



**Report on the  
1<sup>st</sup> Leadership Café for Young Women  
January 2013**

## INTRODUCTION

On January 12th 2013, in collaboration with the *Ivorian Center for Civic Education for Sustainable Development* (CIVED), a nongovernmental organization based in Ivory Coast and *POWER Inc.*, a non-governmental organization based in the United States, the Institute for Education of Women in Africa and the Diaspora (IEWAD) organized the 1<sup>st</sup> "Leadership Café for Young Women" in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.

This Leadership Café was based on the model of the "World Café™," which is a tool for effective consultation to create a dialogue around key issues related to real-life participants. The discussions focused on identifying the different concerns, relevant problems and proposing appropriate solutions to improve the lives of young women in the Ivory Coast in a sustainable manner.

In other words, this Leadership Café helped us to obtain information about the current challenges and issues as well as solutions for a diverse group of young women in Ivory Coast.<sup>1</sup>

To accomplish this, we discussed various topics including:

- sexual harassment
- work experience
- the problem of gender
- securing funding for projects.

All these issues are discussed in more detail below.

### THEME I: SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment was one of the topics discussed at the Leadership Café. This topic was discussed by all of the young women participants who were randomly assigned to the four groups; each group had a single reporter.

The Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary defines sexual harassment "as a persistent and repeatedly gesture with sexual overtones perpetuated by a superior who abuses his power." Indeed, after several exchanges, sexual harassment becomes a strong psychological pressure exerted on a person by another person to obtain sexual favors. Our discussions led us to ask ourselves the following questions:

*What are the causes and consequences of sexual harassment?  
And what solutions can we offer as women leaders to put an end to such acts?*

After discussions among the four groups, it was found that there are several forms of harassment in our society, but, the most widely practiced one is that of sexual harassment, especially targeting young woman for various reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> All of the views and ideas represented in this document represent those expressed by the participants of the 1<sup>st</sup> Young Women's Leadership Café.

A number of the themes related to sexual harassment emerged from the group discussions that ensued during the day.

First, it was suggested that provocative or shocking dress that exposes parts of the body of the young woman may unwittingly attract attention to the girl; she might then be faced with subsequent sexual harassment; or what the group called “involuntary seduction”.

Secondly, it was believed that within our culture, there are sex-obsessed malevolent persons who might also be employers who take advantage of the need for an applicant's employment to harass her.

Finally, the desire on behalf of some young women to follow fashion trends, to please their parents with outstanding school performance, to escape poverty and/or the need money may be some factors that increase the chances for sexual harassment to occur.

It is clearly frustrating that some families do not provide a moral education concerning this social ill of sexual harassment.

The various discussions made clear that sexual harassment leads to consequences at various levels including socio-professional where if the harassed woman succumbs, she loses her sense of dignity and ends up becoming a victim. On the other hand, in the event of refusal on the part of the latter, she may find herself risking the loss of her job. In the academic setting, sexual harassment can result in increasingly bad grades. A refusal to the harasser sometimes exposes her to rape. Also, depending on the various types of harassment, the victimized woman may also experience on the psychological level: depression, lack of motivation, discouragement, loss of self-confidence and attempted suicide or even actual suicide.

The military-political crisis experienced by the Ivory Coast since September 2002 is believed to be a major source of many abuses and violations of human rights and has worsened the condition of the women, who have increasingly been victims of violence; particularly sexual slavery and/or successive rape over long periods of time, followed by beatings and torture.

Following this discussion, we proposed the following solutions:

- First, within the socio-professional arena, we ask that young women dress modestly to help avoid unnecessary provocations in businesses, schools, etc. We are particularly concerned since some young women may dress purposely to attract attention without weighing the consequences of their actions.
- At the national level, we call for officers and law enforcement to seriously consider complaints by victims of harassment and for judges to correctly apply uncompromising laws to cases of harassment. We note with regret that despite the existence of legal laws protecting women such as Article 354 and 356 of the Penal Code that punish Ivorian rape and sexual harassment, the reality is quite different, the implementation of these laws is deficient. Sanctions are not severe enough and the penalties are small.

- On the psychological level, the young woman must seek financial autonomy in order to stop the informal policy of the outstretched hand which is unfortunately, popular with some women. Traditionally, our African culture teaches us that man is the head of the family; and the participation of women in the home life is mainly to support the education and inculcate the values of life to her children. To help avoid being a victim of harassment, the young woman must also have certain life principles and values, for example, how to conduct herself in certain settings and self-respect. Finally, we propose to establish national structures comprising both lawyers and psychologists where individuals can issue harassment complaints, receive advice, and monitor harassment claims.

NB: During the writing of this document, the reporter had to verify the existence of texts of laws on rape and sexual harassment.

## THEME II: PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

During the Leadership Café, we discussed several topics including "professional experience" because we noted with regret that many graduates are barred from office vacancies because of the professional experience that is required by companies.

Based on the discussions, it emerged that experience is an accumulation of knowledge by a person who engages in one or more areas of activities over a long period. It is also the competence or know-how acquired by the employee throughout his/her career as well as knowledge and practices acquired in contact with the reality of life.

*What obstacles do recent graduates experience? How do we cope?*

*What are the challenges we face with the lack of professional experience?*

*And what solutions can we offer so that the experience is not an obstacle for many young people?*

In all human societies, the primary concern among others is to secure work. This need to work drives people and especially the youth to formal training in vocational schools and universities. Unfortunately, we find that in many companies recruitment is made based on one's experience. The lack of professional experience appears to be a discriminating criterion for recent graduates fresh out of universities, colleges and vocational schools. We are concerned that despite professional experience being criteria for recruitment, we are aware that some people submit documents such as a falsified curriculum vitae to get a job.

However, the tension between long-standing employees who have the experience and recent graduates who might bring a freshness of spirit and initiative to the company makes the labor market even more competitive; especially as the management is looking for new partners who possess certain experiences as well as the sincerity, security and certainty that the candidate for a position is credible and able to do the job for which he applied. One might consider that it would make for an ingenious combination of experienced and beginners to give strength to our business, considering that it is difficult for the post-graduate to have the chance to put into practice all his theoretical knowledge. Notwithstanding,

companies want to retain people who do have professional experience. Finally, taking into account that very few employers want to provide this training (especially if it is paid) and required experience to recent graduates due to the slots being limited, this puts recent graduates at a more disadvantaged position.

The participation of several young women in the Leadership Café identified a good number of challenges that women like themselves face. Among these challenges, we identified favoritism; making the transition from school to working life; the lack of infrastructure or training offices due to the recent economic crisis; structural factors such as social inequality and poverty; and labor market conditions and discrimination. In addition, the refusal of companies to integrate young and inexperienced workers into the labor market sometimes results in young women entering into prostitution or other (illegal) means to gain enough money to eat and to take care of not only themselves but also for their families as well and their community.

For future development and prosperity of developing countries, especially when the country's population is predominantly young; we believe the leaders of tomorrow must:

- provide an opportunity for graduates to integrate into the workplace; employers or companies must be willing to offer internships (paid) to young graduates from universities or national and international training schools so that they have the opportunity to practice what they learned during their training;
- allow all qualified individuals, even graduates or students near the end of their cycle, or even unemployed people with very little experience to apply for open positions;
- companies could avoid solely experience-based recruitment and focus on psychological testing and intelligence testing to permit young graduates a chance to prove themselves. Particular emphasis should be placed on the cases of ethnic discrimination, social class, gender (male-female); political affiliation, family or friend ties.
- create start-up projects for young graduates;
- at the national level, require schools to sign partnerships with companies to facilitate obtaining an initial placement. Companies should take the initiative to involve graduates whether they are male or female, red or black, rich or poor to give them practical training.

### THEME III: GENDER - INTEGRATION OF YOUNG WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

The theme of our discussion actually includes both the male and female gender; but, given the fact that this is a Young *Women's* Leadership Café, we found it fitting to focus on the female aspect to understand the problems that this segment of society is exposed to with the sub-theme of "the insertion of the young woman in the workplace".

Insertion is being defined as the integration of a person in a professional or social milieu, yet, in this case, young women seem to be marginalized from this integration. That is why for this activity, we asked the following questions:

*What are the challenges faced by young women for their integration?*

*What are the challenges and solutions for maximum integration into the society?*

Challenges for young women who want to be integrated in the workplace are:

- to be able to perform the required duties and accept the same responsibilities as men in the workplace;
- to seek above all to be financial and social independent;
- to demonstrate competence and competitiveness in their field of activity;
- to be capable of taking leadership roles in organizations as well as political offices.

Unfortunately, many young women face more difficulties which pose as obstacles in fulfilling their dreams. These difficulties are related to high levels of illiteracies especially in young women and the role of housewife in light of our customs and traditions in Africa. Also, the lack of information on how to start and finance projects; as well as her incompetence due to a lack of professional experience which prevents her from being as dynamic.

The relegation of second place vis-à-vis men can lead to women feeling or being demotivated, lacking confidence, and/or demoralized. For example, our traditions teach that women should not speak in an assembly of men.

To remedy this we have enumerated a number of solutions including:

- enroll the girl as well the young woman for schooling;
- conduct awareness campaigns on the importance of literacy for girls;
- disseminate the texts concerning the rights and status of women;
- establish a favorable environment for the integration of women in the sphere of decision-making;
- increase the participation and skills of women in the management of social conflict;
- educate women on their rights and duties in order not to be excluded from the development of Africa;
- provide an opportunity for the woman to apply to decision-making bodies and even assume leadership positions.

#### THEME IV: PROJECT FUNDING

The design and development of a project requires both physical and mental effort, but also substantial financial resources. It is clear that the leadership of most companies is governed by men. This fact has led us to further our investigations and to ask ourselves: what are the problems faced by women in the development of their projects?

We discussed this problem from several difference angles.

- First, on the economic level. There is a lack of bank financing. Taking into consideration that financing banks require approval before granting a loan; loan rates are high; and the repayment does not always correspond to the profitability of the activity makes it more difficult to access

such financing. The process of conducting a long-term study of the credibility and feasibility of the project by the banks before the grant are awarded can slow down its execution.

- In addition, women encounter instances of favoritism on the part of banks in their search for funding. Also, the lack of business plan in the projects and the lack of information on the process of financing and project implementation constitute additional obstacles for women to reach their goal.
- On the cultural and psychological level, one often hears in our society that the woman's place is in the home, that is to say, in the role of housekeeper and educator. Considering this socialization, some women do not have the initiative to pursue an enterprise, while others are engaged in businesses on a relative small-scale. In addition, the high rate of illiteracy among the young women, lack of self-confidence and poorly developed projects are all handicaps hindering the development of the young woman.
- Finally, we noticed that many projects that women have are not realized either because they did not seem profitable or because they have been appropriated by persons with funding.

All these difficulties can contribute in high rates of prostitution due to poverty which further hinders the full emancipation of women, and increases the rate of unemployment and disenfranchisement. Due to the difficulties highlighted above, the financial autonomy of women continues to be suppressed and the continuation of the phenomenon of the outstretched hand continues to devalue women.

Faced with these problems, we propose the following solutions:

- reduced interest rates by banks and other financial institutions to facilitate access to bank loans;
- ask women to join a cooperative or to request a small loan from the bank;
- undertake training on project development and management so that when women submit their projects for funding they are better presented;
- ask the government to encourage private initiatives by reducing the tax rates for banks to create social structures and funding to encourage women to become entrepreneurs.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

At the end of our discussion, we can say that young African women and specifically young Ivorian women face many difficulties to assert themselves and to improve their living conditions in a sustainable way in this changing world. That is why the IEWAD is investing in such activity by creating an environment conducive to unprejudiced dialogue for young women aged 20 to 28 years at various levels of education at events like the 1<sup>st</sup> Young Women's Leadership Café.

As a result of these exchanges, IEWAD is has prepared this report compiling the challenges identified and the solutions proposed by participants; and distributing it to each participant as well as partner organizations and key local stakeholders, including UNESCO, the Ministry of Family, Women and Social Affairs, UN Women, etc.

In addition, the document will be utilized in the development of IEWADs's 5-year strategic plan.