



Gender

Guinea

Hadja Aicha Barry and Sayon Béréte

Two women inspiring others with their commitment to the governance of natural resources



Introduction

Like most African nations, Guinea is a country marked by gender inequalities. Life in society is heavily dominated by men, while women generally have less room for manoeuvre in terms of decision-making, both within their own family and in the broader society.

The statistics on women's representation are revealing: there are over 32 ministers in the current government (February 2020) but **just four women with a ministerial portfolio; fewer than 30% of the seats** in the National Assembly are occupied by women; and finally, **just two of the country's 10 state institutions are led by women.**

The underrepresentation of women in the private mining sector is even more marked:

there are around 20 mining companies that are active in the country **but just one woman in a senior management role.** Similarly, **just three of the 24 members** of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) Multi-Stakeholder Group are women. Women's representation on decision-making bodies is concerning in more than one respect and a number of female leaders are trying their best to take action with the resources available to them.



Hadja Aicha Barry: One of the few women daring to challenge the governance of the mining sector in Guinea

Hadja Aicha Barry has an impressive academic record: she holds a Diploma of Advanced Studies (DES) in geography, a Master's in environmental studies and a Certificate in the governance of the extractive industries, awarded by the Centre of Excellence for the Extractive Industries at the Catholic University of Yaoundé, in Cameroon.

She quickly became aware of the issues of good governance in the extractive industries and knows that citizens' participation is essential. Her past 20 years in teaching have given her a certain taste for public life. This has translated into her tireless commitment to the feminist cause, which gave her the opportunity to move into the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Promotion of Women's and Children's Rights. A born leader and an activist from a young age, Hadja Aicha Barry now heads up the Department of Family at the Ministry.

Leadership in the service of citizen engagement

Described as a "committed feminist" by some, because of her ongoing battle to support women, Hadja Aicha Barry uses every way she can to defend their rights. She divides her energy between her household duties and her passion, which is helping women and girls to make their way in society and convincing them of the necessity of citizen engagement. She has exemplified it herself since she first went to university and deplored the lack of interest among Guinean women in governance, which remains a male-dominated preserve.



Hadja Aicha Barry is a founding member and Vice-President of PWYP Guinea, working particularly on the rights of women. She founded the Coalition of women for mining and sustainable development and has been the regional gender focal point for PWYP's gender project.

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“Our aim is to attract as many women as possible into governance, to improve their participation in the public debate on the extractive industries, which is a heavily male-dominated sector.”



Making her mark in PWYP

Initially, she was the only representative of women's organisations in the Publish What You Pay (PWYP) coalition. Having established herself as an influential figure, Hadja Aicha Barry now sits on the board of PWYP Guinea and oversees the smooth running of the coalition.

“ I am the one who, come hell or high water, defends actions to support women within PWYP, even if it sometimes means losing the debate. That's why I was chosen as the focal point for the gender project in this region, which covers three countries: Guinea, Senegal and Burkina Faso.”

Hadja Aicha Barry defies prejudice and social inertia, and is fearless in expressing her ideas and opinions to contribute to planning and implementing PWYP activities.

Her contribution to the governance of the extractive industries in Guinea

Aware of the social difficulties that prevent women from engaging in keeping track of public policies, in 2019 Hadja Aicha Barry turned her attention to the mobilising power of women's organisations and brought 12 NGOs together to form COGUIFEMINES (the Guinean Women's Coalition for Mining and Sustainable Development). They are now all members of the national PWYP coalition and symbolise the increasing number of women keen to participate in the governance of the extractive industries in Guinea. COGUIFEMINES is also a member of the consultation framework for civil society organisations on women's rights in the mining sector. The framework is relatively new, having been set up barely a year ago, and is planning to organise the first forum on women's rights in the Guinean mining sector. The forum aims to

be a space for dialogue, information, awareness-raising and advocacy, to encourage all decision-makers and stakeholders to take women's rights into account in relation to mining activities. Since March is also Women's Month, it will be used to encourage women to enter the public arena.

Optimism in the face of remaining challenges

It is only fair to acknowledge the improved conditions for women in Guinea, who now have better access to education and public life. However, a number of sticking points remain. The major challenge women face is a lack of self-confidence: their limited skills do not encourage them to get involved in governance.

“ I managed to win over my detractors when I was teaching geography at a secondary school. Some of the senior people at the school had questioned my abilities, prompting the communal authorities in Kaloum to keep a close eye on what I was doing. The director came in person to inspect one of my classes and at the end, she admitted that she was impressed by the quality of the lesson; so she complimented me and I knew she trusted me.”

Young women in Guinea now know that they need to get involved and see things through to the end.



Sayon Béréte:

Working to secure recognition of women's rights in the extractive industries in Guinea

Sayon Béréte, a geological engineer who was part of the 32nd student cohort at the Institute of Mining and Geology in Boké, began her career as soon as she left university. She gained her professional experience with a number of mining companies, including SAG. She then decided to return to Conakry to teach geology. As she explains:

“I got to a point where I wanted to change direction, so I left education and was assigned to the Ministry of Mining in March 2007. My transfer came through in the middle of the year but I didn't abandon my students, who were preparing for their baccalaureate, as I didn't take up my post until the end of the school year.”

She has worked in several departments in the Ministry of Mines and Geology, starting with the Strategy and Development Office (BSD) before joining her favourite, the National Directorate of Geology, where she stayed for two years. Since 2016, she has worked as a geologist in the National Department of Mining Projects.

Her work with the NGO Women In Mining (WIM)

The NGO “Women In Mining” (WIM) was formed in 2014 by women who had previously worked for Rio Tinto and other companies in the public mining sector. The idea of bringing together women working in the sector, whether they were employed by the central administration or



Sayon Béréte, coordinator of “Women in Mining Guinea”. Sayon is an engineer of geology and is seen here prospecting on a mining site.

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mining companies, or worked in gold panning, came about because “*the living conditions of women in the sector left so much to be desired*”.

WIM is chaired by Zeinab Camara, the former director of community relations at Rio Tinto, and now chief of staff at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. After it was formed, the NGO ran a number of awareness-raising activities with women in the mining sector to encourage them to join. The “Women in Mining of West Africa (WIMOWA)” network, of which Guinea is a founder member, was set up in 2015. Although the initiative mainly concerns countries that are members of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), the founding organisations felt it was necessary



Sayon Berete delivering a speech at a gender workshop in Accra in 2019.

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to approach their colleagues in Guinea, given its significant level of mining resources. As someone who had won the trust of her female colleagues, Sayon Béréte was elected to the Executive Board with responsibility for safety and training, at a general meeting held in Dakar.

The battle for women in the mining sector is far from easy, but there are plenty of initiatives in the pipeline. In November 2019, for example, the African Union contacted African women who work in the mining sector to create the AWIMA (African Women in Mining Association), with WIM Guinea playing a central role.

The WIM index

The idea of creating the WIM index grew out of a meeting with representatives of the EITI, and the observation that women are marginalised in the extractive industries both in Guinea and elsewhere. Women who work in the extractive sector are rarely visible and their living

conditions largely ignored. It was to reverse this trend that in 2017, WIM, supported by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) and a number of development consultants (from Gateway) carried out a forward-looking study on conditions for women in the mining sector.

The WIM index aims to provide accurate information on the situation of women who earn their living either directly or indirectly from mining activities. As Sayon Béréte explains;

“ We saw that there was a need to take the situation of women in the sector into account. Several of us joined forces to carry out a study of a kind that had never been done in Africa, or more specifically, in Guinea. It saddens me that today just 10% of managerial positions in the industry are occupied by women, in both the public and private sector.”



Sayon Berete, the only woman at a mining site with her male colleagues.

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Challenges related to social inertia

Even though men and women study for the same qualifications and undertake the same training, women's representation on decision-making bodies remains limited. According to Sayon Béréte, the situation can be explained by sociocultural considerations that are firmly rooted in Guinea.

“ Sometimes, when I'm on a field visit with my male engineer colleagues, they may say, “Béréte, get us a drink of water...”; it's there in their minds, the culture is there, all the time; they think that's something that should always be done by a woman.”

Thinking back to when she started at the Ministry of Mining in 2008, Sayon Béréte recalls that people used to assume she was a secretary.

“ For a lot of people, a woman at the Ministry of Mining obviously had to be a secretary or an accountant.”

In many people's minds, it is a job for men only.

“ Which is quite wrong. Women are just as capable as men.”

She continues:

“ Personally, I take hold of the situation. If I need to, I make my views known. Unfortunately, I know other women who are reluctant to express their ideas, so they often stay in the background.”



Sayon Berete with her colleagues from the Ministry of Mines and Geology of Guinea at the Africa Forum on the Mining in Accra in November 2019.

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The geologist points out that her commitment is driven by two things: the fact that she loves her job, and sheer perseverance. She concludes:

“The thing about me is that I won’t be put down by my male colleagues. Sometimes you have to take hold of the situation and persevere. But you also need to enjoy what you do. I love my job. It’s what encourages me to keep going.” ■



Sayon Berete at a mining site to follow-up on a project.

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