



# THOSE WHO HOLD THE MEANS, HOLD THE POWER

*Aminata Mane*

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*In order to survive the tough competition of the present world and emerge winners, while we need good tactics and a solid plan, of equal importance is a strong mind and a positive attitude. Everything may be in place, but if we lack the confidence and determination to strive forward and put the plans into action, the results wouldn't reach excellence.*

## ***It's never too late***

The story of 63 years old Ms Aminata MANE is one that speaks along the same lines. Although it has only been about three years since she became a part of the cashew industry, she is currently the President of the board of directors of 'Santa Yalla', an economic interest group, conveying to us that it's never too late to pursue your interests.

## ***With the aim of economic empowerment of women***

Ms MANE had known a number of other women in this sector before starting the cashew business. She had seen them efficiently run cashew processing units and these brave women were highly respected and recognized, thanks to their activities in this sector. The fact that they benefitted from it and were able to make a proper living out of it was commendable. When she herself decided to initiate the Leadership Development Programme in Casamance, one of her aims was the economic empowerment of women through their integration in strong value-added sector such as cashew.

## ***Equipped to excel***

Since great things do not come easy, in order to be best equipped in the work sector, she took up a number of tasks that dealt with capacity reinforcement in basic organization management, marketing and fund raising, advocacy and lobbying, cashew nut and cashew apple processing practices. All of this helped in the reinforcement of her capacities, collaboration with partners intervening in the sector, gaining the confidence of the members and sharing the gained experiences which in turn helped her manage the business which currently employs 500 women workers.

## ***Committed and determined***

Although she did not take up any training in particular nor did she have prior work experience in this field, commitment and determination guided her first steps. And in this short time, as part of the program she has been successfully running, she has had the opportunity to organize two reinforcement workshops benefiting women, concerning cashew apple and cashew nut processing techniques. Their financial and technical partners have also supported the implementation of 'Leadership Development Programme' in Casamance (Senegal).

### ***Providing a supportive platform to women***

Speaking about the response of other women towards her business and their involvement in it, Ms MANE is happy to inform us that labor is available because her company works with many groups and the members are divided in high production areas. Women are provided with a number of facilities, which includes the access to financing in order to strengthen their income generating activities along with the reinforcement of their capacities in cashew nut and apple processing.

The company also aids the women to organize themselves inside the operational groups. Despite all this, she believes that the position of women in the industry can still be improved by taking steps to further strengthen their technical capacities, modernize the processing equipment and by making the access to credit easier.

In her opinion, it is the absence of financial resources and the lack of empowerment that stand as obstacles in the journey of women to become leaders.

### ***Her opinions as the representative of the women's organization***

Keeping in mind that she and her team are representatives of women's organization, when questioned about the situation in regard to dealing with her male counterparts in this field, she says that she does not face any particular problem because they are the ones who recruit the men depending upon the job requirements and they are required to work under them based on clearly defined tasks. Hence, each employee's role and responsibility is well distributed. She also does not have any complains when it comes to receiving recognition for she thinks they are well recognized in the cashew sector and this is due to their commitment, determination and will.

### ***Hurdles in the way***

As for the challenges she faces, she says helping women to get an economic autonomy through the setting up of production unit in the major production areas, access to funding, to intensify the production of quality products with the brand UR Santa Yalla, and fulfilling the need to be present and well-recognized in the market, on the local, regional, national and international levels are some big hurdles that stand in the path.

### ***Finding practical solutions***

However, no matter how mighty the obstacles are, every problem comes with a solution and some of the strategies she and her team adopts are the arrangement of financing with a quick and proper access for raw cashew nuts purchasing, and reinforcement of women's capacity from nuts picking and collection to the final product processing.

### ***Her daily routine***

Since she is in charge of such a huge team, when asked about the tasks that she performs every day, Ms MANE gives a brief of her daily schedule which includes coordination of work done by others, providing technical support, attending meetings to discuss the current position and ways to improve the brand as a whole, building contacts, monitoring and supervision of tasks, among others.

### ***Not one to compromise on quality***

She is also very keen on the quality of the products that are sent into the market in the name of their brand and accepts no compromise in this regard. She confesses that they get slightly higher price in the market because their members have been trained in nuts choice techniques when they are purchased. This is also the reason for the supreme quality of their products.



### ***Investment of time to ensure best results***

Besides, in order to maintain the uniqueness of their brand, they ensure the best quality of the raw nuts. Nuts picking is done by women of their groups, and they invest a lot of time throughout the awareness sessions, to teach them the importance of having good quality nuts. The work is done with love, commitment and desire because the women work for themselves, putting in all their dedication into the job.

### ***A peek into her early life***

Moving on, when asked about her childhood, Ms MANE says that she grew up in Kafountine in Senegal along with her parents. Her family's economic status was more or less stable. She also comments that although she started working in another sector in the beginning of her career, she later realized the potential that the cashew sector holds and understood the large margin by which it can improve the community and the living conditions without blocking her business.

Everyone could benefit from such a sector and that is exactly what she was looking for.

### ***Organizing her tasks***

Given the amount of work and time she puts into her work, it may be understood that it would be a mighty task to strike a work life balance. When questioned about the same, she says that while it may seem difficult, through elaborate planning and an internal management with the family, she is able to set her priorities right. She receives moral support from her family and they are proud of her, for which she is glad. And seeing her commitment, even her family members are getting inclined towards the cashew sector.

### ***Fulfilling a responsibility***

When asked to comment on her profession and what it means to her, she says her work is like priesthood and she feels it is helping her fulfill her responsibility towards the women of the community. While she has been able to achieve a number of her goals, she still has big plans for the future. In the years to come she hopes to turn the women into true producers and make the UR Santa Yalla cashew products an internationally recognized label.

She does not deny that there is still scope for improvement in the job given the fact that they are getting an opening to the cashew world, and are continually engaged in a number of meetings to discuss the different positive changes that can be incorporated.

### ***Setting an example for others to follow***

Through her excellent approach and the will to empower women, Ms MANE has been an asset to the working sector. It is commendable that she has been able to achieve her goals to allow women to access the production means through cashew industry and thus has enabled them to overcome their economic obstacles. Her enterprise has made it possible for women to be able to benefit from the opportunities provided by cashew sector, from the collection and production up to the trading.

Being the chairwoman of the organization, she sees herself as the moral responsible. Obtaining a proper financing remains one of her biggest aims as she feels this will allow them to position women, for those who hold the means, hold the power. She has been the force by which women are willing to integrate the cashew sector in the same way as men and we applaud her for that!

