Poetry behind masks: Women slam poets in Senegal speak out to prevent COVID-19

Thirteen female slam poets participated in ‘Slammigration’, an initiative to create six original songs about migration in February 2019. A year later, several of them joined efforts to tackle the pandemic and published videos of themselves on social media promoting solidarity, positive action and sharing preventative messages.

“To tell the truth, I didn't have to think long to commit myself to the cause. The virus affects everyone. It reminds us that we are all related to each other. We have an obligation to look out for one another,” says Mauaya Jua, a participant and well-known artist, singer, poet, writer and storyteller of Congolese origin living in Dakar, Senegal’s capital.

Slam poetry is a relatively recent form of oral, urban poetry. Artists perform using punctuated rhythm. Slam texts, are often autobiographical, conveying powerful messages on social topics that speak to young people.

This discipline continues to be inaccessible for women in Senegal. The Slammigration initiative was launched to provide a platform for women to express their thoughts and ideas about migration through slam and to increase their participation in this increasingly popular space.

The initiative was led by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Migrants as Messengers and Aware Migrants programmes whose goal is to support people impacted by irregular migration through innovative outreach and awareness raising activities and information sharing.

Working with slam poetry in West Africa, the initiative has seen powerful collaborations between artists and returnees, bringing together more than 50 artists including traditional female dancers, plastic artists and musicians.

“We certainly miss seeing smiles, but wearing masks will prevent our tears from flowing, and in the end it's for a good cause, an act for humanity,” Mauaya Jua says.

Mauaya Jua’s poem

Smiling is a beautiful mask,
laughter can be hard
to wear when tears threaten to flow,  
laughter can be heard again  
despite the harshness of our time,  
if we wear a mask,  
one that prevents our tears from flowing bitterly.

Madjiguene Kane, a Senegalese journalist and slam poet from Tamabcouta, is also taking part. "I participate in actions against COVID-19 out of patriotism. As young people we have an important role to play in raising awareness. We must make sure the correct information reaches everyone and make them understand that this is the new reality."

Madjiguene Kane’s poem

A long night of dread,  
The sun will shine.  
The clouded sky will clear.  
Time frozen will thaw.  
Abrupt virus, my kind will survive.  
When the globe will find peace again,  
You, what will you have done for your country?

Ramatoulaye Diène, a Migrants as Messengers Volunteer participated in slam poetry writing workshops and performed with the artists. Having documented and experienced first-hand the harsh conditions faced by Senegalese migrants in Morocco, she wanted to take part in the initiative.

“It was my first time in a slam workshop. It was just magical to see the slammers put themselves in the shoes of migrants and relive the migratory journey through their writings,” she notes.

Diène now takes action to respond to COVID-19 by raising awareness through slam poetry to spread positive messages and accurate information about the virus.
Photo Caption: Ramatoulaye Diène raises awareness in the community by demonstrating how to wear a mask and hand-washing to prevent the virus spreading.

“I can no longer go out or mobilize, but I can continue to raise awareness in my community through social media. We will only stop if the virus is under control in our country and around the world,” says Diène.