

# The key to development: education for girls and boys

SERIES PORTRAITS

Since 1998, Ali Abdoulaye has been coordinator of the NGO VIE Kande ni Bayra, focal point for FAO-Dimitra in the Sahel. His work in rural areas has given him a strong interest in development activities and gender-related issues.

## Could you tell us about your career?

After completing my studies at teacher training college in Dosso, I began teaching in rural areas, first as a schoolmaster and then, very soon, as the principal. It is there that I began having contact with development NGOs. That encouraged me to submit a request for six wells to be sunk and a school garden to be set up to support the purchase of small items of equipment and materials for the school. This experience led me to become involved in development activities and, together with other teachers, I set up the NGO *Volontaires pour l'Intégration Educative* (Volunteers for Educational Integration), VIE Kande ni Bayra, which means "bring your knowledge".

## What are your main areas of activity?

Our main activity is basic education. Enabling children to go to school. And offering an educational alternative to those children who cannot join the classic system. For example,

we carry out literacy activities. The aim is to tackle illiteracy and ignorance, both factors that exacerbate poverty in grassroots communities. We are first and foremost teachers, and it is through education that we can make our expertise and experience available.

Our goal is therefore to educate, offering an integrated education, which can support development activities and provide them a greater chance of success.

Together with our various partners, including Dimitra, we have been able to extend and develop our outreach to include women in the community, especially in the area of education and literacy.

## Speaking of Dimitra, you mention gender equality. Are you involved in activities in this field?

We are the focal point for Dimitra in the Sahel, covering Chad, Benin, Togo, Niger and Mali. We are tasked with collecting all the information available, from the women themselves and from institutions, which might lend credibility to and gain recognition and visibility for the importance of women as a force for rural development. To help carry out this objective we have been given training on gender, so that we can understand what it means. Among the key lessons we have learned is the importance of putting tools in place to empower women and also that of involving men in the activities.

## What brought you to work on gender issues?

When launching VIE, we decided to pay special attention to the sector of the population most affected by poverty and food insecurity, that is to say, those living in rural areas. And in these communities, it can be seen that women are always in the frontline of the fight against poverty, taking up the challenge in the fields of agriculture, finances, education, health, social organization, etc.

To increase the impact and effectiveness of our activities in the field, it therefore made sense to collaborate with women. That was not difficult in itself, once the gender dimension has been taken on board. And once men and women accepted professional and human interaction.

## In your own cultural and family environment, has it been easy for a man to address issues of gender? Have you encountered any resistance?

We have encountered a great deal of resistance. Especially from those who were trying to defend their privileges. These people were strongly opposed to any initiative aimed at bringing about positive change in the position of women in society.

We also met with resistance based on mistaken interpretations of certain religious principles and on misunderstandings of the [religious] texts by women.

There have also been other types of resistance, due to the simple lack of self-confidence possessed by many women in rural areas; these are women who have a heavy workload and little time for reflection and contributing to the future of the community.

## How do you explain the gender dimension to people who are not familiar with it?

As development actors, we started out thinking that the mere fact of having women present at the meetings meant that we could say the gender dimension was being respected. That was until we understood that they not only needed to speak out, like the men, but they also needed to take part in debates and decision-making on all matters concerning the community.

And we also came to understand that in order to introduce the concept of gender in rural areas, it was essential to identify the obstacles and the difficulties, to understand in which areas and activities there were the most gender-related inequalities – in households, within the community. At the level of decision-making, it was also important to look at the areas in which decisions were being made, at the control of responsibilities and at the distribution of tasks within households.

When people are encouraged to reflect, they begin to realize and admit that there are inequalities. This admission can lead to a desire for change and a search for solutions from within. Development actors can play a role in looking for solutions that are sustainable and that can be extended from the local to the regional or national levels.





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**Do you have examples of experiences you have shared through the Dimitra network?**

An example of experiences shared is a workshop organized by Dimitra in Mbour, Senegal, in June 2008, on the issue of land access. The workshop enabled us to learn about the activities of the National Network of Rural Women in Senegal. The conclusions and recommendations from this international encounter inspired us for our activities with grassroots organizations. We took and adapted documents describing initiatives undertaken involving rural women in Senegal and we translated them into our own national languages.

It should be emphasized that we managed to couple this initiative with another Dimitra experience – that of the listeners’ clubs. These clubs are real information tools and discussion forums. At local level, they have made it possible to move the debate on land access for women higher up the agenda. Various approaches and strategies have been debated through the medium of these listeners’ clubs. The discussions have helped women in Banzoumbou to organize themselves and, with support from the chief and several men from the village, they have managed to negotiate with landowners the lease of a fertile plot for 99 years. If they succeed in farming this land in a profitable manner, many of them will be able to lift themselves out of poverty, buy land and strengthen their position in the community. At the moment, this result is cause for considerable satisfaction.

One can very well say that this initiative resulted from the determination and dynamism of these women, but that the idea was largely inspired by the experiences of other partners in the Dimitra network.

**How do you see the future of women, who are considered to be the pillars of society and the economy?**

This is true, given the role that they play, especially in our African societies. Women have the necessary potential to achieve balance and equity by themselves. Observations made in villages where we have worked well show that gender equality is possible. And achievements made at this level can be extended on a broader scale. At the global level, and at government level, things are also moving, with legal texts and resolutions adopted in favour of gender equality, and that provides the impetus to persevere.

**What satisfaction do you derive from your personal involvement in this sector?**

The greatest satisfaction I have is in being more aware of gender equality, in my professional activities and in my daily life. It has almost become a reflex.

My satisfaction is even greater when I visit some villages and see the enormous progress achieved in just 5 years. I see progress in the fact that women are speaking out at village meetings and playing a greater role in decision-making, on all issues linked to community life. In rural areas, women are taking on more and more responsibilities for managing activities, without having to ask for help from men. That is happening in one of our flagship villages, Gasseda. The village women’s group received a multifunctional platform from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). They refused to allow men to become involved, in the management or even the repair of the machine. The initiative is so successful that the management plan is expected to facilitate the

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purchase of a new grinder so that the activities can be continued (see article page 10). Personally, when I see how much has been done in the 30 years that I have been visiting these villages, I tell myself that the next 10 years could bring even more positive changes.

**Given your experience, what advice would you give to readers of the Dimitra newsletter who may be interested in becoming involved in gender promotion?**

The first piece of advice is to... be committed. To understand and fully take on board the concept of gender. Also, anyone wanting to work in this sector must be careful to adopt a participatory approach in any actions they undertake, especially in rural areas. Above all, they should avoid having preconceived ideas, leave space for women’s creative genius and favour solutions that come from within.

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