

Beating the odds
in Mozambique's
Desafio programme

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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).

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 workplaces, 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



PhD student Farida Mamad and her promoter Petra Foubert © UHasselt

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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.’” Mamad did not stop after primary school and managed

to complete secondary education. In 2009, she even completed a Master degree. Today, she is teaching at UEM in Maputo, while simultaneously pursuing a PhD within the framework of the VLIR-UOS *Desafio* programme. Her research is on the impact of policies on people infected with HIV/AIDS and the possibilities that the country’s social security system offers for taking women out of poverty. “I come from a province in Mozambique that is deeply affected by HIV/AIDS,” she explains. “I have almost none of my childhood friends anymore, because nearly all of them have died from HIV/AIDS. Very early in my career as a lawyer, I wanted to specialise in HIV/AIDS.”

Mamad and Foubert join forces

It was 2013 when Mamad and Foubert crossed paths, as Foubert had become the Flemish project leader of one of the projects of the *Desafio* programme at UEM. The project that Foubert

was leading involved social rights and social protection in particular, with a specific focus on health rights and rights for people with HIV/AIDS. At that time, the social rights of people with HIV/AIDS in Mozambique were often violated. At the same time, because these people were many times not aware of their rights, they were even more vulnerable to stigmatisation and discrimination. Although some employers in the country had set up forms of protection or assistance for people with HIV/AIDS, those targeted by these protections often did not claim their rights. When the project started in 2008, social protection and social rights had become an important theme on the Mozambican political agenda, and decision-makers were looking for researchers who could provide them with information, facts and cases in their native language – Portuguese. Although the country adopted a National Strategy for Basic Social Security in 2010, putting these rights into practice proved quite difficult. There was no judicial enforcement of these rights, no higher education programme addressing social rights and no public pressure for implementation of the national strategy, due to a lack of good information. To address this need, the VLIR-UOS *Desafio* project was aimed at increasing expertise in this domain within UEM by establishing a Master

programme in social law at the university and by training PhD candidates and Master students in this expertise. The Master programme is available to important stakeholders, such as the Mozambican government, law and human rights institutions, and the public audience, particularly with regard to rights related to HIV/AIDS.

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 Master programme focuses on people who are already working, for whom we organised a number of evening classes,” explains Foubert. “Once students have taken all of the modules, they receive their Master degree.” 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

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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.