



A2E: Empowering women through education

Vanelle Takou never thought she would go to high school, let alone university in India for that matter.

At three years old, Vanelle's parents got divorced and she went on to live with her father. When she was five, her father got married to another woman and Vanelle's world turned upside down.

"She [didn't] like me," said Vanelle. "She never liked me because I was the daughter of another woman and I was oppressed at home. I never had words. If I wanted to talk she would beat me, she would insult me."

Vanelle felt powerless.

"Nobody was there to understand my pain." Vanelle said. "...When I became a woman for the first time, I was alone. There was no mother to explain what was happening to me because I didn't know what was happening to me. There was no one to tell me about becoming a woman. I was so ashamed and people insulted me in school."

Then, in 2013 Vanelle met A2Empowerment, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering women through education in Cameroon. She initially applied to make friends, instead she found a community of women who uplifted her.

"When I got there, I found myself," said Vanelle. "People who understood me. They taught me how to be a strong woman. Today, I am proud of myself. They taught me everything. What [it is to become] a woman. What [the responsibility of a woman is]. A woman shouldn't have to hide herself, she has to empower herself. They taught me that."



1 - Vanelle (bottom right) when she first joined A2Empowerment.

How it all started

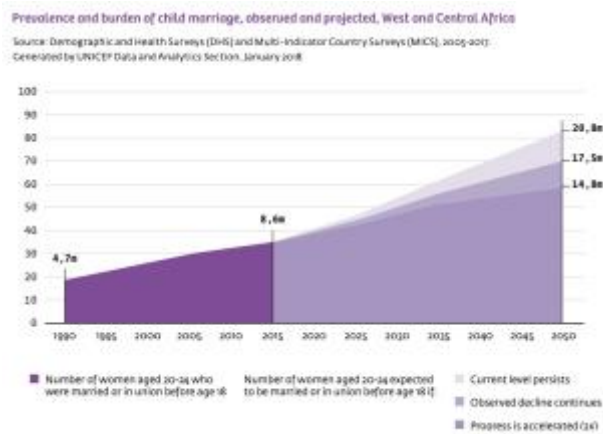


Founded in 2008, A2Empowerment awards educational scholarships to young women in Cameroon who are at risk of dropping out of school. The organization prioritizes women who are in their later years of secondary education, when they are at a higher risk of dropping out. A2Empowerment works with local Cameroonian organizations to identify applicants, award scholarships and mentor recipients.

Co-founders Anne Cheung and Anne Rapin say the organization's fruition originates from Rapin's experience as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching in Cameroon. What she saw alarmed her. Girls dropping out of school at disproportionate rates. In high schools, there would only be a handful of girls in classrooms full of boys.

"I want to help them reach their goals and become independent and have autonomy so they can gain respect," said Cheung. "That was at the heart of the issue behind [Rapin's] experience in Cameroon as a

Peace Corps volunteer. I hope that it's a grassroots organic effort that will have a huge ripple effect that will lead to positive change for women and girls in Cameroon."



*A variety of factors influence the lack of education among girls in Cameroon. **In a 2018 analysis** on child marriages in West and Central Africa, UNICEF found that over 31 percent of teenage girls in Cameroon were married before the age of 18. While Cameroon, ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which sets the minimum age of marriage at the start of adulthood, the legal age of marriage in the country is 15 with parental permission. Even then, arranged marriages are still common among the rural areas.*

After witnessing the oppression women faced in trying to pursue their education, Cheung and Rapin were compelled to act. Since its founding, A2Empowerment has awarded over 1,900 educational scholarships to young women in Cameroon.

Fostering connections



A2Empowerment works with local leaders who volunteer their time and expertise to mentor these young women. Guillaume Chungong Sonbobgah was introduced to Cheung, Rapin and their mission through his job at the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic Education for the Cameroon government.

“I help young people to achieve their goals, to guide them in life,” Sonbobgah said. He sees a need for role models for these young women. He can see their drive and passion but knows their lives have many obstacles. “You know, these girls who are willing to go to school, they're doing well in school, but they come from impoverished backgrounds and it can really take care of their school needs.”



2 - Sonbobgah with some of his mentees receiving their school supplies for the year.



3 - A2Empowerment scholarship recipients and Sonbobgah posing for a picture at a community project to combat global warming.

Sonbobgah currently mentors a group of ten scholarship recipients. He plays an active role in their wellbeing, from monthly check-in meetings, to planning bonding and volunteer opportunities for them to participate in. He believes in listening and engaging with these young women and the power it can play in their lives.

A2Empowerment's approach, as Sonbobgah puts it, mentors the girls from "bottom to top" prioritizing the needs the scholarship recipients bring into the program.



4 - The scholarship recipients participating in a COVID-19 relief volunteering.



5 - The scholarship program members planting trees for a community project.

"We establish a relationship of, you know, big brother, little sister," Sonbobgah said. "I always make sure that some of the issues we discuss usually come from them, because when it's that way, it's easier for them to interact with you. [...] We try to make the relationship between the mentor and the mentee to be freed, you know, more relaxed."

The mentorship relationship Sonbobgah has with the girls goes beyond making sure they are doing their assignments on time and showing up for class. It is keeping them from falling victim to a society that doesn't prioritize their education and value as women.

“If they have issues at home, if has issues as school, if they have issues in the neighborhood I made sure I step in to try to be [...] an example in their life, I try to make sure they come out strong, they don't give become victims to whatever is happening in the society that will cause them, you know, to drop out of school”.



6 - The scholarship program members receiving their school materials for the 2019-2020 school year.



7 - The scholarship program posing with their new school supplies.

The road ahead



Now, A2Empowerment sponsors Vanelle in her pursuit of higher education. Vanelle studies journalism and mass communications at the Chandigarh Group of Colleges in India. There, she wishes to further herself and use her voice to change the world.

"I have a beautiful voice and I will use that voice to help people who are in need," she said.

After finishing college, Vanelle plans to move to Canada to find a job. Once she is financially stable, she hopes to create a foundation to help A2Empowerment for young women who grew up just like her to give them a chance and achieve their dreams.

"Women are strong. We can do anything," Vanelle said. "I'm really grateful for A2Empowerment. I will never stop working with them because they saved my life."



8 - Vanelle in October 2021.

Approximately \$80 USD covers tuition, fees and supplies for a year of school in Cameroon. The full amount of all individual donations A2Empowerment receives is put towards scholarships. A2Empowerment accepts individual donations by check and through PayPal. For information on how to get involved, visit A2Empowerment's donations [page](#).
