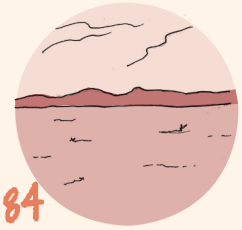
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Женщины мира за мир на земле
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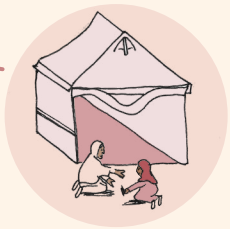
1984

Born in 1984, in Puntland, a nomadic area of Somalia



1988

Amina is four when she is separated from her parents. She grows up with her aunt and sister.



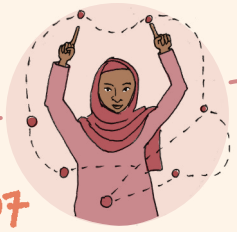
1991 – 1994

As conflicts start, Amina flees from Somalia to the Utange refugee camp in Kenya.



1994

She returns to Puntland and graduates from high school. She and 20 others are selected for training at PDRC.*



2007

Amina is selected to join the team managing a 3-year programme about women and peace.



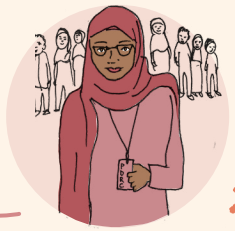
2013

Amina joins a programme about women and peace leadership in the USA.



2017

She wins the inaugural Peacebuilder for Water Award.



since 2019

Amina is appointed head of PDRC's gender equality and social inclusion unit.

*Puntland Development Research Centre is a local think tank providing qualitative research, data tracking, and structured training for female politicians and peacebuilders.



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MEET THE NETWORK

Amina

CONTEXT

In 1991, intense clan fighting devastated Somalia. Today, while there is some political agreement, true reconciliation has never trickled down to the grassroots and community levels. Communities are still actively fighting over long-standing grievances, a cycle fuelled by deep poverty and low incomes. In addition, about half of the population are nomads who are losing their rural livelihoods to severe, climate-change induced droughts. Families are forced to migrate to towns that don't have the infrastructure or resources to support them, driving many desperate men to join the military. At the same time, terrorist groups remain a massive threat. Following the 1991 government collapse, various peace efforts eventually led to the 2002 Djibouti Agreement, establishing the current federal structure. While Puntland state is relatively stable and holds elections, it still operates on a traditional clan power-sharing system with fragile, dysfunctional institutions. Electoral representation is decided by male clan elders. Because women marry outside their clans, the elders argue that women don't "exclusively belong" to either their father's or husband's lineage – using this loophole to freeze women out of leadership roles.

Amina's journey is deeply intertwined with the Somali women's movement in Puntland, starting at a time when women were completely sidelined from social and political spaces. Puntland, despite being one of the most stable parts of Somalia, remains very fragile, and is a male-dominated society, where men lead all the political parties: they are the commissioners and they monopolise all governance structures. Only elders were entitled to participate in peacebuilding and reconciliation talks, reconciling communities and clans. Women and other sectors of the communities were not formally involved. At the time, it was taboo even to talk about women's issues. "Sometimes people would even refuse to attend events if women's topics were on the agenda, saying this is from outside and is not our culture. It is anti-religion to talk about women's issues."

Somali women: the silent architects of peace

Over the past few years, this has started to change. Like Amina who was given an opportunity to join PDRC as a recent high school graduate, women started to push informally for more inclusion in governance, reconciliation and state building.

Since 2005, women in Puntland have slowly but surely driven grass-roots survival, community cohesion and conflict resolution. Steadily, they have transformed from informal, invisible mediators within a highly patriarchal clan framework into increasingly formalised political actors, institutional leaders, and localised peace network builders. In 2007, when Amina started to work on these issues, very few women were present in discussions related to peacebuilding and reconciliation processes at the community level.

"Governance can't be separated from peacebuilding, that's why we pushed hard to have women at government levels. **When a conflict happens, it's key to have women inside the system, so they are part of the committees solving it.**" Along with others, she started advocating, informally at first. For example, she hosted the delegates during reconciliation talks, cooking for them just to be in the same room and listen to their discussions. Then women started to talk about cohesion, a culture of peace and raising awareness within the population. Using their dual-clan identities (lineage by birth and lineage by marriage) women would navigate frontline zones that men could not safely cross. They established peace committees, intercepted early warning signs of retaliatory clan killings and funded local peace agreements through business networks.

In 2007, with the support of Amina's organisation, a regional women's joint peace committee was established in Galkayo with the aim of working on community awareness, ceasefire negotiation and monitoring as well as social cohesion. The committee comprises members from both sides of the city, which is split between two states. Members of this committee were included in the signing of the 2017 Galkayo peace agreements, a major achievement.

From clan-based to inclusive democracy

After the war ended, there was no government and there were no effective structures or social services for the population. In 2005–2006, local councils were established in Puntland for the first time. At that time, women were very rarely present, but this did not prevent them from voicing their needs. Through public campaigns, women started to advocate against the clan-based structure and for the inclusion of women in local councils. "Women are the ones who line up to vote, and alongside young people, are very active in public campaigns. But not only can you not be elected as a woman or a young person, you don't even get access to services. So, we engaged with civil society and leveraged the gender ministry.

"In 2007, we experienced huge success — we managed to push for a presidential decree saying that 30% of the councils should be female. We did a lot of advocacy, saying that the image to the outside world of male-only power is not good. One of our arguments was also that today's women are educated, many having graduated university and that awareness and knowledge of women has changed. Many have political ambitions now. Then using this presidential decree, we started campaigning. We never reached 30% as elected councillors but at least the number of women increased. In the latest elections, we reached 17% of women as elected councillors. It is a massive success – showing we have moved from a clan-based to a democracy-based society."

"We are moving, but I still feel the gap."

Amina's peacebuilding journey started with the opportunity the former directors of PDRC gave her when she did not even have a university degree. At first, she was supported by her aunt and sisters and today she can count on her husband. "He is proud of me and my work. He works in the same ecosystem; he understands what I do. He is not an ordinary man."

Amina feels the passion that drives her at every hour of the day "I am passionate. I feel the need to advocate, to fight to get space and a platform for women. When I see women are still excluded, they are victims being used as tools, and I have to keep fighting." Despite the remaining gaps in public services, Amina still feels the difference from 2007. Even though men continue to hold the majority of political positions, women have more substantive roles and are more present. "Across Somalia I see women's networks, women's organisations, individual activists, and they are all very active and engaged." So, there is hope. Hope that the presence of women in governance will positively influence the country but also hope that young people (who represent 75% of the population) get a chance to be part of the change, alongside the women.

"We are not where we want to be. Women are not represented everywhere, but perceptions have changed — we are moving. And one day, elders and politicians will end up realising that it's not a real peace process if young people and women are not at the forefront."

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

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

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1982

Born in Bunia, the capital city of Ituri Province, DRC, Georgine's mother is Hema and her father Lendu.

1982-2007

She grows up with her mother and uncles in a Hema community, but is rejected and marginalised by them.



She works throughout her childhood – weaving mats, fetching water and working in the fields.



2002-2010

She works in the offices of several political parties, first as a cleaner, then taking notes during meetings and gradually provides analyses and strategic input.



2009

When she is 27, her father returns and she reclaims her Lendu tribal identity.



2019

Her father, a Lendu community leader, is beaten to death by Zaïre militia (a Hema armed group). Georgine starts to work in mediation and community dialogue.



2016-2024

In secret, she passes the state diploma and then earns a degree in political science and administration.



Since 2019

Today she is the founder and coordinator of FADEM.* She participates in the provincial peace process, aiming to disarm and demobilise the armed groups.



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MEET THE NETWORK

Georgine

CONTEXT

In the Djugu Territory (Ituri) of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the rival militias CODECO and Zaïre clash under the pretext of protecting their respective Lendu and Hema communities. The conflict stems from decades (some say centuries) of marginalisation, fights over land and power, exacerbated by political instrumentalisation and illegal extraction of mineral resources (mostly gold). Hundreds of civilians are being killed monthly, thousands are being displaced and children are being recruited daily in armed groups. Women and children are the first victims of sexual violence: 27,000 cases were reported in 2025 in Ituri according to the Congolese Association of Women Lawyers.

Georgine's activism started with the murder of her father, a Lendu community leader, who was beaten to death by Zaïre militia. At that point, her brothers and the Lendu community were plotting revenge, planning attacks and massacres. While the body was still at the morgue, Georgine, as his daughter, was asked to "validate these attacks." **At this precise moment, using her mixed heritage — Hema on her mother's side and Lendu on her father's — Georgine started walking towards the frontline, with the objective of putting in place dialogue instead of weapons and mediation and peace instead of massacres and death.**

"As a child, I felt invisible."

The roots of Georgine's resilience lie in her early life. "I was born into two communities where I was not welcome. My mother suffered so much; we were both marginalised because of me. Every bad thing that happened was because of me, it was always my fault." Georgine grew up in Bambu, 120 km from Bunia. Segregated from her family, she was not welcome at family parties. She had to work from a very young age to feed herself and her family. She rarely attended school. When her aunt, a widow from Bunia, offered to take Georgine in, she saw the opportunity to study in the city. The plan was to become a teacher. "I had to stop, because the principal closed the school to young girls – I only knew how to read and write."

So she worked as a cleaner at different political parties' offices. Gradually, she was asked to do secretarial work, writing protocols. "Then I worked on analyses and I gave advice. People started to notice me. I was professional. I didn't ask for more money, I had no appropriate clothes and often walked barefoot but I was doing my job well." Georgine decided to continue her studies, in secret. "I passed the state diploma on the second attempt because my educational level was low – especially in French. Then I started university, encouraged by my father." He came back to "reclaim" her when she was 27. Georgine agreed to be "bought back" and decided to change her name (her previous name meant "something bad has entered the family.") She lived with him for ten years — until the day the Zaïre militia murdered him. Georgine was 37 years old.

"I was ready to die for peace."

Since childhood, Georgine has lived in conflict, amidst the population who bore the brunt of the fighting between Zaïre and CODECO militias. For Georgine, something has always been clear: **"We must live together. Look at me – I am both, I cannot deny my mother and I cannot deny my father."**

After her father was killed, she realised that the cause of the conflict was the lack of contact between the two communities. "Between chiefdoms, for ten years, neither group ever spoke to the other. They were never cooperating, and I saw the danger. There were too many killings in this zone, we had to bring them closer."

So Georgine approached them; at first they refused. She shuttled back and forth between the two, realising each had lost loved ones, like her. "Everyone has done harm, let's find a climate of understanding, let's talk. I don't have solutions, but I questioned them and I facilitated, even though the climate was really not good. I was thinking, at least let's die for peace and not for conflict. My only goal on that first day was for them to see each other and say hello. I told them to empty out everything they had in their bellies and they finally spoke, and they greeted each other. I remember — it was really hot in the room."

"Talking is good, but living it is always complicated. I started with no means, the means follow."

Her father had set up an organisation and had asked her to take over the reins. She realised what she could do with it after her father was killed and when she started engaging in community mediation and dialogue between armed groups. At first, the organisation had no financial support and was only relying on a few volunteer workers. "My husband was a great support in those years. He had faith in my vision, he constantly encouraged me." Today, FADEM is recognised beyond Ituri Province. Its list of successes and achievements is long, from opening roads to releasing hostages, to facilitating peace agreements and supporting the MONUSCO (the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC) by giving them a "community anchor."

Now Lendu and Hema communities meet and talk to each other. "We are trying to bring CODECO and Zaïre armed groups to the discussion table. But every day peace must be consolidated, because it is really fragile." She is now respected in both families: she is fully integrated among the Lendu and is still in contact with her uncles. "I am now a reference for these two communities. I didn't learn mediation, but life taught it to me. I am self-trained." Women have a major role to play in ensuring communication between the communities and in building social cohesion. This is why she is working with, training and accompanying women and young people from both communities to dialogue with armed groups and put prevention mechanisms in place, to ultimately live together peacefully. "Now, people from the two communities warn each other when an attack is likely. This communication is really what can make us move towards peace."

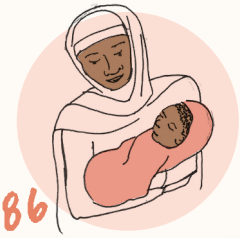
* FADEM (Femmes en Action pour le Développement Multisectoriel) is often called upon to secure the release of hostages and to help humanitarian organisations and the UN gain access to Djugu territory. The NGO has been called upon by the military governor and provincial authorities to seek dialogue with the armed groups. The organisation also works with women and young people and builds inclusive local committees to prevent resurgence of violence and the community-wide escalation of conflict.

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

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

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1986

Born in Bamako, Mali and raised by her mother, the first female politician of Douentza.



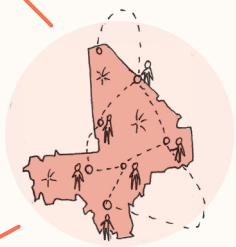
2005

After achieving her baccalaureate, Aminata studies in Morocco.



2012

The war starts in Mali, and Douentza, her mother's village, becomes the epicentre. Aminata uses Facebook to denounce the massacres.



2013-2023

She joins KISAL*, an organisation that collects and relays information throughout the country on human rights violations and war atrocities.



2014

Aminata is appointed director of KISAL* in Mali.



2014

She marries and later has three children.



2023

Aminata speaks about the situation in Mali at the UN Security Council. She faces threats to her life and is forced to flee Mali, leaving her children behind.



2023 onwards

Today, she lives in Europe with her children, where she works as vice-president of KISAL International.

*KISAL monitors and sends out alerts on human rights violations by the armed groups against pastoralist communities in the Sahel.



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CONTEXT

Several armed groups operate in Mali, each with different objectives, ideologies and areas of influence. They are divided into three main categories: jihadist groups, self-defence groups, and rebel movements. The war's consequences are devastating: thousands of civilian and military deaths, millions of refugees and displaced people, massacres, kidnappings, and thousands of children out of school.

MEET THE NETWORK

Aminata

Memories of Douentza village – where it all started

Aminata grew up in Mali's capital Bamako with her two older sisters and her mother. She has profound memories of the holidays she spent with her grandparents in Douentza, where her mother's family comes from. After the 800 km ride there, she spent every holiday with her family, sharing joyful moments and developing emotional bonds with the local people.

In 2012, those childhood memories were changed forever. While Aminata was living peacefully in Bamako, the war started in Mali. Her family and loved ones in Douentza started to share what they were going through in the village that was at the epicentre of the conflict. It is in a zone contested by both the government and diverse jihadist groups. From this point on, there was no turning back for Aminata.

From a Facebook page to mobilising more than a hundred informants throughout Mali

Aminata started to denounce human rights violations, forced disappearances, and massacres of the population on her own Facebook page. Facts, figures and testimonies were based on her conversations and contacts in the communities facing the conflict. As her page gained momentum, she caught the attention of the former president of KISAL Mali and agreed to join the organisation. "Because alone I could do nothing, I realised we had to unite our efforts." The following years, KISAL set up "community relays" in all the conflict zones, especially where pastoral people (the Peuls) walk with their livestock. The Peuls' constant movement makes them and their livestock vulnerable for targeted attacks. Those years were very hard on Aminata's mental and physical health. "The phone would ring constantly; every day I was listening to cases of burned villages, disappeared people, arbitrary arrests. I felt so helpless, but mostly, I did not understand what was happening as I had never experienced such a war. It was impossible for me to imagine that it would happen in my own country." There were days where she was very sad and some days when she would rage against these injustices. But she was always ready to shout, to whoever was ready to hear: **"We are not going to win this war by killing, nor by closing our eyes. Look and listen to what is happening."** All of this while she was having and raising three children.

Telling the truth all the way to the UN Security Council

KISAL's primary role is to call out abuses and to relay verified information on human rights violations. The organisation shares detailed reports with Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the media. In Mali, they were soon labelled troublemakers for relaying information which was deemed taboo. Many see KISAL on the side of the jihadists and as standing against Mali because information must not be passed to outsiders "in times of war."

Aminata recalls tragic episodes from those years, like the Ogossago massacre in 2019, where self-defence militias killed at least 130 civilians, including children and elderly. She also remembers the massacre of men gathering for a wedding in Bounti in 2021 – for which the French military operation "Forces Barkhanes" were held responsible. In addition to the people killed in all these attacks, many did not reach the hospital in time as ambulances were often targeted. But there are also small victories, such as getting an 11-year-old child arrested by the military and in need of care released. The child was released from the police station thanks to KISAL's intervention with the Ministry of Justice. All the people KISAL and their partners were able to get released from prison were then able to access health care.

In 2023, Japan was presiding the UN Security Council and asked Aminata to speak as a Malian civil society member. She did it remotely, from the MINUSMA office in Bamako. **"In my speech, there was nothing new—it was the same as I always used to say on Twitter. But this time, it made a lot of noise and the military junta in power took it very badly."**

Aminata took refuge in the MINUSMA office and left the country a few days later, leaving her loved ones behind; her youngest child was only three years old.

"Looking back, I should have stayed. Even if it meant being thrown in jail."

Aminata has never been able to return home. One of her biggest regrets? "I should have stayed; I would have preferred prison to exile. Because in exile, I have abandoned my people – and this makes me feel very guilty." While she was still in Mali, the conflict was only in the north and in the centre of the country. Still she felt she should have spoken more about peace and social cohesion, of the human consequences of the war. "War has no limit. It means loss of lives, physical and traumatic wounds, family separation, the tearing of the social fabric, without mentioning the displacements and the economic consequences."

Her only hope today resides in dialogue. "There must be a real dialogue with people who have lost everything. They are ready to discuss, to forgive and to make peace today. This dialogue should also include the military and the authorities because soldiers die every day on the battlefield. It is time to put an end to this war. We must first listen to each other, before understanding each other. I think the jihadists are ready for this, if we make the first move. The war breaks my heart each time I hear people tell me their stories, and nothing is worth it. We have nothing to lose by trying to set up dialogue."

Aminata's ultimate dream is to go back home, and that her children can go on holiday to their grandparents and create fond memories of Douentza village.

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

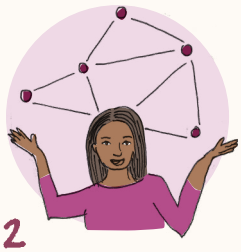
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1961

Born in the Kailahun district, Sierra Leone, the year that Sierra Leone gains independence.



1992

After graduation, she becomes a member of several women's networks. In 1992 she is displaced to Freetown due to the civil war.



1994

Travels to Dakar, Senegal, for the regional preparation conference leading up to the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing. After the conference, she joins other women to start an umbrella organisation, the Women's Forum Sierra Leone.

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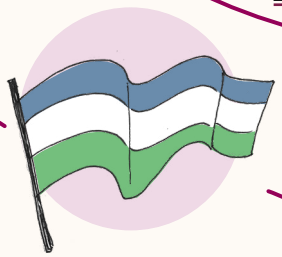


1995

She participates in the famous women's peace marches through Freetown which brought the issue of peace and women's voices to centre stage. She continues to be active with the women's peace movement through the Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET).



As a reporter, columnist and managing editor for local newspapers, Marian Angela helps women and marginalised groups and amplifies their voices.



2004 - 2007

She is a press officer in the Office of the President of Sierra Leone under the first civilian government after the civil war.



Today, Marian Angela is the chairperson of the National Commission for Democracy (NCD). She is also a member of various women's movements and acts as a trainer and facilitator for workshops, including those organised by the MARWOPNET.*



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MEET THE NETWORK

Marian Angela

CONTEXT

Sierra Leone's civil war raged from 1991–2002. The brutal eleven-year conflict was marked by mass displacement, conflict-related gender-based violence and the widespread use of child soldiers. The war formally ended with the Lomé Peace Agreement and UN-backed disarmament. The country has since held several peaceful transfers of power through elections. But the peace remains fragile due to electoral and political violence, economic instability and resource exploitation that particularly marginalises the rural communities. At the national level, women activists have pushed hard for legislative change to strengthen women's participation and leadership, winning a landmark law reserving 30% of parliamentary seats for women. But women remain underrepresented in cabinet and ministerial appointments and face targeted harassment and violence when they run for office. Continuing cross-border tensions along the Mano River, including disputes over land and resources with neighbouring Guinea and Liberia, raise fears of renewed instability.

Marian Angela was born in Kailahun district, Sierra Leone in 1961, the year the country gained independence. Growing up in a highly politicised environment, she observed early how politics shaped everyday life, particularly for women, and how women around her took on leadership roles. Running for school council, she got involved in women's leadership. During her undergraduate research into the social and economic status of women in Sierra Leone she saw a clear pattern: **women carried enormous responsibilities in families and communities, often as primary breadwinners, but they rarely received any recognition and were expected to stay in the background.** She noticed that boys and girls grew up in the same households, but only the boys were kept in school. After graduating, she joined several women's networks and worked with displaced women as an activist.

Sierra Leone's women organise for peace

Displaced during the civil war, she came to the capital Freetown in 1992. In 1994, she attended the regional preparatory conference in Dakar, Senegal, for the women's conference in Beijing. She and other delegates realised that Sierra Leone's women's organisations were too fragmented to be effective. They formed an umbrella organisation, the Women's Forum Sierra Leone, to improve their coordination as well as their chances of reaching decision-makers. With Sierra Leone under military rule at the time, one of their first priorities was building a working relationship with the minister overseeing the gender desk. Marian Angela also took part in the 1995 women's peace marches through Freetown, when thousands of women demanded an end to the war – a moment that helped catalyse a decade of civic action led by Sierra Leonean women.

"We can't leave it to the men": founding MARWOPNET

It was at the Beijing+5 review in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2000 that the idea for the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) was born – out of conversations with women from Guinea and Liberia who shared the same river basin and the same war-weariness. Marian Angela recalls: "The women were tired. Your husband, brother, male child, everyone was being conscripted. You were alone, but you didn't have any means or power for yourself within society. So women said: 'this burden is on us, we can't leave it to the men.'" Despite language differences – francophone Guinea and anglophone Liberia and Sierra Leone – they found ways to reach presidents and rebel leaders, often through women with personal ties to armed groups. When peace talks convened in Nigeria, MARWOPNET was invited to the table, marking a turning point in women's influence in the process. However, Marian Angela stresses that it was not just the women at the table who brought about change – the work in the background was just as critical. Building trust and seeking dialogue both with government representatives and with armed groups were a necessary precondition for peace talks. **"To reach them, we had to find women who had a connection to a fighter, be it a husband or a brother. Especially those who were close to the leadership of the armed groups. We needed to convince them that we all needed peace and engage with all factions, not just the governments."**

Looking back, looking ahead: sustaining women's peacebuilding

Marian Angela became a journalist to amplify the voices of women and marginalised communities. She worked as a reporter, columnist and managing editor for local papers, and as a member of several journalists' associations. From 2004-2007, she served as press officer in the Office of the President under Sierra Leone's first post-war civilian government. She remains candid about the obstacles: "We are living in a male-dominated society. Most of the time, when women push for something, getting across our issues isn't easy." Today she chairs the National Commission for Democracy, after serving as its Southern Region Commissioner from 2017-2021, and continues to work with MARWOPNET, the Women's Movement for Peace and the African Women Advocacy Agenda. She names one hard-won milestone: 30% female representation in parliament for the first time in the country's history. But she also points out that ministerial appointments of women still lag behind and that women who run for office become targets. She credits two mentors, now deceased, with helping her move forward. Today, she mentors young women herself. Marian Angela is concerned about the renewed instability along the Mano River border: "What I see happening is worrisome. After the war ended, attention waned and funding for peacebuilding was reduced, but we still have armed activities along the borders." For this reason MARWOPNET has opened a peace centre and re-engages with women in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia – to head off conflicts before they escalate.

* The Mano River Women Peace Network was one of the first female-led negotiating teams in West Africa, mobilising women across Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and successfully persuading the three countries' heads of state and armed groups to return to the negotiating table. In 2003, the network was awarded the UN Prize for Human Rights by Secretary-General Kofi Annan for its contribution to peace and human rights. That year it became a signatory to the Liberian Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

Marian Angela is a member of the Feminists Connecting for Peace network.

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

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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.

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