A step at a time, UN Volunteers empower women in Côte d'Ivoire

Together with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women, UN Volunteers promote gender equality and women's empowerment in Côte d'Ivoire. Meet three UN Volunteers – Bénédicte Kindji, Scandia Toyo and Gilbert Ngonga Mbiya who contribute to improving the status of women in Côte d'Ivoire.

Bénédicte Kindji, from Benin, is an international UN Volunteer with UN Women. She supports the dissemination and availability of information, and is responsible for monitoring the office's legal issues. Additionally, Bénédicte assists in the management of administrative issues related to human resources, and promotes knowledge building and management.

She is directly involved in the organization of the 'FEMWISE mission' to Abidjan, an African Union mission to support the dialogue of women leaders of political parties in the post electoral context. In the past, Bénédicte coordinated a multi-partnership campaign for 16 Days of Activism.
against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) with the Ministry of Women, Family and Children, the Spanish Embassy, United Nations agencies, the Ivorian League for Women’s Rights and the Platform of Youth Organizations for the Empowerment of Women in Côte d'Ivoire (POJAF-CI). The initiative reached 10,000 people in all regions of Côte d'Ivoire, particularly in Abidjan, Yamoussoukro, Bouaké, Daloa and Man.

Bénédicte also organizes a new campaign 'Generation Equality: For women's rights and an equal future'. To mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, this campaign aims to demand equal pay, equal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work, and an end to sexual harassment and all forms of violence against women and girls. Notably, in four Universities, 900 peoples (298 women and 602 men) were sensitized on gender issues and gender equality.

“I am proud of my engagement to work and volunteer within a team dedicated to the communities for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in general and for the achievement of Goal 5 in particular.” -- Bénédicte Kindji, International UN Volunteer with UN Women

Scandia Toyo, a national UN Volunteer Project Assistant at UNFPA, is based in Man. She carries out field missions within the framework of the project – 'Right to inclusive education and retention of girls in school' – with the aim to promote girls education through a transformative approach by addressing vulnerability factors. Through this project, 10,000 school kits, including 400 made by Scandia herself, and 5,000 menstrual hygiene kits were offered to girls from vulnerable households in 12 educational centers in the Tonkpi Region.

“I am proud of the progress we have seen since the implementation of the project in all regions. Indeed, the completion rate of girls' primary education in the
project's implementation regions has increased from 80.60 per cent in 2020 to 86.91 per cent in 2021. Specifically, in the Tonkpi region, where I work, the primary education completion rate has increased from 80.9 per cent in 2020 to 84.3 per cent in 2021 and the parity index has increased from 96 per cent to 97.4 per cent." -- Scandia Toyo, National UN Volunteer Project Assistant, UNFPA

To promote women's empowerment, UNFPA has set up several centers called 'Women Friendly Spaces' to train and introduce women to income generating activities. At the center in Man, Scandia builds the capacity of women in two main areas - logistics management and gender - this also includes reproductive health, family planning, inclusive education and social cohesion.

Dr. Gilbert Ngonga Mbiya is an international UN Volunteer Project Coordinator with UNFPA. He coordinates the project, 'Right to inclusive education and keeping girls in school'. As part of the project, Gilbert is responsible for the acquisition of reusable sanitary towels and training girls at IFEFF for the production of these towels. IFEFF, women's training and education institutions, are non-formal places of learning for girls who are not able to attend formal school. Here, girls can learn a trade and therefore become self sufficient by setting up an income generating activity for themselves.

Through his work, Gilbert helps implement social innovation for reusable sanitary towels. More than 6,000 female students in the vulnerable areas of Bouaké, Yamoussouko, Dimbokro, Daoukro, Bongouanou, Bondoukou, Bouna, Abengourou, Man, Guiglo and Abidjan have benefitted from the trainings. For one, through innovative techniques they learned how to reuse sanitary pads for more than three years without a need to buy new ones; and secondly and more importantly, they were able to make the sanitary pads themselves. This reduces girls absence from schools and consequently increases their academic performance.
I am proud to see that due to the interventions I coordinate, many girls have improved their school performance and have been able to access quality health care through the school and university health services." -- Dr. Gilbert Ngonga Mbiya, International UN Volunteer Project Coordinator, UNFPA

Gilbert is committed to improving the status of women, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to him, African women do not have the opportunity to use their full potential for the development of their communities. Instead, they are too often relegated to the background because of socio-cultural constraints; whereas they can contribute as much as men to community development.
Working as a volunteer, at this stage in my life, allows me to contribute in a selfless way - to improve the living conditions of vulnerable populations throughout the world in the field of health, education and gender. It is an opportunity for me to help without waiting for any return." -- Dr. Gilbert Ngonga Mbiya

And that is what volunteerism is all about - a shared responsibility to make the world a better place for everyone! Bénédicte, Scandia and Gilbert take one step at a time in their communities in Côte d'Ivoire to empower women to achieve more.

• International women's day • 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 5: Gender equality SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals