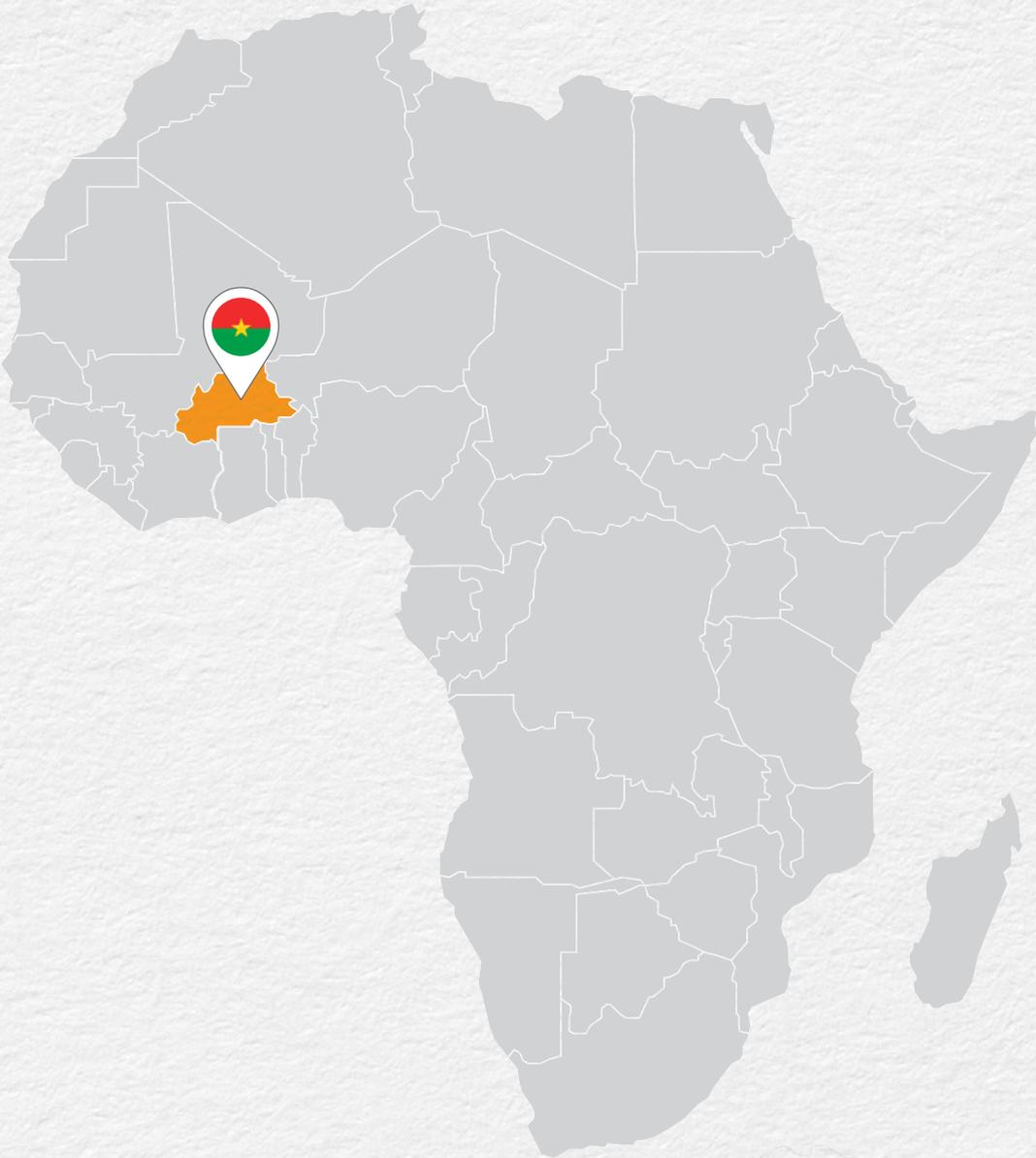
To support the SWEDD project’s aims, he uses his sermons to raise awareness about girls’ education, women’s empowerment, and access to sexual and reproductive health care. “Admittedly, it wasn’t easy in the early days, as our community didn’t want to talk about family planning, assuming it was about limiting births. We helped them understand that managing and spacing births is conducive to the empowerment of women, who can’t look after themselves if they constantly have a baby in their arms.”

This message is not contrary to Islam, explains the imam. “In the time of the Prophet Muhammad, women would become pregnant again just after childbirth. One woman went to see the Prophet, who advised her to practice coitus interruptus, which now equates to condom use. So we managed to convince them.”

The imam constantly advocates for girls’ education, because “having a child who is a successful member of society is a source of pride, and means that parents needn’t worry in their old age. Benin has women ministers, deputies, professors and doctors, and even a female Vice President.” He also recommends that parents listen more carefully when talking with their children. “We worry about our adolescents a lot. They have access to so much information on social networks, and we need to talk to them, especially the girls, about avoiding unwanted pregnancies.”

“A woman who is a successful member of society is a source of pride for her parents”

Burkina Faso





Juliette Compaoré

Juliette is a civil society figure who founded the Association Songui Manégré/Aide au développement endogène [Songui Manégré Association/Supporting Indigenous Development – ASMADE] and works to empower women through vocational training courses run with the support of the SWEDD project.

“You can’t change someone; they have to change themselves.” Juliette, 53, who is involved in a number of voluntary networks, likes to use this quote from her famous countryman, the historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo. A farmer’s daughter, Juliette began her career in the 1990s, supervising 40 women’s groups in charge of cereal banks and grain mills in Oubritenga province. In 1994, Juliette founded the grass-roots development support organization ASMADE, which became an NGO in 2006 and was recognized as a public interest organization in 2015. Now with 145 permanent employees, ASMADE works on women’s empowerment, employability and social protection.

On the ground, ASMADE is supporting the “Female entrepreneurship” component of the SWEDD project in Burkina Faso. With support from other partners, in 2021 it trained 1,620 young women aged 20–30 and 720 adolescent girls, in villages across the country, in producing, preserving and marketing local produce. In addition, 210 adolescent girls who had not attended or who had dropped out of school were trained in various trades.

After their training, some participants went on to set up their own businesses, particularly in the bakery and food-processing sectors. Others found employment in plumbing, mechanics or sewing.

Juliette has invested a great deal of time and energy into women’s professional organization. It is thanks to her work that the collective of women’s food services organizations CARTPL was created in 2008, which is now 5,000 members strong.

“The food processors and caterers were operating alone or in small groups,” Juliette explains. “We supported them to develop a structure, provided training and coaching, and saw them set up their own businesses, become managers and take on positions of responsibility.”

She believes education is the key to empowerment, although there is still much work to be done to change mindsets. “Communities need to create a favourable environment by deconstructing stereotypes about the role and place of women in society,” she points out. “Women can and must contribute to development. All stakeholders need to take stock, starting with women themselves.” Juliette is determined to keep advocating for this.

“Giving women entrepreneurs every opportunity”



Elisabeth Ouédraogo

Ambassador of the Stronger Together campaign launched by the SWEDD project under the theme "Girls' education and women's leadership", this leading figure in the fight for girls' and women's education in Africa founded Scientific Women of Burkina Faso for the Promotion of Scientific and Technological Education of Women (FESCIFA/ PRESCITEF) in 1996.

"Illiteracy is a real handicap in today's society. School doesn't guarantee you a job, but it does give you ways and means to communicate..." Elisabeth, 76, a retired examiner in natural and life sciences, has a key role in defending women's rights in Burkina Faso. She fully supports all the aims of SWEDD's Stronger Together campaign. For her, one of the most important messages the campaign has disseminated through the media is "Don't call me Mrs before I'm 18", which aims to keep girls in school and to tackle child marriage.

She says her journey has centred around "growing awareness", and the conviction that education constitutes both "an essential need and a fundamental right". She herself has never stopped studying, and even today, 56 years after obtaining her secondary education certificate (*baccalauréat*), she is writing a theology dissertation. As a member of the Economic and Social Council of Burkina Faso from 2012 to 2020, she fought hard against the uncontrolled use of chemicals in agriculture. But this former Vice President of the Economic and Social Council is known above all for her unwavering support, from the very start, as President of the FESCIFA/ PRESCITEF.

This organization has tirelessly promoted women's education, and since 2002 has run supplementary classes in mathematics, physical sciences, chemistry and biology for third grade and final year students. This free additional tutoring has been possible thanks to support from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as well as the subscription fees from the organization's members.

"School, an essential need and a fundamental right"

From 2003 to 2017, Elisabeth was also President of the Réseau africain des femmes scientifiques et ingénieurs [African Network of Women Scientists and Engineers – RAFESI], an organization founded in Bamako in 2000. In 2001, she was the inaugural Coordinator of the International Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa (CIEFFA), which was affiliated to the African Union (AU) in 2004. She remains committed to responding to the multiple crises affecting Burkina Faso, particularly in the field of education.



Maïmouna Déné

President of the Association of Albino Women of Burkina Faso (AFAB) and an ambassador for the Stronger Together campaign, Maïmouna promotes the social inclusion of girls and women through education and through access to economic opportunities and to sexual and reproductive health care.

Maïmouna, 43, is taking action on all fronts to end the discrimination she experiences first-hand as a woman with albinism. Patient and self-sacrificing, she is leading a long-term collective battle against the ongoing challenges of “ignorance, social pressures and myths”.

Initially involved in the Association Burkinabè pour l’Inclusion des Personnes Albinos [Burkinabé Association for the Integration of Albino People – ABIPA], where she worked for 10 years, she founded AFAB in 2008 with other women with albinism, “to respond to the specific challenges we experience as women”. The cause gives her life meaning and she says, “As albinism is genetic, I’m also fighting for my children.”

Through her involvement in the SWEDD project’s Stronger Together campaign, she is hoping to raise awareness among a wide audience about girls’ education and their access to economic opportunities and to sexual and reproductive health care, as well as the need to address against gender-based violence and harmful practices. AFAB has signed several agreements, including with the Burkina Faso Ministry of Health, the Slamazone Foundation in Ouagadougou, the Order of Malta’s French Hospitalier Service, and the international NGO Light for the World, based in Austria.

One of its major achievements is “Albiweek”, an annual week run since June 2019 in support of those with albinism, to raise awareness among their families, friends and the general public. Four hundred and fifty albino women and parents of people with albinism have already received training from AFAB in the Centre, Centre-Est and Hauts Bassins regions. Two hundred and eighty of these people attended workshops in saponification (a chemical process used to make soap), 70 attended aviculture courses and 100 attended courses in personal development and self-esteem – the key to all future achievement.

“Improving conditions for albino girls and women”



Kadiiso Ouédraogo

As a beneficiary of the SWEDD project's "Female entrepreneurship" component, in two years Kadiiso went from being an out-of-school adolescent to obtaining a vocational certificate in civil engineering, which will enable her to set up her own business and become financially independent.

Seventeen-year-old Kadiiso lives in the urban commune of Ouahigouya, in the province of Yetenga in northern Burkina Faso. Her dreams were shattered when she had to leave education at the end of primary school due to lack of funds.

After dropping out of school, Kadiiso found herself selling doughnuts to help her aunt, with whom she lived. During this period, she experienced disapproval from some of her

classmates, who were fortunate enough to continue their own education. Her ordeal came to an end when her father told her about the SWEDD project's innovative vocational training programme, "Female entrepreneurship", supported by the Ministry of Women, National Solidarity, Family and Humanitarian Action.

In 2019, she was offered a number of study options at the ministry's provincial branch: electrical engineering, car mechanics, carpentry and civil engineering. This reflects the SWEDD programme's philosophy, which is to offer skills that are both useful and in demand. From 2015 to 2018, SWEDD helped to break down stereotypes about women, with 99,200 girls in six Sahelian countries learning trades considered masculine, such as masonry, motorbike mechanics, welding, driving and maintaining agricultural machinery, or information and communication technologies and the media (radio and visual).

Thanks to the training opportunities offered by the SWEDD project, Kadiiso chose to train in civil engineering. Convinced that women have the same abilities as their male peers and thanks to a grant from the SWEDD project, she obtained her certificate of professional qualification in two years. "This programme has changed my life," she says. With the help of the start-up kit (equipment and working capital) she – along with 270 other adolescent girls trained in Burkina Faso – received in 2021, she hopes to set up her own business and be able to proudly contribute to her family income.

A certificate in civil engineering, despite dropping out of school



Goomzemsé Koalaga

Goomzemsé, a community health worker in the village of Titon in the Nord region, has become a model husband at the age of 50, through the Husbands' and Future Husbands' Clubs. This SWEDD project initiative is designed to involve men more closely in reproductive health and family planning.

Concerned about population well-being due to his job as a community health worker, this polygamous husband, who has two wives and nine children, joined a Husbands' and Future Husbands' Club in 2018. He decided to get involved after the managers of SWEDD "explained the project's benefits to us before it started," he says. "It aims to help us take care of our families, improve their health and foster good understanding and unity between spouses. Before joining the club, I was quite aggressive and didn't consult anyone before making decisions as head of the family."

He says the training enabled him to become "a different man" and a model husband. Goomzemsé has truly changed his behaviour, now helping his wives – Zoudpoko Kogo, 36, and Tinga Kafando, 29 – with household chores. Both women work; Zoudpoko travels to Côte d'Ivoire as a seasonal agricultural worker picking cashew nuts, while Tinga runs a small business brewing millet beer. "I didn't know that a man could help with childcare to make the wife's housework easier, but I do it now. I also help draw water, fetch wood in the bush, wash the children from time to time, and so on. I used to think these were chores for wives. Before the training, we often had minor disagreements, but now we live together peacefully."

"The good relationship between my wife and I has set an example"

As a model husband, Goomzemsé encourages other men to change their attitudes and behaviour by working with his peers to raise awareness, drawing on practical examples from his daily life. Model husbands also work with the health services, accompanying their wives to prenatal consultations to monitor the pregnancy's progress and better manage any difficulties that may arise.

His message: "I encourage heads of families to join the Husbands' and Future Husbands' Clubs, because this programme has changed my life for the better. Many people in the village can testify to this: my family is flourishing and the good relationship between my wives and me has set an example."



Alidou Ilboudo

Teacher and imam Alidou Ilboudo, 53, is married with four children. He lives in Ouagadougou, where he is an authority in his community on issues around “living together” and Islam in general. As a public school teacher, he encouraged his daughters to pursue their studies up to degree level.

As well as being a teacher and educator, Imam Ilboudo is Coordinator of the Burkina Faso Islamic Cultural Centre. Married to Rakièta Sinon, 45, a health officer at the Centre Nord Regional Hospital, this family man is a role model for the SWEDD project, which he benefited from as a member of the Union des religieux et coutumiers du Burkina [Union of Religious and Customary Leaders of Burkina Faso – URCB]. He has taught

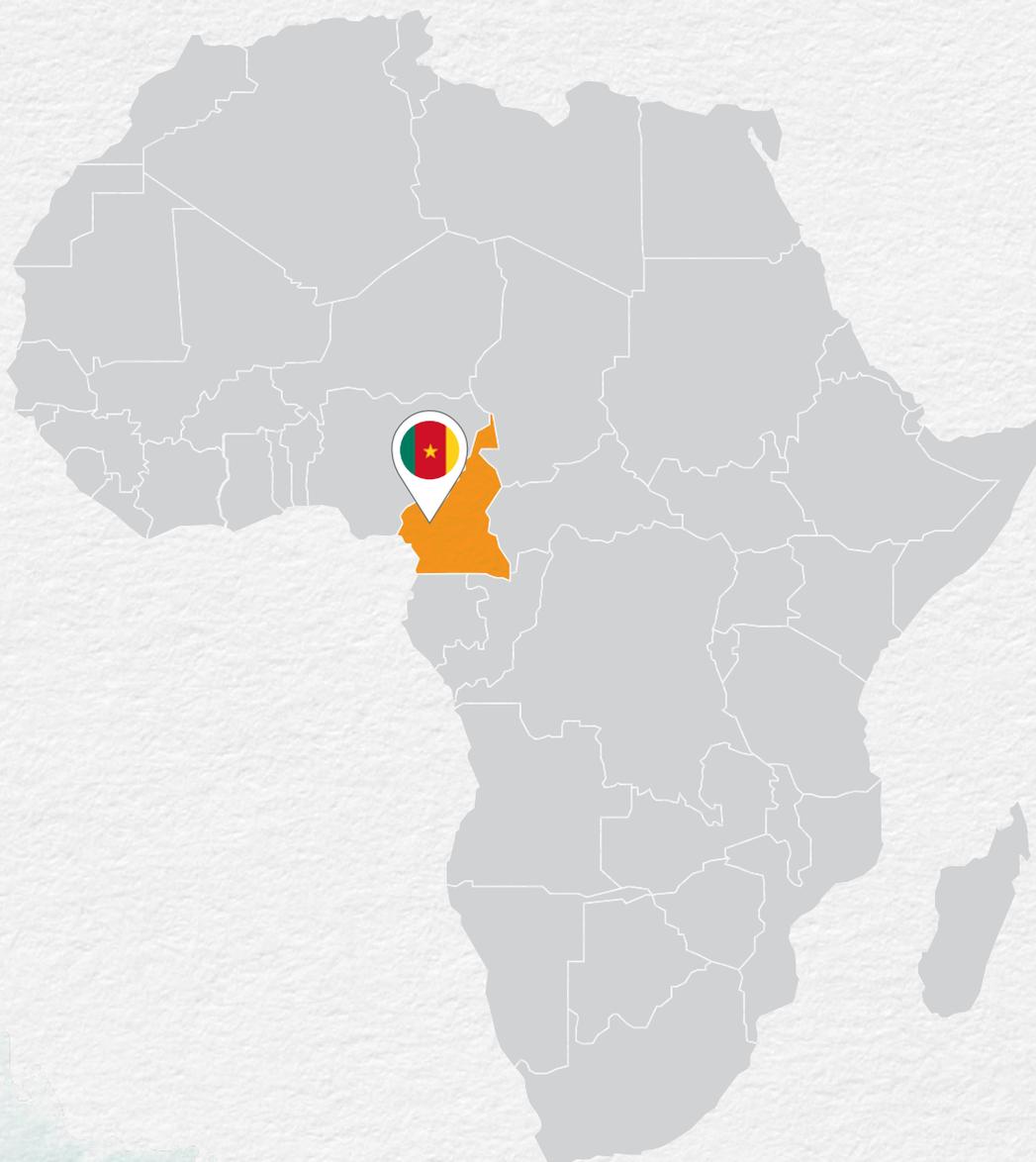
in public schools, where he has encouraged and supported girls to stay in school – particularly his two daughters, who went on to attend higher education up to degree level. “Attitudes must change to reflect people, time and place,” he says. “This changing mindset is an essential break with tradition to create progress.”

Imam Ilboudo has taken part in several SWEDD activities, including developing documents for religious leaders on child marriage, women’s empowerment, training for religious leaders and youth support. He also helped set up the national office of the Burkina Faso traditional communicators network under the SWEDD project, of which he was Secretary-General. On a personal level, he explains that he has learned a better approach to gender issues and also the communication skills needed to bring about behaviour change. Under his leadership, a pool of leaders sympathetic to these emerging issues has been created, with its members providing assistance to families and young people.

He has led advocacy, alongside and towards fellow members of the URCB, in favour of birth spacing, girls’ enrolment and retention in school, women’s entrepreneurship and the fight against child marriage. These actions have helped religious communities become familiar with SWEDD themes. His communications, through the press and public talks, have helped to bring about changes within the Muslim community in Burkina Faso. For example, several imams have set up registers to record marriages.

“Attitudes must change”

Cameroon





Aissa Doumara Ngatansou

As Director of the Association to Combat Violence against Women (ALVF) in Maroua, northern Cameroon, Aissa's commitment has earned her international recognition, including being awarded France's Simone Veil Prize for gender equality in 2019. She works on the same themes as the SWEDD project, for which she is an ambassador under its Stronger Together campaign.

Aissa, 49, found her calling when she rebelled long ago. She was the eldest of her siblings, but was struck by the way her parents treated her differently for being a girl. From the age of 11, she felt treated like a spare part, destined to go to another family. She was forced into marriage against her wishes. "I was promised at 15, married off at 16 and a mother at 18," she says.

"Married off at 16, I protected myself mentally"

She decided to take control of her life and convinced her in-laws to allow her to continue her studies. "I realized that I had to take action for myself and by myself. I protected myself mentally by thinking of myself as a teenager. It was important that I continued to dress like a young person and socialize with my friends, and didn't join a group of wives. Otherwise, it would have been game over for me." As a feminist activist, she has chosen to fight for a change in attitudes towards women.

For a quarter of a century, she has been defending the rights of women in Maroua, capital of Cameroon's Far North, a predominantly Muslim region landlocked between Chad and Nigeria. Since 1998, when she was 26, she has headed the local branch of the ALVF, which she set up after meeting Siké Billé, the Cameroonian sociologist who founded the ALVF in 1991.

The ALVF sets up safe spaces for girls, organizes vocational apprenticeships to empower women, and runs a network of organizations aiming to end child marriage and gender-based violence. "Whistleblower brigades" – teams of 20 people including teachers, religious leaders, parents and pupils – report and expose cases of violence. Between 1998 and 2018, they helped almost 1,200 people.

In March 2019, Aissa received the Simone Veil Prize for gender equality from President Emmanuel Macron in Paris. The first winner of the prize, she was rewarded for her determination and action on behalf of Boko Haram survivors, five years after the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls and the global call to "Bring back our girls".

Since 2014, the armed group's incursions into Cameroon have caused immense damage: children and women have been abducted and forced to become sex slaves and, in some cases, suicide bombers. Aissa and her organization work tirelessly to reintegrate girls who have escaped, and to prevent them being stigmatized.



Djaili Amadou Amal

After publishing her first novel about her experience of polygamy, written following a forced marriage at the age of 17, Djaili put her words into action by founding the organization Femmes du Sahel [Women of the Sahel]. Her organization works in rural areas to get girls into school, and to challenge child marriage and gender-based violence – a topic on which she is preparing to support the SWEDD project.

Born in 1975 to a Cameroonian father and an Egyptian mother, Djaili published her first novel, *Walaande, l'art de partager un mari* [*Walaande, the art of sharing a husband*] (Éditions Ifrikiya) in 2010. This autobiographical account – which follows in the footsteps of Senegalese author Mariama Bâ's famous book attacking polygamy, *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long A Letter*) (1979) – won her immediate acclaim.

Based in Douala, and married to an engineer and writer, the author has since published three novels, including *Les impatientes* (*The Impatient*) (Editions Emmanuelle Collas, Paris, 2020), which won the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens 2020. She describes her journey as “the fulfilment of a childhood dream”.

“Despite not having much access to books in my home town of Maroua, in northern Cameroon, I've always loved reading and kept a diary. As a child, I used to write poetry, not knowing I'd go on to write novels. As a teenager, I had problems like most girls my age in my region, being married off early at 17. Writing allowed me to speak out about my situation and express my feelings.

So I made myself heard in a different way, since social pressure meant I couldn't talk openly about my situation. I got divorced and finished my first manuscript at 21, with no idea at all about the publishing process. I kept it to myself and went on to write a second novel by hand in a notebook. When I decided to leave northern Cameroon and move to Douala, at the age of 29, I set about publishing my first novel.”

Djaili went on to hold a book signing in Maroua, which was attended by representatives from the US Embassy, who invited her to attend a women's civil society leadership programme in the United States in 2012. On her return, she set up the organization Femmes du Sahel, which is based in Douala but works in northern Cameroon.

“Writing allowed me to speak out about my situation”

“I've encouraged girls in high schools to speak out. More than 7,000 of them are more aware due to my novel *Walaande, l'art de partager un mari*. We try to give them the tools they need to protect themselves against violence. Some have reported harassment by teachers or fellow students to the principal. I always give girls my contact details, so they can ask me to step in if they have a dispute with their parents about their future plans. My novel and my organization have a real impact.” In 2022, the novelist also opened a library in Douala, to support girls' education.



Diane Ndarbawa

President of the association for better socioprofessional integration of girls and women in Cameroon (AMIS Cameroun), which she founded in 2020 in Maroua, Diane, 29, is an ambassador for the SWEDD project's Stronger Together campaign.

She lives in the same town as her elder, Aissa Doumara Ngatansou, “a mother figure who’s given me a lot of advice and support”, she explains. Having met through their voluntary activities, Aissa offered Diane guidance and helped her to build her skills.

Married off at 15 and a mother at 18, she divorced her violent husband after her daughter was born. After high school, she decided to take a vocational qualification in management and computerized accounting, which included several work placements. Today, she provides services for companies and voluntary organizations. In particular, she is in charge of monitoring and training at the Association au Secours des

Filles-Mères [Association for the Relief of Young Mothers], in Maroua. “I provide training in the use of digital technology, income-generating activities, group actions, and monitoring in rural areas.”

She has received a great deal of support, including from UN-Women, local organizations and the Cameroon Ministry of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises. Diane takes part in online training courses, as well as international events such as the Generation Equality Forum, held in Mexico City and Paris in 2021 to launch a five-year action plan to make irreversible progress towards gender equality. One of the most recent conferences she attended, the Global Land Forum in Jordan in May 2022, made a strong impression on her: “This wonderful experience taught me a lot about access to land for women and vulnerable people,” she says.

“Becoming empowered role models for our sisters”

She is also a representative of the Action Coalition on Economic Justice and Rights, and a “focal point for girls” for the law enforcement and civil society platform in Cameroon’s Far North region. She says that some of the main barriers she faces are in “access to funding and necessary equipment; traditional and religious constraints on young Sahelian women; and access to information and communication.” Her dream would be to provide a dedicated space for young mothers in her region, “so that they could go from being victims to survivors, have access to training and self-esteem-building tools, and become role models for their sisters.”



Françoise Baba

Françoise, 65, has been Executive President of the Association of Women and Girls of Adamawa (AFFADA) since 2000. She is also one of the community leaders trained by the SWEDD project in August 2022 to propose actions to be implemented in their respective intervention areas. Her advocacy for the elimination of female genital mutilation (FGM) resulted in a bill in 2011 and the amendment of the Code of Criminal Procedure in 2016.

AFFADA, which Françoise set up in 2000 at the age of 41, is active in the Adamawa, North and Far North regions of Cameroon. “Our main battle is to improve women’s contribution to sustainable development in their societies,” she says. After 25 years working as an airline executive, she successfully changed career to work in community development activities and promoting women’s rights.

“AFFADA sees gender equality as a foundation for development, equity, peace and tolerance. As we work in a highly patriarchal environment, we instil the concept of parity in both men and women, and we put a lot of effort into getting women involved in community decision-making circles.”

Since 2016, Françoise has been focusing on getting chiefs to accept women as co-workers. Advocacy was carried out in 16 of the 239 chiefdoms in the three regions covered, and 236 women were given public roles. Although the impact is huge, the task is far from easy. “Cultural constraints mean some people want to keep women out of the picture. It took boldness, patience and persuasion to explain the merits of such an approach, in the face of reluctance and even fierce opposition from certain dignitaries.”

Rather than through grand speeches about parity, Françoise is convinced that tangible change will only come “from the grass-roots, from our villages, and from the traditional chiefdoms that have a lot of power. We’re sure that if the chief agrees to work with women, the knock-on effect will be that the whole community will be treated fairly and women will have their say.”

Two of AFFADA’s other areas of focus are eliminating FGM and combating human trafficking. Advocacy against FGM led to a bill in 2011, elements of which were incorporated into the Code of Criminal Procedure in 2016. “Before, people used to organize parties around female genital mutilation (FGM),” says Françoise. “Nowadays, they do it in secret because the law can impose heavy fines. Those who persist with cutting take girls to neighbouring countries, such as Chad, to perform it.” Since 2015, AFFADA has also been organizing an annual symposium to monitor developments in human trafficking and smuggling, particularly to Gulf countries, and to condemn these practices.

“Involve women in the decision-making circles of traditional chiefdoms”



Achille Pinghané Yonta

Achille has been teaching sociology at the University of Yaoundé I since 2007, specializing in gender and development. He was approached by the SWEDD project to help disseminate its messages, after running a course on the epistemology of gender in 2022 as part of a professional Master's degree.

There are many reasons why Achille, 44, decided to enter a field of study considered feminine. "From a very early age," he recalls, "I innocently observed the arguments between men and women in my society, and they had a profound effect on me. Then, from fourth grade onwards, I lived in the presbytery – a house without women – and I was able to compare it with a traditional home. Due to my social and family status, my curiosity and my research, I attend wedding ceremonies in which people make commitments before the traditional authorities, but it doesn't stop them from later divorcing. I also observed these processes in my first year of university, when I went to court to attend civil hearings in divorce cases."

In 2015, he wrote his thesis on "Dynamics of gender relations in rural west Cameroon: drivers and issues". Its main focus was on analysing the impact of women's empowerment on social cohesion and marital stability. How did those around him react when he chose to work on gender? "Even teachers asked me what's a man going to do about women's issues? When I defended my thesis, a member of the panel asked me if I wanted to be a women's lawyer, and if I was effeminate."

Achille, who publishes in scientific journals, has nevertheless achieved recognition and is in demand for numerous conferences. He works with a variety of organizations, including the international francophone network Genre en Action [Gender in Action] and the US-based global feminist organization Association for Woman's Rights in Development (AWID).

He advocates for "designing women's empowerment projects better, by involving men. Because the main barrier to women's emancipation is men. We need to include them, especially in rural areas where the economy is central to male domination. Empowering women means making them independent from men, which is a source of conflict. We need to raise awareness among men so they understand the benefits of empowering women, who can then contribute to the household economy." He adds, from his perspective as an experienced sociologist, that "for their part, women must understand that their earnings are not reserved for their personal affairs, and that they can also pay bills, which are not the sole prerogative of the husband."

"Men should be involved in all women's empowerment projects"



Ismaïla Bagoudou

Having studied sociology, Ismaïla, 23, advocates for the education and empowerment of girls and women in Garoua, northern Cameroon. He is a facilitator for the SWEDD project's Husbands' Clubs and a member of several organizations, including AJEVOH Cameroun – part of the AfriYAN network with which SWEDD works to mobilize young people.

From a very early age, Ismaïla, the son of shopkeepers, noticed things that prompted him to take action. In 2015, at the age of 16, he joined the North region's Association citoyenne pour les perspectives d'avenir [Citizen's Association for Future Perspectives – ACPA], which advocates for education in general and for girls in particular, promotion of social harmony, and environmental protection. Women's empowerment is a cause particularly close to his heart.

"Because I'm on the ground doing social work for several organizations, I see what goes on and I know how girls suffer every day. I work with them to change their way of seeing things, to encourage them to take the place they deserve in society."

One particular victory marked a turning point for him. "An 18-year-old girl approached me when her parents were considering a forced marriage that would have meant abandoning her studies. I advised her and met her parents, who changed their minds after our conversation. Today, she's continuing her studies."

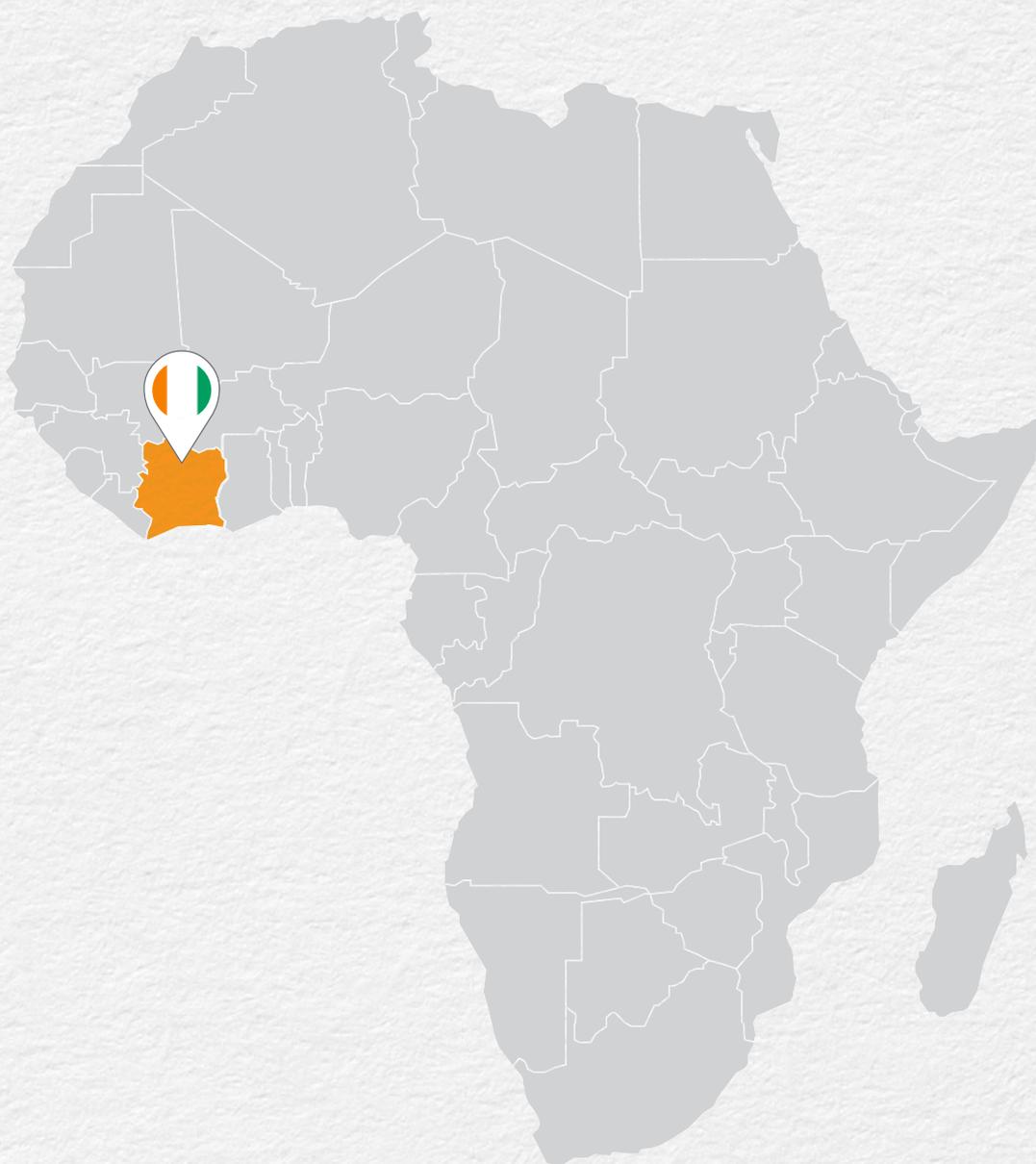
Keen to make an impact, he joined an organization for young humanitarian volunteers (AJEVOH Cameroun) in 2018, then the international humanitarian organization Future Team Cameroon in 2019, for which he is Secretary-General for the Garoua region. He then went on to join the Garoua Youth Solidarity Association in 2020. All these organizations are working to support girls' education.

Since the age of 17, he has volunteered with awareness-raising campaigns run in his region by the Ministry of Youth and Civic Education, to support women's education and entrepreneurship and oppose early marriage and early pregnancy. A member of the Independent Youth Platform for Democracy and Active Citizenship (PIJEDECA), he also manages Itiya Sahel Natural, a company that processes local agricultural products such as corn, hibiscus and ginger, and employs 10 women.

"I know of the suffering young girls go through every day"

Since 2020, Ismaïla has also taken on the role of facilitator in the Husbands' Clubs launched by the SWEDD project. "This exciting project fits in well with the other things I do," he explains. "It includes educational discussions that often address violence against women. This is a recurring theme, and I'm here to advocate for dialogue, which is very important between spouses. I explain, for example, that no one's perfect, and that we may make mistakes, but we have to be able to control ourselves when we're angry, and know how to make amends."

Côte d'Ivoire





Sefora Kodjo

A champion of women's entrepreneurship and an ambassador for the SWEDD project's Stronger Together campaign, Sefora heads up the Sephis Foundation, which runs action programmes and develops partnerships to empower women. She is a focal point for the African Union (AU) FemWise network, and also a member of the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) launched by UN-Women and the AU.

Sefora's fame reached new heights when Barack Obama mentioned her in a tweet in August 2019. The former US President praised this alumna of the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young Africa Leaders programme, alongside a photo, for "helping the next generation of women leaders in Africa rise up." Sefora has also been on the cover of magazines in Côte d'Ivoire for her unwavering support for women's entrepreneurship.

She has multiple degrees: after a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and a Master's degree in Development Studies, she studied international relations at The Hague and strategic project management at Harvard. However, she has not forgotten that she owes her vocation to her mother, with whom she was involved in social action from childhood.

"One day," she recounts, "we went to Yopougon, a working-class district of Abidjan, to donate to Maman Dorcas, who took in orphans.

One teenager started crying after the packs were handed over. I asked her why, and she replied that she would have liked 'to be in my shoes'. She told me she had made sacrifices, such as giving up her studies to look after the other orphans. Her only hope was that they would remember her later and help her in turn. "I thought of all the girls my age who had no ambition because of their social status, and I felt a strong urge to bring them together to take action."

At 31, she already has a long career behind her as President of the Sephis Foundation, which she launched in 2009 at the age of 19, and which earned her the 2018 AU prize for the best women's training initiatives in Africa. Now a Partner Champion for UN-Women, her organization has forged partnerships with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Obama Foundation and GIZ (the German Development Agency). At one time, she also held positions at the Ministry of Youth Promotion and was made director of the Spokesperson's Office at the Ministry of Communication and Media. She left these positions in 2019 to devote her time to the Sephis Foundation.

"Leadership is first and foremost a state of mind"

Its flagship programme, African Women of the Future, is aimed at women entrepreneurs aged 18–35, providing training to help them grow their businesses. To date, it has helped to accelerate 250 companies. A second programme, Peace Heart-Peace Home, specifically targets police officers, who have been provided with capacity-building to tackle gender-based violence more effectively. Finally, the Sephis Tour involves a roadshow travelling the country raising awareness among adolescent girls about leadership, community involvement and academic excellence.

The only constraint Sefora experiences is that of her youth, which pushes her to "prove her skills". The type of leadership she is trying to share is "first and foremost a state of mind", she says. Her advice is to "have confidence in yourselves; be aware of your abilities and the positive impact you can bring to your communities."



Syrah Sy Savané

Syrah, 50, is the project manager for gender and women's empowerment at the National Observatory for Equality and Gender, through the team at the Ministry of Women, Families and Children. She is also a contact person for the SWEDD project in Côte d'Ivoire.

An expert on gender and women's empowerment, Syrah has been working for the National Observatory for Equality and Gender since 2015, following five years as a research officer at the Ministry of Women, Families and Children, in the Department of Equality and Gender Promotion. A graduate of the national training college for social workers, she previously worked as a school peace educator and in early childhood education in Azito, a district of Abidjan.

Her motivation stems directly from her own childhood. "I was raised by my paternal grandmother in Diokoué, a village in north-west Côte d'Ivoire. All my aunts were forced into early marriages. I was sent to stay with them after they got married; I kept them company and saw that they were very unhappy. I lost a cousin following cutting. My aunts also wanted to cut me, but my father, who was a teacher, wouldn't

let them. I watched his fight against female genital mutilation (FGM). My difficult childhood, full of sadness and tears, prompted me to take competitive exams to become a social worker."

After being appointed to the ministry, she was involved in child protection projects, including the plan to accelerate action to end child marriage (PALMP) from 2013 to 2015.

"I was already a member of the technical working group to address teenage pregnancy in schools. Statistics showed much lower figures for the north and east of the country than for the centre and south. A field survey found that girls were being taken out of school in these regions to be married off. Pregnancies outside school were not being counted, and girls were being left behind. So we had to create a favourable environment to keep these girls in school or get them back into the classroom."

PALMP targets 12 of the country's 36 regions, including the North. "We had to target not the students, but the parents who wanted their daughters married, as well as community leaders and religious figures." Teams travel to these regions to carry out awareness-raising activities, with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) first, and then from the SWEDD project since 2017. Syrah helped to draft the subproject on gender, and then to implement it with local NGOs. This enabled the project to be extended to 20 regions from 2020.

"SWEDD has something unique," she says. "The project was put together by technical staff who were already working on the ground. It takes into account all the needs of vulnerable girls affected by early marriage – self-esteem, tools to negotiate their age of entry into marriage, knowledge of their rights, and decision-making. Together with the safe spaces and Husbands' Clubs, the project has been a beacon of light in regions where girls thought they had no rights."

"SWEDD has been a beacon of light in regions where girls thought they had no rights"



Ruth Amadine Oro Tanon

Twenty-one-year-old Ruth is studying for a degree in communications at Félix Houphouët-Boigny University in Abidjan. She is one of the SWEDD project's Stronger Together ambassadors, because of her charisma and dedication.

Coming from a family of 12 brothers and five sisters, she began her fight for women's rights in high school. "It all started when I was 17," she says. "Like other girls my age, I had decided to have sex, because I felt grown-up. My high school supervisor told me there was going to be a meeting about sexual health. I came out of the workshop motivated to pursue my studies,

because what I had been about to do would've disrupted them." In her final year of secondary school, Ruth raised awareness among her classmates of the dangers of early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Her enthusiasm saw her selected as a panelist for another training session.

"I use contraceptive methods to avoid unwanted pregnancies," Ruth says unashamedly in a video message for the Stronger Together campaign run by the SWEDD project across the Sahel.

Now a member of the student association for the Department for Women in Information and Communication Sciences, she promotes women's leadership and their integration into economic and social life. "I give talks to girls, which had proved successful in my high school, where I went from class to class." She says that the main problem facing female students is poverty. "Their parents don't have the resources, so female students don't know how to afford food or fees. They're left to their own devices and want to be like everyone else, which can put them at risk of bad influences and dangerous behaviour."

"Success is a priority"

Her classmates see her as a role model, respecting her strength of character and determination. "I put my heart and soul into women's development activities," she says. For her, a woman leader is "one who knows her strengths and weaknesses, who sets a good example through her actions, and for whom success is a priority, which leads her to push her limits and work hard."



Philomène Tia Glao

Philomène is a prominent figure in the city of Man in western Côte d'Ivoire. She is recognized nationally for her business achievements, heading up a major agricultural cooperative in the Tonkpi region to empower women, and is an ambassador for the SWEDD project's Stronger Together campaign.

Philomène is what is known as a “self-made woman”: chair of a cooperative; a herdsman; a coffee, cocoa and rubber planter; and an entrepreneur in hospitality, transport and construction. Starting from nothing, this village girl from the Tonkpi region has built her fortune step by step, investing and reinvesting in her own diversification.

Her story begins some 50 years ago in a polygamous, impoverished and very large family of 42 children, including seven boys. At the age of 9 and having never attended school, her father offered her in marriage to a man in his seventies, for a dowry of 35,000 CFA francs – the amount her father needed to pay the school fees for one of his sons, who was starting secondary school. The potential husband declined the offer, but it was only a matter of time. At the age of 18, Philomène was forced into marriage, becoming the seventh wife of a 65-year-old man.

In her new home, she obtained a one-hectare plot from a neighbour so she could grow peanuts. With no capital to buy seeds, she worked in neighbouring plantations for 600 CFA francs a day. Her first

harvest provided her with 70 bags of peanuts, the proceeds of which she reinvested. She started a small fish business near the border with Guinea, and in one year generated sales of 3 million CFA francs, which she used to buy a truck in Abidjan to sell fish.

She then went into cattle breeding and acquired land. She currently owns 30 hectares for growing rubber, another 30 for cocoa and another 10 for oil palm. The political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire in 2000 forced Philomène into exile in Guinea, but on her return to the country she got back on her feet financially by collecting bottles, which she then resold, saving up to buy a drinks depot. She chartered a bus to transport older people who need to travel to the city to collect their pensions. In a matter of months, her business grew into a company, Maindeba Transport, which now has 70 buses and 400 employees. She was named as the leading carrier in Côte d'Ivoire in 2014, and two years later she received the Prix d'Excellence from the President of the Republic, Alassane Ouattara.

In addition to her four companies operating in transport, distribution (Tia Distribution), construction (SIATP-CI) and hospitality (Hôtels Golou Marie), she chairs the Tonkpi cooperative society of agricultural and food producers, which was founded in 2020. She has donated two trailer trucks to this group of 3,200 women in western Côte d'Ivoire, 1,000 of whom are in the city of Man. She sums up her motivation as “Men have ten fingers, women have ten fingers, so they can do anything too.”

The cooperative produces and markets bananas, yams, avocados, peppers and tomatoes, as well as the cassava dishes attiéké and placali, which are sold in the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Sierra Leone.

The cooperative's women members have received training in capacity-building, run in partnership with the NGO CARE International. They were awarded the national Prix d'Excellence in 2022, presented by the President of the Republic and accompanied by 10 million CFA francs in prize money. In the absence of a wholesale market in Man to sell their products, they chose to use these funds – and their own finances – to build one.

Self-made woman

“Hard work pays off, but you have to be very patient to get there,” concludes Philomène, who has no intention of stopping yet. Her plans include building a college for livestock farming and a cassava-processing plant.



Lucien Sedia

The head imam of the Ikra mosque, in the Lycée Club district of Man in western Côte d'Ivoire, Lucien is a lawyer by training and ardent supporter of women's causes who is taking part in the Stronger Together campaign launched by the SWEDD project.

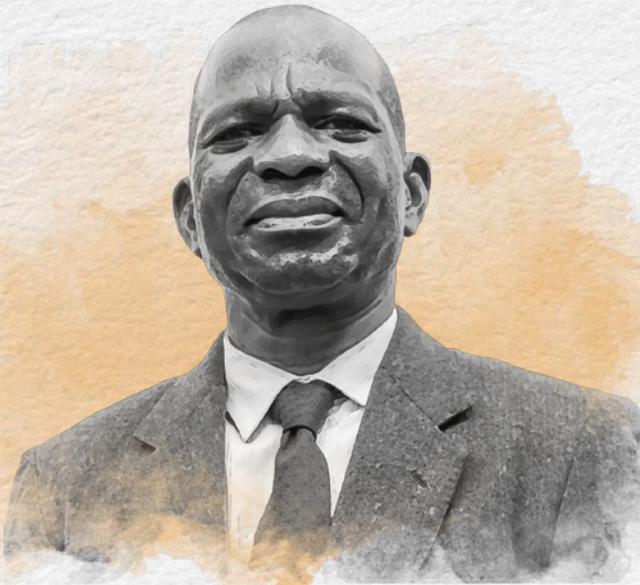
Lucien holds a Master's degree in Human Resources Management and is the father of five children (one girl and four boys). He raises them as he himself was raised: in complete gender equality. His parents treated their sons and daughters equally, entrusting them with household chores, sending them to the market, letting them play in the fields and ensuring that their daughters had as much time as the boys to study their lessons.

"More education and greater autonomy for women and girls – a collective challenge"

His father, he recalls, intervened to stop aunts from asking his daughters to do housework or baby-sit for them. Today, he is as proud as ever of his three sisters: "They're all highly educated and hold senior positions in the civil service."

As an imam, Lucien has witnessed situations in his region of Tonkpi that he considers "disastrous" for young girls and women: "I know a father who completely refuses to send his daughters to school. Not enrolling a child in school is like burying them alive! Even to be a cleaner, you need a basic diploma. Another example: if parents neglect to get birth certificates for their children, the children will suffer very serious consequences. They won't have ID cards or passports, and won't be able to apply for anything. It's a recipe for producing delinquents, a threat to society."

Through his association Ikra communauté des croyants [Ikra community of believers], he appeals to and constantly raises awareness in his community, particularly about the process for obtaining birth certificates for children. His messages have an impact on those around him, as he has seen in his own family: "A young cousin finally sent her daughter to school." During his sermons in the mosque, and his conversations in town, he urges not only the authorities, but also religious leaders, parents and girls themselves to work to improve women's well-being. "More education and greater financial autonomy for them – that represents a collective challenge," he says. "Everyone needs to do their bit."



Robert Gla

Robert, 56, a teacher on secondment as head of examinations and testing at the Bondoukou Inspectorate of Pre-school and Primary Education, is also the head of the Dan community in eastern Côte d'Ivoire. As part of the Stronger Together campaign, he has been identified as one of the community leaders to receive training and awareness-raising in promoting girls' education, for which he is a strong advocate.

Robert is father to three daughters and closely monitors their schooling, as well as that of the pupils in Bondoukou, his town close to the Ghana border. "During the primary level exams, which involve compositions and essays several times a year, my job is to carry out checks in the schools. My job gives me a good understanding of the problems that girls face in their education." As head of the Dan community (a people from western Côte d'Ivoire who form a minority

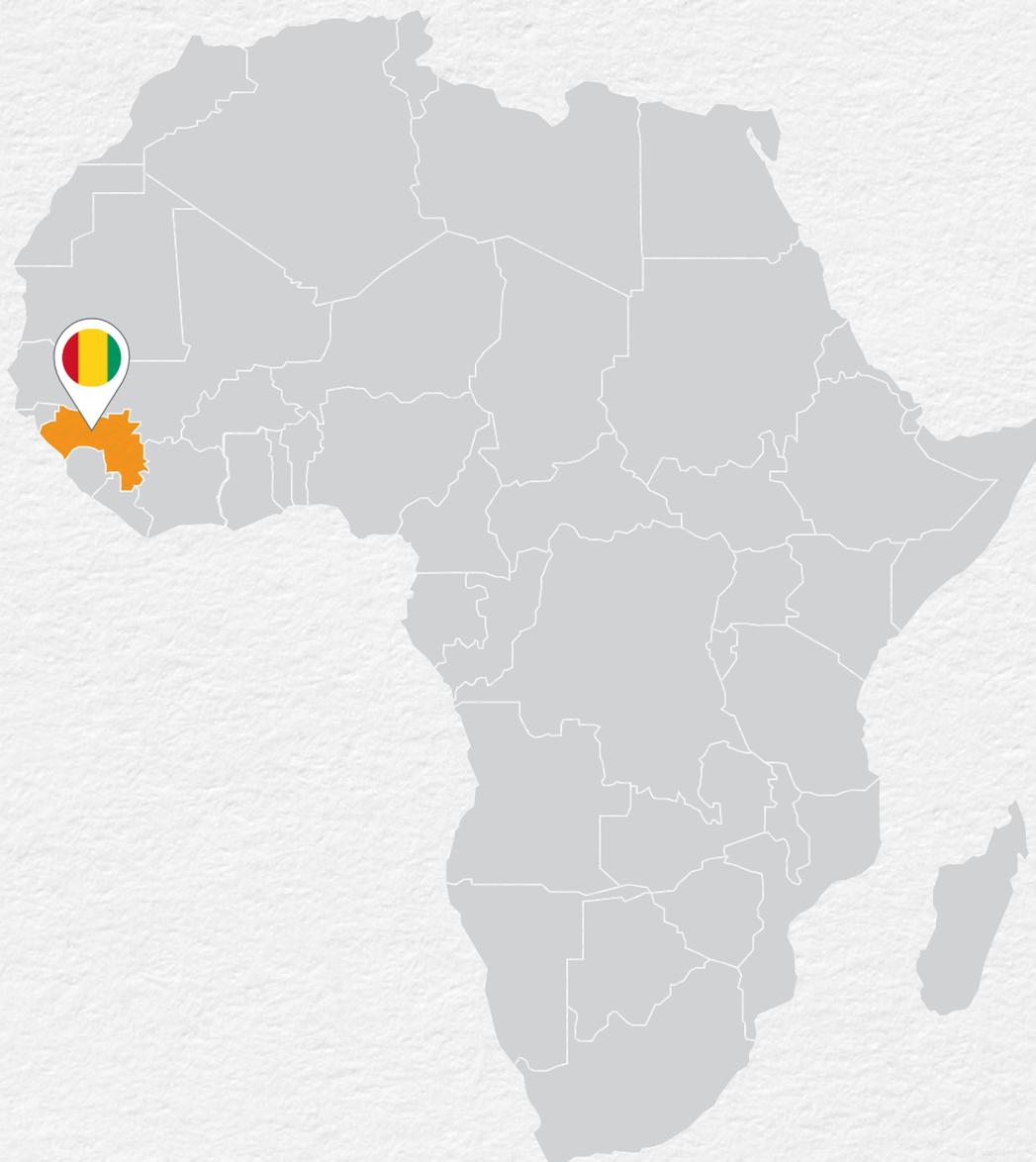
population in Bondoukou), he also explains to the 120 members of his association "what exemplary behaviour we, as parents, can adopt to look after girls and prevent early pregnancies."

In his opinion, poverty remains the main obstacle to keeping girls in school. "Our schools are co-educational and overcrowded," Robert explains. "There are no longer any single-sex boarding schools for either boys or girls, although my whole generation attended them. Today, the way that local colleges work means that pupils leave their villages to move to the city, where they live all over the place. When they've spent the small amount of money their parents gave them at the start of the school year, the children are left to fend for themselves. Who's going to feed these girls? They'll then accept advances from men so they can eat, which results in early pregnancies and failure at school."

Another challenge Robert has observed in Bondoukou is child marriages and the flow of girls leaving their homes at a very young age to work as maids in the capital, Abidjan. "And this is despite them doing better at school than boys," notes the former teacher. "The solutions offered by the SWEDD project are very welcome in addressing these problems, and they should be extended. Communication is a fundamental challenge: we need to involve parents from poor families, so they realize the benefits of ensuring girls finish their education! They must be able to complete their studies, whether in primary or secondary education." Robert strives to share this message with everyone around him.

"Ensuring girls finish their education"

Guinea





Kadiatou Konaté

This 21-year-old activist is co-founder of the Young Girl Leaders Club of Guinea, (CJFLG) and an ambassador for the Stronger Together campaign. She advocates for girls' and women's empowerment by standing up against gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage.

“Change starts at home: it’s you, it’s us, it’s me and it’s for Guinea. To ensure girls flourish, we need to be passionate about our individual and collective commitment.” These were Kadiatou’s words in Labé in May 2022, at the official launch of the SWEDD project in Guinea.

This charismatic and determined young activist co-founded CJFLG in 2016, at the age of 15, with fellow activist Hadja Idrissa Bah, a very vocal figure on social networks against child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). She is executive director of this organization, which has over 500 members across the country, aged

10–24 years. She explains that her goal is to “ensure girls live in safer, more secure spaces.” Guinea has the second highest rates of FGM in the world (after Somalia), with a prevalence rate of over 95 per cent.

Kadiatou takes action through community discussions, educational talks with girls, networking and collaboration with other organizations, as well as through women’s empowerment and “positive masculinity”. CJFLG also speaks out against certain situations, and steps in to enforce the law by preventing child marriages or having them annulled, or by preventing cases of FGM.

Kadiatou travels the world to make her voice heard at meetings and conferences, and has also organized some herself. For example, in 2022, CJFLG held the second Guinean Girls’ Forum in Conakry, on the theme of “Sexual violence in Guinea: what are the challenges?”. This was an opportunity to condemn practices such as sexual harassment. “Today, many young women believe that to get a job, they have to sleep with the boss, even if they don’t want to,” Kadiatou explained in a programme on TV5MONDE. “In intellectual circles, too, use of the ‘casting couch’ is widespread. At school, we even talk about ‘sexually transmitted grades’ – girls sleep with their teachers to get good grades. People think it’s normal, but it’s assault.”

Voted Teenager of the Year 2020 by the French youth newspaper *L’Actu*, Kadiatou also received the AllAfrica Women’s Leadership Award 2020. She says that the barriers to the CJFLG’s work include “sociocultural constraints, poor enforcement of legislation, the lack of effective care for victims and the absence of an integrated support centre for them” – all the more reason to keep up the fight.

“Change starts at home”



Aïcha Bah Diallo

A chemist by training and a teacher by trade, Aïcha, 80, has been Minister of Education for Guinea and Director of Basic Education for the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). A knowledgeable speaker of multiple languages, she has received numerous awards, founded several networks and is an internationally respected figure. She is one of the ambassadors for the Stronger Together campaign because of her lifelong commitment to girls' education.

A member of UNESCO's Liaison Committee and the awards committee for the Mo Ibrahim Foundation Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, this former Minister of Education for Guinea is always hard at work in her chosen field. In May 2022, she was appointed chair of the board of directors of the National Service for Foreign Scholarships (SNABE) in Conakry.

The measures she introduced as Minister of Education from 1989 to 1996 doubled the number of students enrolled, from 113,000 to 233,000.

"Poverty was the main problem," she recalls, "as well as the distance between schools and homes, which made girls even more vulnerable. For them to stay in school and succeed, we also had to focus on the quality of education, including gender-sensitive teachers and teaching materials, and making parents aware of the need for education for all."

Aïcha has taken action on several fronts, including encouraging girls to study mathematics and science, with the help of a scholarship programme. She has enabled adolescent mothers to return to school after the birth of their child, and launched the establishment of Nafa centres, which provide a second chance at education for out-of-school children.

From 1996 to 2005, she was responsible for education policy at UNESCO, where she was appointed to help improve women's education in least developed countries. Her acclaimed work positioned her as a champion of educational reform in Africa. She progressed from Director of Basic Education to Deputy Director General for Education, then Deputy Director General.

"Every year of education reduces poverty"

In 2005, she helped set up the Association for Strengthening Higher Education for Women in Africa (ASHEWA) and was appointed Special Advisor to the Director General of UNESCO for Africa, a position she held until 2009.

"The significant positive effect of education on earned income is well established," she says. "Each additional year of education results in an increase of around 20 per cent, and directly contributes to poverty reduction. Gender equality, health for all, tolerance and peace, environmental protection, economic development: society has everything to gain from this."



Hawa Keïta

Hawa, 54, is a secondary school history teacher and chair of the Association d'aide pour la promotion de la femme [Association for the Advancement of Women – AAPF], set up in the Faranah prefecture in 1998. She takes action against female genital mutilation (FGM) and for keeping girls in school, including through a weekly radio broadcast on women's rights.

Every Tuesday, Hawa and a presenter host a show on Radio Bambou, in the town of Faranah, 426 km east of Conakry. "It's an interactive programme about promoting women and their rights," she explains. "People call in and ask questions about practical issues that directly concern them." This is how she received a call about a woman who had died immediately after giving birth to Siamese twins in a village. Hawa made every effort to evacuate the infants by helicopter to Conakry, where they underwent an operation in February 2021 that successfully separated the two boys, who are now in her care.

At the age of 29, the teacher founded her organization to help keep girls in school. She explains that she herself was "lucky enough to have a father who was a war veteran, and who kept a close eye on his children's studies". The issue of girls gradually dropping out of school is still a cause for concern.

"There may be 40 ten-year-old girls enrolled in 4th grade, then 20 the following year and only 10 twelve-year-old girls in 6th grade. At this level, boys are in the majority, as girls marry early or drop out of school, with their families fearing they will become pregnant." Her organization raises awareness among parents, and looks after girls who have left their villages to study in town, and then dropped out of school.

Influenced by her own cutting and the suffering she endured, Hawa is also committed to the fight against FGM. For example, she set up generation dialogues in five sub-prefectures in 2000, in partnership with the Germany Development Agency (GIZ). "During our surveys, we noticed a lack of communication between girls and their mothers, and between boys and their fathers. The children themselves asked for a space for dialogue, which was set up, between adolescents and adults who were not related, but who could learn about and take on board each other's views through intermediaries. We held discussion groups of 10 people each to talk about FGM."

Addressing FGM by removing the barrier of lack of information

In partnership with the German non-governmental organization Intact, her organization has also launched "cutting-free initiation camps" in three sub-prefectures. The idea is to suggest that parents preserve part of the tradition, by allowing "Sema" midwives to go into the bush with girls to initiate them and prepare them for life as a woman and for marriage, while abandoning the practice of FGM. These approaches have helped overcome one of the greatest barriers Hawa encounters in the fight against FGM: "the lack of information".



Camara Aminatou Barry

Camara is a former Minister of Tourism, as well as a former Minister of Post and Telecommunications. Since her retirement in 2018, as an ambassador for the SWEDD project's Stronger Together campaign, she has been leading grass-roots actions against child marriage and in support of girls' education, in her role as a local elected official in the Fouta Djallon region.

After a successful career, Camara, who was born in 1952, saw her life take a new turn after her retirement. In 2018, she was elected to a five-year term as Daralabé's first vice-mayor, with 40 per cent of the vote from a list of independents. In this rural commune of 12,000 people, 19 km from Labé in the Fouta Djallon region, her work focuses on the future of girls and on environmental protection. "I chose to go to the village to have more impact, and I'm very happy to be working on the ground," she says.

She is constantly raising awareness among parents and local authority staff of the importance of enrolling and keeping girls in school. "The shortage of teachers and the poverty of parents are obstacles to female emancipation," she notes. "We have as many, if not more, girls than boys in primary school, but as soon as girls turn 15 or 16,

their parents take them away to marry them off." She argues for girls to stay in school and against child marriage at communal councils, attended by representatives of numerous associations.

Daralabé is one of 40 "convergence" communes in Guinea, where technical and financial partners, in particular United Nations organizations, are working together to improve their impact. The town has a local child protection council, local "children and families" councils and village organizations. "Some people agree to inform us when an underage girl is due to be married off," she explains. "In one case, we gave one girl a sewing machine and explained to her parents that she could get married when she turned 18. Parents prefer to marry their daughters off early rather than risk the shame of adolescent pregnancy. To convince them, I explain the physical dangers of early marriage and use my own example: I tell them that my parents put me through school and my husband agreed to let me do a doctorate, which enabled me to conduct high-level work that earned me respect."

Camara is also encouraging the women of Daralabé to organize themselves into agricultural groups, so they can process fonio and corn and increase their margins. She is an advisor to the Daralabé "Let's eat Guinean" group, which is made up of around 20 women who have fonio husking machines. "Small steps are being taken, although some behaviours are still entrenched. A project like SWEDD will be very beneficial, because as soon as women are independent, they realize the importance of going to school, having work and not being dependent on a husband." Camara has set up a WhatsApp group of women friends in Daralabé, which has 150 members. She can see the changes happening: "Even to use a telephone, you need to know how to write. Women are aware of the benefits of education, and they fight to ensure that their children, both boys and girls, go to school."

"I explain to parents the physical dangers of early marriage"



Morissanda Kouyaté

Morissanda, 71, is a doctor and Minister of Foreign Affairs for Guinea, and was co-winner of the United Nations 2020 Nelson Mandela Prize for his work on behalf of women and against female genital mutilation (FGM). In 1984, in Dakar, he helped set up the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC), of which he was Executive Director.

Morissanda, then a young doctor aged 32, was prompted to take action by the death of pre-adolescent twins in 1983, due to haemorrhage following FGM. The tragedy occurred in his home town of Kouroussa, in north-west Guinea. Despite his own wife donating blood, there was nothing he could do to save these patients. The tragic event left its mark on him, inspiring him to “fight to avenge Hassanatou and Housseynatou”. Since then, he has talked with FGM practitioners and communities, which has sometimes attracted threats from religious fanatics.

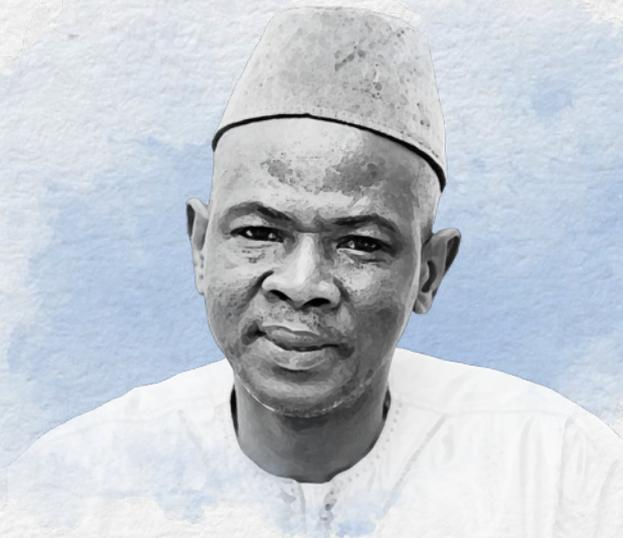
“Cutting has nothing to do with Islam, nor with male circumcision,” he insists. “The mapping of FGM shows that this practice, which pre-dated the pharaohs in Egypt, migrated south and west towards Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Chad, Nigeria and as far as Guinea.”

In 1984, Morissanda co-organized a meeting in Senegal with representatives from 16 African countries to form the IAC – an organization that has since campaigned with its partners to eliminate FGM, an issue he campaigns on relentlessly. Now comprising 23 countries, the IAC continues its awareness-raising and advocacy work.

Morissanda co-authored United Nations resolution 67/146 on eliminating FGM, which still affects more than 200 million women worldwide, particularly in Africa. When the resolution was adopted on 20 December 2012, he gave the V sign for victory in the General Assembly Hall at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. “Hassanatou and Housseynatou, you’ve won,” he said. “Cutting is condemned to death, and you will have helped save millions of girls.”

On the progress made in West Africa, he comments that “girls and women are colleagues in the fight. I’m no longer the one trying to protect them; they’re protecting themselves and I stand by them.” There has also been another reversal: “At the start, we used to hide to fight against FGM, but now it’s those who practise it who are hiding.” He is convinced that this “absurd” practice will one day be eradicated.

“Women are protecting themselves and I stand by them”



Souleymane Camara

A lawyer by training, Souleymane is head of the conventions and legislation unit at the National Department for the Promotion of Women and Gender within the Ministry of Women, Children and Vulnerable Persons. He is also the focal point for the National Programme for Accelerating the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Souleymane is a male role model, and is actively involved in implementing the SWEDD project, which was launched in Guinea in 2022.

Souleymane, 55, has many years of expertise gained on the ground. Recruited by the Ministry of Women's Affairs as a paralegal in 1998, his first task was to improve community justice. "We were deployed to legal aid centres in districts of Conakry, to advise and guide women in need. I was working in the commune of Dixinn and I discovered that women's rights were not being observed, in terms of marriage and inheritance. Women could be beaten and abandoned, which I found abhorrent."

From 2000 to 2007, he was the UNICEF focal point for the National Department for the Promotion of Women and Gender, responsible for setting up regional committees for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Since 2008, as coordinator of the National Programme for Accelerating the Abandonment of FGM, he has been working with

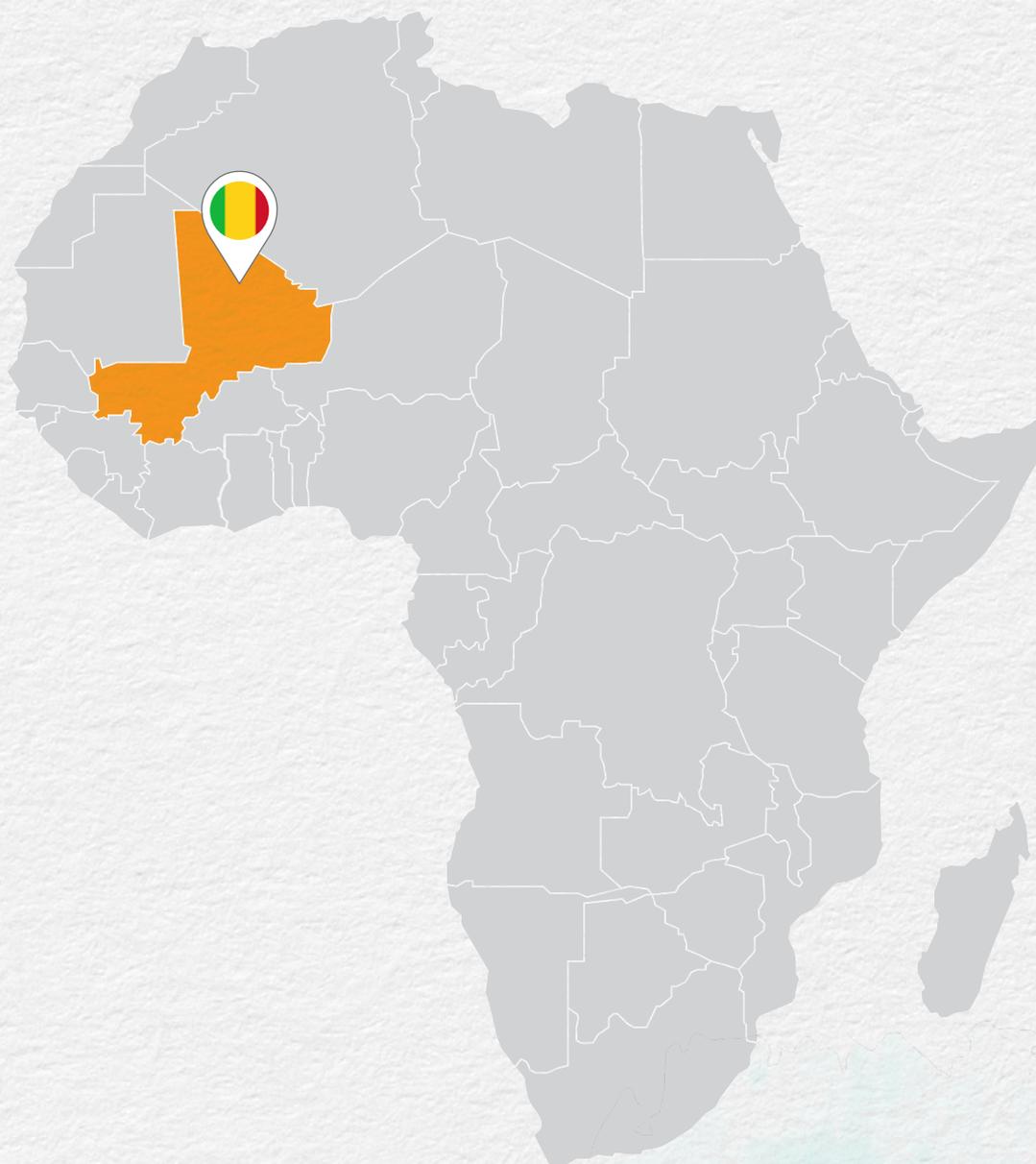
both Christian and Muslim religious figures. "FGM has no religious boundaries," he explains.

Working with the SWEDD project, he is already much more than just a male role model ready to share his experience. For example, he coordinates the field team managing cases of women's rights violations, and provides women with advice, guidance, mediation and support. He was also responsible for setting up a national database on gender-based violence and FGM in 2022, and he oversees monitoring of public declarations on abandoning FGM and child marriage, made by districts and villages with the encouragement of the authorities. "Between 2021 and 2022, 763 villages made these declarations," he explains. "The programme involves committees to monitor the commitments made, as well as to identify and protect girls at risk of FGM and child marriage, through female mentors and male role models in each community."

"As it is a social norm, FGM represents a major challenge"

There are currently 610 female mentors monitoring and supporting 53,000 girls who have not been subjected to FGM and 28,700 unmarried girls. There is still much work to be done, but Souleymane highlights the changing trends. The latest Demographic and Health Survey carried out by the Ministry of Planning in 2018 shows FGM prevalence of 39 per cent in the 0–14 age group, compared with 94.5 per cent in the 15–49 age group. "Compared with 2012, these figures show a drop of 6 percentage points among children and 2.5 percentage points among adults. Since FGM is a social norm in all regions and among all ethnic and religious groups in Guinea, it represents a major challenge. It will probably take two generations to eradicate it completely." Another positive development is that penalties for FGM offences are becoming increasingly severe, with the 2000 law banning the practice, and the Criminal Code revised in 2016 now enforced by judges specifically trained on the issue. "There's no longer any question of getting away with suspended prison sentences and minor fines," says Souleymane. "In 2022, more than 25 people were referred to the courts and sentenced to up to six months in prison."

Mali





Fatoumata Dramé

Fatoumata was part of the first cohort of 105 midwives recruited in Bamako in 2018, to be deployed by the SWEDD project in community health centres across 15 regions. The initiative improves access to health care and aims to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates and increase assisted childbirth in peri-urban and rural areas.

“I work with very vulnerable populations and learn about their hardships, which takes me out of my comfort zone,” says the 32-year-old midwife, recruited by the SWEDD project in Bamako in 2018. After being assigned to Seribila, a village in the Sikasso region of south-eastern Mali, bordering Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso, Fatoumata gradually got to know the rural way of life. She has formed a close relationship with the local population, and provides unwavering care, moral support and medicines.

The maternal mortality rate in Mali is 368 deaths per 100,000 live births. The under-five mortality rate is higher in rural areas (113 per cent) than in towns (64 per cent), according to the latest national health survey. The country’s 1,275 midwives are concentrated in towns, and there are only 4.8 doctors or nurses per 10,000 women.

Due to her concern about women’s well-being, Fatoumata created Bendougou (“the village of understanding” in the Dioula language), an organization for women who produce shea butter. “I brought the women together to set up a weekly tontine to develop local savings capacity, through a contribution of 50 CFA francs every Friday.”

Fatoumata is happy to be helping improve community health indicators, and she is delighted to have seen the SWEDD project scale up in 2020. In her view, it is “rare to see a project involving more than 320 midwives over 30 months, and that increases the number of working midwives by 8 per cent.”

In addition, Fatoumata’s own skills have been strengthened through clinical mentoring and ongoing training. “In terms of my family,” she says, “the project has enabled me to improve my income and contribute to my family’s expenses. My husband now consults me more on family decisions.” Her wish is for “this remarkable project to be continued and supported by the Government of Mali”.

“I work as a midwife with very vulnerable populations”



Mariam Koné

A beneficiary of the SWEDD project, Mariam set up her own business with support from the non-governmental organization (NGO) Agir [Act], using funding from the SWEDD project for girls' and women's education and empowerment.

In the commune of Dialakorodji, it is unusual to be a female painter and decorator at the age of 28. Mariam, a divorced mother, is proud of her new skills. She was one of a cohort of 519 people trained in innovative trades through the SWEDD project in Mali in 2019, with funding of 449 million CFA francs.

The housework she used to do as a housewife is now a thing of the past. "My husband was a factory worker and his income wasn't enough to cover all the household expenses," she explains. "I felt isolated at home, with no hope or any support from my family, being an orphan." Her husband's behaviour led her to divorce him, and to fight for her future and that of her children.

Having dropped out of school, Mariam responded to a call by the SWEDD project in 2018 to recruit girls and women who had left school and provide them with innovative vocational training in the building and public works sector. After being informed and guided by a town hall official who knew her situation, she received her training through the NGO Agir, chaired by former First Lady Keïta Aminata Maïga.

Of the 519 girls and women selected, 93 chose painting, 153 electrical engineering, 93 plumbing, 27 refrigeration and air conditioning, 120 hairdressing and beauty, and 33 dressmaking. The six months of training enabled her to start out in 2019, first with day rates, then negotiating contracts for entire buildings. "I'm happy to say that the support has meant everything to me. I'm managing to pay my three children's school fees, my rent and other expenses."

Far from being singled out because she works in a traditionally masculine profession, she is encouraged by her community, and often held up as an example by the authorities and the media. She has already trained two girls who work with her on-site, to her "great satisfaction". Mariam, who plans to set up her own business and hire more women, also praises the participatory approach of the SWEDD project. "It's designed for all beneficiary communities, local authorities, women and young people. The best way to tackle unemployment and girls dropping out of school is to give them a second chance to succeed in life. Vocational training is the only guarantee of empowerment."

A second chance through painting



Fatoumata Konaté

A beneficiary of the innovative training courses delivered by the SWEDD project across Mali since 2019, Fatoumata has taken her first steps in her career as a photographer and videographer.

At the age of 27, she is well known as a photographer and videographer in Koulikoro, a town on the banks of the Niger River, 60 km north-east of Bamako. Like so many others, she dropped out of school due to adolescent pregnancy. Without work after the birth of her daughter, she was signposted by the Malian non-governmental organization (NGO) Action pour la formation et l'autopromotion rurale [Action for Training and Rural Self-Development – AFAR] towards the innovative training courses offered by the SWEDD project, which enabled her to acquire skills in her new field.

“One day, I heard a radio announcement about a project to recruit young women and girls who had dropped out of school and were keen to enter professions that women don’t usually take on,” she recounts. After applying for media studies, she attended classes for six months and was given a start-up kit in August 2019, consisting of equipment and working capital.

Now self-employed, she is in demand to capture weddings, christenings and other ceremonies in her community and beyond. A journalist from the L24 television station is also teaching her to make video reports and introducing her to video editing techniques. She has set up a television web page that she uses for communication with several partners, as well as to cover phase 2 of the SWEDD project in Mali and the activities of partner NGOs and others.

“The SWEDD project has enabled me to become financially independent, and to regain my dignity and stand on my own two feet,” Fatoumata explains. “Working and contributing to the economy of my family and my city is a unique experience for me.” Her greatest wish is for “the SWEDD project to continue to support girls and women for many years to come, so it can reach even more people.”

“Thanks to photography, I regained my dignity and am standing on my own two feet”



Korotoumou Coulibaly

Korotoumou, 35, married with two daughters, is a community health worker and a female mentor in the village of Tiendo. She has received training to run the safe spaces set up for girls and women by the SWEDD project in her home region of Koulikoro.

After secondary school, Korotoumou took a vocational training course to become a community health worker, as well as mentor training in “facilitating safe spaces” under the SWEDD project in Mali. She was already involved in women’s causes in her community, and explains that she was chosen for this role by the village assembly at the first community meeting that the SWEDD project organized there.

She says that the SWEDD project has had a tangible impact on her life. “It’s given me self-control and self-esteem, and also skills that help me to live in harmony with everyone. I thought my previous knowledge was enough, but I learned a lot from attending the mentor training.” The lessons she has learned include “how to discuss marital problems with my partner, how to share ideas with my two co-wives to ensure our home runs smoothly, and how to encourage discussions with children, especially girls, to bring about a better future”.

Korotoumou feels that the SWEDD project takes an appropriate approach to sexual and reproductive health, as these often taboo issues are discussed “carefully”, she says. This is leading to significant behaviour change, such as women using modern contraception methods, or husbands increasingly helping their wives with household chores. “We’re seeing fewer and fewer early or closely spaced pregnancies, and I’ve seen a lot of improvements to health,” she adds.

“The SWEDD project has given me self-control and self-esteem”

Another of the project’s strengths is the concept of “positive masculinity”, which encourages men to question certain social norms linked to patriarchy. Finally, Korotoumou invites her peers to contact her, so she can share her advice and knowledge, but also to “sign up to future lists of beneficiaries of the SWEDD project”, which she hopes to see replicated in many villages across Mali.



Abdoulaye Diakité

A general teacher by training, Abdoulaye, 39, is involved in the SWEDD project as facilitator of the Husbands' Club and Future Husbands' Club in Dioïla, a town 160 km east of Bamako.

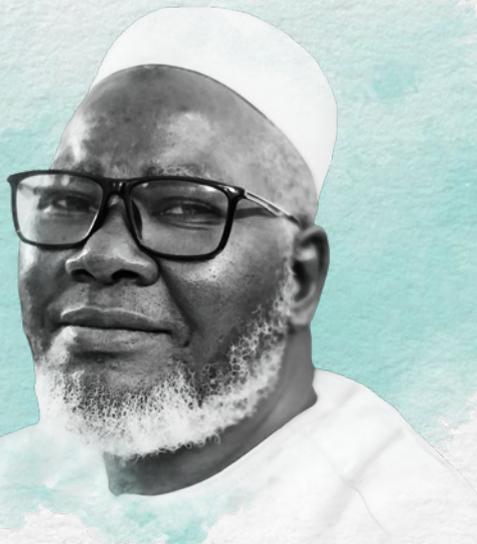
Abdoulaye is chair of the Koto Gnogon Tala Youth Association of Wolomèking, a council member for the rural commune of N'Golobougou, and known as an ardent supporter of "positive masculinity". He is involved in the SWEDD project as facilitator of the Dioïla 2 Husbands' Club and Future Husbands' Club, a role for which he was trained by the Association de soutien au développement des activités de population [Association to Support the Development of Population Activities – ASDAP], a Malian non-governmental organization.

He says he heard about the SWEDD project through a friend, whose behaviour he saw change in his household. "He attended the Husbands' Club sessions in the first phase of the project. Now he takes care of the children, goes with his wife to the health centre and helps with household chores." Abdoulaye wanted to follow this example, so he decided to join the SWEDD project, for which the community leaders of Dioïla appointed him facilitator.

"It's an honour for me to fulfil this role in my village," he says. "I received training in sexual and reproductive health issues, as well as in life skills, which enabled me to behave as a responsible head of the family." The "life skills" component provides young women and men with key information to ensure fulfilling and responsible reproductive health, by raising awareness of the importance of gender relations, as well as birth spacing and control. This is one of the pillars of the SWEDD project, along with girls' and women's empowerment and education. During its first phase in six Sahelian countries, the SWEDD project ran 1,640 Husbands' Clubs and Future Husbands' Clubs.

Abdoulaye sees nothing but positives in his role, which involves explaining to men in villages why it is crucial to space births and to let their wives access prenatal and neonatal health care. "This will strengthen my relationship with my wife and children, and more generally enable me to contribute to social cohesion," he says. "I encourage my peers who the SWEDD project has not yet reached to join the Husbands' Clubs or Future Husbands' Clubs, so they can learn key concepts for living as a responsible man."

"Behaving as a responsible man"



Mamadou Traoré

Mamadou, a 62-year-old imam, is a member of Mali's High Islamic Council (HCI) and the Alliance des leaders religieux et coutumiers d'Afrique de l'Ouest pour la santé et le développement [Alliance of West African Religious and Traditional Leaders for Health and Development – ARAO/SD]. He is also chair of the Réseau Islam Population et Développement [Islamic Network for Population and Development – RIPOD] supported by the SWEDD project.

Married to two women and father to 10 children, Mamadou is a male role model for the SWEDD project, which he has been involved in as a religious leader since 2017.

“The project is strengthening my leadership skills, and helping me better understand my society's problems and how to become more involved,” he says. As part of the project, he took a study trip to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the highest authority on Sunni Islam. On his return to Mali, he and other religious leaders reasoned arguments in support of women's empowerment and against gender-based violence.

“Islam does not prohibit women from working”

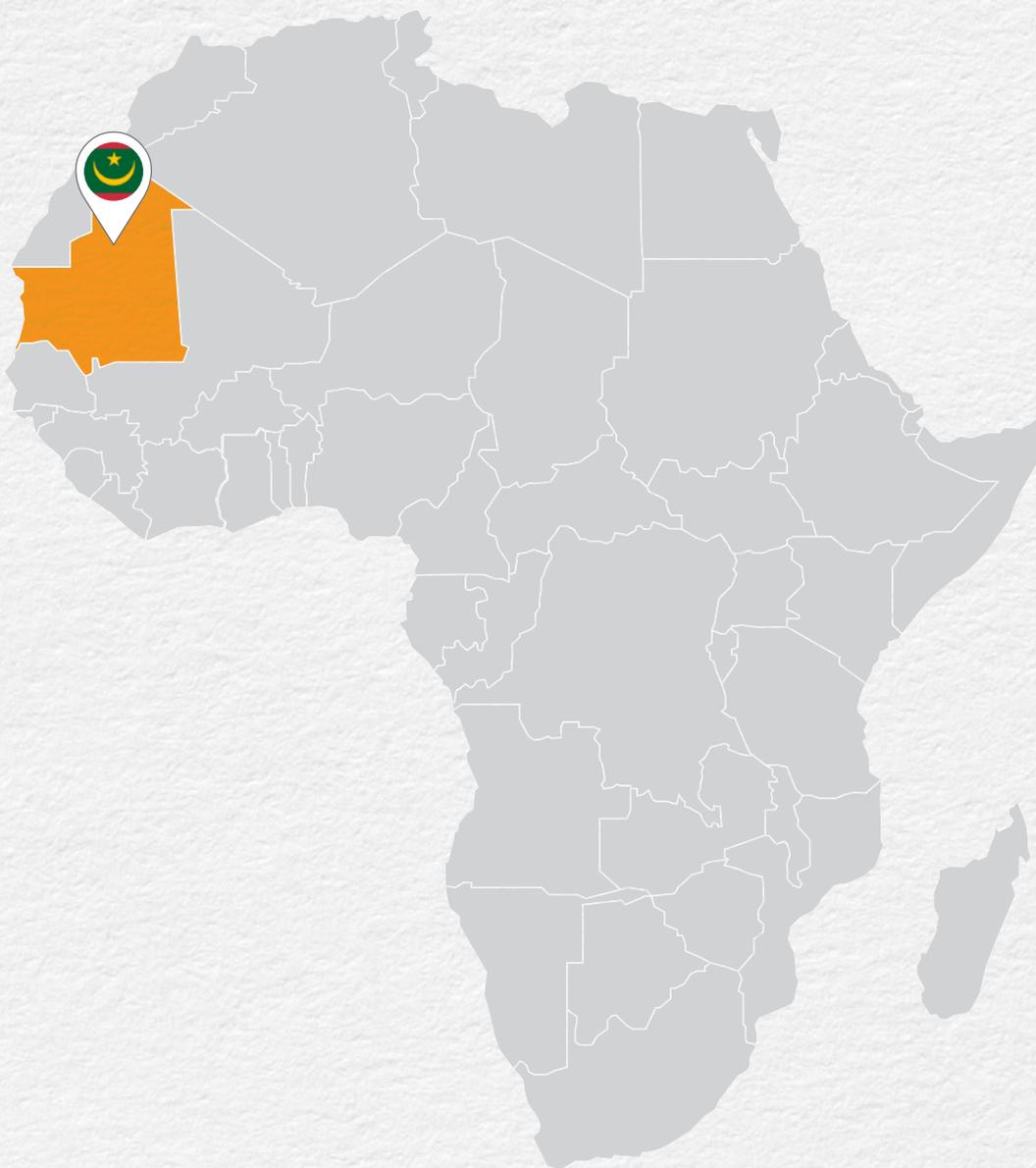
RIPOD, which was founded in 2005 under its former name of the Islamic Association for Quality of Life, is now financially supported by the SWEDD project. It brings together several associations, including those for imams, young Muslims, Muslim women and madrasa teachers. The network's aim is to advocate women's empowerment, access to family planning through birth spacing, pandemic control and social cohesion.

As a father to four daughters, Mamadou believes that empowering women “should be a lifelong struggle”. He points out that “Islam does not prohibit women from working; the Prophet's first wife is an example. Believers are asked to read and educate themselves, regardless of gender. It's important to give girls and women this right, so they can have a bright future – in line with Islamic values, dressing decently and banning ‘haram’ activities such as prostitution and the sale of alcohol.”

In his own capacity, his job is to “advocate for and raise awareness of responsible procreation by spacing births but not stopping or limiting them”. Quoting surah 2, verse 233 of the Qur'an, he reminds us that “mothers who wish to breastfeed will do so for two full years”, thus spacing out births. As a religion that advocates responsibility, Islam also instructs parents to be sure that they can provide for the health, education and nutrition of all their children.

In terms of impact, he has observed tangible behaviour change in both men and women. “I've heard from several men who have adopted positive attitudes towards girls' education and women's economic empowerment, in particular through preaching and sessions for couples and future couples. Several people have reported improvements in their married life.”

Mauritania





Oum Koulthoum Tolba

Oum, 38, lives in Legrane, a town of 30,000 inhabitants located 645 km from Nouakchott. She is involved in combating harmful practices affecting girls, and runs an education centre as part of the SWEDD project.

Oum is a member of the Association des femmes volontaires du développement [Association of Women Development Volunteers – AFVD], which focuses on development, reproductive health and raising women’s awareness of harmful practices, including child marriage. She joined the SWEDD project through a training course held in her town. “After being selected, we attended a training course in Kiffa alongside other women from the communes of the Assaba wilaya, which Legrane is part of. We then used the same training model for the programme beneficiaries.” More than 60 girls are taking courses on their rights, education and female entrepreneurship.

She has observed “a real transformation in the lives of people who have received this training, because they have become aware of their rights and responsibilities, unlike before”. Some have shown courage by returning to their studies, which they had abandoned because of early marriage. Others plan to go to university and dream of holding important positions in the future.

In Mauritania, 35 per cent of girls are married before the legal age of 18. The average age of marriage for uneducated girls is 15.9, according to a report published in 2013 by the National Statistics Office (ONS). “People’s hostility to girls’ education, and the practice of early marriage, are the result of unfounded popular beliefs that reduce a woman’s existence to her role in the home,” Oum explains. “In the past, every family’s ambition was just to get their daughter married as soon as possible. This explains the prevalence of a practice of force-feeding girls, so that they meet a certain idea of beauty that shows they are ready for marriage. But these feudal attitudes are now in decline.”

Oum also presents a programme called *Affaires sociales* [Social Affairs], broadcast by Radio Kiffa, which addresses divorce, girls’ education and the protection of mothers and children. Through these activities, she says she is having a positive influence on those around her. “Today, all the members of my family share my views and are aware of the need to educate girls – something that previously seemed pointless to them, or even forbidden.”

“Girls are becoming aware of their rights, unlike before”



Oumou El Kheyri Mint Dendan

Oumou, 38, is a teacher and a resident of Hassi Abdallah, a rural commune of 900 inhabitants near the town of Tintane, in southern Mauritania. Since 2019, she has been running a safe space for girls as part of the SWEDD project.

"The SWEDD project sent teams to our village in search of qualified women to work with," says Oumou. In March 2019, she received training in the town of Aioun El Atrouss, the capital of the Hodh El Gharbi wilaya.

On her return to Hassi Abdallah, she began to deliver awareness-raising and education for girls through the safe space that the SWEDD project set up in the town. "This space gave them the opportunity to develop their understanding of their basic rights, particularly education, which has had a positive impact," she says.

"In Hassi Abdallah, the SWEDD project has provided moral support, enabling around 30 girls to speak up with confidence," continues Oumou. She teaches first grade of primary school, and has a class of 27 pupils, comprising 16 girls and 11 boys. It is still common for girls to drop out of school due to early marriage, which Oumou identifies as "the main problem" faced by adolescent girls. "When girls drop out of school, it's because they're pregnant or on the orders of their husband, who doesn't always agree to them continuing their education." However, she notes that attitudes are gradually changing. Many of the village's students have set an example by continuing their studies and securing jobs.

In addition, the SWEDD project has provided material support to the women of Hassi Abdallah, in the form of finance for income-generating activities, with 15 women receiving training in sewing. "Life in our village follows the cycle of the seasons," says Oumou. "In winter, during the rains, food needs are covered and trade is busy. But during the dry season, many men and young people leave to find work in Nouakchott." Mauritania is 80 per cent desert and has experienced frequent droughts for over 30 years, resulting in a rural exodus and rapid urbanization. In any event, Oumou is delighted with the presence of the "SWEDD community" and its action on multiple fronts, including its aim to end "verbal violence towards women, which must be challenged".

"Speaking up with confidence"

her studies,” she says. “My younger sister ended her studies in sixth grade for the same reasons as me, although she wanted to continue.”

Since September 2022, Mariam has been a beneficiary of the SWEDD project. She started her business following training she received as part of a cohort of 30 women in her region, and with finance that was provided to her.

“I was looking to improve my financial situation, but before receiving the finance I wasn’t doing any business, even though I dreamed of it,” she explains. Thanks to the \$11,500 granted by the SWEDD project at the end of January 2023, she is busy selling fish and foodstuffs through a neighbourhood grocery store run by the public interest group, which she oversees with two other women. “We buy our goods in Aleg, a town 50 km away, and sell our stock in our neighbourhood.”

Mariam believes that the SWEDD project has provided her with invaluable support, which means she can now rely on a regular source of income. She is delighted with the positive impact the initiative will have on her life, as well as on that of “all the women targeted who were in a financially unstable position like me.”

“Emerging from financial instability”



Mariam Ahmedou Dide

Mariam, 28, is the manager of a public interest group that brings together women in the village of Bir El Barka, 200 km from Nouakchott. She broke free from her role as a housewife thanks to the SWEDD project.

Mariam’s education ended in the fifth grade of primary school, due to her early marriage at the age of 11. “According to our customs, a girl can’t move to the city without her family to continue



Khady Hamad Sow

Khady, a 35-year-old nurse in the capital Nouakchott, has enhanced her midwifery skills thanks to training provided by the SWEDD project.

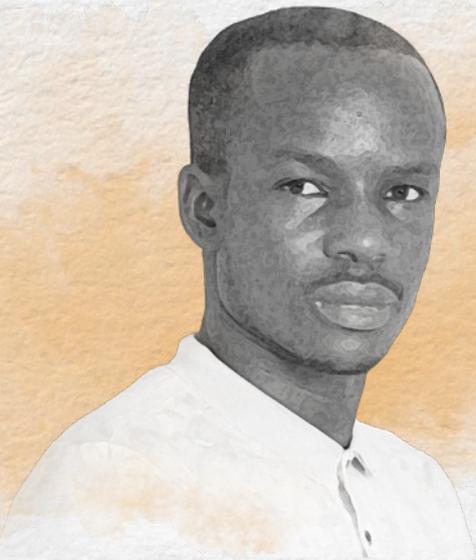
She passed the competitive health examination in 2008 and studied at the Kiffa Health School for two years. In 2010, she was appointed as a social care nurse at a centre in the interior of the country, before being deployed to the regional hospital in Aleg.

In 2015, she was transferred to Nouakchott, where she worked at the National Cardiology Centre for a year, before taking the entrance exam to become a midwife. “I’ve always loved this job,” she says. “I wanted to play my part in my country’s development and to work with women, given the maternal and neonatal mortality rates, which are sadly still high.” In 2019, after three years’ training at the National College of Health Sciences (ENSSS), she graduated with honours as a midwife, and now works at the national hospital in Nouakchott.

In 2020–2021, she attended the continuing education programme offered to midwives by the SWEDD project, which she heard about through ENSSS. “I admire the SWEDD project’s approach in terms of capacity-building for health staff and support for health services, to help us take better care of patients and sometimes even infants,” she says.

“An ally of change”

Today, Khady describes herself as an “ally of change”. She wants to continue her involvement in the SWEDD project so she can raise awareness, share information and bring about “behaviour change among families as well as women, regarding access to care and follow-up by health professionals, during both pregnancy and childbirth”.



Omar El Hacen Djibril

Omar, 34, is a civil society leader in Kaédi, a town of over 50,000 inhabitants on the right bank of the Senegal River, in the wilaya of Gorgol in southern Mauritania. He is involved in the Future Husbands' Club launched by the SWEDD project.

A speaker of four languages (Fulani, Hassaniya, Arabic and French), he began his civil society activities at the Kaédi youth centre, where he organized cultural events, sports tournaments and national unity awareness campaigns. It was there that he and his friends noticed the high prevalence of gender-based violence. "That's why I got involved, even though I felt that as young people it wasn't so relevant to us yet, because it's mostly adults who do these things and bear the responsibility."

After the SWEDD project launched in 2019, "things changed completely", he says. Omar learned about the project and its innovative

approach through a training course in Tintane and a meeting held by the Regional Youth Delegation. "After this meeting, the SWEDD team visited us to select local focal points."

Omar and a young woman became facilitators of the Future Husbands' Club. Here, he began to mentor 16–20-year-olds, with the aim of "developing mature, responsible sex education" and raising young people's awareness of the fight against gender-based violence. "Sharing these ideas and information about degrading practices, during open discussions in a setting where they feel comfortable, is enabling young people to be open to change. We're seeing them move away from discriminatory behaviour towards women. We're helping to build a generation who are aware of women's rights and respect them." Topics of particular interest to young people included sex education, reproductive health, life skills development and time management.

"We're helping to build a generation aware of women's rights"

Omar thinks the SWEDD project takes the right approach by focusing on behaviour change. He sees it as "highly supportive of community life and cohesion in our town, right down to the family level, where the place of girls and women is being reconsidered". He has observed a decline in child marriage and forced marriage, and feels that the situation is improving in terms of empowerment. "Kaédi women are known for their entrepreneurship in agriculture, sewing, dyeing and trade. I know several households that are economically dependent on their activities." Her message: "The most important thing now is for all of Mauritania's young people to take responsibility for changing attitudes to women's empowerment."



Ahmed Ould Yarba

Ahmed, 25, is the imam of the mosque in Wourken, a village in the Hodh El Chargui wilaya in a region of south-east Mauritania bordering Mali. He joined the SWEDD project in 2021 in his role as a religious leader, to advocate for women's empowerment and gender equality.

Ahmed is also a teacher in a *mahadra* (Islamic school). He explains that he “realized the extent of the problems linked to harmful and degrading practices affecting girls and women in our society” thanks to the SWEDD project. The village of Wourken, 1,200 km from the capital Nouakchott, is populated mainly by women, the men having migrated to find work. Nearly all the population lives below the poverty line.

“Changing behaviours, even in areas affected by poverty and a lack of awareness”

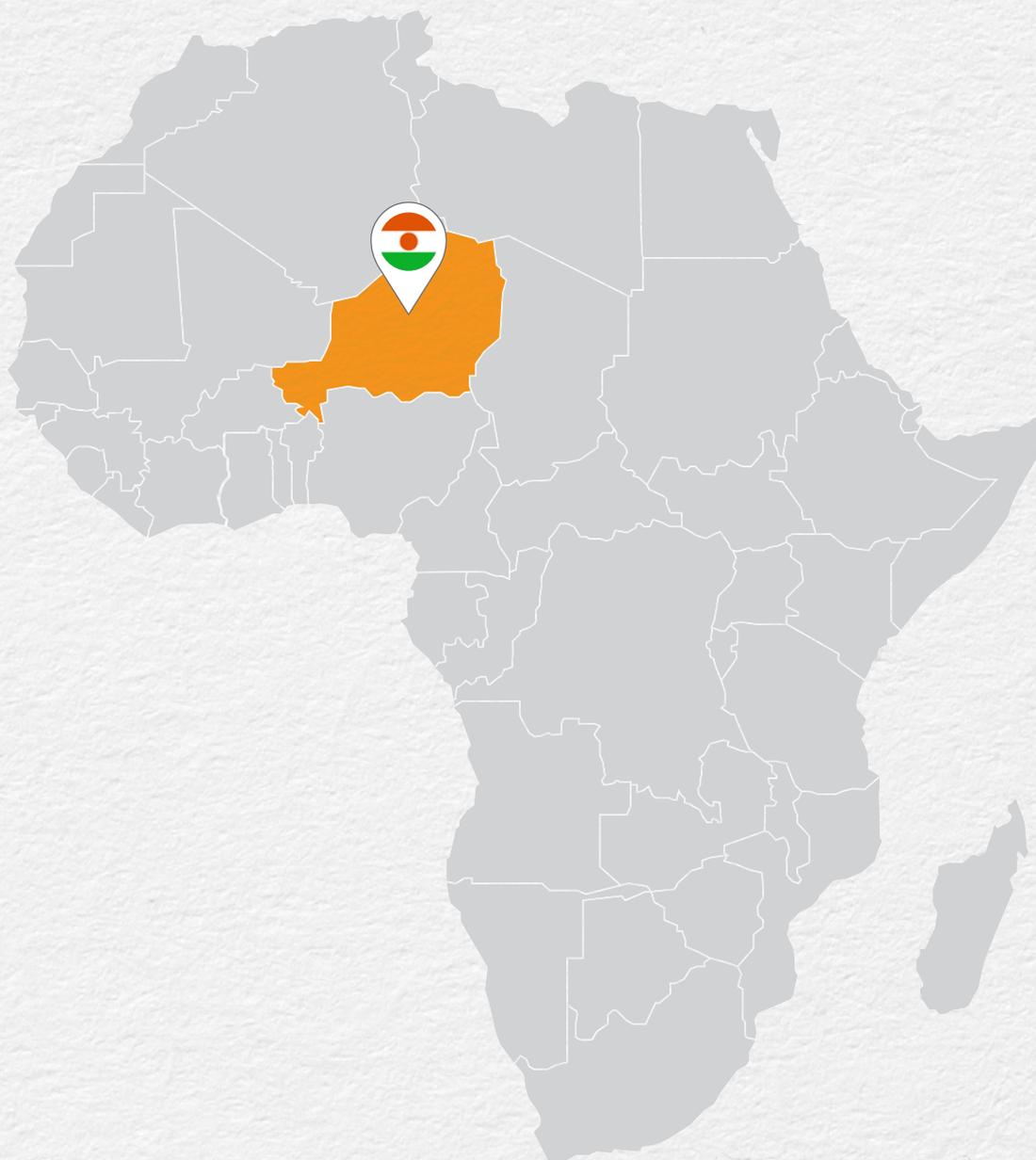
“The biggest challenge facing girls in our village is early marriage, which results in them dropping out of school,” he explains. “Once married, girls often suffer serious, life-threatening pregnancy complications.”

As an imam, he was enlisted to help raise women’s awareness about their rights and responsibilities, including towards their daughters, who they are strongly encouraged to send to school. “The SWEDD project provided us with the resources and equipment we needed. I received individual support in the form of training on women’s rights and the leading role that women have to play in society.”

Ahmed reports that “in our community, early marriage was considered normal and seemed inevitable. People were opposed to their daughters studying and to women working. The SWEDD project stepped in to introduce us to good practices and to make us – religious leaders, men and women – agents of change.” He now opposes these past attitudes. “Most of the harmful practices affecting women are the result of cultural constraints that have nothing to do with Islam, which calls for respect for the overall integrity of an individual. It’s down to misinterpretations of the texts and the influence of customs on the collective understanding of Islam as regards the status of women.”

Times are changing, and many girls are now fighting to complete their studies, seeing them as “the only way to succeed in life”, he says. Ahmed considers the SWEDD project remarkable in that it “aims to change behaviours, especially in areas affected by poverty and a lack of awareness”. He points to changes in attitudes within his own family, particularly with regard to girls’ education and awareness of the dangers of early marriage. “A change that was unimaginable just a short time ago,” he admits.

Niger





Hassane Haousseize Zouera

Police Commissioner

Having worked as a senior police commissioner for almost a decade, Commissioner Zouera, 39, has played a key role in the activities of the SWEDD project's legal platform, in her capacity as head of the Division for the Protection of Women and Children. Supported by 107 brigades across the country, this Niamey-based unit has a number of responsibilities relating to public order and citizen protection.

Commissioner Zouera is responsible for detecting warning signs of criminal behaviour, particularly among children living on the street, assisting children and women in distress, monitoring the placement of children at risk, and implementing emergency measures to protect children and women. With a Master's degree in economic and business law, she first headed the Economic and Financial Investigations Division at the Department of Criminal Investigation. In 2015, she was appointed to run the Research, Regulations

and Statistics Division at the Department of Public Safety, and then in 2020 the Division for the Protection of Women and Children. She is a member of various national committees, and is particularly involved in the committee for the transit of vulnerable people evacuated from Libya to Niger.

As part of her duties, she provides training on gender-based violence at the National Police Academy. She has provided awareness-raising for 218 officers of various ranks, including sessions on interview techniques, report writing and data collection. This skills-building has had tangible results. Two data-collection campaigns in the field identified 2,628 cases of gender-based violence in 2020.

The slogan "Zero tolerance for gender-based violence" carries weight when used by Commissioner Zouera, who is respected for her frankness and integrity. In 2021, she received the United Nations Population Award, which honours individuals and organizations for outstanding contributions to population, development and reproductive health issues. It was awarded for her contribution to making Niger a safer place for girls and women.

Protecting women and children from gender-based violence

Commissioner Zouera helped draw up the action plan for the SWEDD project's legal platform, which she supports, as well as Niger's draft directory of legal texts relating to women's empowerment, including sexual and reproductive health, girls' education and gender-based violence. She is an admired and sought-after individual, readily sharing her belief, born of common sense and discipline, that "a woman is capable of moving mountains if she really wants to. All she needs to do is set a goal and make every effort to achieve it. It's not magic and it's not impossible!"



Amina Niandou

Amina is a media specialist and an ambassador for the SWEDD project's Stronger Together campaign. She is responsible for Parliament communications and is chair of the Niger section of the Association of African Communication Professionals (APAC-Niger), a member of the High Council for Communication on behalf of Niger's women's organizations, and a member of the G5 Sahel Women's Platform. She runs the magazine Femmes et Gouvernance [Women and Governance], and is involved in the SWEDD project's efforts to bring about social and behaviour change.

Graduating top of her class from Niger's Training Institute for Information and Communication Technologies (IFTIC), Amina, a 47-year-old mother, is an approachable television journalist with a successful career. Specializing in gender and the media, she has launched several initiatives, including the Charter on Improving the Image of Women in the Media, and the Spotlight Initiative to tackle violence against women and girls and to keep girls in school.

"Identify your own talents, develop them and make a living from them"

Amina's first experience in this field, which led to her becoming the figure she is now, dates back to her childhood. As the daughter of a cook once employed by a French development worker, she spent time with this family, but she also helped her mother with her small business selling food, lemon juice and ice cream. She was in regular contact with people from all walks of life, and discovered she had a talent for communication. Her mother's business, in which she outperformed her sisters in sales, was later chosen as the sales outlet for Niger's first dairy company, Solani. "My skills grew with everything that happened after that," she explains.

The injustices she witnessed as a child also underpinned her motivation. Her mother, who gave birth to six daughters before having a son and then another daughter – Amina – was stigmatized by her in-laws. Given the shortage of brothers to help their father with his chores, she and her sisters were asked to take on jobs considered masculine. She threw herself into this, to earn smiles or compliments from her father, and to forget the nicknames he gave her mother. This background also explains her ambition to practise a respected profession and to promote women.

Encouraged by her sisters, her mother, her husband and her peers in journalism, Amina is a champion for the cause of empowering women and girls. To help them "find themselves", she recommends training in personal development and leadership. Convinced that self-esteem is the foundation of all success, she readily offers this advice: "Never let yourself be discouraged; identify your own talents, develop them and make a living from them."



Yacouba Haoua Mainassara

Yacouba, a 33-year-old Nigerien seamstress, was one of the first to sign up for the women's empowerment activities launched by the SWEDD project in 2019 in Madoua, an urban commune 550 km east of Niamey. After a series of training courses in life skills, reproductive health, human rights and financial management, Yacouba discovered a vocation for sewing, embroidery and knitting.

She quickly became her trainer's assistant, and in 2020 her creativity and leadership resulted in her chairing an economic interest group of 28 artisans specializing in sewing and in making decorative objects. In addition to the members of the economic interest group, Yacouba has also trained and empowered six women from her neighbourhood, with a further 15 girls currently undergoing training.

In 2020, she took part in an exhibition and competition organized by the SWEDD project and its partners, winning first prize in sewing. Today, she earns on average 15,000 CFA francs (\$25) a day from her business. She is happy to be held in high esteem in the community, and to have her husband's support.

Yacouba is delighted that she no longer needs to "ask for handouts". Instead, her determination has turned her into a working person who can be depended on, by both her family and her neighbourhood. She has very clear dreams for the future: she plans to expand and to set up a workshop and showroom in a busy location, where she will be able to display her creations after an advanced course in fashion design.

Having become a female role model, she has been hired as a trainer at the centre where she learned the skills of her trade. "We have a duty to support her," says the mayor of the Madaoua commune, where the authorities have licensed the operations of the economic interest group and are preparing to allocate it a site that reflects the company's success.

"Empower yourself, so you can better empower others"



Nafissa Moussa

In 2019, Nafissa trained as a construction electrician under the SWEDD project's innovative training scheme. She now earns her living working in Roumbou, a rural commune in the Maradi region.

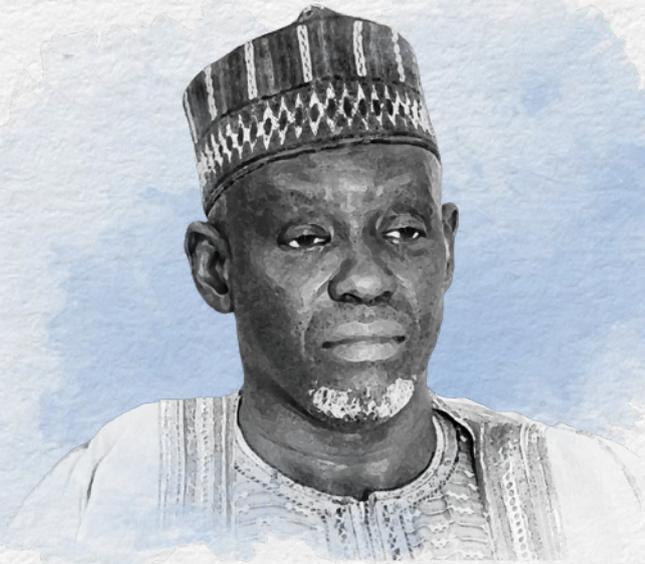
"I'm proud of what I do, and I'm especially grateful to the SWEDD project for helping me reach my potential." Nafissa, 23, works in Roumbou, in a sandy agropastoral region 700 km east of Niamey. She represents the modern woman, ready to climb ladders to carry out electrical installations on buildings.

Divorced and a mother of one, she proudly dons her overalls to respond to requests from local residents for minor repairs. "Roumbou is only a village but I'm earning 10,000 CFA francs a week, a sum I could never have earned regularly before," she says.

Her trade, which she learned in 2019 under the SWEDD project's innovative training scheme in Niger, has helped improve her family's living conditions. "I don't need handouts anymore, I help my parents when they need it, and I'm even managing to save," she says. She quite literally led her family out of the dark, by installing electricity in the family home. "Thanks to her, I'm going to start an ice cream, fresh water and juice business," says her mother, delighted to see Nafissa sharing her knowledge with her younger brother, who is ready to follow in her footsteps.

Nafissa still receives criticism in her conservative society, but she has learned to deal with this. All the more so because she knows she is accepted, as she is included in all the projects undertaken by her generation in Roumbou. "Despite the social constraints, the situation is gradually improving for women, and we still need the approach taken by the SWEDD project," says Adamou Bara, vice-mayor of the commune. "We're happy to help Nafissa, so her example can mark the start of empowerment for the women of Roumbou." Today, Niger's rural electrification programme and the development of solar energy represent opportunities for this pioneering electrician.

"Today I'm an electrician and I don't need handouts anymore"



Sheikh Mahaman Bachir El Hadj Oumarou

Sheikh Mahaman Bachir is a theologian and Islamic scholar committed to all aspects of solidarity, tolerance and peace. He chairs the Alliance des religieux pour le développement socio-éducatif, économique et sanitaire [Alliance of Religious Leaders for Socioeducational, Economic and Health Development – ARDSES] and is a member of the High-Level Committee for West Africa as well as the Centre for Sexual and Reproductive Health for Adolescents and Young People. He is part of the SWEDD project's network of religious leaders in Niger, which aims use people who are influential and respected in their society to communicate messages.

With an open and caring personality, he specialized in religion and development during his studies at Al-Azhar University in Cairo – the highest authority on Sunni Islam – and at the Higher Institute of Education at the Islamic University of Say in Niger.

Sheikh Mahaman Bachir is active on social media. He is passionate about this means of communication, where he posts messages that are seen by a large number of followers. He was identified by the SWEDD project precisely because of his influence. He expressed his willingness to support the project, alongside other religious leaders, to work towards changing mindsets and behaviours. “We’re a generation of tolerant leaders, in tune with our times, and capable of analysing and understanding religious texts,” he explains.

Along with the other members of the SWEDD network of religious leaders, which includes Christians and traditional leaders, he has attended several training courses abroad. He is happy to discuss issues of concern and sensitive subjects affecting women. These include child marriage, girls’ education, gender-based violence, access to sexual and reproductive health care, and women’s empowerment. Taboos around discussing these issues and resistance to change are often the result of tradition, as well as a misunderstanding of social norms.

Sheikh Mahaman Bachir points out that the Islamic texts advocate for equality between men and women. Thanks to dialogue and increased awareness, “we’re pushing boundaries”, he says, while praising the “role played by the SWEDD project in developing women’s self-confidence, with a view to achieving their aspirations”.

“We’re pushing boundaries”



Maman Mansour Maiguizo Kane

Maman Mansour is a traditional leader who not only acts as an intermediary between the SWEDD project and the Association of Traditional Leaders of Niger (of which he is Secretary-General responsible for external relations), but is also the regional coordinator of the Council of Traditional Leaders of Africa (COTLA) for action against early marriage and female genital mutilation.

He has an official role as canton leader for the commune of Tessaoua, in the Maradi region, 890 km east of the capital Niamey. As a traditional leader and a link in the chain of authority, with the power to sanction leaders of villages, tribes (nomadic herders) and districts, he is widely respected and is very active on issues of health, education and respect for women's physical integrity.

“May tomorrow's women be educated, dynamic and empowered”

In 2018, Maman Mansour set up a free and voluntary millet collection operation in Tessaoua, in close collaboration with village leaders, to help those on low incomes who are suffering from illness. Of Tessaoua's 350,000 residents, no fewer than 8,220 families contributed, enabling 26 tons of millet to be collected. The sale of this financed 418 transfers to health centres in Maradi and Zinder, and transfusions for mothers suffering from post-partum haemorrhage.

Aware of the frequent problem of girls dropping out of school, Maman Mansour has also launched, with the support of development partners, a back-to-school programme for 123 students who had not obtained their secondary education certificate (*baccalauréat*) or basic secondary education certificate (*brevet d'études du premier cycle* – BEPC) in 2018–2019, followed by 163 more in 2020–2021. This initiative was made possible by recruiting 26 tutors.

In addition, 200 rural committees for the monitoring and protection of adolescent girls have been set up in canton's villages and hamlets. Each committee is made up of the village leader, imam and representatives of women and young people. They are responsible for reporting cases of early or forced marriage, girls not going to or dropping out of school, rape and sexual assault, and refusal by girls and women to attend health centres.

Safe spaces for girls aged 13–19 have been established in rural areas to support these measures and provide training in trades with local potential. The scheme will include literacy courses and modules on personal hygiene, environmental protection and irrigated farming, as well as a counselling, advice and guidance service.

“We're fighting for things to be different for the women of tomorrow,” concludes the traditional leader. “We want them to be well-educated, agile, empowered and respectful of their environment and social values.”

Chad



Aïcha Moussa*

* An alias, as she reported anonymously for safety reasons.

Aïcha was identified as a vulnerable adolescent by the SWEDD project in 2018, when she was faced with a forced marriage and the risk of abduction. For three years, she lived in a residential centre run by the SWEDD project to ensure that girls continue their education. After obtaining her secondary education certificate (baccalauréat), she trained as a midwife, again through the SWEDD project, which enabled her to postpone marriage.

Aïcha grew up in a village in the Sahel, as the daughter of a soldier. In 2018, at the age of 16, she moved into a residential centre run by the SWEDD project to ensure that vulnerable adolescent girls remain in school.

At the residential school, she led a reclusive life, knowing that a forced marriage was planned for her, which was likely to involve abduction. She took the threat seriously: the practice of marriage by abduction persists in her country, where the average age of marriage for girls is 16. Concentrating on her studies, which she saw as her lifeline, she earned the respect of her classmates and the directors of the residential centre, but she did not risk visiting her parents during the holidays. She also did not own a phone, to avoid being traced.

However, after obtaining her secondary education certificate in June 2020, Aïcha had to return home. Her father decided to enrol her in a higher institute of health studies, but when her mother fell ill, she was called urgently to her bedside. She returned home in despair, having been instructed to prepare for marriage, willing or not.

Hearing of an opportunity to undertake midwifery training at an institute through the SWEDD project, she prepared her application and was accepted. Her family refused to let her go to stay so far from the village, so a field coordinator made the trip and managed to convince her parents of the importance of the training on offer, telling them that the students were fully supported.

“The days of forced marriage are over”

Today, Aïcha has made her professional success key to her personal fulfilment, above any plans to marry. She has a clear message: “I encourage other girls to follow my example, to build their lives before committing to a household. I thank the SWEDD project for these life-saving opportunities and I ask parents to encourage girls to study. The days of forced marriage are over.”



Baba Sultan Brahim

Baba, 56, was forced into marriage at the age of 14 and deprived of her ambition to study. She is now chair of the union of Kotoko women in the sub-prefecture of Mani, and of the union of women's groups in Mani (Chora). She runs a cooperative specializing in market gardening, which has received support from the SWEDD project on women's empowerment.

Baba is the daughter of the Sultan of Mani, a traditional leader of the Kotoko community in western Chad bordering Cameroon. She was married off at the age of 14, in 1980. Her aunt, who brought her up, forced this husband on her without her consent, or even that of her parents. As a young mother who had had six children, three of whom had died, she also had to mourn the loss of her plans to study, but she did not give up.

At the age of 26, her destiny took a decisive turn when she was recruited as a facilitator by Secours catholique du développement [Catholic Relief for Development – SECADEV], a non-governmental organization (NGO) working to support women's organizations in Mani. Buoyed by this experience, she decided to launch her own organization,

Sam-Ningui, which means “solidarity” or “helping people in difficulty”. Her organization stepped up its activities and its results soon attracted attention. It launched a working capital fund, invested in poultry breeding, grew trade by lending to its members at 5 per cent interest, bought a five-hectare field for rain-fed crops and acquired a motorized pump for market gardening.

In 2011, Sam-Ningui expanded its activities by bringing together women from all over the sub-prefecture, and then founded the union of women's groups in Mani (Chora), for which Baba was appointed chair. Chora, which now has 378 members – 129 women farmers and 249 traders – specializes in market gardening (producing 5.7 tons of onions in 2019–2020), small-scale trade and tontines, and builds community safe spaces for girls and women. In addition to support from the German Development Agency (GIZ) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), it receives support from the SWEDD project through two local NGOs, which have supplied a tractor, a motorized pump, seeds, a millet mill and spare parts.

As part of the SWEDD project, Baba has also taken the initiative of creating “Alwidah Chabab”, an association of girls fighting against harmful practices, including child marriage, which is common in Kotoko families. All her work has a single goal: “for women to be empowered”.

The barriers she has encountered include insufficient resources for training, digging and equipment. However, she has achieved success through membership fees and loans. Chora's activities have been commended by men and her community in general, and have helped change attitudes. “Mani girls now continue to go to school, even when they are married.” Baba's next steps include building a women's centre in Mani, a village pharmacy and maternity wards, as well as acquiring solar equipment and training electricians.

When unity is strength



Maïmouna Haroune

Chair of a cooperative of women's groups in Linia, in Chari-Baguirmi province, Maïmouna, a 38-year-old shopkeeper turned carpenter, is both a beneficiary of the SWEDD project and an ambassador for the Stronger Together campaign. On the back of her own success, she has made sharing and women's empowerment her core values.

Maïmouna now sells furniture, including beds, wardrobes, tables and chests of drawers – a far cry from her days of selling milk, which she had done since childhood. Her parents, Arab cattle breeders, were not part of “the culture of enrolling girls in school”, she explains. For over four years, Maïmouna has been employing four men in her carpentry workshop in Linia, in Chari-Baguirmi province.

“Women are pillars of development”

Determined to take charge of her life and contribute to her household, Maïmouna first opened a ladies' hairdressing salon shortly after her marriage, a business she was forced to abandon because of her husband's objections. She then turned to importing fabrics and household products from neighbouring Nigeria, running a profitable business until the emergence of Boko Haram. The offences committed by the Nigerian armed Islamist group posed serious threats to safety. Maïmouna's mother prevented her from endangering herself by travelling, so she was forced to change her business once more. To avoid travelling, but also to fill a gap in supply and demand, she opened a carpentry workshop in Linia. It did not matter that this was considered a masculine profession; she knew that the majority of customers were women.

Her business has already enabled her to buy outlets in Linia and the capital N'Djamena, as well as to finance her diversification into agriculture and to share her success by working to help other women. Maïmouna is an advisor to the platform for women's groups and cooperatives in the value chain in Linia, which has 53 members representing over 450 women. Through the SWEDD project, the platform has received a flour mill, rice and peanut husking machines and a peanut oil press. Her own cooperative, which produces rice, sesame, beans and millet, has also acquired a tractor thanks to the SWEDD project.

Maïmouna is a female role model, pursuing her path with confidence and determination. She was appointed chair of the Dourbali section of the union of women's groups and cooperatives in Chari-Baguirmi province, and is an ardent campaigner for girls' education and against harmful practices, convinced that women must “fully assume their role as pillars of development”.



Macka Chérif Mahamat

An entrepreneur to the core, Macka launched her dressmaking workshop, Sisters Design, in 2015. It now employs 30 women. Regarded as a female role model by the SWEDD project, she is driving its expansion while also sharing her success through women's groups.

Macka, 29, single and without children, comes from a modest family in the capital N'Djamena. While studying biomedical engineering in Sudan, she also studied the design of headscarves worn by Muslim women. On returning to Chad in 2015, she launched her company, Sisters Design. After analysing gaps in the market, she became convinced it had potential when she successfully made the headscarves worn by the bridal party at her brother's wedding.

“Success is going from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm”

Her interest in medicine is still evident in her catalogue, which also includes gowns, aprons, visors, caps, surgical masks and washable sanitary towels. Macka approaches overcoming obstacles with a strong spirit and this Winston Churchill quote in mind: “Success is going from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm.” Rather than talking about the difficulties, she prefers to talk about her successes.

And with good reason: in six years, Sisters Design has grown from 5 to 30 employees, and the company is in robust health with annual sales of 108 million CFA francs (around \$178,800). To market her products, Macka has formed 12 women's groups in the provinces and a group of 90 women in the capital, N'Djamena. Since 2017, she has found various sources of funding to grow her business. She has forged partnerships with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Institute for Innovative Technologies for Development (TECHNIDEV), the National Office for Youth and Sports Support (ONAJES) and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, as well as the Youth Network for Development and Leadership in Chad (RJDLT), for which she has been coordinator.

Driven by a keen desire to share, she has supported several young women entrepreneurs, including Yayam Alida, who received a cheque for 50,000 CFA francs and three months' technical support. Fatimé Ahmat Garbao, a home-based seamstress who owns her own machine, is another of the women who have received professional and financial empowerment from Sisters Design.

Macka continues to expand her horizons, with specific goals in mind. She is aiming to secure the market in the country's hospitals with her offering of personal protective equipment, and also to train 5,000 women and girls in the manufacture of reusable sanitary towels, with the support of UNFPA. Another plan for the future is to export these sanitary towels to countries that are part of the SWEDD project, by launching a network of mobile stores.



Abdelkader Adoum

Abdelkader, a 61-year-old father and grandfather, imam of the main mosque in Massenya, a town 165 km south-east of the capital, encouraged his eight daughters to study. He coordinates the interfaith platform for the SWEDD project in Chari-Baguirmi province, which is trying to change attitudes to women's empowerment, girls' education and access to sexual and reproductive health care, by calling on figures who are influential and respected by their communities.

Abdelkader, a shopkeeper and coordinator of the interfaith and religious platform for Chari-Baguirmi province, runs his family the same way he runs his business: by involving his wife. This has earned him the nickname in Massenya of "the imam who runs his shop with his wife".

In agreement with her, and in a spirit of family cooperation, he enrolled their eight daughters in school, and did not marry any of them off

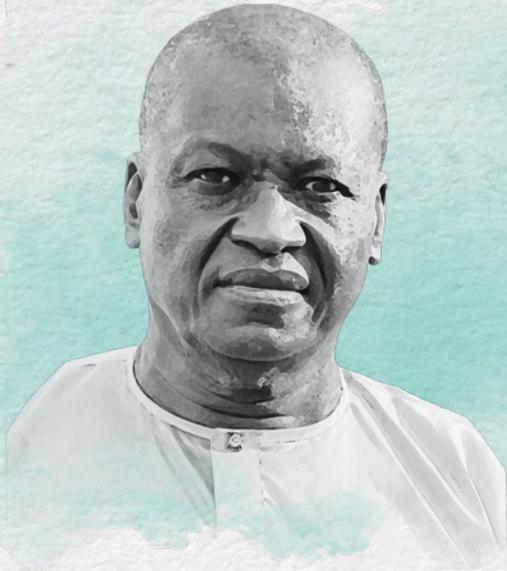
until they were 18. Three of them obtained their secondary education certificate (*baccalauréat*). Mariam and Haoua are students at the University of N'Djaména, and Zeinaba is working as a volunteer teacher while waiting to get a job with the civil service. Their younger sisters are still at primary and secondary school. Their father sees the cost of their education as an investment in the future.

"I'm banking on their success, because a well-educated girl brings happiness to her family and her household," he says. "Things have changed; we can no longer stick to our traditional ways in preventing girls from going to school." He imposed a precondition for marriage on his sons-in-law: that his daughters continue with their higher education, to give them more opportunities in life.

Keen to ensure harmony in his household, he believes that "making decisions together with my wife definitely has a positive impact on the children. My daughters are open-minded, they copy the way our household works, they've started small businesses, they're happy and they're able to fend for themselves, which I'm delighted about."

In his sermons, he raises awareness in his community about issues relating to women's empowerment, girls' education and access to sexual and reproductive health services. He often reminds people that the Qur'an teaches them to seek knowledge and requires all believers to educate themselves. Abdelkader encourages parents, especially fathers, to follow his example, and believes that changing attitudes is a matter of "becoming aware".

The imam who runs things with his wife



Oumar Moumine

A retired banker based in the town of Mandelia, Oumar encouraged his five daughters to study, and is a “model father” for the SWEDD project.

From a family in Madiagoh canton that was part of the traditional chiefdom in the Kotoko community, this 60-year-old makes no secret of the fact that he comes from a conservative tribe with a tradition of forced, early and intermarriage. He is a polygamous husband, with both wives living under the same roof, and a father to 12 children, including five daughters. He first set himself apart by enrolling them all in school. He also resisted family pressure to promise his

daughters at an early age to the princes of the canton. He was determined to see them complete higher education, and likes to quote the adage that “when you educate a girl, you educate a nation”.

His eldest daughter, Falmata, is now a state-registered nurse employed by the Ministry of Public Health, while Aïchatou and Haoua have obtained bachelor’s degrees in business management and administration and in human resources management. Both run stores in the N’Djamena supermarket Modern Market, while waiting to join the civil service. Adama, his fourth daughter, is in her third year studying hospital administration and management at Emi Koussi University in N’Djamena, while his youngest, Fatime, is still in her final year of secondary school.

“To educate a girl is to educate a nation”

Oumar is proud of the material support he receives from his daughters. He is also keen to set an example for Kotoko families, encouraging them to abandon early marriage and keep their girls in school. He is happy to speak at the SWEDD project Husbands’ Clubs, where he is keen to get across his message that “girls’ education is the best tool in the fight against poverty. An educated girl is an asset for development.”

Conclusion

Whether they have just graduated from secondary school or are an established businesswoman, whether they are a police commissioner in Niger, a novelist in Cameroon, a carpenter in Chad or a young activist in Guinea, all the women interviewed for this book attach high importance to the values of solidarity. Central to many of the testimonies is the word “sisters” – in the broad, generic, African sense of the term.

Many of the stories told in these pages are inspiring, not because they can be reduced to a single person, but because they demonstrate the power that combined will can have on an entire community. Determination to advance a collective cause represents the lowest common denominator – although highly significant – for all the women, but also for the men who shared their stories.

The views expressed by the SWEDD project beneficiaries, and those supporting the project through the Stronger Together campaign, reveal a number of cross-cutting trends: the burden of patriarchy, religion and certain traditions, the effects of poverty and the impact of safety risks.

Despite these challenges, there are many reports of hopes and success stories. The SWEDD project demonstrates that it is possible for a woman to find her way and earn a living in so-called “masculine” trades, even when she has dropped out of school due to early pregnancy. One of the most poignant testimonies in this document recalls how, in Chad, the SWEDD project was able to protect a vulnerable adolescent girl from early marriage through abduction, and to help her build an independent future.

For their part, men are also spreading the word about women’s empowerment, through Husbands’ Clubs and platforms for religious leaders. They all stress the importance of dialogue and of setting an example for their peers, starting with their own families – with women being consulted and helped with household chores, and girls attending school or having completed higher education. Ultimately, this culture of sharing goes a long way towards explaining the SWEDD project’s impact. Building on successes, rallying goodwill and working relentlessly: these are the keys to the further progress that the SWEDD project is aiming to achieve in the years to come.

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Putting a face to those transforming the lives of vulnerable girls and women

