



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

UNESCO Series on Women in African History

# Aoua Keita



The UNESCO Series on Women in African History is produced by the Communication and Information Sector of UNESCO. This publication has received additional support from the Culture Sector, and the Social and Human Sciences Sector.

UNESCO specialist responsible for the project: Sasha Rubel  
Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Jouveaud

Published in 2017 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization  
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

© UNESCO 2017



This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>). By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<http://www.unesco.org/open-access/terms-use-ccbysa-en>).

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

Translation from French (original) to English: Obioma Ofoego  
Illustration of the cover page : Massiré Tounkara  
Graphic design: MuYang Li

# Comic strip

## **Sira and the student movement in Mali**

---

**Illustrations: Massiré Tounkara**  
**Script and text: Ophélie Rillon**

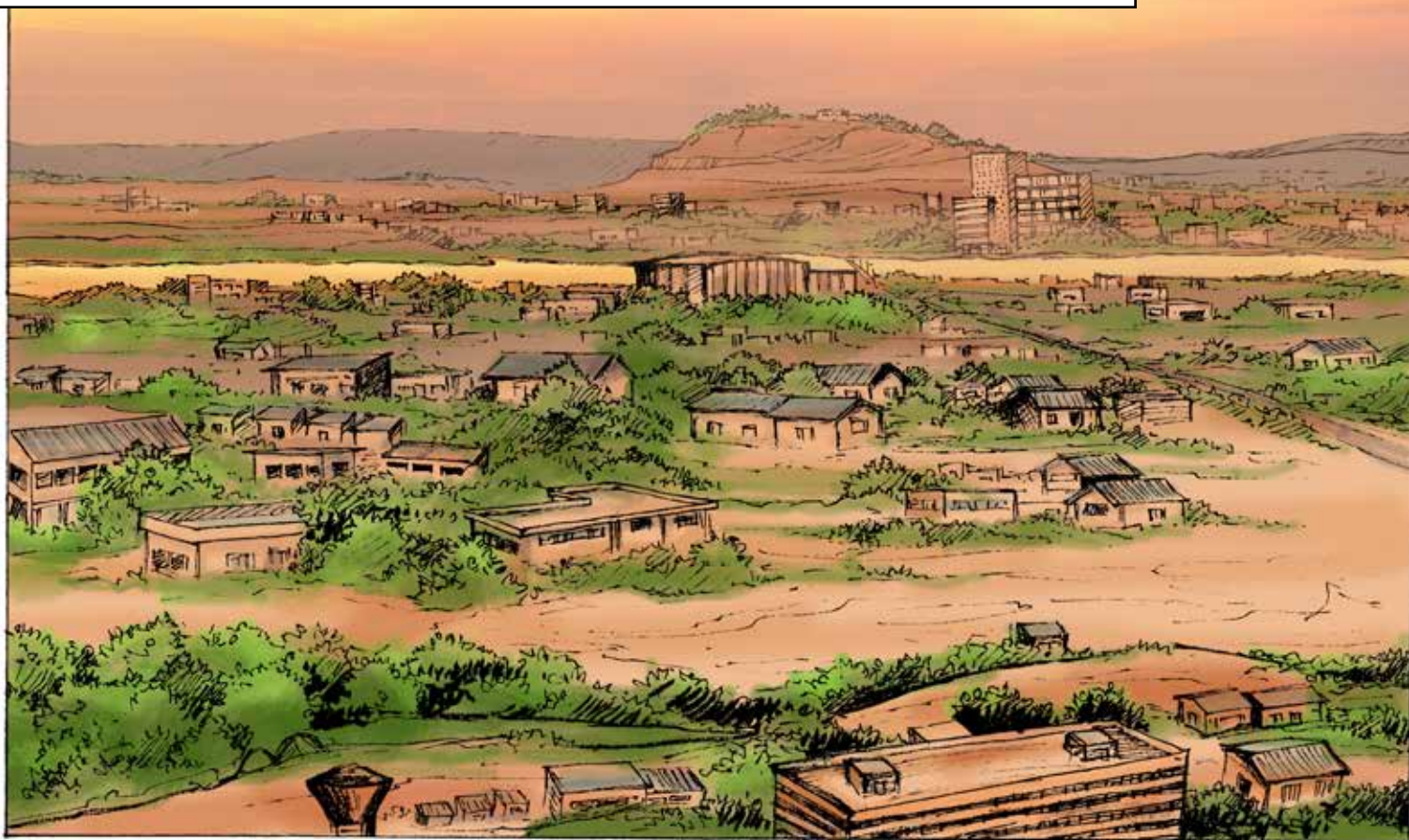
### **Foreword**

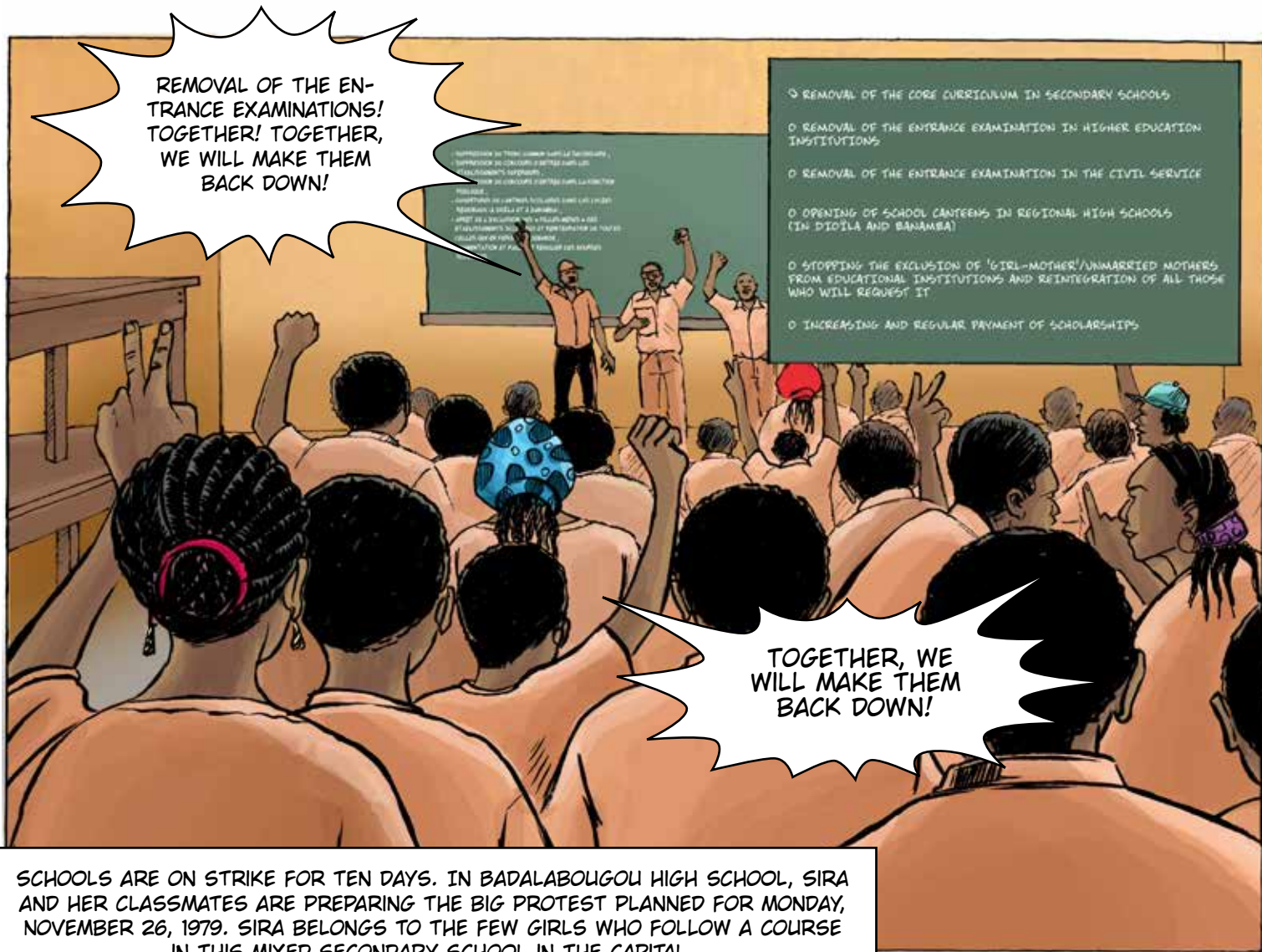
The following comic strip is a story inspired by the figure of Aoua Keita and the student movement in Mali (1977-1980). The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research on those elements. They do not claim to be an exact representation of the events, people, architecture, hairstyles, or clothing of the period.



BAMAKO, IN NOVEMBER 1979. THE SCHOOL YEAR BEGINS. FOR SEVERAL YEARS, THE CONTESTATION FLARED UP AGAINST THE REFORMS INTRODUCED BY THE REGIME OF MOUSSA TRAORÉ. IN 1977, AN ENTRANCE EXAMINATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION WAS INTRODUCED, FOLLOWED IN 1979, BY AN ENTRANCE EXAMINATION IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE. BOTH MEASURES PROVOKED A BROAD SOCIAL MOVEMENT OF PUPILS AND STUDENTS. TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS AND THE RETURN OF STUDENTS TO THEIR REGIONS, THE NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS AND PUPILS OF MALI (IN FRENCH: UNION NATIONALE DES ETUDIANTS ET DES ELÈVES DU MALI, LINEEM) ESTABLISHED A PLATFORM OF DEMANDS DISSEMINATED BY ITS SUPPORTERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY. THE OBJECTIVE WAS TO PREPARE A BROAD STRIKE MOVEMENT FOR THE BACK-TO-SCHOOL PERIOD OF 1979.

THE STUDENTS HAD THEN CREATED A METAPHOR TO DESCRIBE THE SITUATION IN BAMAKO, WHICH WAS THE PROTEST HEADQUARTERS: «THE HILL OF POWER WAS FACING THE HILL OF KNOWLEDGE AND BOTH WERE SEPARATED BY THE VALLEY OF IGNORANCE.» ACCORDING TO THIS IMAGE, THE HILL KOULOUIBA (HEADQUARTERS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE) OPPOSED THE HILL BADALA (WHERE THERE WERE SEVERAL SCHOOLS), SEPARATED BOTH BY THE NIGER RIVER AND THE VALLEY WERE LOCATED RESIDENTIAL AREAS.





REMOVAL OF THE ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS!  
TOGETHER! TOGETHER,  
WE WILL MAKE THEM  
BACK DOWN!

- ◊ REMOVAL OF THE CORE CURRICULUM IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS
- ◊ REMOVAL OF THE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS
- ◊ REMOVAL OF THE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION IN THE CIVIL SERVICE
- ◊ OPENING OF SCHOOL CANTEENS IN REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS (IN DIOULA AND BANAMBA)
- ◊ STOPPING THE EXCLUSION OF 'GIRL-MOTHER'/UNMARRIED MOTHERS FROM EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND REINTEGRATION OF ALL THOSE WHO WILL REQUEST IT
- ◊ INCREASING AND REGULAR PAYMENT OF SCHOLARSHIPS

TOGETHER, WE  
WILL MAKE THEM  
BACK DOWN!

SCHOOLS ARE ON STRIKE FOR TEN DAYS. IN BADALABOUGOU HIGH SCHOOL, SIRA AND HER CLASSMATES ARE PREPARING THE BIG PROTEST PLANNED FOR MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 1979. SIRA BELONGS TO THE FEW GIRLS WHO FOLLOW A COURSE IN THIS MIXED SECONDARY SCHOOL IN THE CAPITAL.



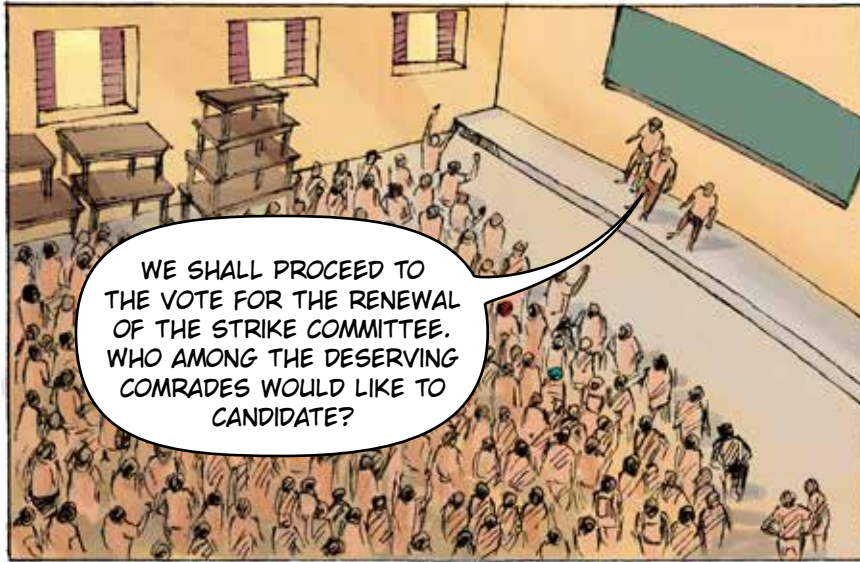
THERE IS NO MORE PAINT...



...AND IT'S NOT THEIR RHETORIC THAT WILL BRING US MORE! THEY TALK AND TALK AGAIN. BUT WHAT ABOUT US AND OUR OPINION THAT COUNTS SO MUCH?



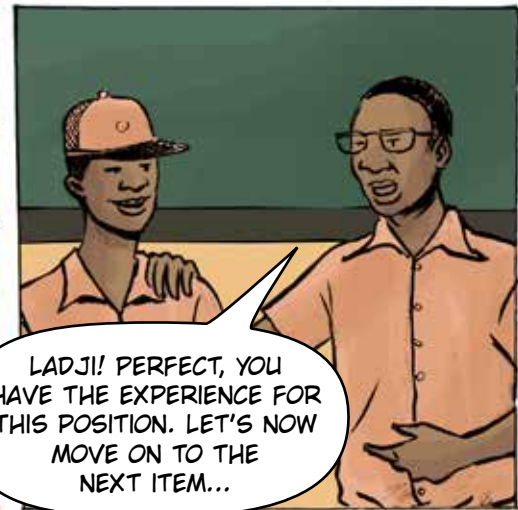
THAT'S ANOTHER REVOLUTION TO LEAD MY DEAR. DO YOU REALLY THINK A BOY WILL LISTEN TO US AND ACCEPT TO BE LED BY A WOMAN?



WE SHALL PROCEED TO THE VOTE FOR THE RENEWAL OF THE STRIKE COMMITTEE. WHO AMONG THE DESERVING COMRADES WOULD LIKE TO CANDIDATE?

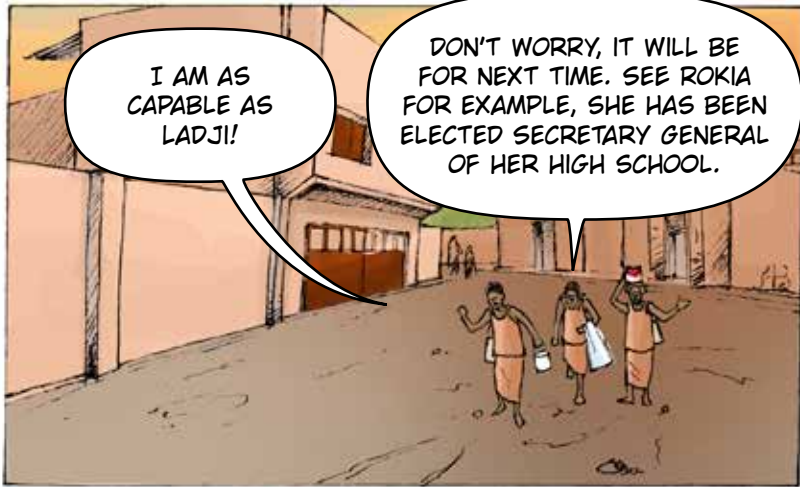


I CANDIDATE FOR THE POST OF SECRETARY OF INFORMATION!



LADJI! PERFECT, YOU HAVE THE EXPERIENCE FOR THIS POSITION. LET'S NOW MOVE ON TO THE NEXT ITEM...





I AM AS CAPABLE AS LADJI!

DON'T WORRY, IT WILL BE FOR NEXT TIME. SEE ROKIA FOR EXAMPLE, SHE HAS BEEN ELECTED SECRETARY GENERAL OF HER HIGH SCHOOL.



EASY, IT'S A GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL.



NOT ONLY THAT: NOW SHE GOES TO MEETINGS OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF THE UNEEM.



THEY SLOWLY BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND THAT GIRLS HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY AND CAN ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY. DON'T WORRY SIR, WE WILL FIGHT!



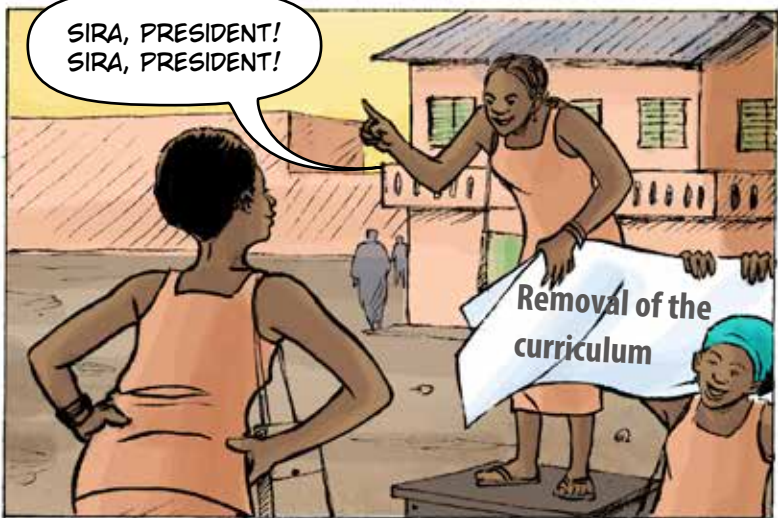
WE WILL HAVE TO:  
IT IS NOT THE BOYS THAT WILL  
CARRY OUR CLAIMS. IF TODAY  
THEY SPEAK BETTER THAN US IT  
IS BECAUSE WE LET  
THEM SPEAK!





VOTE FOR SIRA,  
PRESIDENT OF  
LINEEM!

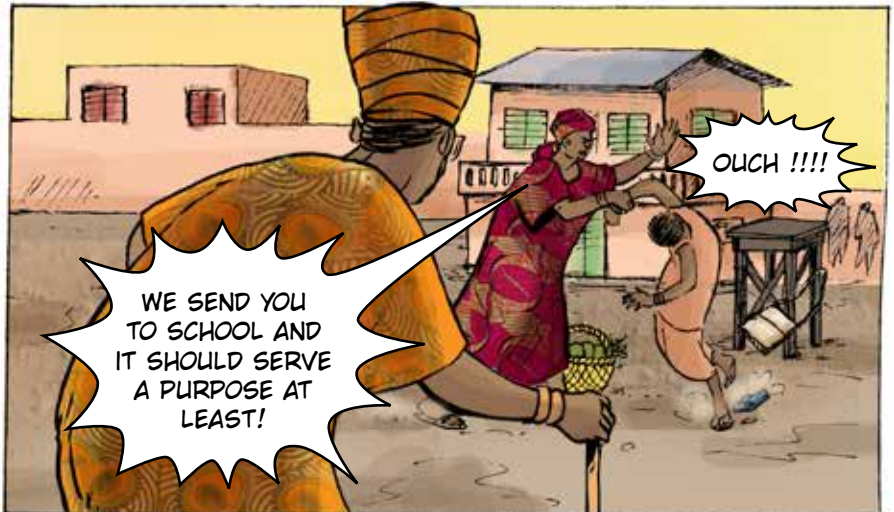
YOU MAKE ME  
ASHAMED! I ALREADY  
TOLD YOU NOT TO HANG  
WITH THESE ROGUES WHO  
ARE IN POLITICS INSTEAD  
OF STUDYING!



SIRA, PRESIDENT!  
SIRA, PRESIDENT!



OUCH !!!!

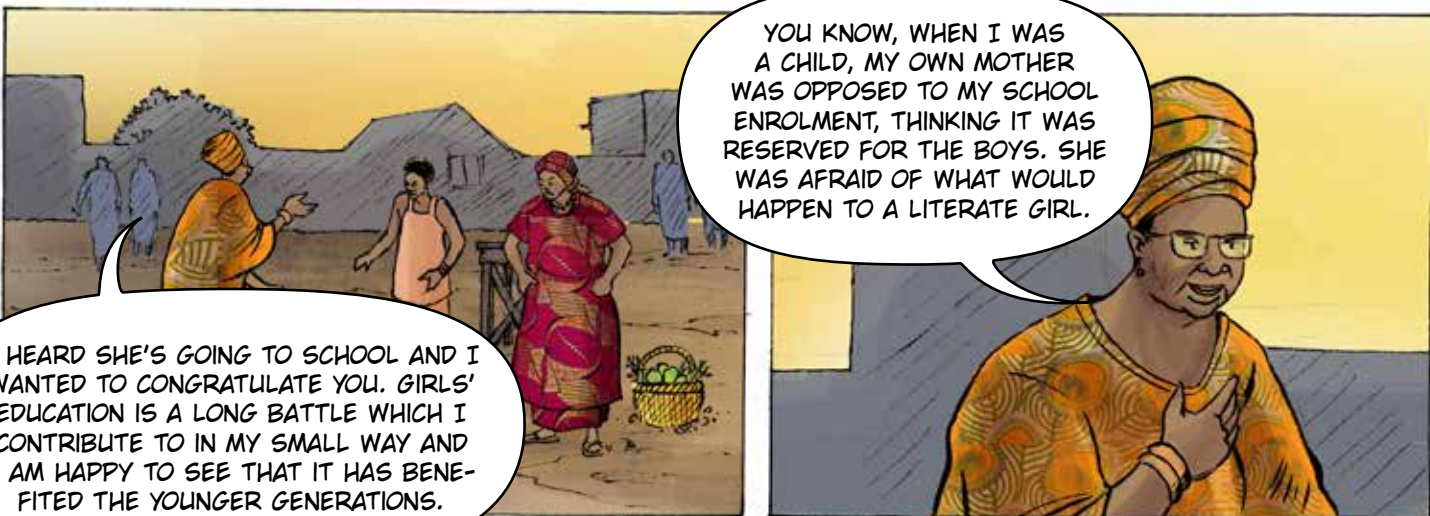


WE SEND YOU  
TO SCHOOL AND  
IT SHOULD SERVE  
A PURPOSE AT  
LEAST!

OUCH !!!!



YOUR DAUGHTER SEEMS TO BE HARD HEADED AND I DON'T THINK BEATING HER UP WILL CHANGE ANYTHING.



I HEARD SHE'S GOING TO SCHOOL AND I WANTED TO CONGRATULATE YOU. GIRLS' EDUCATION IS A LONG BATTLE WHICH I CONTRIBUTE TO IN MY SMALL WAY AND I AM HAPPY TO SEE THAT IT HAS BENEFITED THE YOUNGER GENERATIONS.

YOU KNOW, WHEN I WAS A CHILD, MY OWN MOTHER WAS OPPOSED TO MY SCHOOL ENROLMENT, THINKING IT WAS RESERVED FOR THE BOYS. SHE WAS AFRAID OF WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO A LITERATE GIRL.





WITHOUT THE FIRM DECISION OF MY FATHER, I WOULD NEVER HAVE ATTENDED SCHOOL AND BECOME A MIDWIFE. LATER ON, THIS JOB ALLOWED ME TO MAKE A LIVING...

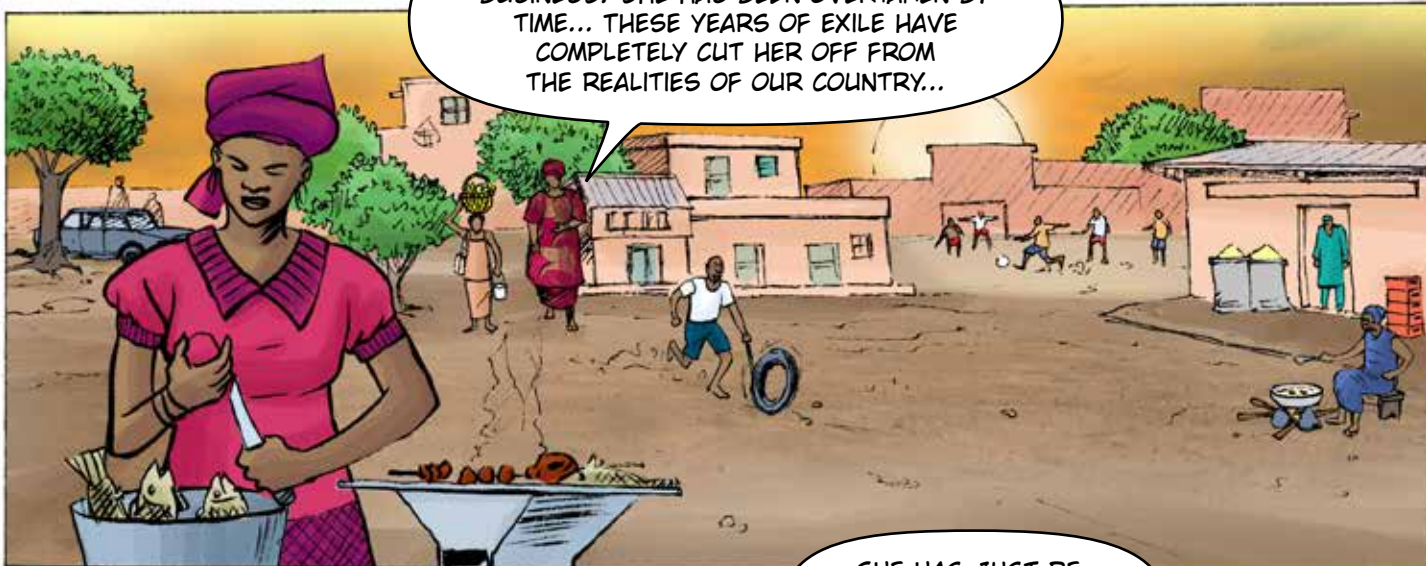


...AND SUPPORT MY OWN MOTHER WHEN SHE WAS TOO TIRED TO WORK. BUT I WILL NOT BOTHER YOU ANY LONGER WITH MY OLD MEMORIES...



I WISH YOU A GOOD EVENING. GOD BLESS YOU.

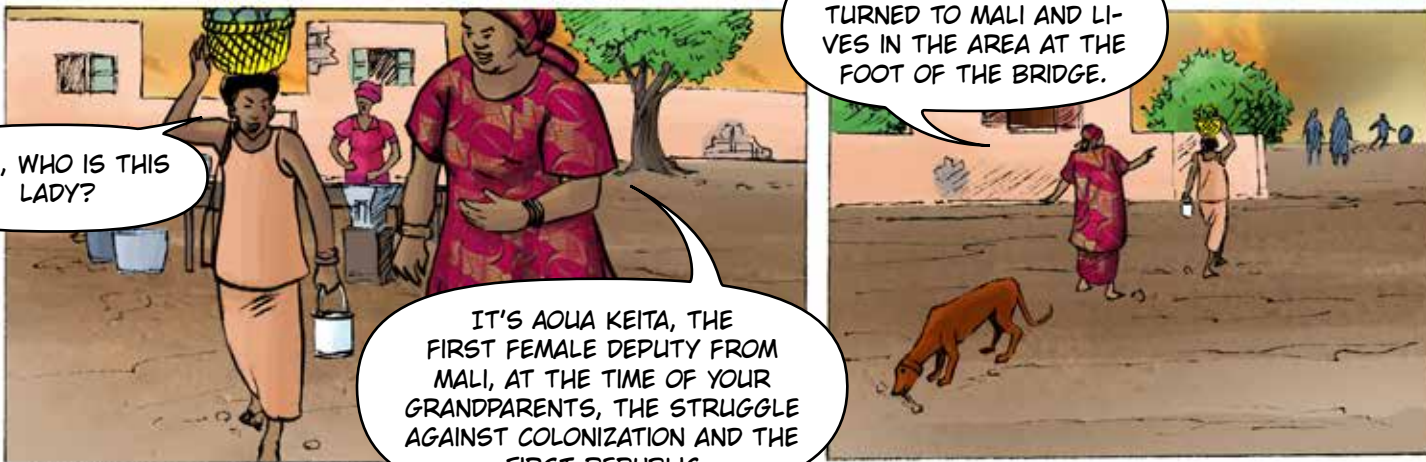
THIS OLD AOUA SHOULD MIND HER OWN BUSINESS! SHE HAS BEEN OVERTAKEN BY TIME... THESE YEARS OF EXILE HAVE COMPLETELY CUT HER OFF FROM THE REALITIES OF OUR COUNTRY...



SHE HAS JUST RETURNED TO MALI AND LIVES IN THE AREA AT THE FOOT OF THE BRIDGE.

MOM, WHO IS THIS LADY?

IT'S AOUA KEITA, THE FIRST FEMALE DEPUTY FROM MALI, AT THE TIME OF YOUR GRANDPARENTS, THE STRUGGLE AGAINST COLONIZATION AND THE FIRST REPUBLIC



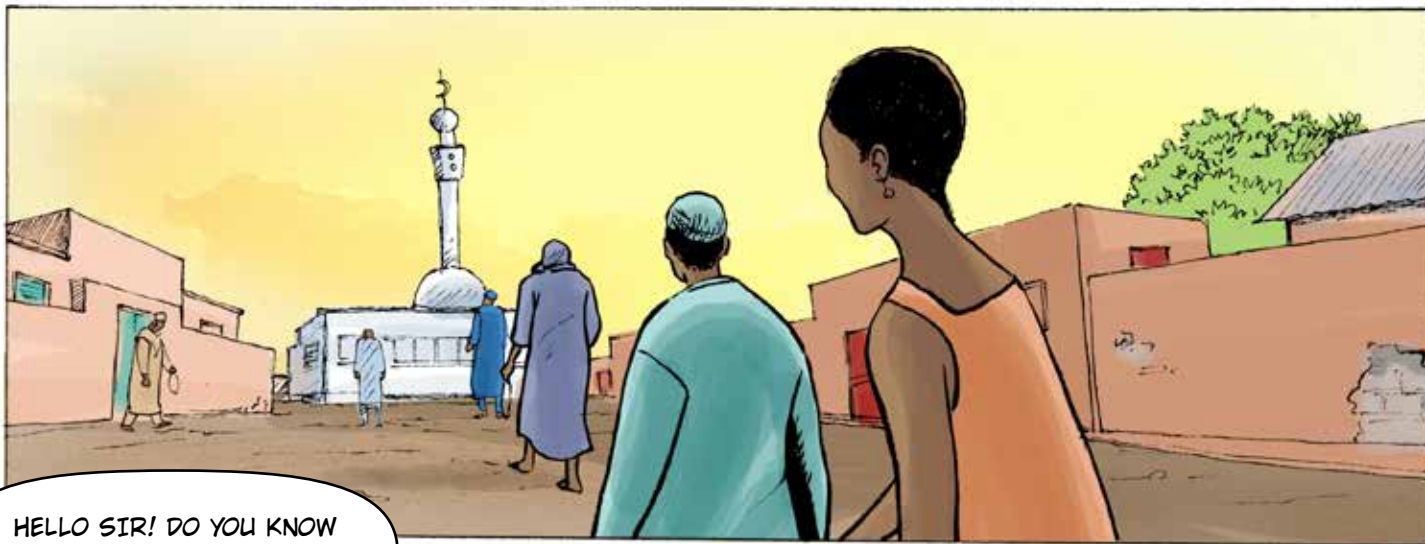
LATER IN THE EVENING...



THE NEXT MORNING







HELLO SIR! DO YOU KNOW WHERE I CAN FIND THE HOUSE OF AOUA KEITA?





GOOD MORNING MADAM. I WANTED TO THANK YOU FOR YESTERDAY...

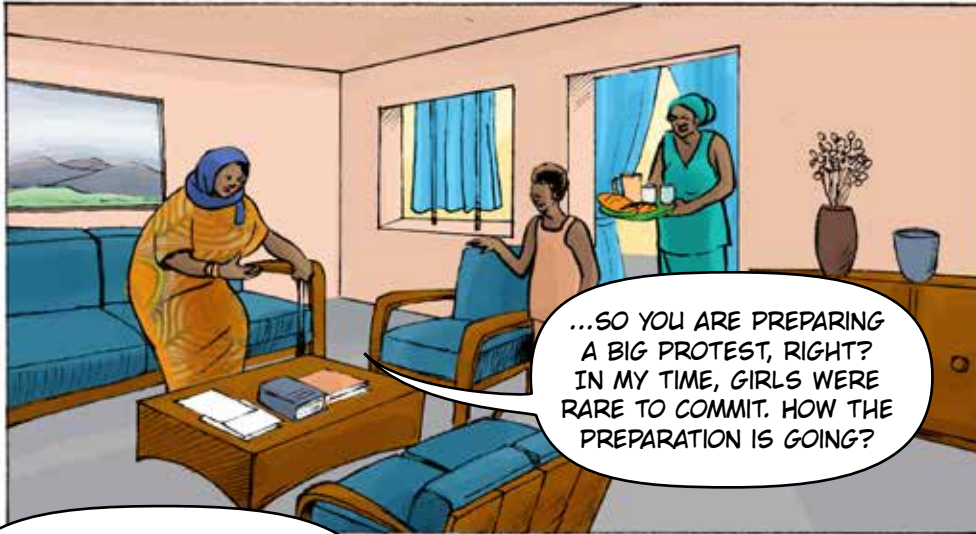


NO NEED TO THANK ME... WHAT'S YOUR NAME AGAIN?

MY NAME IS SIRA.



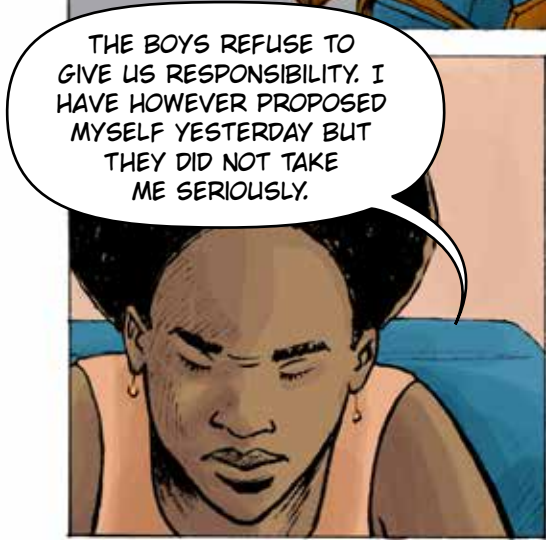
PLEASE, COME IN SIRA!



...SO YOU ARE PREPARING A BIG PROTEST, RIGHT? IN MY TIME, GIRLS WERE RARE TO COMMIT. HOW THE PREPARATION IS GOING?



WE ARE ALMOST READY... BUT, IT IS MORE DIFFICULT FOR US, GIRLS.



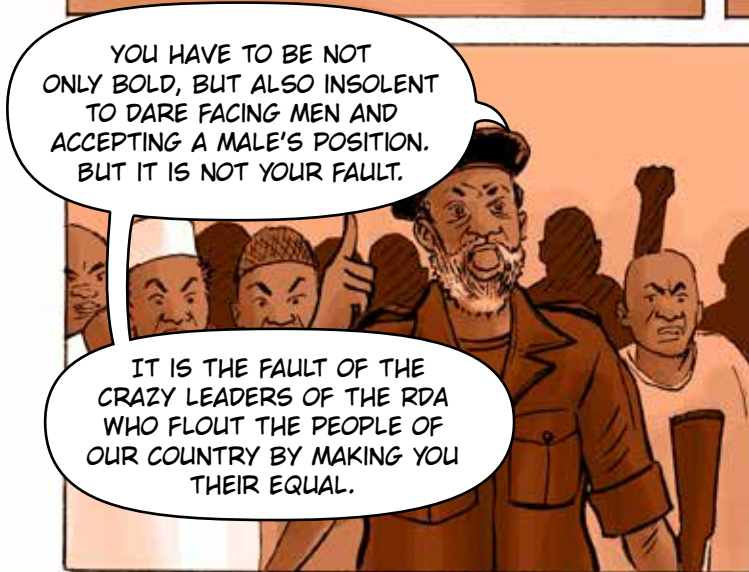
THE BOYS REFUSE TO GIVE US RESPONSIBILITY. I HAVE HOWEVER PROPOSED MYSELF YESTERDAY BUT THEY DID NOT TAKE ME SERIOUSLY.



INDEED, IT IS HARDER FOR US WOMEN....

WHEN I PROPOSED MYSELF FOR THE DEPUTY POSITION FOR SIKASSO, I SUFFERED A HUMILIATION THAT WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN: ON THE ELECTION DAY OF APRIL 8TH, IN 1959, ALL MY MALE FELLOW CANDIDATES HAD LEFT TO HANDLE DIFFICULT AREAS. AS A RESULT, I HAD TO MONITOR THE VOTING IN KOUTIALA AND THE SUBURBS. I VISITED MANY POLLING STATIONS AND OPERATIONS RAN SMOOTHLY, BUT AROUND 11:30, WHEN I ARRIVED TO SINGNE, A SMALL VILLAGE OF 500 INHABITANTS, I WAS DENIED ENTRY TO THE POLLING STATION.







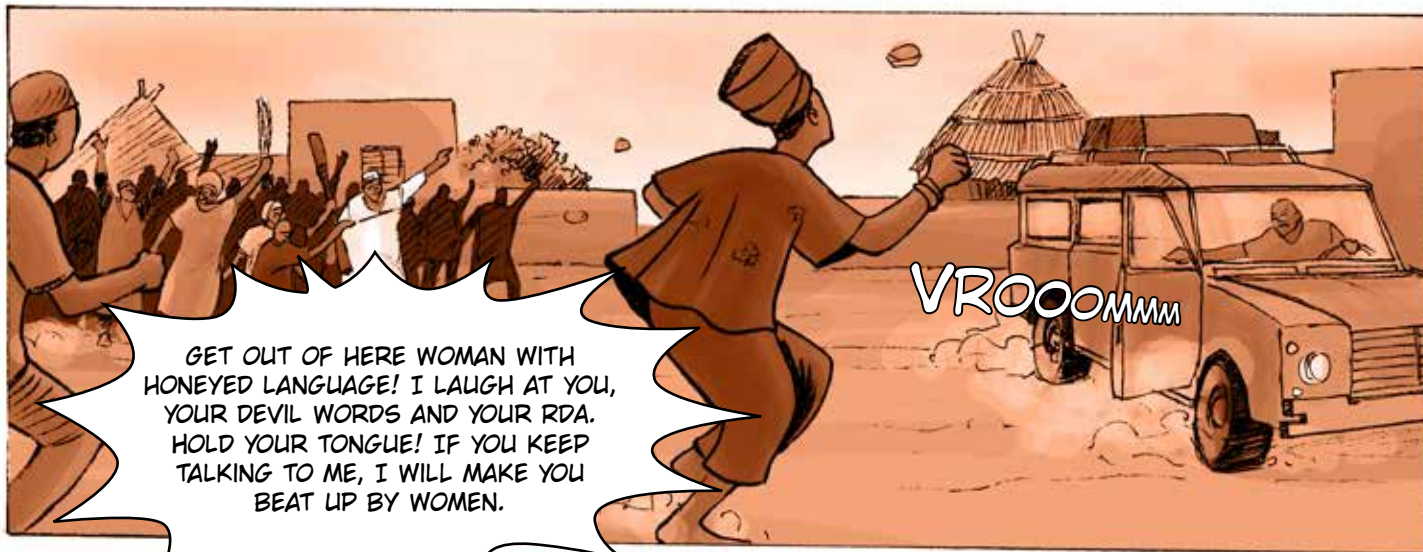
THE CHIEF OF THE VILLAGE WAS COMPLETELY DRUNK. I GOT SHOVED AND SPAT ON AND MANY MORE.



AND THE WOMEN OF THE VILLAGE DID NOT INTERVENE?



QUITE THE CONTRARY: THEY RUSHED ON ME TO GIVE ME A CORRECTION AND IT ALMOST COST MY LIFE!



GET OUT OF HERE WOMAN WITH HONEYED LANGUAGE! I LAUGH AT YOU, YOUR DEVIL WORDS AND YOUR RDA. HOLD YOUR TONGUE! IF YOU KEEP TALKING TO ME, I WILL MAKE YOU BEAT UP BY WOMEN.

VROOOOMMM



IT WAS A CLOSE CALL!


YOU SEE, THIS HUMILIATION DID NOT STOP ME FROM CONTINUING TO FIGHT OR BEING ELECTED.




AUNTIE, HOW DID YOU DO TO IMPOSE YOURSELF? HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO BE RESPECTED AND ACCEPTED AS A DEPUTY BY THE MEN OF YOUR PARTY?

WELL I WAS NOT ALONE, WE FOUGHT COLLECTIVELY TO VOICE OUR CONCERNS. INITIALLY, I HAD TO HOLD CLANDESTINE MEETINGS OF WOMEN IN MY MATERNITY HOSPITAL TO AVOID TRIGGERING THE ANGER OF HUSBANDS THAT COULD NOT STAND TO SEE THEIR WIVES INVOLVED IN POLITICS.






MY FRIENDS, THOUGH WE ARE FEW IN NUMBER TO HAVE THE RIGHT TO VOTE, IT IS OUR DUTY TO PARTICIPATE IN ELECTIONS IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, EACH ACCORDING TO OUR POSSIBILITIES, TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE VICTORY OF OUR PARTY.



AS A GRIOT, I WILL DIFFUSE THE WATCHWORDS DURING BAPTISMAL AND MARRIAGE CEREMONIES.



AS A TRADER, I MAKE A DONATION OF 1000 FRANCS TO THE PARTY TO HELP THE CAMPAIGN.



AS FOR ME, I'LL TAKE CARE OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE CARDS OF OUR PARTY WHEN I GO SELL PEANUTS FROM HOUSE TO HOUSE.

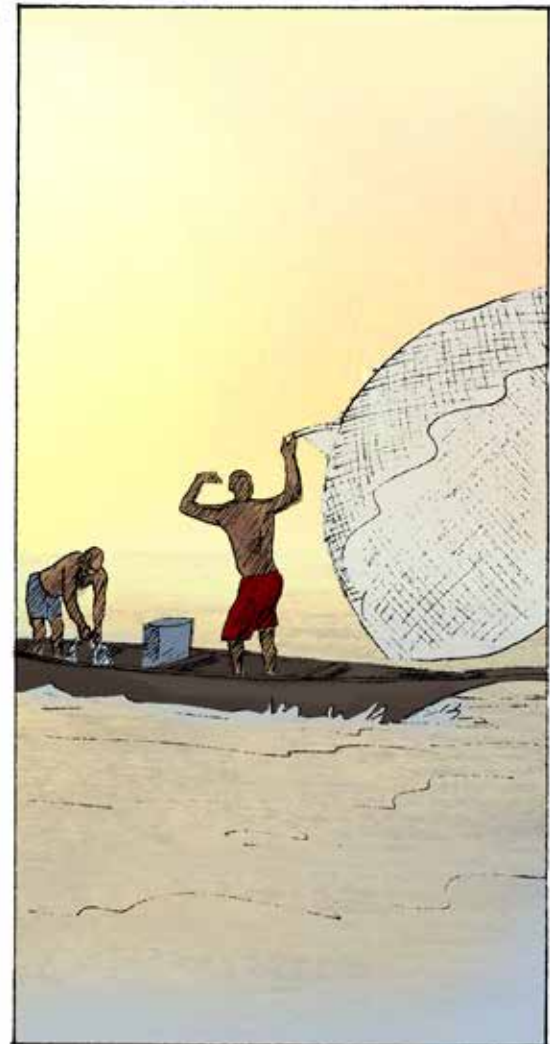
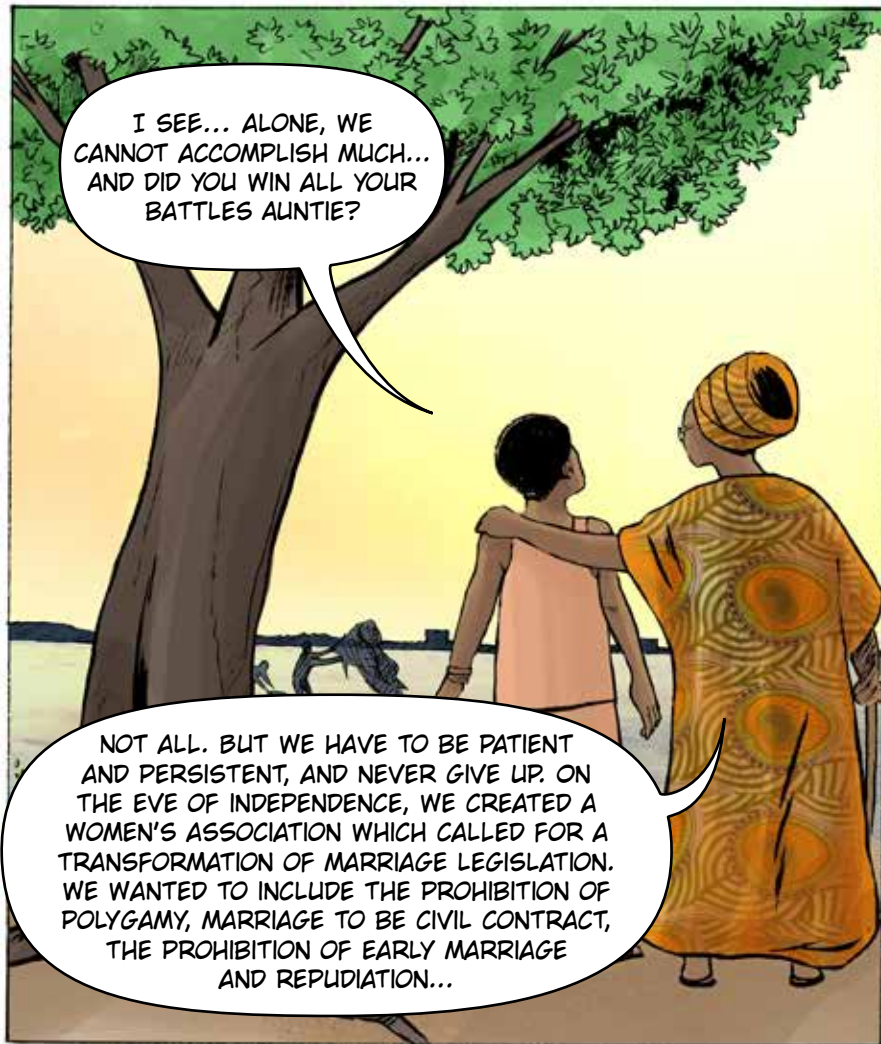
CONGRÈS INTERNATIONAL DES FEMMES  
SYNDICALISTES - BUDAPEST 1956

CONGRÈS INTERNATIONAL DES FEMMES  
SYNDICALISTES - BUDAPEST 1956

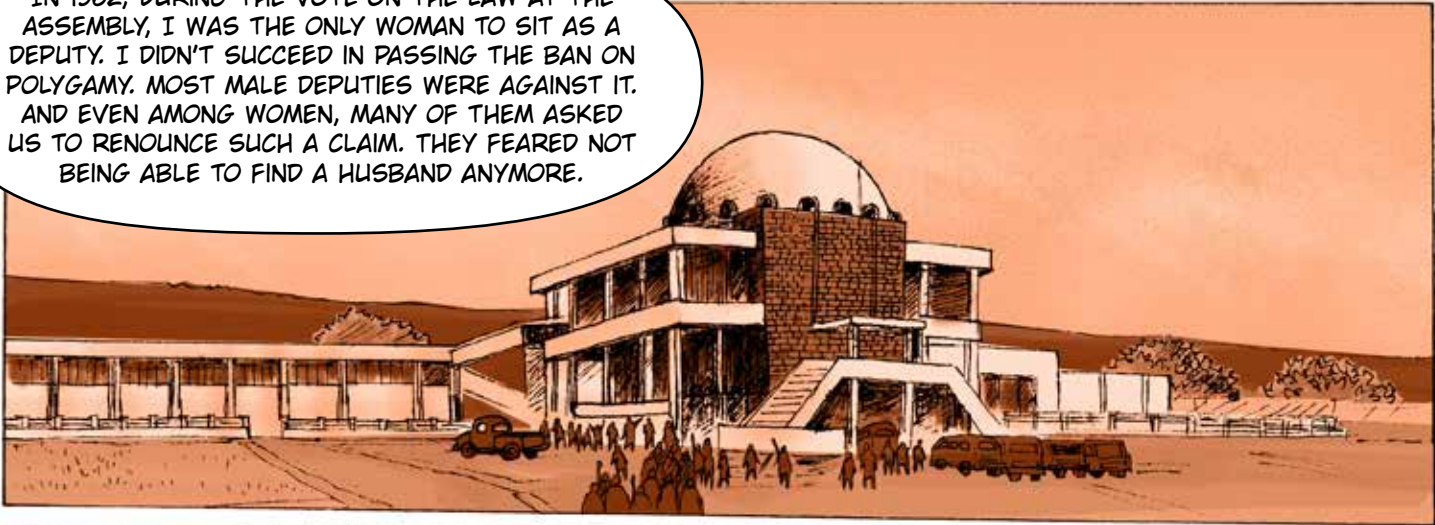
IN 1956, WITH MY FRIEND TEACHER AÏSSATA  
COLLIBALY, WE CREATED A UNION OF WOMEN WITH  
TWO OBJECTIVES: FIGHT AGAINST COLONIZATION  
AND DEFEND THE RIGHTS OF FEMALE EMPLOYEES.  
WE TRAVELLED THE WORLD TO PARTICIPATE IN IN-  
TERNATIONAL WOMEN CONFERENCES AND DISCUSS  
OUR COMMON CONCERNS.

SISTERS! TODAY, WE ARE HERE ALL  
TOGETHER TO DEFEND THE RIGHTS OF  
WOMEN WORLDWIDE. ALL WOMEN, RE-  
GARDLESS OF ORIGIN AND SKIN COLOR,  
ARE PURSUING THE SAME GOAL...

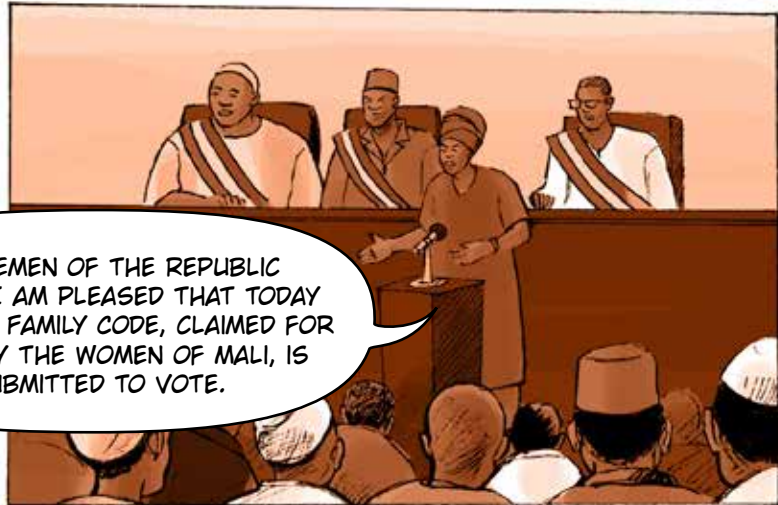




IN 1962, DURING THE VOTE ON THE LAW AT THE ASSEMBLY, I WAS THE ONLY WOMAN TO SIT AS A DEPUTY. I DIDN'T SUCCEED IN PASSING THE BAN ON POLYGAMY. MOST MALE DEPUTIES WERE AGAINST IT. AND EVEN AMONG WOMEN, MANY OF THEM ASKED US TO RENOUNCE SUCH A CLAIM. THEY FEARED NOT BEING ABLE TO FIND A HUSBAND ANYMORE.



GENTLEMEN OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALI. I AM PLEASED THAT TODAY THE DRAFT FAMILY CODE, CLAIMED FOR YEARS BY THE WOMEN OF MALI, IS SUBMITTED TO VOTE.



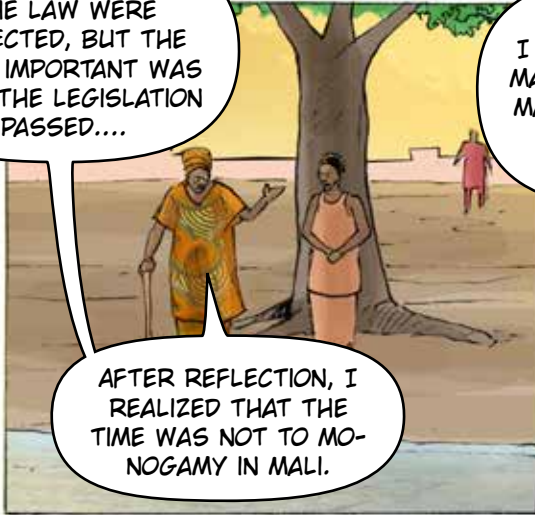


THE COLONIAL  
ADMINISTRATION HAD  
REFUSED TO DEFEND  
WOMEN'S RIGHTS,



I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT  
YOU, MEN OF MALI, WILL TAKE  
INTO ACCOUNT THE CONCERNS OF  
YOUR SISTERS, MOTHERS, WIVES  
AND DAUGHTERS; OF ALL THOSE  
WHO HAVE WORKED WITH YOU  
FOR THE INDEPENDENCE  
OF OUR COUNTRY.

SOME PARTS OF THE LAW WERE REJECTED, BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT WAS THAT THE LEGISLATION PASSED....



AFTER REFLECTION, I REALIZED THAT THE TIME WAS NOT TO MONOGAMY IN MALI.

YOU KNOW, EVEN ME, I MARRIED A POLYGAMOUS MAN OF MY WILL LATER ON! MAYBE THIS FIGHT WILL BE HANDLED BY YOUR GENERATION.



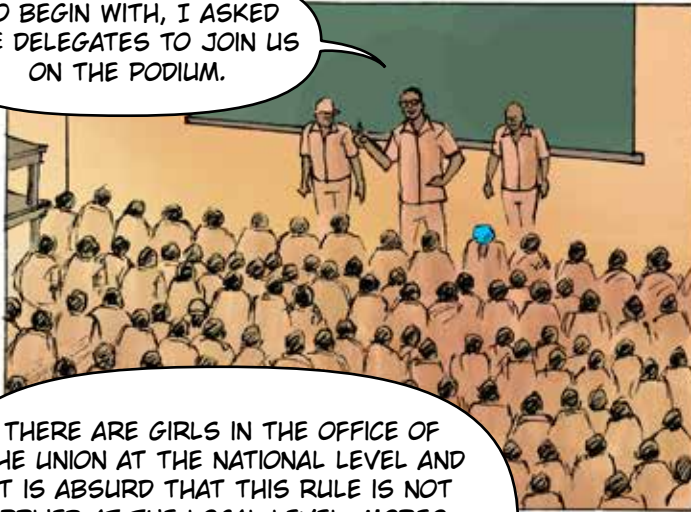
GOOD MORNING MADAM.



SIRA, I AM ON MY WAY TO THE NEXT MEETING. ARE YOU COMING?



TO BEGIN WITH, I ASKED THE DELEGATES TO JOIN US ON THE PODIUM.

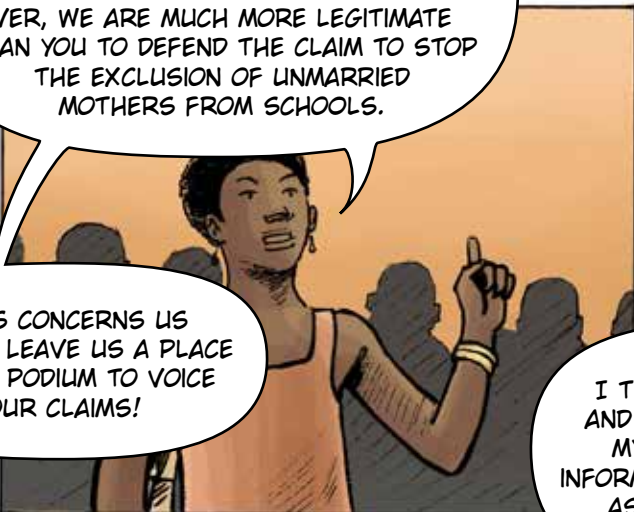


COMRADES! WE, GIRLS, DISCUSSED BETWEEN EACH OTHER AND WE BELIEVE IT IS IMPORTANT THAT ONE OF US SITS ON THE COMMITTEE OF THE SCHOOL IN ORDER TO MAKE THIS INSTANCE REPRESENTATIVE...

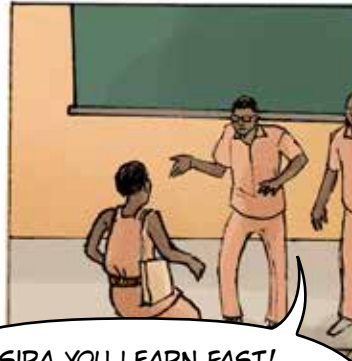


THERE ARE GIRLS IN THE OFFICE OF THE UNION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL AND IT IS ABSURD THAT THIS RULE IS NOT APPLIED AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. MOREOVER, WE ARE MUCH MORE LEGITIMATE THAN YOU TO DEFEND THE CLAIM TO STOP THE EXCLUSION OF UNMARRIED MOTHERS FROM SCHOOLS.

...THIS CONCERNS US DIRECTLY. LEAVE US A PLACE AT THE PODIUM TO VOICE OUR CLAIMS!



SIRA YOU LEARN FAST! I THOUGHT ABOUT THAT NIGHT AND I THINK YOU'RE RIGHT. TAKE MY PLACE OF SECRETARY OF INFORMATION AND DON'T HESITATE TO ASK ME IF YOU NEED A HAND. I'LL BE YOUR ASSISTANT.



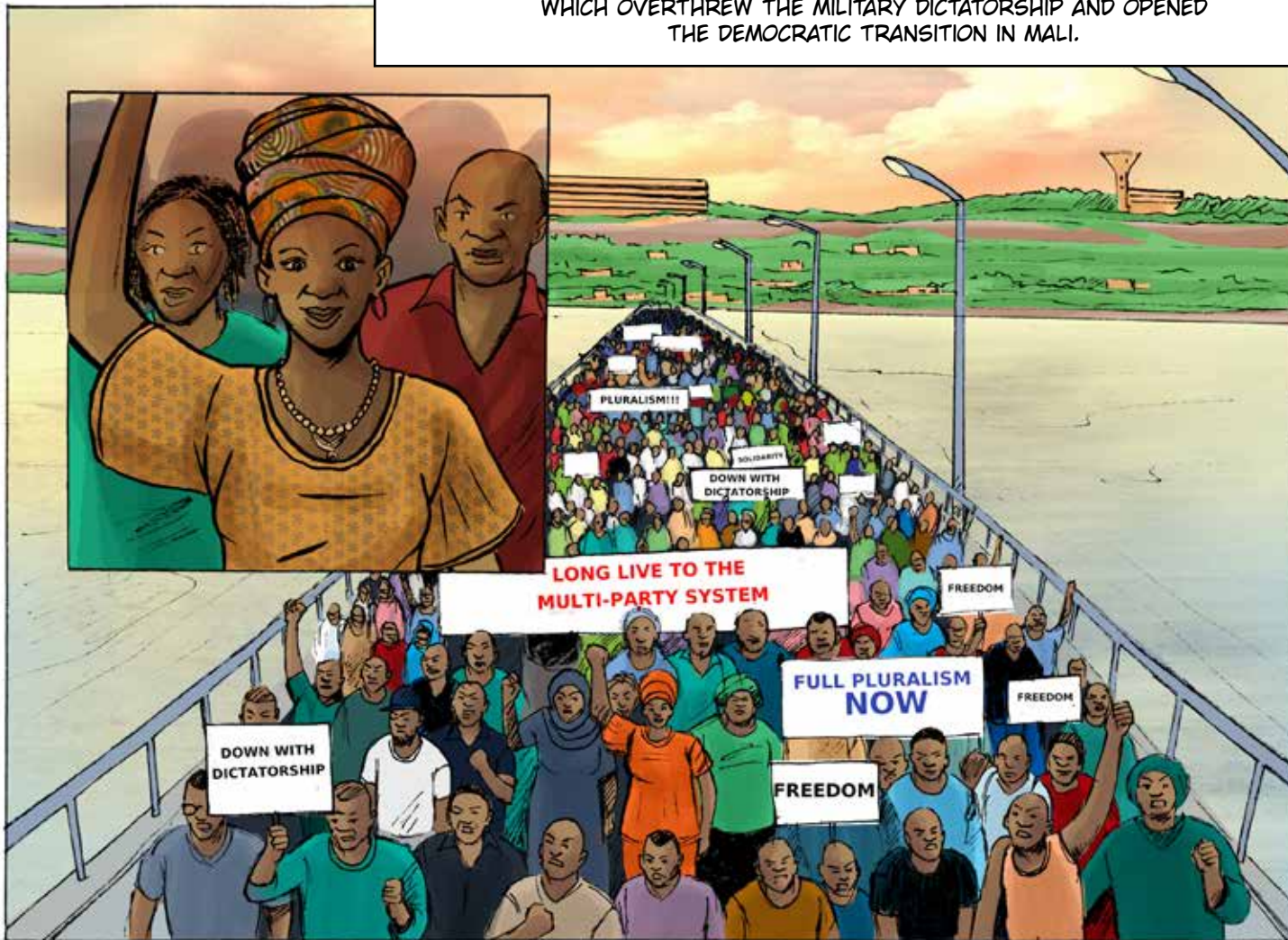




AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS OF VIOLENT CLASHES WITH THE AUTHORITIES, THE STUDENT MOVEMENT IS REPRESSED IN BLOOD. ABDOUL KARIM CAMARA ASLO CALLED «CABRAL», A 25-YEAR OLD STUDENT IN PHILOSOPHY AND GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE LINEEM IS TORTURED TO DEATH ON MARCH 17, 1980. GIRLS AND BOYS ARE ARRESTED, IMPRISONED AND INCORPORATED BY FORCE INTO THE ARMY. SOME FEMALE STUDENTS ARE SUBJECTED TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE. IN MAY 1980, AOUA KEITA DIES OF DISEASE.



MANY OF THE YOUNG ACTIVISTS OF THE MOVEMENT OF STUDENTS BECAME, ELEVEN YEARS LATER, THE ACTORS AND ACTRESSES OF THE REVOLUTION OF MARCH 1991 WHICH OVERTHREW THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIP AND OPENED THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN MALI.



## **Aoua Keita**

Aoua Keita (1912-1980), a Malian midwife and anti-colonial activist, has received many distinctions. Born in Bamako, she won admission to the city's first girls' school in 1923. She went on to graduate in midwifery. A member of the African Democratic Rally (RDA), she was elected to Parliament in 1959, thereby becoming the first woman in French-speaking Africa to be elected to the national legislative assembly of her country.

## **Women in African History**

By way of various artistic and pedagogical resources available online, this UNESCO project highlights a selection of historical female figures, from Africa and of African descent, who have distinguished themselves in the history of the continent in areas as diverse as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), defence of women's rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

The selection of women figures proposed in the framework of this project is not exhaustive and represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.



For additional resources, please visit the web site [www.unesco.org/womeninafrica](http://www.unesco.org/womeninafrica)