

She Climbs The Wall

By Sora Shirai

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Interviewee: Fatoumata Fall

Five-year old Fatoumata Fall was going to climb the wall. Her grandmother had forbidden her from doing so. But she didn't like how people treated her differently from her brothers. Her brothers were allowed to, and she really wanted to. So she climbed. And she's been climbing ever since.

Fatoumata Fall grew up in Dakar, Senegal in a family of eight children: three boys and five girls. As the eldest daughter, she naturally became responsible, helping her parents take care of her younger siblings. Families with less than 5 or 6 people are rare in Senegal, and even if one had a small family, people in the community would constantly come visit. Personal space was limited and Fall never had a room to herself growing up. But what she did gain were social values: understanding the importance of a community, helping and being mindful of others, and overall being a "good" person. As Fall explained, "the first time I used the term 'I' was when I was 15. The concept of 'I' is not very renounced. So you had a sense of 'we'. Everything was 'we'".

However, even at the age of 5, Fall began to notice the subtle differences in the way people treated her and the way they treated her brothers. Deeply bothered, Fall focused on finding things that she could do better than the boys. She was always first in class and won many competitions. Then at 10 years old, Fall was selected to attend the Maison D'Education Mariama Ba, an incredibly selective boarding school where only the top-performing 35 girls in Senegal are enrolled based on performance in an entrance exam. Attending the all-girls boarding school on Gorée island, which is also a World Heritage Site where the historic House of Slaves is located, Fall's spirit was calmed and re-directed. She began to feel a strong sense of sisterhood and a sense of belonging was restored.

For 5 years, Fall continued to enthusiastically learn new things, letting her curiosity guide her. But slowly she began to feel as though the island was too small for her. She wanted to see the bigger world.

In 2007, Fall noticed a pamphlet with the words "African Leadership Academy (ALA)". As she picked it up, she felt goosebumps. Fall still remembers the photo on the front cover of the pamphlet: "It was just seeing those young faces and thinking, 'Wow, we could work on something much bigger together'".

Initially, her father was encouraging but her mother was skeptical. After all, if she attended ALA, she would be the first class; there were no previous students' experiences she could hear. But slowly Fall convinced her mother to let her go and went to South Africa. Again, things didn't come so easily and Fall was faced with a challenge. While she had mainly spoken in French in Senegal, she would now have to mainly speak in English.

At ALA, Fall first began considering the possibility of voyaging to the US. Her African studies teacher had graduated from Harvard and the founders were from Stanford. So while most top-performing students in Senegal, including her brothers, went to France for college, she decided to apply to colleges in the United States. She had never been to the US and all she knew about it were from the few movies she'd watched and her father's taste for US rock and jazz music. Fall was accepted into Harvard University and despite the few things she knew about the US, Fall began climbing another wall, unafraid.

Freshman year, Fall was shocked that only 25% of the 120 students in her Applied Math class were female. However, her female classmates continued to decrease each year, and by the end of her junior and senior year only 10% of the class was still female. Nevertheless, Fall's love for mathematics led her to graduate from Harvard University with a degree in Applied Mathematics.

Fall's journey around the world continued as she helped start the African Leadership University in Mauritius, then travelled to Argentina at 22, meeting her future husband and helping to teach math at two different high schools. However, Fall began to realize that wherever she went, there appeared to be many women around her who were not being taken seriously but were too scared to come out and advocate for themselves. Passionate about solving this problem, she joined Brian Liou and the company Ralph, committed to empowering workers, especially women and people of color, those that are most commonly underpaid for their work. Now Ralph has already brought back a cumulative \$5 million to clients, and Fall and Liou were recognized for their work on the 2021 Forbes 30 under 30 list.

Using statistics and modeling to build a database and to analyze compensation patterns based on various factors including skillset, location, and experiences, Fall continues to use math in her work today. She notes that she is always careful about outliers when making predictions. And whenever she has a problem and feels her panicking emotions starting to kick in, she always tells herself to just look at the data, both numerical and qualitative. While negotiating wages involves many numbers, finding a new job can often be an emotionally stressful period for the client. "But having this instinct of 'let me just look at what the data is saying' and trusting that, that's like a blessing" Fall says.

When asked what brings her pride, Fall doesn't talk about any of the numerous awards she's won. "I don't think that pride is what I feel when I get awards, I feel gratitude for the people who got me there" she says. Throughout her life, Fall exhibits this mentality of cherishing connections with other people. I personally noticed this as well. When I met her for the first time, she willingly met despite being at the airport and wearing a mask. The second time we talked, we talked without her video in order to save bandwidth since she was in Senegal and there was a limit to available electricity. Right after I finished the meeting, as I was writing an email to thank her for her time, she emailed me first with two spreadsheets of startups in fields which I had told her fascinated me during the meeting.

What does bring pride to Fall? "Showing up on the hardest days", Fall replies. "On my hardest days the instinct is to give up. I felt some day was really hard but I still woke up and still faced that meeting or whatever it was." While COVID-19 is a challenge: not being able to be in person with her team members or clients, having to be in California time even though she is in Senegal, etc., Fall's 5-year old mentality continues to live inside her as she faces this new wall and climbs it yet again.

Autobiography:

Sora Shirai is a 10th grader at Hanover High School. She loves mathematics and anything related to science. She plays the violin and viola and is part of the New England Conservatory Preparatory School's Youth Philharmonic Orchestra. She is also a co-founder of the HHS French Club, member of HHS a cappella group Dachords, and plays soccer and unified basketball. In her free time she likes to read, sleep, cook sweets, and memorize pi.