

BREAKING BARRIERS

AN ECHELON TO SUCCESS

Mariama Kalokoh, called "Power Saw," born in Tongo Bomi, Niawa region, Lower Bambara chiefdom is well known for being a vivacious young lady who is inspired to empower women and communities to become self-reliant. Mariama lost her parents when she was very young and only received a primary education as a result. She was forced to market products on the streets since she had to drop out of school to work in order to support herself.

In 2016, she founded the Unity Women Development Association in Loworma with a group of 25 women to promote women's engagement in politics and administration in that region of the country. She was selected as one of the active women advocating women's concerns in the chiefdom when the "More Than a Woman" initiative, funded by Irish Aid, began implementation in 2018. She participated in the Village Savings and Loan Association concept training sessions and received the necessary support to help women gain economic independence. She proved to be a dominant force by propagating the VSLA concept to over 825 women and organising them into 35 VSLA based on the approach she had learned. All 35 VSLAs are mobilizing and saving their own resources to invest in large-scale agricultural activities and personal business activities.

"I learned a lot during my VSLA training sessions with SEND Sierra Leone and so I knew I had to spread this knowledge to my colleague women in a way they would understand since most of us are uneducated and uninformed, Been aware of the opportunities available for women groups made us feel more secure and empowered to take on



Fig 1. MARIAMA INFRONT OF ONE OF THE VSLAS RICE STORES

advocacy problems and persuade other NGOs to support agriculture for the groups", she highlighted.

To ensure social cohesion and promote inclusion, Mariama as a result of her training from SEND advocated for the practice of the Gender Model Family to bring the spouses and their wives together especially for agriculture purposes. The Unity Women Development Association operates as an umbrella body for all 35 VSLAs under Mariama's stewardship as its executives have received relevant capacity-building and leadership training from SEND. The umbrella VSLA operates as the advocacy arm for all the other 35 group and is therefore registered with all the necessary government agencies to access opportunities for all its members. Mariama as the Head of the umbrella body lobbied SOLIDARIDAD—an international organisation to support the agricultural activities of her VSLA. The umbrella VSLA received 2900 cashew seedlings from SOLIDARIDAD to support their agricultural diversification into tree-crop farming.

As part of COVID-19 emergency responses by Irish Aid through SEND Sierra Leone, the Unity Women were given a gari processing machine to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic on rural women farmers. The revenues from the sale of their processed cassava into gari, as well as savings from other neighboring villages paying to have their cassava processed into gari, were saved into the VSLA to provide larger loans for group members.

The Unity Women Development Association has cultivated 15 acres of land which has been used to harvest over 100 bags of rice, 10 bags of coucous, 20 bags of okra and corn in the 2020 planting season. With her eyes set on sustainability through diversification, Mariama as the Head of the umbrella body lobbied SOLIDARIDAD-an international organisation to support the agricultural activities of her VSLA. The umbrella VSLA received 2900 cashew seedlings from SOLIDARIDAD to support their agricultural diversification into tree-crop farming.

The umbrella VSLA has ensured the registration of all 35 VSLAs under its stewardship with the Kenema Credit Union in order to obtain loans to strengthen and expand their agricultural and business operations. Additionally, the umbrella Unity Women Development Association, received a loan from the Credit Union in 2021 and used part of it to purchase two pieces of land to build a rice mill and silo to process and store their rice harvest. They plan to construct a technical vocational center with the remaining funds from the loan and personal savings from their VSLA. This center will conduct adult literacy classes for women and offer instruction in tailoring, soap manufacturing, and gara tie-dyeing, among other skills, to women and adolescent girls.

Mariama Kalokoh expressed that it is her desire to use the skills training center to change the lives of many other women like herself who have had little or no access to education, and to challenge them to become better citizens beyond her community, chiefdom, and Sierra Leone as a whole

Mariama is now an entrepreneur, an agriculturist, and one of the Kenema Women in Governance Network's PROs. She is married to Mohamed Kalokoh and has a son.



Fig 2. Members of the Unity VSLA sing songs of joy as they gather for a weekly meeting



Fig 3. Mariama poses in front of another rice store owned by the Unity VSLA



Fig 4. Mariama and members of the Unity VSLA pose in their groundnut farm