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Transforming Gender Norms in Rural Mali by Opening Spaces for Action

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Presenter/Author Information

Kelly Bohrer, Anna Taft, François Chauvet, Kessia Kouriba, Hawa Yalcouyé, and Moussa Tembine

Transforming Gender Norms in Rural Mali by Opening Spaces for Action

Communities in the Tommoquiné Region of Mali are actively pursuing development despite economic challenges, insecurity, and isolation from many opportunities. Historically, the marginalization of women and girls has held back some of these efforts and denied certain rights to some of the population. Currently, a transformation of norms surrounding women's roles in public life and of practices harmful to women and girls is taking place, inspired by a Women's Literacy, Leadership, and Enterprise program generated through a transnational collaboration between local communities, a Malian linguistic association, and The Tandana Foundation, a Dayton-based non-profit organization. Instead of reinscribing colonial dynamics, this partnership opens spaces for action that enable communities to change norms and practices on their own terms. Women who have participated in this program are making their voices heard in local decision-making fora in ways that were not accepted before, disrupting economic exploitation by exercising new literacy and numeracy skills, and leading transformations of marginalizing practices, such as early, forced marriage. By focusing on opening spaces for action, rather than attempting to fabricate social reality to fit a preconceived vision, this program avoids the dangers inherent in approaching human affairs as if they could be made, as mainstream development has so often done. It embodies an alternative approach that allows the opportunities of action--expressiveness, the remedy of forgiveness, allowance of the unexpected, inclusiveness, flourishing of human relationships, and emergence of meaning—to enable genuine and durable changes. This form of transnational collaboration offers an example of educational, economic, civic, and cultural engagement that supports locally-led transformations that increase inclusion and expand opportunities. In this panel discussion, two Malian practitioners will share their experiences supporting transformations at the grassroots level, an American practitioner-scholar will connect philosophical insights with concrete practices, and a Mexican simultaneous interpreter will facilitate immediate bilingual comprehension.

Presenter Biographies:

François Chauvet
Language Consultant
The Tandana Foundation

Born in Mexico City, François Chauvet grew up in a bilingual household, accustomed to switching rapidly between languages. He earned a bachelor's degree in history from Mount Angel Seminary and entered the Roman Catholic priesthood in 1984. In addition to serving as a priest, he has worked as a simultaneous interpreter in Spanish, French, and English for more than 40 years. He has interpreted for the Mexican Senate, the Diplomatic Corps in Mexico City, and the French Embassy among other institutions. Based in Paris, he currently works as interpreter for the Society of Mary in Europe and is pursuing a master's degree in theology at the *Institut Catholique de Paris* while also serving as The Tandana Foundation's Language Consultant. François will provide simultaneous interpretation between English and French during this panel discussion and will also interpret selected other presentations into French for the Malian attendees, so that they can participate fully in the conference and take part in reciprocal knowledge sharing. His participation will provide a smooth listening experience for the audience during this panel and will also facilitate the forging of connections between practitioners and academics and the sharing of experiences among people of different backgrounds throughout the conference.

Kessia Kouriba
Literacy Instructor and Program Assistant
The Tandana Foundation

Born in Boundou, Mali, Kessia Kouriba is committed to being a role model and leader for other women in her region. She has been an integral part of the Women's Literacy, Leadership, and Enterprise Program, which Tandana sponsors in partnership with a Malian linguistic organization, Alpha Formation Traduction et Conception Documentaire au Pays Dogon (AFCTD-PD), that has reached more than 2,700 women and been a catalyst for enhancing women's abilities to operate independently, to participate in local decision-making processes, and to assert their priorities in family and village life. In addition to serving as a literacy instructor since 2014, Kessia has assisted in leading women's leadership workshops and training sessions for project management committees. Prior to working for Tandana, Kessia earned her baccalaureate in human science from Lycée Hamadou Dicko in Sevaré and spent two years working for the Evangelical Development Agency of Mali as a teacher for the Strategic Program for Accelerated Schooling/Gateway Program. She has also participated in workshops to create a syllabary for the Tommo So language through SIL. Kessia is based in the village of Kansongo, Mali. She speaks Tommo So, Bambara, and French.

Anna Taft
Founding Director
The Tandana Foundation

After graduating from high school in Ohio, Anna Taft spent four months in Panecillo, Ecuador, where she taught at an elementary school and built the connections that inspired her to create The Tandana Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting the achievement of community goals through caring intercultural relationships that embody mutual respect and responsibility. For sixteen years, The Tandana Foundation has partnered with 100 communities in Mali and 25 in Ecuador on initiatives that respond to local priorities in food security, water resources, education, health, environmental conservation, income generation, and community infrastructure. Anna earned a bachelor's degree from Whitman College with honors in politics and a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from Skidmore College, with a focus on morality in a pluralistic world. As an independent scholar, she has published two book chapters and has a book about her philosophy of transnational engagement under submission with Brill for its Philosophy of Peace series. Based in southwest Colorado, Anna speaks English, Spanish, French, Kichwa, and some Tommo So.

Hawa Yalcouyé
Mali Scholarship Coordinator
The Tandana Foundation

Originally from Nalou, Mali, Hawa Yalcouyé attended primary school in Kilegou, secondary school in Ningari, and high school in Bandiagara. She earned a bachelor's degree in sociology from the Faculty of Letters, Languages, and Human Sciences in Bamako. Hawa became a literacy instructor for The Tandana Foundation in 2019, both teaching and sharing the value of education through her example. In 2021, she became Coordinator of Tandana's new scholarship program in Mali. In this role, she supports students in achieving education and gaining skills that are needed in their communities, so that not only their families but also the Tammoguiné region can benefit from their knowledge. Hawa has also served on the selection committee for enterprise proposals from

women's associations as part of the Women's Literacy, Leadership, and Enterprise Program and participated in ceremonies to present startup funds to the winning associations. She speaks Tommo So, Bambara, French, and a little bit of English. Hawa is based in Bandiagara, Mali.

Panel Moderator
Kelly Bohrer
University of Dayton