

THE ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN MALI



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Introduction

This article examines the impact of adult education in the lives of women in Yélékébougou and Kolokani¹, who have participated in literacy programmes, vocational training, and income-generating activities, supported by DVV International and its local partners. The article argues that these initiatives, in which hundreds of women have participated and regained control of their lives, have become a powerful catalyst for women's empowerment in Mali.

Context

More than half of women in Mali are illiterate and this negatively impacts their access to information, civic participation, and employment opportunities. Many have no option but to take on precarious forms of work. Adult Learning and Education (ALE) offers them an alternative. Adult education is provided by the state, civil society, and the private sector. It extends beyond basic literacy and numeracy by building self-confidence, enhancing technical skills, and supporting income diversification. This empowers participants to engage more actively in economic activities, improving their ability to provide for their families, while also fostering greater involvement in community life. Women who have participated in the programmes have taken charge of shaping their futures, as reflected in the following testimonials collected by a team during a field visit to the Community Education Centres (CECs) in Yélékébougou and Kolokani in 2025:

'I am Mrs Simpara Kaniba Coulibaly, a widow with six children. I am a product of adult education. At the Centre d'Education Communautaire (Community Education Centre/CEC) in Kolokani, I learned to read and write, then to dye fabrics, and make soap. Today, I am a

trainer, municipal councillor, and provider for my family. I have trained 10 women, raised my children alone, and built a house that I rent out which provides me with money at the end of each month. Thanks to DVV International, I am economically independent'.

'Thanks to DVV International, we have learned many trades that allow us to be independent today. We have our own money to take care of the daily needs of our families, and we have fewer arguments with our husbands about expenses for food, health, and children's schooling. We live in peace at home'.

Mrs Sitan Konaré (learner at Yélékébougou CEC)

Literacy, an essential foundation

In Yélékébougou 150 women have participated in literacy learning in five REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) circles², and in Kolokani there are 75. The REFLECT method is a participatory approach to literacy that uses learners' real-life problems as the basis for learning and social empowerment. REFLECT is not just about basic literacy; it aims to build critical thinking and encourage social action. For example, the women have organised health awareness campaigns around malaria, strengthening their civic engagement. Ms Rokia Traoré from Kolokani affirms: *'Avoiding disease means saving money to invest elsewhere'*. The women also better manage their income-generating activities, for example, seamstresses master measurements and vendors learn how to use scales. Ms Sounkoura Coulibaly says: *'We can no longer be fooled at the market. If a customer wants two kilos, they'll get two exact kilos'*.

Vocational training

In Yélékébougou, as in Kolokani, learners receive training in a number of specialties: cutting and sewing/dressmaking, peanut paste production, saponification (soap making), processing of agro-food products³, clothes dyeing, beauty services, and market gardening. One thousand and nineteen women have benefited from one or more training programmes, and been awarded certificates. Some have become trainers at the CEC where they were trained or elsewhere, while also working independently, whereas others have chosen to start their own businesses.

Income-generating activities

After completing various training programmes, many women in Yélékébougou and Kolokani have engaged in one or more income-generating activities, leading to remarkable transformations both in their personal lives and in the well-being of their families. It is clear from the women's accounts that trades learned at the two CECs have brought joy and fulfilment, as evidenced by the statement '*today is better than yesterday*', a sentiment echoed by many.

Mrs Diaraoulé Diarra, a learner at Kolokani CEC, explains it as such: 'Now I know better how to do business to earn a living and take care of my family. I manage to make a profit from selling agro-food products. I can meet my family's needs. I even managed to increase my capital without anyone's help!'

Mrs Sanogo Aichata Koné adds: 'I can't even list all the benefits of my activities. I hardly ask my husband for anything anymore. I even cover our children's expenses without waiting for him. The children are now receiving a better education, and their school results have improved'.

Cutting and sewing/dressmaking: One hundred and nineteen certified seamstresses have each opened their own sewing shop in

Below is a table showing the number of women trained since 2023 at the Yélékébougou and Kolokani CECs and their specialisations:

Specialisation	Yélékébougou	Kolokani
Cutting and sewing/dressmaking	45	170
Peanut paste production	83	80
Soap making	74	50
Agro-food processing	64	150
Clothes dyeing	16	55
Beauty services	37	00
Market gardening	45	150
TOTAL	364	655

Yélékébougou, Kolokani, and other villages within these two communes⁴. Among them, there is one hearing-impaired woman and two young women with physical disabilities.



Cutting and sewing/dressmaking at Kolokani CEC.

Peanut paste production: This activity is carried out in a peanut growing area, so the raw material is purchased locally. This product is highly valued in Mali as it is the main ingredient in a sauce called *tigadèguè* which is eaten with rice. In Kolokani a group of women were trained in how to make this product, and 31 women work in a processing unit located in the Koko neighbourhood. They produce 20 buckets of peanut paste per week which they sell at 6,000 CFA francs⁵ each, earning 120,000 CFA francs weekly. According to the centre's manager: '*They work for themselves and are able to take good care of their families*'.

At the Yélékébougou CEC, Ms Kadidia Traoré, a learner, explained the production and sales process during a literacy lesson held in the presence of the testimonial collection team. Other learners came to the board to do addition and multiplication calculations - from 600 kg of peanuts as raw material, the women produce 72 buckets of peanut paste per month, with a monthly profit of 162,000 CFA francs.

All production is sold to local buyers (traders and individuals) and foreign buyers, such as workers from World Vision, DVV International, government officials (on site or in transit). Sometimes, a single trader comes from the capital, Bamako, and buys the entire yield to resell it there.

Soap making: Recently, this has been a challenging period due to the high cost and scarcity of raw materials. Of the women trained in Kolokani, only three have managed to set up their businesses and work. Nonetheless, reports from Yélékébougou indicate that this activity was quite profitable

not so long ago, owing to its practical value, as Ms Salimata Diarra states: 'The benefits of soap production are countless because everyone needs it. You cannot go a day without using it'. From the money generated by soap sales, an amount was withdrawn as a contribution to construct a shed in the centre's yard in which the women carry out several activities, such as statutory meetings of CEC members, small sales stands, and literacy classes during the hot weather.



Soap making at Yélékébougou CEC.

Agro-food processing: The women work in a small unit where they dry fruit and vegetables such as mangoes, tomatoes, onions, peppers, and celery, purchased during the harvest season. These dried products are then sold during periods when fresh produce is scarce and expensive. They also produce fruit juice, which is sold on-site or by order and transported to other localities.

Clothes dyeing: Despite competition, mainly from Chinese suppliers, women engaged in this activity manage to succeed because there are customers who prefer traditionally dyed *bazin*⁶. The widow Kaniba Coulibaly is well-known in this field. She has regular clients in Kolokani and surrounding villages, and also in Bamako. She also makes soap to diversify her income sources.



Clothes dyeing at Kolokani CEC.

Beauty services: There are a few trained women in this area and they earn a living working for themselves in Yélékébougou or other areas of the commune. Their services are popular, particularly among women wishing to enhance their appearance for traditional or religious events, weddings, and baptisms.

Market gardening: Women trained in Kolokani are all active and work in various villages of the commune. The CEC manager confirmed that this activity has changed the lives of these women. They sell their produce, earn money, and support their families. In the village of Djoima, Yélékébougou commune, DVV International funded the development of a one-hectare irrigated area, with fencing and a water pump for watering mainly vegetables. Forty-five trained women currently work on this site. Selling their produce generates income that allows each woman to contribute to improving her family's quality of life. The women hold certificates in organic agriculture and, therefore, offer organic products to customers.



Soil preparation for vegetable farming at Kolokani CEC.

Women's groups and Saving for Change (SfC): In Kolokani, the women set up a dual-purpose fund, consisting of a solidarity fund to help in times of need and a working fund to sustain income-generating activities. They also use the Saving for Change model⁷: groups save money, and loans are granted to members in rotation, who repay with a pre-agreed interest rate. This rotating loan system ensures continuous activity for each learner in the group.

Way forward

While the knowledge, skills, and income-generating activities highlighted in this article help women become more confident and independent, they continue to face challenging working conditions. As a result, they hope to have:

- More rooms to work more efficiently and comfortably
- A secure storage facility for their products
- Educational materials
- More sewing machines⁸ and equipment for soap and peanut paste production.

Conclusion

The above testimonials of the women's lived experiences illustrate that adult education is a catalyst for socio-economic transformation in Mali. Supported by DVV International and its partners, women are equipped with literacy and practical skills - strengthening their ability to manage business activities effectively, building self-confidence, and opening the door to independence, even in challenging contexts. By improving their livelihoods and living conditions, women are able to care for themselves and their families. They are role models within their communities and inspire others. To strengthen, sustain, and expand these achievements, continued investment in adult education and support for local initiatives is essential.

Endnotes

1 Yélékébougou is a village and rural commune and Kolokani is a town, both are in the Koulikoro Region.

2 REFLECT is a combination of the theory of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, and the practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal. Reflection Circles are facilitated gatherings where participants engage in shared learning.

3 Agro-processing involves value-adding transformation of products that originate from agriculture, forestry, and fisheries industries.

4 Mali is divided into 10 regions and one capital district. The regions are divided into 56 cercles. The cercles and the district are divided into 703 communes.

5 The West African CFA franc is used by eight countries.

6 A West African fabric made from hand-dyed cotton, resulting in a damask textile known for its stiffness and vibrant sheen.

7 This is a well-established community-based savings initiative that began in Mali in 2005 to provide financial services to women in rural areas who are often excluded from formal banking systems. It is a form of the broader category of informal savings groups or Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs).

8 Presently, 105 young women are being trained in cutting and sewing/dressmaking at Kolokani with eight machines. There are 54 learners at Yélékébougou with five machines.



Agro-food processing at Nossombougou CEC, Mali.