



Mariama

NIGERIEN CEREAL BANK MEMBER
EARNING RESPECT AND SECURING FOOD

Mariama has a husband, three children, dozens of relatives, an adobe hut with a straw roof, a few hens, five dresses, some colourful scarves, a mortar, a hoe, a dozen plates and cups, some spoons, four pots, some jerricans, four light bulbs, three bracelets and a very pretty necklace. Mariama knows that she was born in 1983, but she does not know the exact date – and it never occurred to her that she should know it.

Niger is one of the poorest nations in the world, a very large country full of desert; the birth rate of its 15 million inhabitants – 83 percent are farmers – is among the highest on the planet: 7.7 children per woman. Mariama was born in Dokimana, a town with no electricity or running water about 60 kilometres from Niamey, the capital city – where her father worked two or three hectares of land. Mariama was the fifth of seven siblings, so she always had someone to play with around the house or near the river. When she was six, she began helping around the house: she would help her mother cook,

clean, bring water in from the well and firewood down from the bush. She also helped her mother with her crops: women often grow gombo, a common local condiment, on their own.

Her parents never sent her to school. Her brothers went, but she didn't, and now she regrets it: she believes that, had she gone, she would have had more opportunities, like some of her neighbours who became teachers and earn a salary and don't spend their lives grinding millet. When she was ten though, her mother and grandmother started to teach her the Koran: Mariama learned to recognize those letters and, after a time, she was able to remember and reproduce sounds that, together, made sentences in Arabic which she, of course, did not understand. It was like singing a song whose lyrics, she had been told, were the word of God. Later, each night at the town's Koranic school, by the light of oil lanterns, the marabou – the religious wise man – would explain to her what the words she was repeating meant.

What did you most like doing when you were a teenager?

What I most liked doing was filling up my belly, getting dressed up and reading the Koran.

Ten years ago, when Mariama was sixteen, a man from Dalweye, thirty kilometres away, came to Dokimana: his name was Aboubakar. He was twenty-five years old and had some relatives there and, it later became clear, he was looking for a wife. One day, the man walked up to Mariama, looked her straight in the eye, and told her that he loved her. Then he went back to his town to tell his parents that he had found his wife.

Here, we don't spend a lot of time conversing, dating, stuff like that. If a boy wants to marry a girl and the girl agrees, they get married as soon as they can prepare the wedding.

Dalweye is a very poor town, a hundred adobe constructions scattered on dry ground. Mariama was afraid: she was no longer under the control of her father but of her husband, and she was going to spend the rest of her life with a man whom she barely knew in a place that was not her own.

Weren't you happy to get married?

No, well, yes... I knew that I could trust my husband, he was not a stranger to my family. But the man is always stronger than the woman, and you never know what will happen.

"I also see myself differently, because I know that I make a contribution to the household."

Mariama became a wife: she cleaned the house, ground the grain, washed, cooked, and went to the fields to take her husband millet paste for lunch. One year later, she had her first child; the girl was born at home under the care of the town midwife. She had a normal life full of hard work; it might have been calm if there were not the constant threat of hunger.

Mariama's family – and most Nigerien farmers – eat, if they can, three times a day: at dawn, a ball made out of millet that has been ground for hours in a wooden mortar, mixed with a little milk or water; at midday, the same millet dish or a soup that consists of hot water with millet flour. Dinner, when night falls, is the most elaborate meal: it consists of millet or corn paste with a sauce made from baobab leaves, gombo or whatever there is. Two or three times a month they also eat fish, or some chicken. And on holidays or special occasions, Mariama makes white rice with a sauce made from sorrel, squash, tomato and peanut paste.

But sometimes we don't have much food, and we can only eat twice, or even once, a day. Or we don't have anything at all.

The most difficult time of year is the period they call "la soudure". In June, when the rains start, the peasants plant millet and corn to be harvested in October; those months when the earlier harvest is running out and the next one has not yet begun – especially August and September – are times of hunger. Mariama has always known hardship, but the situation is getting worse every year.

Before, an average field, three or four hectares, could yield up to 300 heaps of millet. Now, if it yields 150 that's a lot. And before each heap yielded seven or eight tias, and now they never yield more than three.

The most common measure in Niger, a tia, is a bowl that contains two and a half kilos of grain. And Mariama says that the grains don't ripen because the lands are used up, the fertilizer is very expensive and there are no carts to bring it in. And there are few trees left because they have been chopped down for firewood and to build houses and utensils – "If you don't have wood, you can't do anything here" – and that, since there are no plants, there is less water. But the worst thing is that now it rains much less than before, she says, less and less. Without naming it – she wouldn't know the name –, Mariama speaks of climate change.

In 1999, when she arrived to Dalweye, Mariama found out that some women there had started a support group. In Mariama's town nothing like that existed and at first, a shy newcomer, she didn't dare ask them to let her in. But she did follow their activities. The first group of women from Dalweye was formed in 1997 following a Care International initiative. It consisted of forty women who got together, talked about

their problems and tried to contribute 100 francs – about 20 US cents – every week to build a fund that would offer them loans of 5,000 to 10,000 francs to help start up a small business: selling fritters, couscous, milk. The group helped them to get by, but eventually they learned out about cereal banks, and wanted to form one.

Cereal banks are one of the most efficient ways to fight the threat of hunger following droughts in Niger. There are already 2,000 cereal banks in the country. The mechanism is simple: a group of women who have been active in their villages commits to build a warehouse, and they receive from the World Food Programme – through different NGOs – an initial capital in the form of grain, usually one hundred 100-kilo sacks of millet, corn and rice.

The bank sells and/or lends small amounts of grain to the community at two key times of year: in the month of June, when the first rains say that it is time to plant, and when “la soudure” comes. The women, who are divided into commissions, run the bank, though all the major decisions are made in a general assembly. In order to be sustainable, the bank annually “capitalizes”, and buys more grain for the following year. Through the bank, women are able to get grain in their hometowns, instead of



having to walk dozens of kilometres to the nearest market. The bank also regulates prices, since the bank’s prices are always below the market. Primarily though, the bank is a resource that reduces the threat of hunger, and earns women a place of respect in their communities and homes.

Now my husband looks at me differently. He knows that without the bank we sometimes would have nothing to eat, and we women are the bank. I also see myself differently, because I know that I make a contribution to the household.

In 2002, the women from Dalweye joined all their resources to build the warehouse. They say proudly that they did it by themselves.

No, we men helped out, says a representative of the village chief.

You did some work, but we women provided the money.

Amidst laughter, the debate at the Dalweye women’s assembly carries on. They have gathered this morning at the hirara – “the place of the words” in Djerma – under the mango tree to discuss the figures for the last year. The president shows them the books: they have 821,930 francos in cash and 153 100-kilo sacks of grain. Mariama sits among the women. She joined the group seven years ago, when the warehouse was being built, and now she participates in all of its activities: discussions, debates, training classes, and a literacy course. When

“la soudre” comes round, Mariama often buys grain: a few years ago, the women from Dalweye decided not to make any more cereal loans because it often took them too long to get them back and that created problems.

In 2005, electricity came to Dalweye. Before, night in the town was gloomy and silent; now people don't have to go to bed when it gets dark. And the mill works better, and some people even have a fridge to cool water to sell. Mariama only uses electricity to light her house with a few light bulbs: that's the only electrical gadget she has.

That year, Mariama had her first son, and she was very relieved. A boy can help his father in the fields and, when he gets married, he doesn't leave but brings his wife home; the boy's mother can finally rest as her daughter-in-law does the housework. A son is labour and the promise of retirement. And Mariama knew that women who do not produce male offspring can be scorned by their husbands. Indeed, if they can, such husbands may take a second wife, because they never believe it could be their fault that they don't have male children.

Mariama's life varies little from day to day. She gets up with the sun every morning, goes to the well to get water, makes breakfast, sends her children to school, dusts

the house, grinds the millet, talks to her relatives, cooks the midday millet, takes it to her husband, tends to her small lot of gombo, washes the clothes, looks after the children, makes dinner and goes to bed. She sometimes sells couscous outside the school.

Is there ever a day when you don't work?

No, why?

Just asking.

No. Only when I am sick. But if not, no, I work every single day.

And would you like not to work one day?

Yes, I would. But I know that is never going to happen. Well, maybe when my children are grown up, but not before.

Mariama thinks that if her children learn how to read and write, even to speak a little French, maybe when they are grown up they will have a trade and, perhaps, even be able to support her.

Have you ever been to Niamey?

Yes, I have been there to see relatives. I like it very much. The food is good, and you can tell that people are well fed. They are attractive and clean, their skin is shiny and their clothing pretty. The poor people in the city are better off than the rich people here.

Would you like to live there?

Yes, of course.

Why not try?

Because we don't have enough money to live there. There you have to have a lot of money, because you have to pay for everything: wood, water, food, everything is for sale.

And if one day a magician came along and told you could be whatever you wanted and do whatever you liked, what would you choose?

What I want is to have enough money to buy some cows and fatten them up, to plant spices and sell them at the market, to have a fridge to cool water and sell it, to really start a business. That's what I would choose to do. To know that I will never go hungry.

DROUGHT AND DESERTIFICATION

FARMING A WARMER EARTH

In the coming century, regions in the world regularly experiencing droughts and heat waves are likely to experience more frequent extreme weather conditions because of climate change. Further, vulnerability to droughts, in both developing and developed countries, is estimated to be higher than previously believed, based on observation of recent events.¹

As Mariama's story shows us, many women assume farming responsibilities at an early age. But her story also shows us that there are ways to safeguard the availability of seeds and food while empowering women, including young women. This is important, as experts suggest that the management of drylands will only be successful when men and women participate fully and equally in the work.²

A dryer land affects both rural and urban populations, with the impact being more difficult to mitigate for poor people and people living in drylands. Agriculture will suffer not only from smaller yields, through weaker soil, lack of water and damage to crops, but also threats such as increased death in livestock and more frequent wild fires. Cities will suffer from lack of access to water and water pollution, bringing sanitation problems as well as shortage in water needed in industry and construction. People living in cities can expect a magnified extent of droughts and heat waves, as cities are hotter than nearby rural areas. The risk of spreading of food- and waterborne diseases increases.³

The toll of more frequent and stronger droughts and heat waves will be both human and economic. Although current droughts are not all associated with climate change, analyzing their effects hints as to why mitigation of the effects of droughts is essential. In West Africa, long droughts have forced some nomad populations to settle down, radically transforming centuries-old ways of living and forcing people to learn new methods of farming and caring for their cattle. While there might be no alternatives to such change, initiatives to strengthen the capacities of former nomad populations are crucial, and need to be sensitive to what the change might mean culturally.

More frequent and stronger droughts and heat waves also risk having vast impacts on biodiversity and desertification. Desertification; the degradation of land in arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas (not the expansion of existing deserts), occurs when a number of factors interplay: One is the removal of forest and plants from land (to be used as fuel or giving way to farming, new construction and urban expansion), as it means there is nothing binding the soil any longer. Another is eroding of topsoil through herding of cattle. A third is overexploitation of soil through farming.⁴

All of these factors relate to poverty and lack in capacity to sustainably farm the land. About 90 percent of the world's dryland populations live in developing countries. Wind and water erosion enhances the process, leaving the land in a mix of

sand and dust. Drought and heat waves amplify the process. Currently, as much as 40 percent of the earth's land is threatened by desertification.⁵

Desertification does not only bring challenges in terms of food shortage, sandstorms or disruption of water flows; it is also a serious challenge in terms of security. Desertification risk triggering crisis in regions characterized by famine, political and civil unrest, migration and war.⁶ It also has a gender dimension. Traditionally, agriculture work in drylands is heavily gender-segregated, with women assuming large responsibilities for gathering and preparing food. Thus, women's status and livelihoods are jeopardized when droughts and desertification threatens access to food. Women's socio-economic status is therefore a component that must be included in work aiming at adapting to and mitigating the effects of drought and desertification.⁷ Further, it is essential that both men and women are involved in initiatives that potentially change power dynamics, if changes are to be accepted by the community as a whole and persevere. Mariama's experiences stand as an important example.

The term drought may refer to a meteorological drought (precipitation well below average), hydrological drought (low river flows and low water levels in rivers, lakes and groundwater), agricultural drought (low soil moisture), or environmental drought (a combination of the above). The impact of a drought is dependent on human behaviour, such as how land is used, how water resources are exploited and the size of the population living off a specific water source.⁸