



Sika Ahawo, Portfolio Specialist, UNV Regional Office for West and Central Africa, leads a team-building activity during a retreat with UN Volunteers from Congo in 2017

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Turning the tables for women builds a more resilient world

Since the beginning of the pandemic in West and Central Africa, 1,270 women UN Volunteers have been mobilized to respond to the crisis. These women are health professionals, community leaders, engineers, scientists, women's rights activists, researchers, communication specialists, and statisticians. They are making a significant and crucial contribution every day in the most affected socio-economic sectors. Inspired by powerful role models across the world, these women UN Volunteers are real-time examples of transformational leadership in communities, organizations, and public institutions.

As I reflect on this year's International Women's Day's theme "Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world", I cannot help but be tempted to reconsider women's triple roles of productive, reproductive, and community work in society, often referred to as their triple "burden".

“ What if this triple burden, which predisposes women to be the hardest hit by this pandemic, was the stepping-stone that will make women the backbone of recovery in communities?

I think of Ashu Orock Ernestine, a UN Volunteer Human Rights Officer with the OHCHR Liberia, who refused to sit and watch COVID-19 rob [6 young girls of their right to education](#). These girls who had fallen pregnant during the lockdown were not allowed to return to class and sit for exams. Thanks to Ashu and her colleagues, Danai Kudya and Francis Igiriogun, the school's decision was challenged and drew the attention of the authorities. Due to these UN Volunteers' actions, the girls were allowed back at school and thus breaking the vicious cycle of poverty.

No girl should be left behind. As Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the newly appointed Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO), puts it *“educating our young girls is the foundation for growth and development”*.

According to a policy brief published by the UN Regional Gender Team Group (RGTG) for West and Central Africa, policies that do not reflect women's voices or include them in decision-making are simply less effective and can even do harm. Thus, it is important to ensure women's equal participation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making including involving women in the so-called “non-traditional” health specialties.

A year ago, this day, on International Women's Day 2020 I was in Brazzaville Congo, attending the official launch of the [African Women Health Champions initiative](#) led by Dr. Moeti Matshidiso, the first African woman Regional Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) Africa Region. The initiative aims at deploying 100 young African Women across the 47 WHO country offices in Africa.

“ Together, we need to do more to empower women, including building skills beyond traditional training, addressing social norms, and helping the next generation of girls. I commit to supporting the next generation of female leaders in Africa. One such way is through the Africa Women Health Champions Initiative in partnership with UNV.” Dr. Moeti Matshidiso, Regional Director of WHO Africa Region.

UNV was able to identify nearly 2000 young African women aged 22 to 35 with the required expertise in the areas of family health, nutrition, disease prevention and control, emergency preparedness, information management, innovation, as well as communications.

The unprecedented context of this pandemic has also helped reveal the leadership skills of some outstanding women, UN Volunteers included, which has led them to be elevated into leadership positions. This is the time to step forward and build on all the gains achieved for a more equal and equitable world.

“ From an early stage in my career, coached and mentored by men and women who believed in my abilities, I was given the opportunity to prove myself wherever I was, from Zimbabwe to Burkina Faso, Congo/Gabon, and now Senegal. I believe in girls’ education. I believe that when given a chance, women can make a difference while holding key leadership positions, as evidenced by the success rate in the management of the impact of COVID-19 in countries headed by women.

Therefore, it is my opinion that turning the tables in the approach to women’s triple role in society is not just about rectifying long-standing inequalities but also about building a more just and resilient world.

 West and Central Africa

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