"At one point, I was told to go and have children"

When we met Mamad for an interview in the summer of 2018, she was about to finalise her PhD at Eduardo Mondlane University (UEM) within the framework of the Desafio project on social rights. Her supervisor is Petra Foubert, professor at Hasselt University’s Faculty of Law, whose research focuses on discrimination law, particularly with regard to employment. Although these two women come from very different backgrounds, they clearly have many similarities. Both are passionate about law and they share a great amount of idealism about using their knowledge to improve the fate of many women – particularly in Mozambique, but also in the rest of the world.

HIV/AIDS, early pregnancy and child marriage in Mozambique

Women and girls are two of the most vulnerable groups in Mozambique, along with children, the elderly, the disabled and the chronically ill. Although the country does have laws in place to protect these two groups, its provisions are often violated in practice.

One major health risk faced by women, as well as by large segments of the general population of Mozambique, is the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. According to UNAIDS data from 2018, more than two million of the country’s 29 million inhabitants are HIV-infected.

One problem that is specific to girls is that they are often forced to marry and bear children from a very young age, which results in them dropping out of school. When girls discontinue their education early, they do not acquire the knowledge and skills that they need for future employment opportunities. Moreover, child brides are isolated from school, friends and work-places, and they do not receive the social support needed for their emotional well-being. Many times, child marriage is accompanied by teenage pregnancy, with the associated risks to both mother and child of dying before or during childbirth. Teenage pregnancy can also have a lasting impact on the girl’s health, education and income-earning potential, and this impact is frequently...

By pursuing higher education as a young woman in Mozambique, Farida Mamad did not choose the path of least resistance, given the omnipresence of child marriages, gender inequality and poverty in this South-eastern African country. Mamad nevertheless made her own choices. This is a story about her contribution to solving a number of Mozambique’s greatest challenges: social security, women’s rights and HIV/AIDS, partially within the VLIR-UOS IUC programme (‘Desafio’ – Portuguese for challenge).
“My mother always said ‘I’m not marrying off my girls. They will go to school.’”

transferred to the baby she is carrying. In terms of health, girls are often exposed to the risk of HIV/AIDS at a young age. In addition, access to sexual and reproductive health information is often limited in remote areas.

Taking the road less travelled

If it had not been for her mother, Mamad would have suffered the same fate. “My mother always said ‘I’m not marrying off my girls. They will go to school and work in a bank’. For myself, I wanted to be a teacher at a very early age.”

This was far from evident, however. According to UNESCO estimates from 2014, only about 32% of all girls in Mozambique made it to the last grade of primary education. “Studying in Africa, in Mozambique, is not something for women,” Mamad confirms.

“Postponing having children is not something for women. At one point, I was told to ‘go and have children’,” one point, I was told to ‘go and have children’.” Mamad did not stop after having children.”

Postponing having children is not something for women,” Mamad confirms. “Studying in Africa, in Mozambique, is not something for women.”

Changing lives together

At the time of our interview, ten years after the start of the Master programme, about 60 professionals from a variety of backgrounds, such as civic organisations, NGOs and the private sector, have benefited from the university’s Master programme in social law. “The project has also had a substantial impact outside of the university. We have collaborated with the institute that trains judges, we have worked with a parliamentary committee and we are in touch with the social security department, as well as with the human rights and children’s rights commissions,” explains Foubert.

Returning to the original goals of the project – to raise awareness within key institutions and to train paralegals in the local community – courses and workshops in social law have indeed been organised for students, paralegals and members of the parliament. For example, members of the parliament participated in conferences organised as part of the project, in addition to participating in training courses to acquire expertise on social rights and social protection and the chronically ill.

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requesting legal advice from the university. The project has also had a special link with the Mozambican Platform of Social Protection, and it has helped to create a centre for social rights. The Mozambican Bar Association (which unites lawyers in Mozambique) is aware of the research. The UEM has additionally organised four conferences in order to disseminate the knowledge generated through the project. The research has also resulted in brochures and leaflets, which have been distributed throughout civil society in order to raise awareness on human rights and social protection with regard to HIV/AIDS.

Girl power

Mamad says that education has made an incredible difference in shaping the person she is today. “I was a very shy girl when I was growing up, until I got good marks and was told that I could teach in the faculty. Education made me question everything that I had learned as a child. My life has changed. I’m more confident. I hope people like me can open a window of hope to other people.” One thing is for certain: Mamad will not conform to any gender stereotype, and is headed straight towards the finish line for her PhD. “Completing this PhD will be a statement against the suppression and underestimation of women in Mozambique: no one thinks that I will be able to do it,” she adds with a smile.

Social rights in Mozambique

With its 44 years of independence from Portugal, Mozambique is quite a young country. Although it has made considerable economic progress since 1975, it remains one of the world’s poorest countries. Poverty increases most social risks, including infant mortality, chronic malnutrition, children dropping out of school, child labour, child marriage and short life expectancy. For this reason, the Mozambican government has set up social security strategies, with the most recently published strategy focusing on the period 2016–2024.