



Project « Using law for rural women's empowerment in five West-African countries »



**TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY: MOST SIGNIFICANT
CHANGE STORIES BY RURAL WOMEN LEGAL
LITERACY VOLUNTEERS AND COMMUNITY
RECONCILIATION COMMITTEES**

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FOREWORD

Started on January 1st 2009, the project « Using law as a tool to empower rural women in 5 West African countries” aims at enabling women members of peasant women organisation coordinations and their respective areas in the 5 countries the project covers, mainly Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo to:

- know their rights
- to claim them in order to enjoy them in the same way as men in their family, community and professional lives and to have them enforced in favour of women in their respective milieux.

Today, there are 250 women farmers trained on their rights. The latter committed themselves to use law and help their sisters use it through sensitisation and legal assistance actions on behalf of women victims of the violation of their rights.

To support their actions and bring grassroots’ communities take their responsibilities, the paralegal women farmers also committee themselves into pushing volunteer men and women in their villages to constitute committees for fighting against the violation of women’s rights; these committees are intended to take in charge the violation of women’s rights and to implement preventive strategies. Until today, 125 committees have been formed.

One year before the end of the project, WILDAF is happy to propose a selection of witnesses by women paralegals and of cases both the latter and the community committees fighting violence against women have dealt with.

Moreover, according to the preconceived idea, the numerous violations of women’s rights consisting of physical, sexual, psychological violence and exclusion from access to inheritance, land, decision making are not unchanging practices. Things may change if community members, individually or collectively, take their responsibilities. This is what the cases treated by paralegals and community committees show us.

May the witnesses and cases strengthen the decision of each of us and the authorities’ to commit himself or herself to acting for contributing to change in our societies that are longing for well-being and justice, and particularly for gender equality.

I - THE PROJECT'S IMPACT ON RURAL WOMEN FARMERS

Togo: From training to assertiveness

Ms. **AKPOTO Atsoupi**, farmer and mother of five children is a volunteer paralegal in the Yoto prefecture, has become the President of *the Union of Producers of food grains in Yoto Prefecture*



"I've really have a breakthrough, a few months ago, I would never have accepted a position of responsibility within my organization. Although I have the capacity to do so, lack of confidence in me was still an obstacle. Shortly after the training including the rights to equal participation of women in decision-making structures, the opportunity has arisen for me to prove my ability through the election as President of our Union. I have taken appropriate action and filed my candidacy for the presidency of the Union of Producers of food grains in Yoto Prefecture. I made an effective campaign and I was elected by 57 members against 8 for my competitor. This is an unprecedented score. I have a term of 3 years before me and I will work hard to show that we women, we are able to do as much or better than men".

Talking about her actions in the field, Ms. Akpoto said that through the paralegal's training, she can deal with problems facing her or her community.

Thus in her community, she has helped to reduce the dropout rate. *"There are some students who were left schools because they said that they were beaten at school. Being aware of the situation and as a paralegal, I initially approached the parents to explain the importance of school and the exercise of parental authority. I then went to talk with teachers on the issue. Since then, everything comes back in order".*

Burkina Faso: The knowledge and use of law, an efficient way of empowering women and fighting against poverty



I am Roukiéta DARE, a woman farmer in Boalin, Burkina Faso. I am married and mother of 4 children.

For me, everything began with the paralegal training WILDAF gave rural women. Before this training, I was working in my husband's farm, a vegetable farm. I was timid with no self-confidence. But with this training, I understood that I can share something with the women in my community, provided I want it. According to my commitment during the training, I decided to sensitise women in my community on their basic rights. But before that, I had to solve two important problems. First, I had to solve the problem related to my lack of education. We were trained in Mooré, but the working documents we were given after the training were in French. I had never attended school for being able to master the themes developed. To solve this problem, I had had to call on a more resourceful woman paralegal to help me better understand the themes and, possibly, translate the important parts of the training document. Thanks to her, I could better understand things.

The second difficulty is that, being in a Muslim area, our community is not accustomed to seeing a woman sensitise populations and talk of socio-cultural matters. Consequently, my husband and a few members of my family did not want me to undertake any sensitisation. I discreetly had had to beg some influential personalities' support for advocating with my husband. It was a success and I could begin the sensitisation sessions.

After the third session, a group of women in my community came and expressed their concerns and needs: they wanted to become literate and have access to credit for carrying out income generating activities. I did not know what to do immediately, but, all the same, I noted down their complaints. I decided to bring their complaints to whom it may. I still did not know what to do, so I referred to my parents and other more

experienced people who proposed a few possible solutions and steps likely to end up successfully.

On these experienced people's advice, I went to the heads of the regional head office of agriculture for the literacy issue. They sent me to the appropriate service. The leaders of this unit, after listening to me and a few investigations, made a room and teaching materials available to us and took all the costs in charge. The first level took place and covered three months. For the credit, I first went to an institution called ODE that grants small credits to women. Unfortunately, I came up with a negative result. In the end, FAARF (Support Fund for Women's Income Generating Activities) accepted to give us the loan. But beforehand, some conditions were to be fulfilled, among which two principally: to get organised into groups because FAARF grants credit only to groups and choose, for the groups, leaders who own identity papers. It is to be noted that some of these women and I usually work individually on other people's farms for insignificant remunerations. Once back, I informed the women of the conditions required for the loan and devoted myself to organising them into groups according to each woman's field of interest and choice.

On the whole, 12 groups of 25 to 30 members each were born among which one of shea producers, another for transforming peanut into peanut paste, and others for producing dolo soap, soumbalé, and still others undertook various small businesses, etc. With the other women, we could identify women who accepted to act as group leaders and to guarantee members for paying the loans back. After all these moves, I went back to FAARF managers who discussed with every member to get informed on their individual motivations. A few days later, the grant was confirmed. For the moment, we have received a loan amounting to F CFA 25,000 per person. Payment will start at the end of the sixth month of activity. Together with other women from our area and the social worker recruited by the project for coaching us, we have undertaken the administrative process in order to obtain agreement certificates for the groups.

Some paralegals of our area (Ziniaré) took the example of my work to have women in their areas organised into groups. Together with these paralegals, we advocated with the local authorities, mainly the traditional chief and the landowners, to acquire lands for our groups. Our steps were successful and today every group has received at least 3 hectares of land.

Meanwhile, we asked officials from the Ministry of Women's Promotion to come and sensitise us on maternal and reproductive health.

On 15 October 2009, in the framework of the world woman farmer's day, there was an exhibit of agricultural products in Ziniaré where I exhibited my own production based on enhanced seeds. My products were selected and I was awarded F CFA 150,000 and a bicycle.

Today, my husband and neighbours are proud of me!

II - SUCCESS OF LEGAL LITERACY VOLUNTEERS' ACTIVITIES

Benin: Alternative approaches in settling domestic violence

Husband pledges to stop beating his wife

Right after been in touch with women's human rights in the country, women's farmers paralegals gained confidence and became precious assistance and help in their communities. The paralegal living in Sakete reported us the case:

"Lady Avlessi in Sakété in Benin went to the farm with her co-wife and their common husband for harvesting maize. In the farm, an argument occurred between the two co-spouses. Supporting his younger wife, the husband slapped Lady Avlessi who bites him to defend herself. He then in turn bites his wife and violently blew her repeatedly in the abdomen which caused Lady Avlessi important traumas revealed by the medical certificate issued to her. Her health condition required a nearly three week hospitalisation. Dissatisfied with the facts, the victim's relatives brought her back to their home after she recovered."

"As a paralegal trained by WILDAF for the area, I was informed. I met the victim who told me the complete facts and gave me some proofs. After listening to her, I appeased her and showed her different available means of redress of the situation. But Lady Avlessi did not intend to go to the police fearing to be rejected by both the community and her own family. Insistently, I explained to Lady Avlessi that gender violence is an offence punished by the law and no matter the perpetrator is one's husband. I understood her fear but continuing settlement of cases as usual in family would no longer help ending violence against women. With insistence, I proposed and it was accepted that the settlement been leading to a commitment signed if needed at the police office by the husband."

Benin: the deterring effect of the paralegals' action

In Ségbouhé, a husband made very angry by his wife, was about to throw her luggage out when his neighbours reminded him not to forget that there are "defenders of the female sex" in the village (alluding to the paralegal and committee members) and that he would have to face sanctions as soon as he threw her things out, whatever the reasons. These words from the neighbours weakened the furious husband's decision who chose to refer to the paralegal in Ségbouhé.

In Hinvi, a husband was about to beat his wife but he recovered his self-control. He came and gave evidence that he renounced because he remembered the "people of WILDAF" saying, during one of their sensitisation sessions, that no one had the right to be his own judge.

Volunteers to be an advocate for violence against women in the community

"Last September, Mrs Ouattara Mariam, aged 31 and mother of two children one of whom was a girl child, was beaten and held in custody for three days by her husband. She succeeded in running away from her husband's house with her girl child and asked for my assistance enabling her to go back to her mother in a neighbouring village.

After listening to her and quieting her and with her agreement, I met her husband, Mr. Abdoulaye. In the beginning of our conversation, Mr. Abdoulaye did not seem to regret anything and was ready to repeat his reaction (and this toward any other woman) if she came back to his house because, for him, it is normal that the man, as head of the household, has the right to punish his wife in such a way.

I took the decision to meet the village IMAM (the couple being Muslim) and the head of the community. I did it with the social worker's assistance. The two local authorities helped us to make Mr. Abdoulaye, the lady's husband, understand the legal punishment he deserved by exercising violence on his wife. The imam was satisfied of our action in the settlement of this conflict and called on us for a sensitisation meeting in the Muslim community (which was very difficult before we helped to settle this case)."

Our greatest satisfaction was that, during the sensitisation, Mr Abdoulaye had officially promised no more to use violence against his wife and he even volunteered to be our spokesman near men who usually were violent against their wives but were absent at the meeting.

Togo: LLV'S prevent a man from exercising violence against his wife in Kpélé-Konda

*My name is **KLEVOR GERARD** and I'm married to only one wife. My spouse took the habit of going out and coming back late without informing me, even during weekends when I stay at home.*

"She alleged going out to visit her friends in the area for discussion. This situation was creating conflicts in our relationship.

On hearing about the existence of the committee that fights violence against women in Kpélé-Konda, a village 4 km from Kpélé-Tsiko where we lived, I did not hesitate travelling for seeking the committee's intervention. The committee summoned my wife who did not deny my allegations. The committee said it did recognise her right, as a woman, to visit her friends and relatives in my presence or absence, but she must beforehand inform me and come back on time to carry out her duty as mother of the family. They made her

understand that this was a case of violence practised by a woman on her husband who expected finding his wife at home after a long working day and that this attitude might make me suspect her of infidelity. The situation also applies to me. The couple's happiness and harmony are at stake. They gave her advice which she well accepted."

"In this particular case, the husband and witnesses found that we had been objective in settling the case and that we did not try, at all cost, to favour women. This gave certain credibility to our committee" declared one of the members of the committee.

Togo: In Yotocopé, a widow recovered a farmland confiscated by her family by accessing their right



Lady Akouvi Avoke, mother of two children lost her husband three years ago. After her husband's death, her family in law did whatever possible to snatch her own farm and her husband's from her. She was then repudiated and deprived from the farms and all the goods they acquired together. She attended a sensitisation by the Yotocopé paralegals, she reported her problem to them and they took an appointment. The paralegals explained the different possible alternatives and redress procedures and she begged for their assistance. The village chief was immediately informed. On the paralegals' proposal, successive meetings took place with the family in law. The paralegals and the village chief had had time to explain to the wrongdoers the impacts of their acts on the woman, on their late brother's children and on the family as a whole. After a little reluctance, the family finally accepted to give the widow her farm back and to share among the two children their late father's farm. Thus, thanks to the two Yotocopé paralegals, Mrs. Avoke recovered her rights after a three year period of difficulties; everybody was satisfied.

Through this evidence illustrating these women and men's commitment to working for their community's welfare, we could efficiently make mentalities evolve and behaviours change from the grassroot if we were supported by these available local resources.

As many witnessed when we were collecting evidence, all kinds of obstacles occur and make the work on the field difficult.

**IMPACT OF THE ACTIVITIES OF COMMUNITY
RECONCILIATION COMMITTEES**

Ghana: contributing to put an end to violence regarding rape

I am Eric Aryee, a member of Ga West community reconciliation committee.

"Prior to the launching of the CRC's Ga West Municipality, rape and defilement of student and girls in the community were seen to be a normal thing in the community. However after the launch of the CRC's, community members became conscious of it including students in the community. On November, 2010, a primary school teacher was caught raping a student at the school toilet by some students. The students immediately reported the issues to me as a community reconciliation committee member.

The case was immediately reported to the police and the student immediately referred to the hospital for the necessary attention. The student was admitted and discharged after going through medical examination and treatment. The teacher after sensing danger took to his heels and has since then never been seen in the community. The police are however on the lookout for him to be persecuted."

This is an effective warning for authors and potential authors of rape in the community.

Benin: Committees sensitize women to say no to violence in Agoita, Gbada and Hlaga, Denou

Recently in Agoita, a husband was savagely beating his wife but had had to run away himself because, when other hearing her cries and as if they had discussed the case before, other women rushed him shouting that nothing would ever justify violence against a woman. He said he was afraid because in front their number and the fury in their eyes, he believed they would treat him brutally.

Gbada committee got mobilised against the forced marriage project Albertine was a victim of

On last February 27th, the committee members of the above named locality were informed of a kidnapping aiming at forcing to marriage Albertine KOUDENOUKPO, aged 16 and who sold various items. The author of this kidnapping was Bienvenu KOUNASSO, a close friend of Albertine's fiancé. He wanted to sell Albertine for F 80,000 with the help of a middleman residing in Sakété.

The committee members, backed by the victim's parents complained at the brigade de gendarmerie in Adjohoun. The security forces, closely collaborating, succeeded in

bringing the girl from Kétou and giving her back to her parents. On the contrary, the kidnapper and the middleman who was to marry the girl by force were arrested and are now sharpening their teeth on the tool bits of Porto-Novo prison.

The Committee in Ahounzonmè thought unacceptable the home violence Martine was victim of and sued the author in justice

Lady Martine HOUNSOU-ADI is an apprentice hairdresser aged 22. In Cotonou where she was living, she met a 27 year old young man named Moïse BODJRENOU, a moto-taxi driver. He made her pregnant, then abandoned her and fled to Nigeria. A few months later, the girl went to Moïse's village and her mother-in-law took care of her until she gave birth to her child last October. In December, gentleman Moïse, who never tried to know what happened to Martine, came back from Nigeria with another girl who was also pregnant. He was angry with his mother for taking care of the girl. One evening there was an altercation between Martine and Moïse. The latter wanted to snatch the 200 francs a neighbour gave Martine for food while her mother-in-law was absent. Quickly, the situation degenerated; Moïse and his new girl-friend attacked Martine and were cudgeling her. Moïse was not satisfied. He took a pestle and knocked her neck and she fainted. After his crime, he fled to a neighbouring village with his new girl-friend.

Informed of the event by neighbours, the paralegal of the locality alerted the other committee members. After gathering information and analysing the situation which revealed serious, the Committee, having got the victim's consent, took the decision of sending the settlement of the case to competent authorities. The paralegal, helped by the committee members, took photographs of the victim. They also photocopied the medical certificate. With these proofs, the brigade de gendarmerie was contacted; Moïse and his new girl-friend were arrested. After a two-day custody, they were referred for hearing to the Porto-Novo first instance tribunal on Friday, December 18th 2009. They were presented to the first attorney-general prosecutor in presence of the victim. The new girl-friend was released, a committal order was signed against Moïse who, even in presence of the prosecutor denied all the facts he was accused of.

After the hearing that occurred on 04th January 2010, Moïse was sentenced to a three month imprisonment with respite.

This arrest and imprisonment was largely talked of in the area and contributed, more or less, to cooling down the adepts of violence against women.

