

1972

Born in Ivory Coast, second of 3 daughters. Her mother is Togolese and her father is Ghanaian.



Grows up in a strict Christian family; both parents are pastors. Bijoue works from a young age: feeding the poultry on the family farm or rolling fishing nets imported by her dad before school.



1988

She moves to Ghana, starts studying at the polytechnic.

PeaceWomen Across the Globe
FriedensFrauen Weltweit
نساء من أجل السلام عبر العالم
Femmes de Paix Autour du Monde
Женщины мира за мир на земле
Mujeres de Paz en el Mundo
Mulheres pela Paz ao redor do Mundo
Donne di Pace nel Mondo
ピースウーマン―国境を越え平和をつくる女たち
全球和平妇女



1999

Interns as a government liaison officer during an international peace conference.



2005-2017

Bijoue starts a family and is ordained.



2000

Hired as a bilingual secretary at West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)* and a year later becomes its regional programme officer.



2018 onwards

Joins the African Union (AU) as a Peace and Security advisor. Develops the framework for FemWise-Africa.



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MEET THE NETWORK

Bijoue

CONTEXT

West Africa experienced devastating conflicts and political crises in the 1990s and 2000s: the first and second Liberia wars, the Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast wars, among others. Those conflicts were largely driven by state collapse, the illegal exploitation of natural resources, and the destabilising spillover of violence across porous national borders.

"When I found the expression of who I was..."

Her name is Kesia-Onam Bijoue Togoh Birch. Her father wanted a boy, hence her name: Kesia-Onam means "this is what God has given me." But Bijoue was not as pretty as her sisters and she was strong, like a boy. She got to do a lot of work at home, finding comfort in reading the Bible and conversing with God. Bijoue grew up in a community full of foreigners and migrants. "They were many interesting things: migrants, prostitutes, drunkards. But in our home it was different, we knew God. At home it was very strict, thankfully. And we turned out good."

Bijoue moved to Ghana at age 15 to study in a secondary school for her O-levels and A-levels and proceeded to the Accra polytechnic. "I wanted to become a midwife, but I thought I could not do science. People used to say the polytechnic will give you a job, so I chose this. To get a job." In Ghana, the little girl with funny teeth realised people would somehow gravitate towards her. She started to read every book she could find and became "knowledgeable." "I discovered I was smart. And I started to smile despite my teeth." At that time, several conflicts were raging in West Africa. As she was graduating, she got a consultancy to take notes at a capacity-building workshop in Abidjan. "I had only two days to get ready and then for two weeks I worked until 9 pm every day. A lot did not make sense to me. I transcribed everything, and came back with a big report. And the report passed the quality control. This is how WANEP decided to hire me."

At WANEP she met Emmanuel Bombade, the programme director and a passionate peacebuilder. Learning from him, Bijoue undertook training and attended workshops. WANEP was small at the time, with only seven staff members. Bijoue worked closely with the executive director. As a bilingual secretary she learned a lot from translating reports. Soon she was asked to edit proposals, until one day, she was asked to travel to Abidjan and take funds there as WANEP had no bank account in that country. "I was taken to a meeting where there was a conflict among the leaders and I had the money with me. So I decided first to listen, before handling the money. I wanted to be sure it was OK to hand over the money. I was nearly 23 and I was a woman, surrounded by men. My background as a Christian – you have to be peaceful. I had good skills, such as active listening. This turned out to be my first mediation. We came to a compromise and when I handed over the money, they thanked me."

"Important things need to happen behind the scene to make peace possible."

Bijoue played a critical role over the years and across the continent, supporting women and doing "backstopping" for them, among other things For instance, during the women's liberation movement in Liberia in 2003, when women were pressurising Charles Taylor to sit down at the negotiation table, Bijoue was there every day in Accra. She made sure the women had clothes, places to sleep, contact with the media and the funds they needed. She essentially buit a support system to ensure the women were in the spotlight and could achieve what they had set out to do. **"WANEP did all the logistics for the women during this time. Finally Charles Taylor arrived, and as we know the pressure from the women was decisive in making him sign his resignation."** But her work also focused on womens healing processes. "It does take time to take care, women are always in resilience mode. Women are dealing with very deep wounds, and sometimes it makes them confrontational. Many are also affected at home, facing domestic violence, but are still building peace. And when we have trust between us and develop friendships, we become stronger together."

When she joined the FemWise-Africa secretariat, a network of women mediators, she continued to work behind the scenes: "pushing things, but in silence." As a political adviser to the Special Representative of the Chairperson of the African Union to Chad, she was deployed to the Qatar talks. A month before these talks, the armed groups needed to meet on their own. It was expedient that the AU paid for that meeting. "It was very very difficult to get funds to the people. But I was able to convince the ministry of reconciliation to arrange pre-financing for the meeting. Money from the transition government – imagine! But this allowed consultations to take place with all stakeholders involved."

People at the centre

Driving for hours on terrible roads, Bijoue travelled across Africa – even when she was pregnant, even with her babies. She not only supported high-level negotiations, but also put in place what she calls "gender early warnings", because signs of conflict often start at community level. For instance, in the Sahel women see the signs of growing extremism, but they don't know how to report it. **"Women would see they were selling more salt at the market. And salt is one of the ingredients used to make home-made bombs. So we put in place a system where women would report this to the police."**

Today, as Bijoue looks back on her journey, she is thankful to the many different people she met. To her husband who supported her, to God who has been lighting her way and to the women and the communities from whom she learned so much. "Peace is something that you can learn, and not always in a classroom. What you need is passion, and what you have inside will actually transform the people."

*WANEP (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding) is the largest regional civil society peacebuilding organisation in West Africa. Founded in 1998, it operates across 15 countries to support conflict prevention, human rights, and mediation.

**WIPNET (Women in Peacebuilding Network) is a programme launched by WANEP with the aim to increase the number of trained women practitioners in peacebuilding as trainers, researchers, mediators and advocates.

Bijoue is a member of the Feminists Connecting for Peace network.

For more information please visit: 1000peacewomen.org/en

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