

Çava?

The Newsletter of Friends of Guinea

Advocacy, Information, and Networking for Guinea and Peace Corps Guinea



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Gender Conferences Threatened by PCPP Decision

Dana Schneider (Kinieran, '00-'02), Projects Director
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Friends of Guinea is very concerned this year about the future of the Gender Conferences. Due to a recent change in policy at the Peace Corps Partnership Program/Office of Private Sector Initiatives (PCPP/OPSI), projects that include funding for transportation and lodging will no longer be approved. Since the bulk of the costs for the Gender Conferences goes toward those two expenses, PCPP/OPSI is, so far, unwilling to approve the project.

We believe this project matters a great deal. Each year this program brings girls and boys from small towns and villages from all over Guinea together for an exchange of ideas, viewpoints, and learning. Often, this is the first opportunity for the young participant to travel outside his or her region. The program has grown considerably over the years, and now includes professional mentoring, interaction with local political figures, and extensive education about health and welfare.

It would be tragic if the new restrictions put an end to a decades-long program that has become one of the highlights of service for many Peace Corps/Guinea Volunteers and which has had a profound impact on the lives of young people.

In the past FOG has been very active in fundraising for the Gender Conferences and has raised substantial money to support them. However, FOG is not allowed to donate to any project that has not been approved by PCPP. Money leftover from last year's conferences and proceeds from Peace Corps calendar sales are set aside for this year's events, however, no other fundraising activities are taking place at this time until FOG knows if its monies can be used for the purposes for which it was allocated. The coordinator of this year's conferences, Brian Buehler, is trying to find out if there is a way to resolve this problem and FOG is waiting to hear what PC/Guinea decides.

For more information, or to obtain a copy of a template letter that you can use to express your concern about this situation, please contact Dana Schneider at projects@friendsofguinea.org.

Changes in Guinea?

Emily A. Ramshur (Koubia '00 - '02)
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"So, has Guinea changed?" This was the question asked of me repeatedly by PCVs during my recent trip to the country. As a returned volunteer who has been back in *Ameriki* for a few years, the current volunteers were eager to chat with me about changes, improvements, and/or developments in this country we have come to know and (mostly) love. They seemed almost desperate to hear that, at least after half a decade, Guinea was moving in the right direction towards better government, health, transportation, education, economy, etc. My reply to this question about change was usually something to the effect of, "There are two differences that I notice: the presence of cell phones and the exchange rate." This didn't seem to be the answer the volunteers were seeking.

Thanks to Jen Peterson, the director of Helen Keller International (HKI), my most recent return to Guinea was for the purpose of a brief internship with the organization. HKI's work is focused on nutrition and preventable causes of blindness. Office buzzwords include vitamin A, micronutrients, food fortification, iodized salt, reduction of anemia in pregnancy, nutritional enhancement for people living with HIV/AIDS, and the treatment of severe child malnutrition.

It was quite a learning experience for me to be in a professional office in Conakry, amongst Guineans with work deadlines, measurable outcomes, cell phones, internet access, and business cards. This was in contrast to the up-country Guinean "professionalism" I came to know well during my PC service, which was characterized by meetings that began 2 hours late (if at all), teachers who sometimes accepted bribes

What is... ÇaVa?

ÇaVa is the quarterly newsletter of Friends of Guinea and seeks to maintain contact and community among members as well as inform them of the official activities of the organization.

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and sexual favors from students in exchange for grades, and half-baked project ideas that were impeded by an absence of reliable communication or transportation. There is a reason that PCVs living in the interior of the country are instructed to develop a new conception of “success.” *Les petites changements* at site came only with sensitivity, time, and persistence (if at all).

One task I completed for HKI on this trip was an evaluation of a training of health care workers that had taken place a few weeks earlier. The training was on the treatment of severe child malnutrition. My role was to speak with the trainees to ascertain what they had learned and if there were gaps in their knowledge, and to assess their capacity to implement and apply the new information. I traveled to Faranah and Kankan, medium-to-large sized regional capitals in the east, to speak with them in their own work environments. I was very pleasantly surprised working with these Guinean collaborators. Their levels of professionalism, ethics, compassion, and perspective were highly impressive. They engaged in brainstorming for ways to improve delivery and quality of medical care and were proactive and focused on prevention. They were more interested in talking about solutions than obstacles and suffering. According to my gauge, the “sleaze factor” was zero. I was blown away.

Their high level of professionalism aside, they also struck me on personal and social levels. Among them were young professionals my own age (early 30s) who had not succumbed to the intense social pressure to marry because, according to them, they had not yet met the person they loved and with whom they shared common interests and goals. Their interests included constructive critique of government, world politics and cultural exchange. While I had friends my own age in Koubia during my PC service, these people in my age group (then, ages 24-26) had vastly different lives and experiences from my own. With very few exceptions, they were married with numerous children, spent their days butchering cows or working in the fields, felt powerless in a universe marked by great and frequent suffering, and left everything to the will of Allah (si Allah jabbi!). This kind of defeatism and fatalism was almost undetectable in the Guinean HKI collaborators with whom I had the pleasure of working.

Had these people been beamed down to Guinea in my absence? No! They had been there all along – it just turns out that I never worked with their kind in two years in an off-the-paved-road prefectural capital of 1,500 people.

On the plane home I revisited this question posed to me by so many volunteers: “Has Guinea changed?” Well, maybe not much. However, my *perspective* of Guinea regarding the level of professionalism that exists there amongst a petite minority has definitely changed. My impression of these individuals was entirely positive. This conjures in me a new level of hope that effective collaboration can take place, basic quality of life for Guineans can be improved, and Guineans themselves will play a large hand in that process.

That being said, however, my personal hope is that this “change” that many of us desire and work for in Guinea will not alter the fundamental character of the country and its people... the kindness and hospitality, the slow pace of life, the natural beauty of the landscape, the humor and honor that many Guineans possess, the social importance of human connections. Ideally, change would improve the quality of life of Guineans and preserve the environment, as well as allow for the retention of those things we love about Guinea and that make the country the special place it is...

After all, this visit felt much like going home.



Dr. Bogora and a pediatric patient; Hospital of Faranah.

The Co-Wife Factor

Can polygamy create child-bearing competition?

Jamaica Corker (RPCV Guinea '01-'03)

[Ed. Note: This article originally appeared in the Fall 2006 issue of WorldView Magazine. It is reprinted here by kind permission of the author and the publishers of WorldView.]

Polygamy is part of the daily reality for most West Africans. It is a cultural and financial necessity for many women in communities where tradition and women's lack of economic power perpetuate both its practice and the desire to have many children. Both polygamy and family planning programs are prevalent throughout West Africa, but unless family planning programs can explicitly address the unique circumstances faced by polygamous women the pressure to have many children may work against family planning measures.

I arrived in my village in Guinea expecting to face men's resistance to family planning but it had not occurred to me that women's relationships to one another within a polygamous marriage could also be a disincentive to use contraception. As a Peace Corps health volunteer at a village health center, I worked with staff who talked to women about the benefits of birth spacing and offered them the pill and injectables. Over time, I came to understand how competition between co-wives led many women to have more children than they would otherwise choose.

I also saw several instances where polygamous women sidestepped this pressure and took family planning into their own hands. Halimatou, my closest friend in the village, was able to avoid the co-wife factor, which often encourages a woman to have more children than she might otherwise choose. After having six children with two husbands, Halimatou had decided she was done with childbearing.

"He can have more kids if he wants to," Halimatou declared one afternoon, looking up indignantly from the stool where she sat cradling baby Aicha in her lap. "I'm done." She said she was ready to buy birth control.

"When he was here last week, I heard him say to Aicha, 'The next baby your mom has will be a boy.'"

"Ehh!? Another one? I already have six children, and two are for him. I'm too old to have any more. If he wants another child, his other wife can give it to him."

Halimatou and I were sitting under the shade on her porch, passing the hottest hours of the day together while her five older children were at the afternoon school session. We chatted as she prepared for her afternoon of frying and selling *gateaux* to drivers on the main road. Halimatou had a sophistication that made it possible to talk with her about almost anything. She had been raised in the capital, Conakry, before being married off to a man in the small village in our highland region of Guinea. Unlike others there, she knew city life and knew that some aspects of life in the village were hard for me to understand. Polygamy and exceptionally large families, two of the most foreign aspects of Guinean village life to me, often dominated our conversations.

Like most women in my village, Halimatou was a *sina*, or co-wife, in a polygamous marriage. Practically every married woman I knew had at least one co-wife; polygamy was the rule rather than the exception. It was so common that after just a few months in the village I learned to greet polygamous men by asking how each of their wives were, playfully teased other women by calling them my *sina*, and clarified sibling



Friends of Guinea

**Advocacy, Information, and Networking
for Guinea and Peace Corps Guinea**

Friends of Guinea is a non-profit organization made up of former and currently serving Guinea Peace Corps Volunteers, Guineans inside and outside of Guinea, and others interested in promoting the cause of Guinean development in the world at large. We are a country-of-service affiliate of the National Peace Corps Association. Dues are \$15 annually for individuals, and \$23 for families.

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relationships by asking if a brother or sister were "same mother, same father," or simply "same father."

Halimatou had been the only wife of a well-respected local man who died six years before, leaving her with four young children. She always told me that she could have taken care of herself and her children after her husband's death, but an unmarried woman of any age is unacceptable in most of West Africa. Usually, a widow is married to a brother of the deceased. Halimatou eventually married her husband's younger half-brother—"same father"—who was a shopkeeper living in a nearby city with his own family. He accepted the responsibility of supporting his brother's widow and her children and, in return, it was her responsibility to bear him children. She gave him two more daughters.

Her desire not to have any more children was hardly surprising. She estimated she was nearly 40 and now had six children ranging in age from 18 months to 18 years. Her husband visited the village every month or so and gave Halimatou money to help support all the children, but it was never enough to cover all the family expenses. Her roadside *gateau* business helped to make ends meet.

A widow must remarry to have someone to provide for her children. But most men take an additional wife, or wives, to demonstrate wealth and to achieve high status in the community. A man can have up to four wives at one time. While many women are reluctant to enter into a polygamous marriage, being a second, third or fourth wife may bring some respect and economic security. Having many children is also considered a sign of status or wealth in much of West Africa, particularly in smaller, traditional villages.

When I first arrived in Guinea, I was surprised to learn that many women with access to birth control services chose to have so many children. I came prepared to blame the husbands, but a few women in the village told me that, although they knew about family planning, a woman often wanted enough children to be equal to her *sina*. But I had trouble understanding what one woman's number of children had to do with another's decision about how many to have herself.

During my two years in Guinea I came to understand how dynamics within polygamous marriages compel many women to have as many children as possible. I learned that in a polygamous society, a monogamous marriage can always become polygamous. The decision to take another wife is the man's. Many women fear that their husband will take another wife, particularly if she cannot have as many children as he'd like. She may also want to be well established within a marriage, with many children, should her husband choose to take on another wife.

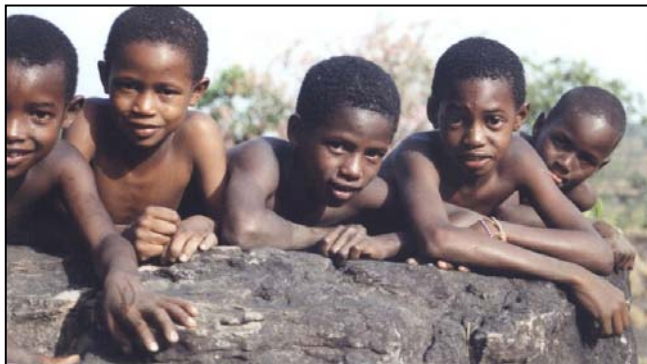
A woman can be the primary wife, with whom the husband spends most of his time, or she can be the *sina* who runs the household in which the man bases himself, as in the case of Halimatou. For such women their *sina* is all but invisible, living in a different town or village and having little or no contact with the husband's other family. In many cases, however, polygamy means co-wives will share a household or compound.

Although every wife is given her own cooking hut or room, these situations nonetheless constitute intimate communal living. If co-wives get along this can create a sense of camaraderie, with *sinas* taking an active role in raising each other's children and supporting one another. However, *sinas* sharing a household can also lead to great rivalries, as wives compete for a husband's resources. This competition can compel a woman to have as many children as her co-wife so she won't lose family resources allocated to a *sina* who has more children to care for.

Being a co-wife might not restrict access to contraception but it can discourage women in polygamous marriages from choosing to use it. Family planning programs are designed to offer assistance in spacing or limiting children for everyone, but they don't address a co-wife factor that can encourage polygamous women to have more children than they might otherwise like to.

Competition between *sinas* can pressure women to have as many children as possible or compel them to have children later in life than they would otherwise choose to, as with Halimatou. However, family planning programs can offer basic birth control when wives are no longer concerned with the *sina* competition. Some women like Halimatou, who have older children close to working age, may feel less reliant on their husband for long-term financial support.

During my two years in Guinea, Halimatou often expressed her intention not to have any more children. Sometimes she talked of going to Conakry for "the operation" that would keep her from getting pregnant again, but the distance and expense of the trip coupled with the small but tell-tale scarring of tubal ligation made it an unrealistic option. Instead, we often discussed the possibility of getting birth control pills or injections from the health center. I thought



nothing had resulted from our discussions until one day she took a crumpled paper out of her *pagne* and smoothed it out before me. It was a receipt from the health center for a contraceptive injection that cost 500 Guinean francs—about 25

cents—and a reminder to return in three months for the next shot.

"The doctor said to come back later for the next shot and wrote the date down here," she said. "I'll probably forget the day, so you have to help remind me, Binta," Halimatou said, using my Guinean name.

She leaned over baby Aicha, folded up her reminder note and shook it at me, showing her seriousness. "After he left for town this morning, I walked straight over to the health center and got the shot. I've done my part for him. If he wants more children, his other wife can have them." Then she tucked the paper back in her skirt and took herself out of the *sina* competition.

FOG Officer Elections in February

Next February, Friends of Guinea will hold its annual officer election. FOG members will be emailed a slate of candidates and a ballot with which to express their choice. The February newsletter will come out very close to the elections, so we want to tell you about them now.

All Officer and Member-at-large positions are up for election, but if you are interested in helping out, we particularly want you to know about the positions whose current occupants will not be able to continue in the coming year. Steph Chasteen, now that she has her PhD. and the perfect job, is finding herself a little snowed under and is bowing out of the Secretary position. Steph says, "The Secretary is in charge of keeping FOG's records, which includes key board decisions, summary data such as amounts fundraised each year for the Gender Conferences, officer contact information, etc. The secretary also schedules and organizes board meetings four times a year, and solicits and compiles quarterly reports from all board members. It's a fun job for someone who's good at organization, and has an hour or so to spare each week. The secretary job doesn't take very much time, but it's a key position to the smooth running of FOG!" If you have any questions about the secretary position, email Stephanie at info@friendsofguinea.org.

Another helpful person who wishes to bow out next year is Membership Director Emily Ramshur. Emily said she feels torn, but is afraid her grad school plans will get in the way of her work for FOG. The membership job is vital to FOG's existence, but Emily says it is not that hard. "I keep the members database, process new members, send out renewal reminders to current members, process NPCA rebates, write a

brief quarterly report and occasionally a piece for the newsletter, and field general questions that come in from our membership. It's a fun little set of tasks (if you are detail-minded, as I am)." She also says she might consider sharing the job with someone next year, if nobody wants to take it on outright. Email Emily with any questions you may have, at membership@friendsofguinea.org.

Sharon Buehler plans to hang around for another year as GPS Coordinator, managing the Guinea Parent Support listservs, but says she will be looking for a replacement after that. Woody Colahan, the Newsletter Editor, will stick it out if you will have him. No word yet from other FOG Officers.

For more information on the different Officer posts and their responsibilities, visit www.friendsofguinea.org and click on "Contact FOG" under "Quicklinks."

Guinea Ties Iraq for 2nd Most Corrupt

Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perception Index, released on 6 November, places Guinea in a three-way tie with Iraq and Myanmar for next-to-last place with a CPI score of 1.9, just ahead of Haiti with a score of 1.8. Based on surveys of business people and country analysts, the CPI rates countries on a ten-point scale, with a score of ten indicating "highly clean" and a score of zero indicating "highly corrupt." Twelve surveys are used in all, and at least three different surveys are required for a country to be listed in the index.

"A strong correlation between corruption and poverty is evident in the results" of the study, according to TI. "Almost three-quarters of the countries in the CPI score below five (including all low-income countries and all but two African states) indicating that most countries in the world face serious perceived levels of domestic corruption. Seventy-one countries – nearly half – score below three, indicating that corruption is perceived as rampant."

Finland, Iceland and New Zealand are at the top of the list, tied with a score of 9.6. The United States is somewhat farther down, sharing a score of 7.3 with Belgium and Chile. As TI notes, "A concentration of so-called 'failed states' is apparent at the bottom of the ranking." The complete index, along with detailed analysis of its findings, is available at www.transparency.org.

2007 Calendars Available

Claire Lea (Banain, '02-'04)
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The 2007 International Calendar produced by RPCVs of Madison, Wisconsin is now available. Purchase these excellent,

high-quality wall calendars from Friends of Guinea for \$15 each (\$12 each for three or more) and your dollars will support FOG projects. These calendars make great gifts for moms, dads, teachers, work-mates, bosses, advisors, professors, committee members, your friend who wanted to join Peace Corps but never did (a little encouragement never hurt), and even your sympathetic neighbor – you know, the one who puts up with your loud African music late at night. There are some amazing photos in it this year, too.

All proceeds go toward funding projects in Guinea. So get those orders in soon! Order over the internet (it's safe!) at www.friendsofguinea.org. Follow the link on the main page to purchase calendars. If you prefer, send a check by snail mail to me at Claire Lea, 410 N. College, Apt. A, Columbia, MO 65201. Don't forget to include your address! I'll send you your calendars promptly.

Free personal Classifieds in CaVa?!

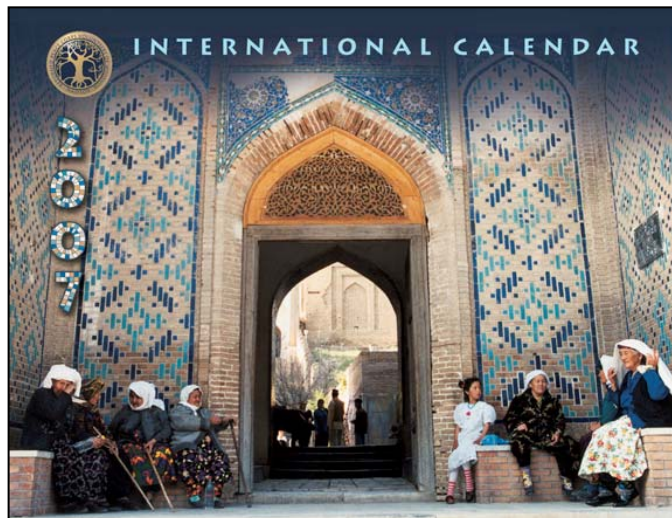
All members in good standing of Friends of Guinea are entitled to one free personal advertisement per year in *CaVa?*, the quarterly newsletter of Friends of Guinea. These advertisements are limited to 21 words and are intended primarily as a way for families and friends to send messages of support and encouragement to volunteers serving in Guinea, although they might equally be used to broadcast other messages. Take advantage of this free service by emailing your message of 21 words or less to the Newsletter Editor at newsletter@friendsofguinea.org. Please note that this service is available only to current members of Friends of Guinea, so please submit your advertisement under the name in which your membership is listed so that we may verify your status.

Classified

Dear Katelyn, we all love and miss you. Proud of the job you are doing. Love, Mom, Brooke, Kelly, Dillon.

Email Newsletter Available

If you prefer not to have this paper version of *CaVa?* cluttering up your mailbox, or if you don't want your membership in Friends of Guinea to promote deforestation, or if you just want to save us the price of a stamp, you may elect to receive this newsletter by email. The email version is formatted in HTML, and includes a link to a .pdf version of the paper newsletter that is posted on the Web and contains all the formatting of the original. Or you can receive both the paper and electronic version, and have the best of both worlds. Email membership@friendsofguinea.org and let us know of your preference, and we'll make a note of it.





The swearing-in portrait of G12, the July 2006 group of teachers. Guinea Parent Support Coordinator Sharon Beuhler says the GPS group for G12 has 70 members, including families and friends of 22 out of 29 volunteers. She also reports that the GPS for January 2007 has already started, "with three parent members already. How I enjoy this enthusiastic start!"

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