

Mixing Tradition and Technology to Improve Women's Health

Traditional communicator adopts *RAPIDWomen* model as persuasive advocacy tool to improve health, well-being of women and girls in Mali

Mr. Mamadou Ben Chérif Diabaté is a highly respected traditional communicator within the Network of Traditional Communicators for Development in Mali, West Africa. As its president and founding member, he is a charismatic man who is respected by the highest governmental and religious authorities in Mali. For him, defending the rights of women is the obligation of any esteemed traditional communicator in Mali—a country that has historically revered women, yet where legal status, health, and economic opportunities significantly favor males.

People living in his rural district of Kita also revere Mr. Diabaté. Kita is one of the cradles of the *griots*—storytellers, singers, poets, musicians, and repositories of oral tradition dating back to the 13th century reign of Sundiata Keita, King of Mande. Acting as the king's counselors, the griots were responsible for maintaining order in the kingdom and mediating disputes of any kind. They were also responsible for perpetuating the *Kouroukan Fougá*—the famous charter initiated by the king, which served as the constitution of the early Malian empire—through songs and stories

Article 16 of the historical charter states that, “Women, apart from their everyday occupations, should be associated with all management of society,” promoting the inclusion of women in decision-making.” As a descendant of the great Mande griots, Mr. Diabaté has dedicated his life to upholding the storied tradition of his forefathers, leading the way to empower women and advocate for their health and happiness.

In Mali, access to quality healthcare services plays a crucial role in the lives of women. However, only two out of every 10 women make decisions regarding their own health and less than 10 percent of Malian women use any method of family planning. These factors contribute to unintended pregnancies and high fertility, which elevate maternal and child mortality. Many women also face domestic violence, which is largely considered acceptable by society, including by many women.

Although he had mastered his role as mediator of conflicts within families and Malian society, Mr. Diabaté lacked information to influence improvements in women's health, a goal he sees as part of his calling as a griot. He needed statistical data and evidence on how to reduce maternal and infant mortality.



By involving women, Mamadou Ben Chérif Diabaté has lived up to the tradition of the griots of old. Together, Mr. Diabaté and women's associations remain dedicated to prioritizing the health and happiness of women throughout Mali.

Photo by Abdoulaye Ganda, Health Policy Project—Mali

*“I immediately perceived the **RAPIDWomen** model as a powerful advocacy tool. Trained in its use by HPP/Mali, I adopted the model and asked for its adaptation to the rural areas,” says **Mamadou Ben Chérif Diabaté***

Earlier this year, Mamadou Ben Chérif Diabaté attended a training workshop on how to use the *RAPIDWomen* model as an advocacy tool. *RAPIDWomen* is an interactive software modeling system that illustrates how investing in family planning, reproductive health, girls' education, gender norms, and maternal health programs can increase the quality of life for women, girls, and families. The presentation outlines the situation of females in the country, analyzes results from the model, and outlines key policy messages and calls for action. As a result, government leaders, health officials, and policymakers are able to make informed decisions on health policies—particularly those that affect women's health.

After the workshop, Mr. Diabaté and several other trainees agreed to champion the cause of improving the lives of women and continue to use the *RAPIDWomen* model with other Malian associations. He presented the model's findings alongside fellow women's rights advocate, Ms. Bocoum Salimata Ouattara, president of the Association of Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, to nearly 70 attendees from the Government of Mali, nongovernmental organizations, women's associations, and members of the local media.

With a sharp understanding of the model and the strength of his conviction, Diabaté was able to employ evidence from the *RAPIDWomen* tool in his traditional communicator's approach and connect with the participants much like the griots before him and make a convincing case for the importance of investing in women and girls. Participants engaged in heated discussions about how to best reduce violence against women. All agreed on the most important issue—the need to stop it from happening.

Following the presentation, leaders from the Association of Women Physicians, the Association for Women's Dignity, and the Malian Association of Women Lawyers publicly committed to incorporate the *RAPIDWomen* model in their efforts to promote the welfare of women and girls in Mali. Mr. Diabaté recommended that the model be translated into local languages and called on participants to suggest associations to which the model should be disseminated in order to reach as many people as possible.

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About the Health Policy Project

The USAID-funded Health Policy Project (HPP) builds capacity around the world for improved health policy, advocacy, and governance. HPP contributes to improved health outcomes through strengthening the efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of health systems. It is implemented by Futures Group, in collaboration with the Centre for Development and Population Activities, Futures Institute, Partners in Population and Development – Africa Regional Office, Population Reference Bureau, RTI International, and the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood. For more information, please visit www.healthpolicyproject.com or contact info@healthpolicyproject.com