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WOMEN’S DAY, 8 MARCH, IN WEST AFRICA

As we mark International Women's Day today with a large number of events organised across West Africa, it is a timely moment to look at progress made and remaining obstacles to achieving gender equality. In West Africa, large gender disparities persist. Women and girls are disadvantaged in many areas and don’t enjoy the same opportunities as their male counterparts. This is true for almost all public sectors, ranging from unequal access to basic social services (health, education, water & sanitation, energy, etc.), unequal property rights and persistent gender gaps in the labour market and the public sphere (see Maps & Facts).

The legal frameworks, policies and strategies are hard to find, but they do exist. Since the mid-2000s, almost every West African country has created a national gender policy or strategy. Regional organisations like ECOWAS, UEMOA, CILSS and the African Union have all adopted gender policies and they are increasingly mainstreaming gender issues in different policy sectors. But, in practice, gender is still considered mostly as an afterthought and gender policies are often not implemented effectively. The SWAC Secretariat has compiled national gender policies and strategy papers to facilitate access and dissemination of the existing policies and institutional frameworks. You will also find in this issue, an opinion piece by SWAC Secretariat Director Laurent Bossard that was published in Le Monde Afrique, and draws attention to the difficult situation of many girls and women in the Sahel. Another blog article, published on the OECD Insights blog, calls for men to be more involved so that we can make faster progress in achieving gender equality goals on the ground. Lastly, we invite you to discover some of the measures taken by Thomas Sankara, the former President of Burkina Faso, to improve the conditions of women more than 30 years ago. Since 1984, 8th of March has been a public holiday in Burkina Faso.
MOROCCO WANTS TO JOIN ECOWAS

On 25 February 2017, Morocco officially asked the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to become a full member. Morocco has been an observer to ECOWAS and has developed strong political, human, historical, religious and economic ties at all levels with ECOWAS member countries. Morocco’s King Mohammed VI recently signed new cooperation agreements with Guinea, following a meeting with President Alpha Condé. He also met, on 27 February 2017, with Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara in Abidjan. They signed 14 new bilateral agreements in the fields of military cooperation, medical equipment, finance, logistics, ITC and transport infrastructure. Morocco is a key player in boosting the regional integration process on the African continent and is instrumental in connecting the northern and southern shores of the Sahara. However, Morocco’s request to join ECOWAS provoked a “geopolitical earthquake” in Algeria. Morocco’s move also weakens the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), which is suffering from competition between its members - Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia.

LUXEMBOURG MINISTER ON BURKINA FASO VISIT

From 18 to 20 February 2017, a delegation from Luxembourg, headed by the Minister for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Action, Romain Schneider, paid a working visit to Burkina Faso. Luxembourg plans to donate some EUR 60 million to Burkina Faso from 2017 to 2021 to support the implementation of Burkina Faso’s National Action Plan for Economic and Social Development (PNDES), which should be implemented from 2016 to 2020. During this three-day visit, the minister attended the inauguration ceremony of the Noomdo Centre, a centre for the social integration of vulnerable children in Koudougou, in the province of Boukiemdé. The centre was created by Le Soleil Dans la Main, a Luxembourg-based organisation. Schneider also met with representatives of 12 national NGOs to talk about projects, best practices and challenges. Moreover, Schneider participated in the ninth edition of the Luxembourg-Burkina Faso Partnership Commission, co-chaired by the Burkinabe Economic and Finance Minister, Hadizatou Rosine Sori-Coulibaly. This meeting comes on the heels of the just concluded Burkina Faso donor conference, which was held in Paris in December 2016. The country received pledges and loans of over EUR 12.7 billion from bilateral and multilateral partners to fund the PNDES. They also spoke about a project to support the development of information technology in Burkina Faso. Schneider rounded up his visit with a reception organised by the Burkinabe President, Roch Marc Christian Kabore and an inspection of the National Office for Forest Inventory, which helps in the systematic collection of data and forest information, a facility funded by the previous indicative programme.

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE AFRICAN SAHEL?

The Center for African Studies at the University of Florida hosted the 2017 Gwendolen M. Carter Conference in African Studies on 23-25 February. Organised by the Sahel Research Group, the conference brought together over 50 academics and policy makers working on the Sahel from Africa, North America and Europe. The event provided an opportunity to discuss the pressing environmental, social, economic and political challenges that the region faces. In his keynote address, Professor Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan of the Niger-based Laboratory of Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development (LASDEL) highlighted the modernity of Sahelian societies and the widening gap between these societies and the state. Building upon the work conducted in the Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel, Olivier Walther, one of its authors, examined the geographical significance of the Sahel, its fluid boundaries, its spatial dynamics and how the region has been progressively redefined by security issues. In the concluding roundtable, Hassana Alidou, Nigerien Ambassador to the United States, encouraged scholars and policy-makers to pursue more wide-ranging, open dialogue on the specificities and constraints of today’s Sahel. The papers presented at the conference will be published in the Handbook of the African Sahel by Oxford University Press.
**BURKINA FASO: FESPACO CINEMA FESTIVAL IN FULL SWING**

It was seven days of movie fever! This was the feeling that gripped the African continent during the 25th Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), which ran from 25 February to 4 March. Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Alain Gomis won the Golden Stallion prize for his movie “Félicité,” a story about a poor mother and bar singer who tries to raise money for her sick son’s operation. It is the second time that Gomis has won the regional film contest; he also just won the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival. The FESPACO competition is usually reserved for movies made in Africa and produced by African filmmakers. It also represents a networking opportunity for African movie makers to exchange ideas and showcase their work to a large audience. This year’s festival theme was, “Training Schemes for the Cinema and Audiovisual Industry,” and welcomed Côte d’Ivoire as its special guest of honour. President Alassane Ouattara attended the closing ceremony, together with his Burkinabe counterpart Christian Roch Kaboré, which illustrates the importance of this cultural event. With a budget of XOF 1.2 billion slated for the 2014-2023 period, this year’s edition featured 950 selected films with more than 450 video screenings to over 100 000 visitors. Created in 1969, FESPACO is organised every two years in Ouagadougou and is the largest film festival in West Africa.

**THOMAS SANKARA IN THE “LAND OF UPRIGHT WOMEN”**

On 8 March 1985, former President Thomas Sankara organised a National Week to honour women. The International Women’s Day celebration in the *Land of Upright Men* was the scene of intense moments of reflection. Since that year, 8 March has been a public holiday in Burkina Faso. Thomas Sankara had the idea to keep women from going the market on that day, and demand that men do the shopping and cooking instead. This inversion of gender roles was intended to remind men about the realities of the daily grind of their wives, mothers and sisters, and to, above all, allow men to experience those things first-hand. The president of Burkina Faso also left his mark by making himself a tireless advocate for women prostitutes.

**OPINION**

**GIRLS ROBBED OF THEIR CHILDHOOD IN THE SAHEL**

In his most recent opinion piece, published by *Le Monde Afrique*, SWAC Secretariat Director Laurent Bossard reacts to the miserable situation of many girls and women in the Sahel. In Mali, Niger and Chad, 40% of children under five suffer from stunting. In these countries, at least 100 children out of every thousand die before reaching the age of five. More than three-quarters of the girls in Niger get married before they turn 18 and 28% are married by age 15. About 85% of girls under 24 are illiterate and half of Niger’s girls have never gone to school. “What is the use of our cries of outrage?” questions Laurent Bossard.

**GENDER EQUALITY IN WEST AFRICA: ACTIONS SPEAK MORE THAN WORDS**

Several decades of gender debates, special events and development goals dedicated to the empowerment of women, add up to only modest improvements on the ground. “What should count, though, is not the number of commitments we make, but the true progress we achieve on the ground […] If men were ready to help women, things would move much faster,” points out Julia Wanjiru from the Sahe land West Africa Club Secretariat (SWAC/OECD) in an article published on the *OECD Insights blog*. 
In 2006, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the first female head of state in Africa. Since then, many national and regional gender policies in West Africa have sought to achieve gender equality, increase women’s participation in decision-making and expand women’s economic opportunities. However, women in West Africa - as in many other parts of the world - remain largely underrepresented in the political sphere. When we look at the national percentages, women occupy only 421 seats in West African parliaments, representing 16.1% of all lawmakers. In West Africa, 12 out of the 17 countries have averages that are below the world average of 23.3%. Senegal is a notable exception. With women making up 42.7% of its parliament, it ranks as number seven, just behind Sweden. Rwanda is the world leader when it comes to women’s representation and 63% of its lawmakers are women. Women occupy on average less than 20% of ministerial posts, and, of those, they are mostly clustered in the ministries covering women’s affairs and social issues. Men also outnumber women within ministerial administrations. While women generally occupy secretarial, accounting, human resources and other administrative positions, men hold most of the technical and managerial positions. To encourage more women to participate in politics, the region adopted the ECOWAS Gender and Elections Strategic Framework (GESF) and Action Plan in December 2016. This was followed in February 2017, by a series of recommendations to update the “Supplementary Act relating to Equality of Rights between Men and Women for Sustainable Development in the ECOWAS Region.” In terms of top leadership positions, the Commission of the African Union is setting a good example. Its new commission maintains the proper gender balance - four out of the eight elected commissioners are women. The previous commission was chaired by Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the first woman to lead the continent-wide organisation.

WHO’S WHO?

AMINA J. MOHAMMED, UN DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL

Born in Kaduna in 1961, but originally from the north-eastern Nigerian state of Gombe, Amina Mohammed is the third woman and second African to hold the position of Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations. Formally sworn in on 28 February 2017, she is serving under the current UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres. Mohammed is not entirely new to the UN system and brings a wealth of development experience to her new role. She gained a good reputation for the key role she played during the negotiations surrounding the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Agenda as the UN Under-Secretary-General and as a special advisor on post-2015 development planning at the national level. Mohammed served under three Nigerian presidents from 2000 to 2014 as an adviser on the country’s implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. This culminated in her nomination in November 2015 as Nigeria’s Minister of Environment and Nigeria’s Representative to the African Union Reform Steering Committee under Nigerian President Buhari. Prior to her entry on the international development stage, Mohammed held a number of positions in the private and academic sectors. She was the founder and CEO of the Centre for Development Policy Solutions and was an adjunct professor at Columbia University in the development practice programme. In 1991, she founded Afri-Projects Consortium, a professional service firm that provides engineering and consultancy services. Referred to as one of the most powerful women within the UN system, Mohammed’s role includes not only operational and administrative responsibilities, but she must also ensure inter-institutional and inter-sectoral coherence of activities and programmes in order to support the Secretary-General and strengthen the UN’s work on development policy and climate change. A mother of six children, Mohammed is a recipient of the prestigious Nigerian National Honours Awards and has been inducted into the Nigerian Women’s Hall of Fame.