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Bineta Diop: One of Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World for 2011

by Jacqueline Adams, Africa.com Chief External Relations Officer and Executive Editor

She looked down and laughed nervously. “I have a bunch of friends,” [Bineta Diop](#) said when I asked how she was selected as one of *TIME* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World for 2011. “But I share this award with the women in Africa. It will give greater visibility to our work.”



Those friends include Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who praised Mrs. Diop by name last October when she spoke at the United Nations. “I would like to honor our colleagues in civil society, many of whom are on the front lines – literally on the battle lines—in the fight for gender equality in conflict zones around the world. Thanks in particular to Bineta Diop,” Secretary Clinton said, citing Mrs. Diop's work with the former president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, both of whom were co-chairs of the United Nations Civil Society Advisory Group of Women, Peace, and Security. *(Photo of Mrs. Diop courtesy of FAS)*

Mrs. Diop is the founder and executive director of [Femmes Africa Solidarite](#) (FAS), the NGO that she launched in 1996 to bring a gender-based approach to conflict prevention on the African continent.

In that role, Mrs. Diop commutes from Geneva, Switzerland to her home in Dakar, Senegal to the various countries in which she helps women survive and thrive in the midst of war and repression: Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda. She began in Liberia, where in 1996, she said, women were crying and saying “we have to pick up the pieces.”

She rejects the description of women in war zones as “victims” Women are survivors, she said. “Most women are moving forward the agenda, the economic and political development of the African continent. Through the media, we are continuing to put pressure on the various leaders.”

Mrs. Diop recalled a conversation that she had years ago with Liberia's president, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, about the difficulty of rebuilding war-torn countries and helping the region's women. “Ellen told me that you really have to have it in your heart to do this work. You have to be willing to die for it, because I can transform my country.” Mrs. Diop continued, “We need the women of Africa to say, 'It's me! I have studied and learned and I want to do it! Ellen has opened the door. If she can do it, I can go into politics too.’”

She cited the candidacy of Kah Walla to become president of Cameroon as evidence that women in Africa are stepping forward. But Mrs. Diop doesn't underestimate the difficulty of the job ahead. Some countries, like Rwanda and Senegal, have passed laws that mandate that half of the seats in the legislature must go to women. Mrs. Diop is pushing for more than mere tokenism. "We need real programs in education and especially in health care," she said, "We need to ensure that girls stay in school and get their educations. And we need reproductive rights to liberate women's bodies, souls, and minds! And we need to mobilize women to help build bridges between neighbors who have fought one another for so long."

"It is up to us to seize the power," she said. "Nobody will give you power. You have to seize it and you have to want it."

The website for FAS states that "[w]omen are the economic drivers of Africa, on average working twice as many productive hours as men. They are also the constituency most incentivized to build peace. A gender-based approach to conflict prevention has the potential to transform the continent. And at the forefront of that approach is Bineta Diop, 61. "

In his *TIME* essay, philanthropist Mo Ibrahim, another of Mrs. Diop's friends, wrote that "her relentless campaign for gender parity is empowering women to play a leading role in African development."