



Centre for African Justice,
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CENTRE FOR AFRICAN JUSTICE

*Uplifting Women
for a Change*



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Founder's Statement



If life has taught me one thing, it is that everyone has a life story to share; the only question is whether they are willing or not to share it. Storytelling has been an integral part of African culture and society. Our elders used stories that date back to thousands of years to pass morals, history, culture and belief systems from one generation to another.

At Centre for African Justice, Peace and Human Rights, the Women Empowerment Department uses storytelling as a tool for empowering young African women. In today's world where traditional storytelling does not seem very popular, we use the Women Empowerment Magazine as a platform for empowerment and inspiration, through storytelling. There are lots of hidden benefits to sharing your story and or reading one's story; for example, reading someone's story helps you find similarities with other people, it reduces your burden and your pain; it brings inspiration, hope and a desire to try again, despite what you may have been through in the past. So instead of remaining in the valley of 'I think it is just me'; thinking you are the only one in the entire world facing such difficulty; you are lifted to a higher pedestal of realising that someone has been through the same thing and actually survived it.

Sharing and reading stories are effective ways to impact lives, motivate people, create change, learn values, become resilient, forgive your past and re-strategise for the future. Our organisation believes in giving women a platform to share their stories and giving younger women opportunities to read, learn and benefit from other women's stories. We achieve this through the Women Empowerment Magazine, an online quarterly magazine which is designed to be freely accessible on the internet, at no cost to the user. We also achieve this through physical and virtual motivational storytelling events organised for young African female students/migrants in the Netherlands.

In this volume of the Women Empowerment Magazine, we have published insightful life stories of selected women of African descent, hoping that it interests and inspires young African women/ girls in our society. Noting that sharing life stories sometimes presents itself as a herculean task which most women avoid, we would like to express our immense gratitude to Ms Nenita La Rose, Ms. Mekka Abdelgebar, Ms. Aya Chebbi and Ms. Ebere Akadiri, for contributing to this magazine and for wholeheartedly sharing their life stories despite their very busy schedule.



Women empowerment is a mammoth task that requires meaningful partnerships and resources. Therefore, the idea of publishing this quarterly Women Empowerment Magazine also comes across as an opportunity for us to share our work and seek new partnerships that can assist us in achieving the department's objectives. With a team largely made up of volunteers and interns, we acknowledge the need for an accelerated resource mobilisation strategy that can take our work to greater heights. As the organisation is growing in leaps and bounds, we believe that by sharing these inspirational stories, we will gradually harness and attract key partnerships that may be useful to the fulfilment of the mission and vision of the Women Empowerment Department.

Looking into the future, I am excited by the greater works which are about to be accomplished and wish to thank our readers for taking their time to read the inspirational stories compiled in this Magazine. Lastly, a big thank you goes to the Board and Management of Centre for African Justice, Peace and Human Rights, the Women Empowerment Department and everyone who contributed to making this publication a success.

Sophia Ugwu

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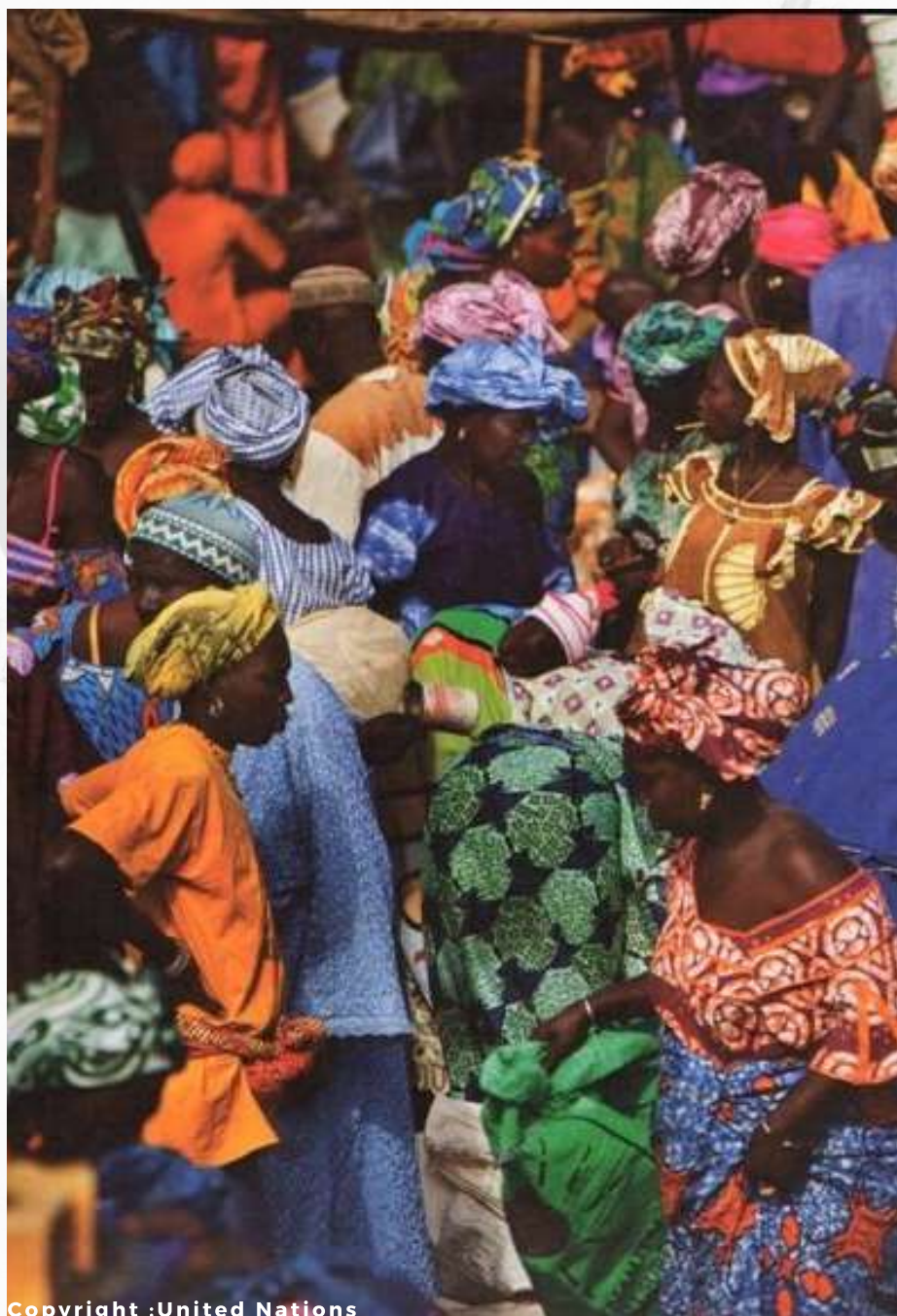
AFRICAN WOMEN WHO HAVE MADE HISTORY

Mary Manukure

African women and women of African descent have made great impact and efforts towards the development of Africa for centuries. Women are change makers and have always shown their bravery and strength throughout history. In this section of the publication we will be giving a brief background of some of our amazing African women who have been a cause for peace and progress.

Their impact can be found in diverse areas such as, politics, diplomacy, liberation, fight for freedom, defense of women's rights and inequality, environmental protection and protest against dictatorship.

Through their commitment to create a just society for their generation and future generations, they fought wholeheartedly. Demonstrating that, even though the term feminism was not long ago recognized, its definition has been portrayed for centuries.



Copyright :United Nations

Yaa Asantewaa - Queen Mother of the Edweso tribe (1840 -1921, Ghana)

Queen Mother, Nana Yaa Asantewaa, was born in the year 1840 in Besease into the Ashanti Empire as the eldest of two children. She was born to Ataa Po (Father) and Ampomah of Ampabame(mother), who were both farmers.

In this era, the education of girls and women was deemed irrelevant. Nana Yaa Asantewaa, just as other girls in the community, was subjected to undertaking domestic chores and care roles. She cultivated crops around Bonankra, which is presently a town in south-central Ghana. She had a childhood without any important incidents.[1] She was married into a polygamous home to a man from Kumasi, with whom she had a daughter. Accordingly, she became a successful farmer and mother as expected by society.[2]

Her brother, Nana Akwasi Afrane Okpese became the Edwesuhene (ruler) of Edwesu. During the rule of Nana Akwasi, Yaa Asantewaa witnessed several events, including the civil war between 1883 and 1888, that posed a threat to the future of the Ashanti Confederacy. She was ordained as the queen mother of Edwesu in the Ashanti Empire by her brother in the 1880s, and following the death of her brother in 1894, she nominated her grandson Kofi Tene as the Edwesuhene (ruler of Edwesu).[3] The Ashanti Confederacy experienced a major crisis with no less than four wars fought between the British and the Ashanti. The last civil war between them in the 1870s destabilized the Ashanti Confederacy, as the Ashanti capital was set on fire and ransacked, while the British were also implementing forced labor, and imposing a compulsory tax of about £160,000 on the people.[4]



Photo derived from article by Tracy Trace

[1] TFP 'Yaa Asantewaa' < <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/yaa-asantewaa-40813.php> > accessed 19 April 2020; Korsah, Chantal (22 July 2016). "Yaa Asantewaa". Dangerous Women. Retrieved 20 February 2017.

[2] ibid

[3] "Yaa Asantewaa". Dangerous Women Project. 22 July 2016. accessed 19 April 2020; Boahen, A.Adu 'Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British War of 1900-1' (2003) James Currey Publishers. < Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British War of 1900-01> accessed 19 April 2020

[4] Boahen, A.Adu 'Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British War of 1900-1' (2003) James Currey Publishers. < Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British War of 1900-01> accessed 19 April 2020 ; TFP 'Yaa Asantewaa' < <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/yaa-asantewaa-40813.php> > accessed 19 April 2020.

In 1896, the king of Ashanti- Prempeh I, other members of the Asante government and Yaa Asantewaa's grandson were exiled by the British to Seychelles, following which she became the ruler of the Edwesu–Juaben District. After four years of constant negotiations and refusals by the British to release her grandson and the other members of the Ashanti government, she decided that they needed to take action. The then British Governor, Frederick Hodgson was demanding for the Golden Stool which served as the symbol of the Ashanti empire's sovereignty.[5] As the chiefs (men) of Ashanti, were not willing to fight, she led a rebellious siege at the Kumasi fort where the British and their allies took refuge. They cut telegraph wires, blocked all roads and food supplies and attacked relief columns. She was selected by the chiefs as a war-leader of the Ashanti fighting force, thus making her the first and only woman in the history of Ashanti to play such a role.[6]

Even though the war ended with a British victory in September 1900 with Yaa Asantewaa being captured along with 15 of her closest advisers and exiled to Seychelles for 25 years, her quest to rebel against the British colonialism, and to defend the Golden stool portrayed a courageous leadership which made her to be revered. She serves as an inspirational figure in the history of both Ghana and West Africa.[7] The Golden Stool War was the last major war led by an African woman. To date, she is honored in Africa as one of the greatest African women. She is honored with a school named after her, 'Yaa Asantewaa Girls Secondary School'. In a worldwide competition organized by the BBC Focus on Africa Program at the end of 1999 to select the African Personality of the Millennium, Yaa Asantewaa placed 20th out of one hundred nominees.[8]

Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa can be portrayed as a heroine of her time, a woman of great knowledge, a politician, human rights activist, and a leader. Her courage and military strength demonstrates the uniqueness of female leadership. She is a great inspiration to all the generations of women. She encourages women to stand, speak up and fight for individual and universal freedom, and to never get intimidated.

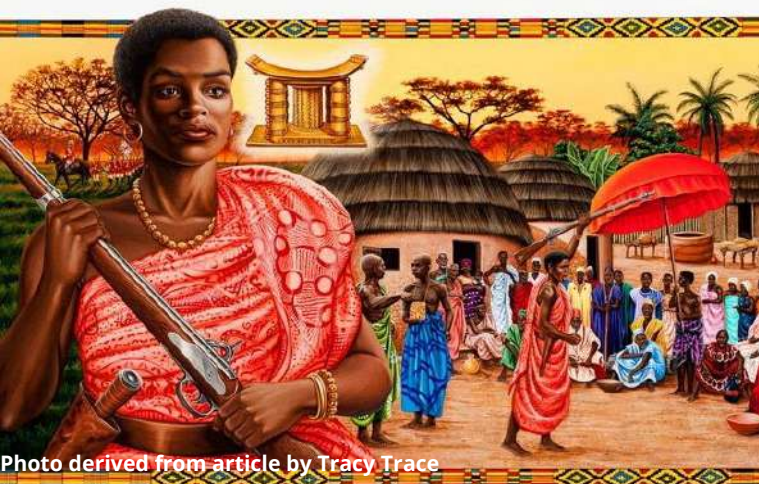


Photo derived from article by Tracy Trace

[5] Boahen, A.Adu 'Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British War of 1900-1' (2003) James Currey Publishers. < Yaa Asantewaa and the Asante-British War of 1900-01> accessed 19 April 2020

[6] Yaa Asantewaa < <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/yaa-asantewaa-40813.php> > accessed 19 April 2020.

[7] NYA < <http://nanayaaasantewaa.de/who-is-nana-yaa-asantewaa/> > accessed 23 April 2020.

[8] NYA < <http://nanayaaasantewaa.de/who-is-nana-yaa-asantewaa/> > accessed 23 April 2020.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti

Social Activist

(1900-1978, Nigeria)



Photo derived from article by Jo Daniel

Funmilayo Ransome Kuti's birth name was Francis Abigail Olufunmilayo Thomas. She was born on 25th of October 1900, in Abeokuta, to Daniel Olumeyuwa Thomas and Lucretia Phyllis Omoyeni Adeosolu. Her ancestral history is rooted in Abeokuta in what is today known as Ogun State, Nigeria.

She attended the Abeokuta Grammar school for her secondary education and furthered her education in England. After her study in England, she returned to Nigeria and became a teacher at the Abeokuta Grammar School. On 20th January 1925, she married Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, whose name she took afterwards. Her husband was a defender of the commoners in his country and was one of the founders of both the Nigerian Union of Teachers and Nigerian Union of Students. They had three children Beko Ransome-Kuti, Olikoye Ransome-Kuti and Fela Kuti.

Their household took an egalitarian approach to marriage and family life, meaning that the wife and husband were on an equal footing, and their daughter and sons, all shared household chores, demonstrating that, equality was a way of life and not merely an ideology.[9]

Initially drawn into the political world by her husband, she demonstrated an outstanding quality of leadership, as she began literacy classes for adult women in Ijebu-Ode. In Abeokuta, she founded a nursery school and organized the Abeokuta Ladies' Club. A charitable club with a membership tally of more than 20,000 individuals, spanning across both literate and illiterate women. Their activities included holding literacy classes for the women.[10]

[9] Ransome-Kuti, Funmilayo (1900-1978) <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ransome-kuti-funmilayo-1900-1978>> accessed 23 Apr. 20.

[10] Ransome-Kuti, Funmilayo (1900-1978 <<https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/ransome-kuti-funmilayo-1900-1978>> accessed 23 Apr.20.

Market women began to complain to her about the excessive taxes imposed by the British, hence, she campaigned against taxes and price controls. Supported by the Abeokuta Ladies' Club and the Nigerian Union of Teachers (founded by her husband), she helped the market women draw up petitions and protest against the officials of King Alake Ademola of Egbaland. The Alake of Egbaland was the paramount Yoruba king of the Egba people, an ethnic subgroup of western Nigeria, of which the majority is from the central part of Ogun State.[11]

Their argument was that, if women were taxed, they should also receive benefits in return. She also presented resolutions demanding improved sanitation, medical care, literacy classes, and playgrounds for children. In 1946, the Abeokuta Ladies' Club became the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU), redefining its activities as essentially political; to unite Nigerian women, promote women's economic, social, and political rights, and to cooperate with all organizations in fighting for the independence of the Nigerian people.

She also campaigned for women's votes. She became a member of the ruling National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons party for many years and was the treasurer and subsequent president of the Western NCNC women's Association. In the 1950s, she became one of the few women elected to the house of chiefs, which was one of her homeland's most influential bodies.

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti is remembered as a pioneering African feminist, social activist, educator and anti-colonial freedom fighter. Her dedication to fighting injustice is what makes her a phenomenal woman in African history. She empowers women to be courageous and take initiatives for their human rights and in fighting against oppression. Her work empowers us to fight for our rightful positions, wherever we find ourselves, including standing in unity against unjust practices.

[11]"THE EGBAS, THE OWUS, AND THE DAHOMEANS – AFRICAN HISTORY"<<https://www.africaresource.com/rasta/sesostris-the-great-the-egyptian-hercules/the-egbas-the-owus-and-the-dahomeans-african-history/>> accessed 27 April 2020

NZINGA MBANDI- QUEEN OF NDONGO AND MATAMBA (1583-1663, ANGOLA)



Queen Anna Nzinga was born into a royal family in the Portuguese settlement of Angola in 1583. Her father Kia Samba was the “ngola” (ruler) and her mother was Guenguela Cakombe. She was named “Nzinga” because her umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck after birth. A person born in this way was predicted to be proud and haughty. In her case, this signified that Nzinga will become a queen. Nzinga's father was a dictator of the Ndongo and Matamba kingdoms which governed the Mbundu people. She had two sisters; Mubkumbu Mbande and Kifunji Mbande.[12]



Photo credit: History click.

Nzinga was greatly favoured by her father, as such; she was able to witness how her father carried out his leadership duties and she was even taken along to wars. She further attended strategic war meetings and important governance affairs with her father and was eventually trained as a warrior to fight alongside him. She was also taught to read and write in Portuguese by visiting Portuguese missionaries.[13]

Ngola Mbandi Kiluanji, the King of Ndongo, died in 1617. His son, Ngola Mbandi, became the new king, but he had neither his father's charisma nor the intelligence of his sister Nzinga Mbandi. When they were harassed by the Portuguese in 1622, he sent Nzinga Mbandi to Luanda as his envoy, to negotiate for peace with Dom João Correia de Sousa, the incumbent Governor of Portuguese. Upon her arrival, she was only provided with a mat to sit on; whilst chairs were provided for the Portuguese.

[12] Miller, Joseph C "Nzinga of Matamba in a New Perspective" in The Journal of African History (1975)16 (2): 201-216.

[13] Williams, Hettie V "Queen Nzinga (Njinga Mbande)" in Alexander, Leslie M.; Rucker, Walter C. (eds.). Encyclopedia of African American History (2010).

Upon her arrival, she was only provided with a mat to sit on; whilst chairs were provided for the Portuguese. This Portuguese behavior portrayed a "subordinate status, a status reserved for conquered Africans." Nevertheless, Nzinga ordered two of her men-maid to get on all fours, as they served as her chair while she was speaking to the governor's face to face.[13] This was to illustrate that they were both on the same level. She was a fierce negotiator and was able to reach an agreement with the Portuguese. This resulted in the withdrawal of Portuguese troops from her home kingdom and recognition of its sovereignty, in return for open trade routes to the Portuguese. Nzinga proved to be an outstanding negotiator and diplomat.[14]

Subsequently, the Portuguese rescinded their alliance to the treaty as they continued to raid the Ndongo kingdom, as they took "slaves and precious items" in the process.[15]. After her brother died in 1624, the Portuguese declared war on Ndongo and other tribes that were close. She quickly distinguished herself as an excellent sovereign. Even though she was opposed to being a ruler because she was a woman, she used her lineage to support her claim to the throne. She led her troops to battle displaying her skillfulness in arms.

Her tactics in warfare and espionage, her diplomatic skills, her ability to forge numerous strategic alliances, including the Dutch and her knowledge of the trade and religious issues served her well in tenaciously resisting Portugal's colonialist aspirations until she died in 1663.[18] As a woman, she represents the symbol of the fight against oppression, racism and sexism.[19]

Queen Nzinga's zeal to excel and be the best while demanding equality, empowers women not to accept or tolerate less from anyone, even when being undermined because of their gender or skin color. Teaches that we should let our actions speak for us. She is remembered for her remarkable leadership, political, diplomatic and brilliant military tactics.

[14] Williams, Hettie V "Queen Nzinga (Njinga Mbande)" in Alexander, Leslie M.; Rucker, Walter C. (eds.). Encyclopedia of African American History (2010).

[15] Williams, Hettie V "Queen Nzinga (Njinga Mbande)" in Alexander, Leslie M.; Rucker, Walter C. (eds.). Encyclopedia of African American History (2010).

[16] Williams, Hettie V "Queen Nzinga (Njinga Mbande)" in Alexander, Leslie M.; Rucker, Walter C. (eds.). Encyclopedia of African American History (2010); UNESCO 'Women in African History' < <https://en.unesco.org/womeninafrica/njinga-mbandi/biography> > accessed 20 April 2020.

[17] UNESCO 'Women in African History' < <https://en.unesco.org/womeninafrica/njinga-mbandi/biography> > accessed 20 April 2020.

[18] Ribeiro, Orquidea & Torres Moreira, Fernando Alberto & Pimenta, Susana 'Nzinga Mbandi: From Story to Myth' (2019) Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts.

[19] Ribeiro, Orquidea & Torres Moreira, Fernando Alberto & Pimenta, Susana 'Nzinga Mbandi: From Story to Myth' (2019) Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts.



Wangari Maathai- Environmental activist (1940-2011, Kenya)

Wangari Muta Maathai was born in Nyeri, a rural area of Kenya on April 1, 1940. At the time of her birth, Kenya was still a British colony. Her father worked as a tenant farmer to support the family. He was determined to educate his daughter even though it was uncommon for girls to be educated at that time, as such; he registered her at a local primary school when she was 8 years old.[20]

She proved to be an excellent student, so she was able to continue her education at the Loreto Girls' High School, where she won a scholarship in 1960 to attend her college education in the United States of America. Accordingly, she joined the Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas, where she earned a bachelor's degree in biology in 1964. She went on to complete a master's degree in biological sciences at the University of Pittsburgh after two years.[21]

Through her education and experience in the States, she drew inspiration from the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements in the United States. She went on to pursue doctoral studies in Germany and the University of Nairobi, before obtaining a PhD in 1971 from the University of Nairobi, where she stayed to teach veterinary anatomy after graduation. Professor Maathai became chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and an associate professor in 1976 and 1977 respectively.[22] She became the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate and the first woman to attain those positions in the region.[23]

Being inspired by the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements in the United States, while working with the National Council of Women of Kenya, she aimed to end the destruction of Kenya's forests and lands, which was caused by constant development and remedy actions, which had negatively impacted the country's environment including providing income for women since their resources were being depleted.[24]



[20]Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 21 Apr. 20.

[21]Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 21 Apr. 20.

[22]Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 21 Apr. 20.

[23]Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 21 Apr. 20.

[24]Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 21 Apr. 20.

Accordingly, in 1977 she launched the Green Belt Movement to afforest her beloved country while helping the nation's women. The movement led to the planting of more than 30 million trees in Kenya and provided roughly 30,000 women with a new set of skills and opportunities. She also challenged the regime of the president of Kenya during that time, the dictator Daniel Arap Moi, particularly, on its developmental plans and his handling of the lands in the nation. Consequently, her outspoken critic led to her being targeted by the government and detained on numerous occasions.

In 1989, she and her organization staged a protest in Nairobi's Uhuru Park to prevent the construction of a skyscraper. This campaign drew international attention, and the project was eventually dropped. This campaign was one of her most famous actions. The park where the demonstration was held is now known as the "Freedom Corner." During another protest, which was held a year after, she and other protesters were beaten and badly injured while calling for the release of political prisoners.[25]



Photo credit: Britainica

In 1986, she and other leaders of the Green Belt Movement established the Pan African Green Belt Network, a new movement to educate the world leaders about maintenance and environmental improvement. Consequently, similar initiatives were initiated in other African countries, including Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe.[26] She was persistent and a vocal opponent of the Kenyan government until Moi's political party lost control in 2002. After numerous attempts for a seat in the government, she finally earned a seat in the country's parliament that same year. She was then appointed assistant minister of environment, natural resources and wildlife.[27]

[25] Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 22 Apr 20.

[26] Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 22 Apr. 20.

[27] Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 22 Apr. 20.

In 2004, she was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize for "her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace." [28] In receiving her Nobel Peace Prize, she challenged the world to broaden the understanding of peace, as, "there can be no peace without equitable development; and no development without sustainable management of the environment in a democratic and peaceful space." The United Nations committee commended her "holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights, and women's rights in particular." [28]

Her first book was, 'The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience.' [29] It detailed the history of the organization. In 2007, she published her memoir titled 'Unbowed' and The Challenge for Africa (2009), in which she criticized Africa's leadership as ineffectual and urged Africans, including its leaders to try and solve their problems without Western assistance. She also frequently contributed to International publications such as the Los Angeles Times and the Guardian. [30]

Wangari Maathai overcame incredible obstacles while devoting her life to service, to her children, constituents, women, and certainly all the people of Kenya and the world as a whole," She remains strong example of how one person can be a force for change. As written in her memoir, "What people see as fearlessness is persistence." [31]



Photo credit: History click.

Mathias' work illustrates the power of a woman. Her works are evidence that, when women encourage, empower each other and work together towards a goal, it is achievable. Women are capable of sustaining and developing a country that mostly does not recognize the impact of women. As women we have the power to build or destroy, including, the power to make the government accountable, and using that power positively results in positive and life changing outcomes.

[28]Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 22 Apr.20.

[29]TheGreenBeltMovement(1988;rev.ed(2003);Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>>accessed 22 Apr. 20.

[30]Biography<<https://www.biography.com/actiist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 22 Apr. 20.

[31]Biography<<https://www.biography.com/activist/wangari-maathai>> accessed 22 Apr.20.

Huda Sharawi- Feminist and Nationalist (1879 – 1947, Egypt)

Huda Sharawi was born in the Egyptian city of Al-Minya into a wealthy family. Her father was a landowner and an active national politician who held several government positions, including being a member of the Chamber of Delegates.[32] She was raised in Cairo within the harem system where women were confined to secluded apartments within the home and wore face veils when going out. She was homeschooled as an elitist, taught in French which was the main language and made to memorize the Quran in Arabic.[33] At the age of 13 years, she got married to an older cousin, Ali Sharawi, who was in his late 40s. Nevertheless, she lived away from him for seven years, while she advanced her education. Pressured by her family, she moved in with her husband, which the union thereof produced two children: a daughter, Bathna, in 1903 and a son, Muhammad, in 1905.[34]



Photo credit: Inside Arabia

In 1908, she helped found the first secular charitable organization operated by Egyptian women, a medical dispensary for underprivileged women and children.[35] Furthermore, she and her husband were strong supporters of Egyptian independence from Great Britain, as such, her husband Ali Sharawi and others founded and became a member of the nationalist Wafd party. In 1920, she founded and served as president of the Wafdist Women's Central Committee.[36]

[32] Britannica 'Huda Sharawi' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Huda-Sharawi>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[33] Britannica 'HudaSharawi' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Huda-Sharawi>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[34] Britannica 'Huda Sharawi' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Huda-Sharawi>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[35] Britannica 'HudaSharawi' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Huda-Sharawi>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[36] Britannica 'HudaSharawi' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Huda-Sharawi>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[37] Britannica 'Huda Sharawi' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Huda-Sharawi>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[38] Britannica 'Huda Sharawi' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Huda-Sharawi>> accessed 22 April 2020.



Accordingly, the Egyptian women's open participation in the nationalist movement marked a turning point in Egyptian society, as there had never been a time where so many women publicly engaged in political activism. After the death of her husband, she shifted her focus from the nationalist movement to women's equality.[37] This led to the formation of the Egyptian Feminist Union, in 1923, a union that sought women's suffrage (the right to vote in elections), the reforms to personal status, laws, and increased educational opportunities for girls and women. [38]

In March 1923, on her way home from a conference of the International Women Suffrage Alliance in Rome, she removed her face veil in the Cairo train station. This was seen as an act of rebellion and a form of protest, thereby encouraging other women to follow her actions. She is best remembered by this act.[39]

She remained the president of the Egyptian Feminist Union for the rest of her life and became the founding president of the Arab Feminist Union in 1945. In December 1923, she helped set the standard age for marriage at 16 for women.[40] In 1924, she founded the first secondary school for young women and celebrated the first women university graduates in 1933. Under her leadership, the Egyptian Feminist Union launched the magazine *L'Égyptienne* in 1925, and the Arab Feminist Union launched theirs', *Al-Mar'ah al-Arabiyyah* ("The Arab Woman") in 1946.[42] She published the '1986; Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist' which is her memoir of growing up in a Cairo harem.[43]

Although the accomplishments she made in gender equality and national liberation in the 1920s and the 1930s have slowly been overturned by decades of tyrannical rule in Egypt, she can still be remembered for her unprecedented feminism movement struggle across the Arab world and its positive impact on girls and women.

Huda Sharawi can be praised for her boldness and passion for education. This should empower women to be dedicated to their education, when they are fortunate to be enrolled in school. Education exposes one to different perspectives in life and it sets a good foundation for women.

[39]Britannica 'Huda Sharawi' <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Huda-Sharawi>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[41] InsideArabia 'Huda Sharawi: A Remarkable Egyptian Feminist Pioneer' <<https://insidearabia.com/huda-sharawi-a-remarkable-egyptian-feminist-pioneer/>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[42] InsideArabia 'Huda Sharawi: A Remarkable Egyptian Feminist Pioneer' <<https://insidearabia.com/huda-sharawi-a-remarkable-egyptian-feminist-pioneer/>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[43] InsideArabia 'Huda Sharawi: A Remarkable Egyptian Feminist Pioneer' <<https://insidearabia.com/huda-sharawi-a-remarkable-egyptian-feminist-pioneer/>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[44]InsideArabia 'Huda Sharawi: A Remarkable Egyptian Feminist Pioneer' <<https://insidearabia.com/huda-sharawi-a-remarkable-egyptian-feminist-pioneer/>> accessed 22 April 2020.

Rose Lokissim -Soldier (1953-1986, Chad)



Rose Lokissim was born circa 1955 in Chad. As much is not known of her early years. She was one of the first female leading soldiers in and from Chad. She made a great impact and was recognized for her hostility during the protest against Hissène Habré's dictatorial regime in the 1980s.[45]

“Hissène Habréis was the most ruthless US-backed dictator. He killed thousands and committed torture throughout eight-year rule, before he was exiled in 1990. Although he promoted ethnic cleansing, including having a prison in his backyard, he was still supported by the United States and France.

She was confined in 1984 and tortured for eight months, tortious acts as having wires put on her breasts, being electrocuted until she was weak or unconscious and dragged into the prisons.

Throughout the confinement, she achieved and recorded all the names of prisoners and disappeared victims on cigarette papers. Including all the abuses committed by the political police and smuggled it out of the prison by tactical means to her family and friends. She was the binding strength for the other prisoners. She did that to create a record for them to be remembered.[46] Consequently, she was killed when her activities were discovered by the Habre's secret police - the Documentation and Security Directorate "DDS" in 1986, she was 33 years old when she got executed.[47]

[45]InsideArabia 'Huda Sharawi: A Remarkable Egyptian Feminist Pioneer' <<https://insidearabia.com/huda-sharawi-a-remarkable-egyptian-feminist-pioneer/>> accessed 22 April 2020.

[46] Human Right Watch 'To Trap a Dictator' <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/08/trap-dictator> accessed 28 April 2020.

[52]'Talking About Rose', a prisoner under Hissene Habre's brutal dictatorship' < <http://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20150421-talking-about-rose-story-one-womans-struggle-against-brutal-dictatorship-chads-hisse>> accessed 28 April 2020.

[1] ibid



Police documents found at the abandoned DDS office stated that: *“During the two years of her detention, the subject [Rose] never changed her attitude. Instead, she boasted about it. Given that she is irredeemable and still poses a threat to the security of the state, even in prison.”*[48]

Her execution did not prevent the inspiration, she gave other victims in waging campaigns to see Habré and the DDS held accountable. With the support of Human Right Watch, their campaign gave rise to the creation of the Extraordinary African Chambers in Senegal, where Habré and other members of the DDS were tried and convicted.[49]

The tenacity of the survivors in bringing Dictator Habre to court has shed light on her bravery and courageous heart for her Country and her memory lives on. {50}

Rose Lokissim, the woman who looks death in the face and smiles. She is a brave woman with a wonderful soul. Her ability to be the light in the midst of darkness, should empower women to continue to be strong and courageous. She encourages women to continue the fight for justice, even in their darkest moments.



Photo credit:Pinterest

[48]“The chilling execution of a Chadian soldier who documented an exposé on dictator Hissène Habré” <<https://face2faceafrica.com/article/the-chilling-execution-of-a-chadian-soldier-for-her-documented-expose-on-dictator-hissene-habre>> accessed 28 April 2020.

[49]GlobalJustice <<https://ciccglobaljustice.wordpress.com/2015/05/21/new-film-shines-light-on-victims-of-chads-habre-regime/>> accessed 28 April 2020.

[50] aljazeera < <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/05/talking-rose-150521103155485.html> > accessed 28 April 2020.

THE STORY OF NENITA LA ROSE-PONT

Migrant women and girls have twice the difficulty of breaking through than birth citizens. The story of Ms Nenita La Rose-Pont, enlightens on the power of decision-making and portrays consistent zeal in pursuing one's ambitions and devising careful strategies to achieve them despite the struggles and challenges faced. She proves that, with determination, you can achieve what you aim for. Although she has climbed the ladder of fulfilment and success, she still remembers her humble beginnings and is proud of it. She has used her office and positions to influence politicians and policy-makers to contribute to the best interests of her community, advocate for the rights of women and migrants and ensure positive changes are made.



Can you tell us about yourself, and are you of an African heritage?

My name is Nenita La Rose-Lont. I was born on August 4, 1956, in a working class neighbourhood of Paramaribo, Suriname; at that time still a Dutch colony. I am the eldest of three children. I have a brother and a sister. We have a mixed origin, African and European. My father is of an African heritage, a direct descendant of enslaved people from the West Coast of Africa who were taken by force to the East coast of South America. After the abolition, a group of families including my father's ancestors, managed to buy the plantation they had worked on.

My mother is Creole, from a mixed African and European descent. Her great grandmother was called Gezina Anette, she was the only daughter of an enslaved girl who at the time of abduction was still a child. She was seen as the property of Dutch women and was made a house slave. After some years Gezina's mother and she were given back their freedom, a manumission, and she married a European from Jewish descent. So yes, I am of an African heritage.

What is your career and relevant academic qualification?

I studied Law (MSc) at the University of Amsterdam and graduated in 1986. After graduation I had a career at the Amsterdam city government for almost 20 years as Deputy Director at the Mayor's Office, Director International Affairs and Management Board member of the Southeast City District. From 2007-2015, I was the Executive Director of Child Helpline International (CHI), a UN Recognised organisation that advocates for the Rights of Children and Young People around the world. I am also a trained legal mediator and coach. As of march 2018, I was elected as City Councillor of Amsterdam (PvdA). I am also the President of the Dutch Women's Council (NVR) and board member Amnesty International NL.

How have the places where you grew up influenced your identity and perspective as a person?

Born in Suriname, I am the product of multiple cultures. My childhood years have been strongly influenced by two women, my mother and grandmother. These two energetic women knew how to tackle issues of life and preferred to think about solutions rather than focus on the problems. These values have positively impacted my life till today.

When I was six years old my mother decided to take destiny into her own hands, to save her marriage and to travel after her husband. The year before, he had left the family to go and study economics in The Netherlands. The three of us (my mother, my brother and myself) arrived by boat unannounced in the Netherlands during winter in 1962 to the astonishment of my father. The first night we spent at the Salvation Army was quite an experience.

Being the eldest of three children, the seven years that followed were to me years of hard work and adjustment. I had to work hard at school. And with working and studying parents, I also had to do my part in the household. In addition, it was extremely important for me to find my way into the Dutch culture. Being one of the few Surinamese children in the Amsterdam neighbourhood at that time, I wanted to know and learn everything. Information about the city and the people, how my new friends, and their families lived, who our neighbours were, what the grocer, the coal merchant, and the milkman exactly did. Nothing was too much for me. My father urged me to find out everything by myself and to do a lot of reading.

At school and in the neighbourhood I had to explain a lot in turn about my origin and I had to try to dispel prejudices like; "no, we did not live in trees in Suriname; yes we spoke Dutch at home; yes I combed my hair also with a comb." It was a time to adapt and integrate into the new society and hope for acceptance without being shut out.

Which events or observations impacted your life and perspectives as a girl child growing into adulthood? Also, what dreams and goals did you have when you were growing up and how have you achieved these? If not, why did they change?

By the end of 1969 the family was preparing to re-migrate to Suriname. I was thirteen and was advised by my parents to stay in the Netherlands with distant relatives as this would be much better for my future. I chose to go back to Suriname. The family bond and the reunion with my grandparents and other relatives in Suriname were decisive.

There the integration process started again from scratch. As a "black Dutch" I had to adapt in a heartbeat to the Surinamese way of life. I did not remember much of my country of birth but knew everything about Dutch history and geography.

And the Amsterdam accent (that hot potato in my mouth) had to disappear as quickly as possible. High school in Paramaribo was more than an institute of knowledge to me. It was also a school of life. With new eyes I looked at the sometimes painful differences between rich and poor, to social injustice, the struggle of a nation on the road to independence, but I also saw the pride of a poor country that so badly wanted to know prosperity. The country went through an awakening process and all these themes were often raised by the teachers during classes.



These years of experience have shaped me to a large extent. In that period I was able to develop the social skills that are required to function in complex cultural relationships. I learned as a teenager to independently handle things; things for which my hardworking parents, trapped in an unhappy marriage, often had no time for.

The long hot summer holidays, during the Surinamese dry season, were to me as a teenager also periods of loneliness. I found inspiration in listening to music. My father's extensive record collection was a treasure to me. The world of music that opened up to me has always been my source of inspiration. I dreamed of being an artist, a singer or a dancer. Of course reality turned out to be different. This is the love I shared with all my children, and I am proud that my oldest daughter made it to the level of becoming an international pop star.

What are some of the opportunities that you received which moulded you into the woman that you are now?

Back to the Netherlands; In 1974, being an eighteen year old teenager with a high school diploma, I boarded the airplane, going back to the Netherlands by myself to study. Back to familiar grounds, but still a huge step. A lot in Amsterdam was still recognizable, but meanwhile a lot had also changed drastically. I was no longer one of the few overseas Dutch inhabitants. Together with me on the airplane were young and elderly people who arrived in the Netherlands. They were all looking for a better life.

In 1975, Suriname became separated from the Kingdom of the Netherlands and became the independent Republic of Suriname. I remained Dutch and my parents and family became Surinamese. We are separated by nationality to this day, a bizarre situation for us.

Identify and describe the challenges you encountered in establishing the woman that you are today. How do you classify these experiences in your life story?

With my knowledge of Suriname with its dizzying multitude of ethnicities, and with my experience in the rapidly changing Dutch society, I see myself primarily as a cosmopolitan. In my later international work, I really benefited from the accumulated ability to be able to operate across boundaries of cultures. There have been many challenges these past years living in a western country. Being an emancipated woman anywhere in the world, still to date, can be challenging. But being a black emancipated woman can be even more challenging.

What are some of the important values you have which helped you to be successful?

I was lucky enough to be raised by two strong women, my grandmother and my mother. They always told me: “let no one ever belittle you, believe in yourself”. They encouraged me to be independent and do the things I want to do, to become the woman I am today. And that’s exactly what I did!

How did you invest in your life to become the person you are now? What limitations did you have to conquer?

I invested in new experiences, being socially active, stepping out of my comfort zone and getting to know new people. Most importantly, I am proud of who I am and of what I have achieved. I will always have an open mind for new experiences. Aiming for the sky!



Can you walk us through the journey to your career success? What was your first job and how have you developed to be a success in your career?

I have combined work and study during my entire student life. This is because I had very little money to spend and therefore needed to work to earn more but also because I wanted to. My first official job was at the City Hall where I started as a Junior Advisor. But the experience I cherish the most is the time when I was 15 years old and had my first job during the school holidays by helping out an optician by delivering the recipes for the glasses to a nearby factory on my bicycle. With the money I earned, I bought my first golden ring which I have to date. I did not have to ask anybody for it. I learned what it means to earn your own money and to be able to decide for yourself what to do with it.

What inspired your career path and have you always known what path you wanted to follow?

As a teenager I also wanted to become a ballet dancer. While being a University student in the Netherlands, I made it to the city theatre, performing in the Swan Lake event organised by the local ballet school. I was the only black swan (literally). A very nice experience but it also brought me back to earth. I realised that becoming a professional dancer would cost a lot of blood, sweat and tears and I was also realistic enough to know that I would neither meet that standard nor be willing to make that sacrifice. I had chosen to study English Language and Literature because of my love for the language and for literature. Searching for the Holy Grail, it turned out that it wasn't English Literature but it took me a while to realise this fact. At the time when I made this choice I did not realise that organisational management suited me more. Once I realised that, I did not hesitate to switch to the Law Faculty. During my Law studies I also worked as a legal adviser for refugees at Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland.

During this period I visited the refugee detention centres at Schiphol on a regular base as an observer.

This gave me a deep understanding of the reasons why people flee their country, risking their lives, in search for peace and prosperity for their children to grow up.



**“let no one
ever
belittle
you,
believe in
yourself.”**



What were the challenges you faced towards climbing the ladder of success in your career and how were you able to overcome these challenges?

Being a proud Master of Science I applied - very pregnant - at the City of Amsterdam. The Town Clerk with whom I had the job interview did not even notice I was pregnant and wanted me to start the following week, while I was due the following month. There have been many jokes about this incident for a long time! Since that time I have gained some 20 years of experience in the municipal public sector. One of the most memorable activities was to organise, together with the ANC representative, the visit of Nelson Mandela to Amsterdam. On June 16th, 1990 shortly after his release in February, Mr. Mandela was welcomed by the Mayor of Amsterdam and thousands of people who were gathered at the Leidseplein and I was there with them.

What do you love about your career and why?

What I love about my career is the fact that I was blessed to meet so many different people but if it is time to change you should not hesitate. I have changed jobs frequently sometimes because I could not resist the challenge and sometimes for pure practical reasons such as being close to home and the school of my children.

In Africa and the world as a whole, women are often overlooked or considered inferior. Has this ever been a problem for you, or in any way slowed down your progress, or does this rather push you to achieve more?

As I mentioned earlier, the challenges I have encountered these past years in the western world have been the same every woman meets in her lifetime. In the East or West, the North or South especially when women's rights are concerned; there is even a tendency of a backlash nowadays. There appears to be a strong adverse reaction to women's emancipation. The bias and discrimination we sometimes encounter nowadays, can have such a disruptive effect on every progressive step society has made so far when it comes to women's right. This is alarming. So women should support and stand up for each other because gender inequality is not ok.

How have you been able to impact or influence women with your career?

As President of the Dutch Women's Council (NVR) I also try to do my part together with my fellow board members. With our activities and lobby work, our focus is not only to inform, educate and exchange experiences with our members and their followers, But also to influence politicians and policy makers. It's all about keeping the struggle for women's emancipation and women's rights on the political and community agenda.



Living in a male-dominated world, it may be difficult for some women to pursue their career or achieve their goals. How do you keep your focus thriving to excel in life?

The past century we have experienced that emancipation will never be a linear process upwards. There will always be setbacks to deal with and there will always be opposing forces. And so, after remarkable successes - some of them historically - women have now entered an era of stagnation again. We learn from studies and analysis that currently unequal treatment between men and women in the Netherlands is even increasing again. This is also the case in other countries. The growth of the proportion of women in politics, in the labour market, or in managerial positions is stagnating. In the 2017 equality ranking, the Netherlands dropped from 16th to 32nd place. And so, in this 21st century, 121 years after its establishment, the Dutch women's Council is once again at a crossroad, moment of choice for innovation, rejuvenation and fresh ideas. It's all about keeping society, especially the new generation informed about the struggle for women's emancipation and women's rights.

How do you balance personal life with your demanding career?

When it comes to balancing my personal life and career, I must admit that I have won the lottery. For over thirty years now my husband and I have always shared responsibilities, especially when it comes to the children. We believe that it is important to do things together in the upbringing of children, making use of each-others strong points. On the other hand, economic independence is my life motto and in my view one of the most important goals to achieve. Only then you can have an equal relationship. As women we carry with us many unfulfilled ambitions from the past. At the same time social relations keep getting more complex. It is important to keep looking for opportunities in which to invest your energy, to educate yourself and become an independent woman.

Can you tell us your life story? What is your motivation and which female leaders in history or present times have inspired you to be the person you are?

Today, I myself, and probably all of you, stand on the shoulders of many women in our lives, women in history to whom we owe tribute. Today I am particularly proud to stand on the shoulders of my mother and grandmother. They encouraged me to be independent and do the things I want to do, to become the woman I am today. My grandmother was the wife of a shoemaker in Paramaribo. She managed to spend all her modest savings on education and a better life for her five children. My mother was the youngest child, a rebel. Even as a young girl she preferred to go her own way, not caring too much about trivialities such as social conventions and regulations set by others. She married young – she was a teenage mother - and after a not so happy relationship, in which the interests of her partner, my father, usually prevailed, she radically took matters into her own hand.

My mother divorced and dedicated her life to others. She developed into a confident, independent, self-assured, progressive woman, with whom many young people came by for advice or practical support. Until her death recently, she was loved and admired by many in the Surinamese society.

And so I find myself – after many career steps – as the city councillor of Amsterdam and the current President of the Dutch Women's Council. I am that little girl from Paramaribo, granddaughter of a low-educated shoemaker's wife of a man with a drinking habit tendency, and daughter of a socially engaged, true rebel. And I am proud of my heritage.

What is your ideology on women empowerment and how does it improve the society?

The history of the Dutch Women's Council and that of women empowerment is the story of 121 years of struggle, in which a long search for the best strategy and the right organisational form has taken place. Declared superfluous or even dead many times by sceptics, the Women's Council is still a strong network organization with a reach of over one million women. But there is still a lot to be done on the road to equality and emancipation. The question that we have kept asking ourselves over the past decades is; how we can definitively break through the dominant paradigm of female subordination. We have continued to believe in Sisterhood over the years, the social, ethical and emotional pact between women, regardless of origin, religion and ethnicity. Based on this we can continue to fight together. Not against men. But as much as possible with those men who can identify with our struggle. Women have made a huge catch up in the last hundred years.

Due to the effect of mechanization, the predominance that men derived from their greater physical strength has largely become irrelevant. Women have also become less dependent on men because of the worldwide and spectacular decrease, since the 1960s, of the average number of children that women have in the course of their lives. And in close connection with this; also because girls and young women all over the world have started attending school and attaining more and more education, they gained a significant level of economic and financial freedom. And because they are at least as competent as boys and young men, their chances at the labor market have improved drastically.

This global advance of women is met with resistance. The open, stubborn resistance to women's emancipation comes mainly from the extreme right and from the extreme orthodox, whether they are religious (churches) or political (the Alt-Right movement). They are gaining ground, although relatively small in numbers, their compelling demands and influence can be immense. So, in mainstream life however subtle, the idea is gaining notoriety: so long for emancipation; enough is enough. Let's go back to normal.

What issue on women's rights do you think should merit adequate attention and how can we achieve the solution?

Women's rights are again under fire. In the past few years there was unmistakably a social regression, with new resistance to the emancipation of women and the increasingly sense of fragility of masculinity. Too many men are still at the centre of power in a cultural-psychological way, and seem to like it that way. That has been going on for a few years now, but with little attention in the social debate.

Perhaps this backlash is the paradoxical confirmation of the spectacular success of women's movements and women's emancipation in the 20th century. This backlash is a mix of open resistance and silent acceptance. That brings us to activism today. With the internet and social media, feminism has become polyphonic. The #Metoo movement is clearly one of the historical tipping points of the mass movement of women. The # Metoo movement marks a historic change: women and girls no longer tolerate unacceptable and cross-border behaviour.

So women's movements have triggered a lot of change. More importantly: a lot of movement is actually going on as we speak. And there is still an awful lot to be done. Because the good news is: even though women's rights are not completely inviolable, women and girls can no longer be put back in the corner. Behind toxic leaders, fearless and promising young women have emerged. Smart girls, who get up, open their mouths and speak out, young women who understand the complexity and connect to gender issues in a completely natural way with various social issues such as global warming, racism, xenophobia and sexism.

COVID-19 has attracted the attention of the world and governments. From your perspective, how do you think the pandemic is affecting human rights, women and children?

As for the current COVID-19 pandemic, at the moment no one can tell which direction this will go. Either egoism will prevail amongst people or it will give a boost to the idea that working together is necessary. It is hard to predict which direction the developments will turn. This will be depending on the political choices made in the leading countries worldwide. One thing is certain; the solutions for a worldwide persistent problem such as violence against women will remain under pressure.

With your knowledge and years of leadership experience, what parting message do you have for women and girls that aspire to be like you, which will empower them to pursue their goals, quicken their potentials and enable them to stretch and achieve their visions?

Dear ladies, always try to be the best version of yourself. Do not try to be someone else. Be bold and resolute, but train yourself to understand when patience might be the best strategy. Don't hesitate to look for a mentor and don't be too proud or afraid to ask for help and advice. Working on your networks is vital and next to knowledge, having a strong network is one the most important keys to success.



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The question that we have kept asking ourselves over the past decades is: How can we definitively break through the dominant paradigm of female subordination? We have continued to believe in sisterhood over the years, the social, ethical and emotional pact between women, regardless of origin, religion and ethnicity. Based on this we can continue to fight together. Not against men. But as much as possible with those men who can identify with our struggle.

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THE STORY OF EBERE AKADIRI

The story of Ebere Akadiri is that of a visionary who sets goals and achieves them by all means necessary. Her story shows the power of focus, strategic planning and how the little steps that we take can be a huge success, even to the point of encouraging and impacting others. She is an epitome who proves that no dream is too big to chase. As a migrant woman who came to the Netherlands with no prior knowledge of the Dutch language nor their culture, she has been able to break through the challenge of starting all over again, and is now able to help young women to achieve their success stories as well. Ebere has followed her passion and used her values, gifts and talents to contribute to the good of the world



Can you tell us about yourself and your African heritage?

My name is Ebere Akadiri and I am from Nigeria in West Africa.

What is your career and relevant academic qualifications?

I studied Food Science and Technology in Federal University of Technology in Owerri, Nigeria. Then, I went ahead to do my Master's degree in Management and Leadership. I have also done a lot of courses in Marketing, Brand and Leadership.

How have the places where you grew up influenced your identity and perspective as a person?

Today, I would say that growing up in Nigeria helped me in a lot of different ways, one of which being that it helped me to see things differently. It also taught me to be resilient and to have this 'can-do' attitude – an attitude of a winner – never giving up and trying until I succeed. This helped me a lot in finding myself in a new country – The Netherlands. Not knowing where to start from, I really tried to use what I had learned in the past to make sure that I succeeded in this new country.



Which events or observations impacted your life and perspectives as a girl child growing into adulthood?

I had a very happy childhood, even though my mother died when I was eight years old. The fact that I had every member of the family taking care of me helped me feel a real sense of community, with everybody trying to make sure that I was okay. I would say that was something really meaningful and it taught me to also care for people. It doesn't really matter whether they are related to you or not, just be kind and generous. Even till today, I value generosity more than anything and I teach my children how to be generous.

What dreams and goals did you have when you were growing up and how have you achieved these? If not, why did they change?

I would say that where I am today is a result of my visions for my life. I learnt early on in life to create visions; my ten-year vision, my five-year vision, one-year vision. Where I am now, I have almost achieved all the five-year visions I created for my life, and I am still pushing to achieve my ten-year goals. I have not reached them yet because it is all about taking small steps every day and keeping my eyes on that vision. Having Ataro, a food packaging company in The Netherlands, is a plan I wrote five years ago and I am trying to make sure that my spices are sold in every country in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa. This is a big goal and I am already getting there. Now, I do sell in different countries, but I want to establish a presence in those countries as well.

Identify and describe the challenges you encountered in establishing the woman that you are today. How do you classify these experiences in your life story?

Some of the challenges I encountered involve moving to a new country – the challenge of not knowing how to speak the same language, not understanding the culture, starting afresh. I tried so much to learn about the culture and I tried to push myself to network, and make sure that my voice was heard even though I don't come from this country. I tried to do what I could do to impact different people, especially other women, and this has helped me to establish myself as a leader and as a strong voice.

What are some of the opportunities that you received which moulded you into the woman that you are now?

Having the privilege to go to school and being able to go to university – and a very good university for that matter – really shaped who I am. Also, having the early opportunity to work with so many corporate organisations in Nigeria has also helped me today to be a fearless woman who goes out for what she wants, and I do always try to get what I want.

What are some of the important values you have which helped you to be successful? How did you invest in your life to become the person you are now? What limitations did you have to conquer?

My number one value is generosity. I do my best to share what I have and it touches people's hearts. Relationships are important to me as well, and so are collaborations. I think these have helped me to be successful and to be where I am now. One of the ways I have always invested in myself is through learning. I know that leaders are learners and they constantly learn new things. So I have always set my visions very high, and then I take a step backwards and ask myself, "what is going to stop me from getting this? What obstacle is in my way? What is it that I don't know?", then I go and learn it and try and conquer it.

Can you walk us through the journey to your career success? What was your first job and how have you developed to be a success in your career?

I had my first job when I was a university student. It was an internship, working in an oil company called Total Elf. I did a lot of internships with different oil companies, even though I studied Food Science and Technology. I found it fun to be working in an office and I ended up working in Schlumberger Nigerian Ltd, which was a French Oil servicing firm, and I grew very quickly from my youth service, which is a one-year compulsory service.

I was retained to work there and within a year, I became the base operations manager's secretary, above every other secretary that had worked there for about 10 to 15 years. Of course, they did not like that, but I believe that my work ethics got me promoted.



What inspired your career path and have you always known what path you wanted to follow?

I studied Food Science and Technology and I don't even know why I picked that course, but based on that, I went into starting up a restaurant in Nigeria. The restaurant did very well not because I studied Food Science and Technology, but because I had to learn how to manage a business as they are two different things – knowing how to cook and knowing how to manage a business. So one of the things that has helped me to be successful is constantly learning how to make things better and actually implementing what I learn.

" So I have always set my visions very high, and then I take a step backwards and ask myself, "what is going to stop me from getting this? What obstacle is in my way? What is it that I don't know?", then I go and learn it and try and conquer it."

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Photo credit: The World Bank

What were the challenges you faced towards climbing the ladder of success in your career and how were you able to overcome these challenges?

There are always challenges, sometimes financial challenges. For example, to set up a big restaurant while I was very young, it required me to look for a lot of money from the bank. I faced a lot of rejection from the banks because that was my first business and I had no collateral. I kept moving and not giving up until a female bank manager approved my bank loan request and I was able to get the money, which helped my business to be really far ahead of other struggling businesses.

What do you love about your career and why?

One of the things I love most is helping and inspiring other people. I love teaching other people how to run successful businesses, inspiring them with my life story and teaching how to lead successfully. I also love hosting events. This is something which is a natural gift for me and it's why every business I have ever done links with an event. I also have an event consulting firm, where I have organisations manage their end-to-end event, regarding planning, strategy and actual execution. I manage both live events and virtual or online events.

In Africa and the world as a whole, women are often overlooked or considered inferior. Has this ever been a problem for you, or in any way slowed down your progress, or does it rather push you to achieve more?

It is not only in Africa that women are considered less knowledgeable than men. It is worldwide, and this is why I started an organisation called, Rise and Lead Women. We inspire women to take the lead, to rise and to achieve whatever they want to achieve, because I believe that nobody can stop a woman who has decided to rise. For me, that is the same story. I have been rising and there are so many obstacles, but I don't notice those obstacles because I have a vision of where I want to get to and I go for it. There are oppositions, but I don't pay much attention to them.

How have you been able to impact or influence women with your career?

It's always better when people talk for others. So for me, I would prefer that women who I have impacted speak about me. Through Rise and Lead, we have impacted hundreds of women. Today, so many of those women have started a new career or a new business. Some of them come and tell me that they are able to ask their bosses for a raise or a promotion, and may change jobs. Many women tell me that I inspire them because of how I do lots of things even despite having 5 children, and I am just an energetic person who is always trying to look out for women who really desire to grow. So, I do impact people through training. I give a lot of knowledge on entrepreneurship and leadership. I do this through articles, blogs and my social media posts, and through events and training that I conduct on a regular basis.

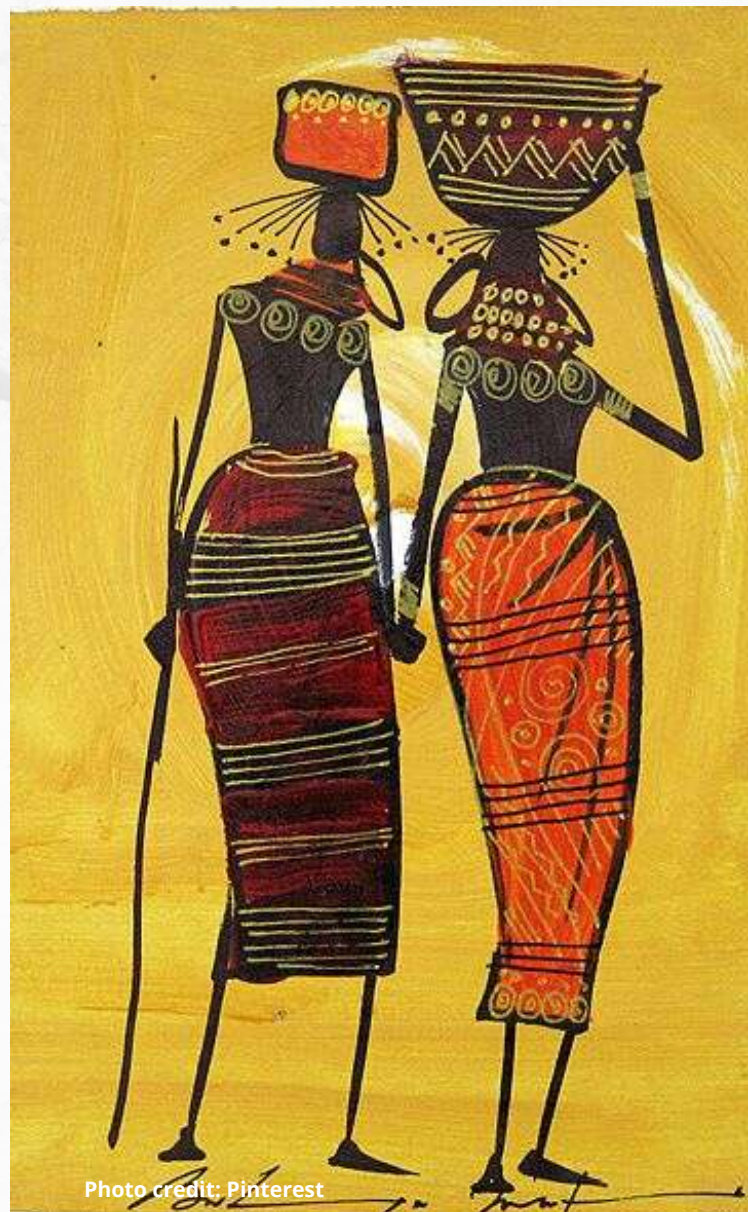


Photo credit: Pinterest

Living in a male-dominated world, it may be difficult for some women to pursue their career or achieve their goals. How do you keep your focus, thriving to excel in life?

I do not allow those labels to affect me – ‘male dominated’ and all of that. That does not concern me. I understand my purpose on this earth, I know my gifts and I go ahead and work on them. The more I work on them, the more I excel in life.

How do you balance personal life with your demanding career?

It is all about priorities. I set my priorities; my family and my children come first and every other thing comes after. So it is more about taking care of what comes first and then doing the rest.

Do you have any ethical values or personal beliefs that have directed or direct your path towards your achievements?

When it comes to personal beliefs, I believe that we are all gifted and every human being has gifts that are meant to be used for others and in using that gift to help others, we achieve financial success. That is my belief system and I believe that leaders are learners and that people should always learn new things. I firmly believe that whatever we set our minds to achieve, we can achieve it. I also believe that leadership is not about your title or position, but about the impact you make in people’s lives.

What is your passion, greatest strength and motivation?

I am very passionate about bringing people together so I host a lot of events regularly, almost on a monthly basis, online and offline. I love the fact that I get to see people, and I am also passionate about offering people food, such as at parties and at my house.



Photo credit: Willow place

Do you classify your successes as your final destination or do you still aim at stretching your potentials and contributing to the good of the world?

My success is not my final destination. I still have a long way to go. My visions are stretched and I believe I will achieve them.

What is your ideology on women empowerment and how does it improve the society?

Women are already empowered. What we do is to inspire women to decide to rise and decide to get what they want. I don't call that empowerment, I call it inspiration, supporting people and helping women to learn the right skills. I know that many people would call it women empowerment, and there is nothing wrong with women empowerment, but what we do at "Rise and Lead" is a little bit different. Of course, when we talk about equal opportunities for men and women, it improves society because when a woman earns enough money, the family prospers and society also prospers. When a woman feels empowered, which means when a woman is financially stable and when women feel that their voices are heard, then they can contribute to society with their innovation, their thoughts, their gifts and talents. But if women are not given that opportunity to contribute to these, then we lose out on it. So I prefer to call what we do promoting equal opportunity so that women have the same opportunities as men to contribute to society in solving social problems.

COVID-19 has attracted the attention of the world and governments. From your perspective, how do you think the pandemic affects human rights and the society?

Talking about COVID-19, of course it has affected everyone. From the food supply chain, to people fearing losing their jobs, to people's health, to families being separated, to inequality widening, loss of revenue and loss of businesses. It is affecting the economy, affecting families, affecting the mental health of individuals because total isolation is not how God created us. We were created for relationships. So if we are not able to connect with people and form that relationship with them, then we are not living in our full lives and potential. This affects us and our mental health, especially for those who are single and live alone. It is affecting everybody.

Life during COVID 19 is not the same in light of women and children, how do you see life after the pandemic for them?

It all depends. As long as nobody does anything and the government does the right thing, life for women and children will not face any problem. The only problem I see is that, there is going to be a loss of revenue and if children are no longer going to school, when it is time for them to go back to school, the parents who have lost their jobs and don't have enough money to send them to school, especially in Africa, will find money to train the boy child and the girl child will stay home and do some housekeeping and farming and domestic work. That is what I fear most. Also for women who already didn't have enough money, some of them may lose their jobs and if they are single, it is going to be harder for them to recover from this pandemic.

When the pandemic finally comes to end, in your opinion what can this mean for career women?

When the pandemic finally comes to an end, I hope people would have learned to do things a bit differently, like how to use the internet and how to use digital technology, because even if it comes to an end, we don't know when something similar will happen again. So I believe this is the time for people to learn new skills, get wiser and get more innovative. Also, right now, they should be using this time to invest in relationships virtually and after the COVID, those people who focused on improving themselves and their skills in different areas and focused on the future of work, will be the people who have some jobs to return to after COVID-19.

What advice will you like to share with any woman that aspires to be like you?

What I will say to anybody who aspires to be like me is that, they should first be like themselves. They should look inwards to see who they are. It is not about trying to be like somebody else, it is about looking inwards to see how you are specially gifted and expanding the vision of who you want to be personally and what you want in life, and then start working towards it. I didn't look at anybody and say I wanted to be like that person. I just have a mind of my own and my own vision of what I want to be in life and that is what I work towards because most times, when women try to be like somebody else, they miss their own calling, they miss their path and they feel frustrated because you can never be like any else.

So the right question is, "what advice do I have for women who want to rise and lead?" . What I would say is that, maybe they need a mentor to guide them on exactly what to do. I also feel that women should always try to improve themselves and their knowledge and also form a lot of alliances, relationships and networks, because those are the key things that are going to help women succeed.

With your knowledge and years of leadership experience, what parting message do you have for women and girls that will empower them to pursue their goals, quicken their potentials and enable them to stretch and achieve their visions?

What I will say about women who want to lead is that they need to have the vision of leadership. You need to aspire to lead. You can say, 'I want to run this big organisation' or 'I want to be a CEO' or a manager, or whatever you feel led to do. Then, you have to create a step-ladder process – 'this is my vision, how do I get there? How do I get from point A to point Z? And gradually, when you think about that, you will get ideas on what you are supposed to be focusing on to get ideas on getting from point A to point Z. So my advice is, go and look inwards, have a vision for your life and then learn and ask yourself, whose help do I need to get to where I need to be? Do I need to go back and learn something through education? Do I need a mentor, do I need to read books or do I just go there and ask for what I want? Whatever comes to mind, that is exactly what you should be doing. And be happy with what you have, but keep pushing for more. It is key and it is very important to your success.



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One of the ways I have always invested in myself is through learning. I believe that leaders are learners and they constantly learn new things. So I have always set my visions very high and then, I walk backwards and I check what is going to stop me from getting this? What obstacle is on my way? What is it that I don't know, and then I go and learn it and try and conquer that.

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THE STORY OF MEKKA ABDELGEBAR

The story of Ms Mekka Abdelgebar is the story of determination, resilience and sacrifice. Forced marriage is a situation which most girls are unable to escape from, but Ms Abdelgebar was able to achieve this through education which was then but an opportunity for girls and not a right, to liberate herself with the support of her father. Being a firm believer of the statement, “when you educate a boy, you educate a man but when you educate a girl you educate a nation”, she is one of the educated women who have played a significant role in capacity and peace building, contributed to community strengthening and gender issues. Her story depicts overcoming family issues during her childhood, making decisions to protect her future and sacrificing her time for her family then moving on to pursue her dreams.



Can you tell us about yourself?

My name is Mekka Haroun Abdelgabar and my religion is Islam. I was born in a village in South Darfur - Sudan. I am married and I am a mother to 4 children; three daughters and a son, and grandmother to 4 children, two boys and two girls.

What is your career and relevant academic qualifications?

At the moment, I have a small business which renders embassy services. I am also a freelance translator with the IND, and a director of the foundation VOND. For my academic qualifications, I have a bachelor in accounting from Umdurman university in Sudan. I have a master's degree in Public Policy and Administration from the Institute of Social studies, The Hague. I had my first phase Ph.D. in Public Policy and Administration from Twente University in Enschede, and MCSE from institute Inter Elan in Rotterdam. Firstly, my husband and I established a small business called Holland Ambassade Services (HAS) which I operate alone, because my husband is an employee of the Ministry of Justice. HAS is an intermediary small business providing legalization and visa services to Dutch companies which are exporting goods and services or doing business with different countries. The companies send me their official documents needed for their work abroad, I perform the attestation of these documents from institutions such as the court, the ministry of foreign affairs, the chamber of commerce and the specific embassy where the Dutch company is doing business with, and I get paid for these services. I also work as a freelance interpreter for the immigration and naturalization services (IND) for the Sudanese and Darfuri refugees.

Lastly, I established the Darfur Women Organization in The Netherlands (VOND) in 2005, in solidarity with the women of Sudan in general and Darfur in particular. VOND has accumulated experience with the domain of peace-building, capacity building, community strengthening and gender issues which is based mainly on the United Nation Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325.

VOND organized a symposium in 2006 in The Hague on “The Role of Darfur Women in Peace Building and Reconciliation”, with the purpose of highlighting the status of Darfur to the Sudanese and the Dutch communities. In 2007 VOND organized a 4-days training for 25 Darfuri women leaders of CBOs in Khartoum, for women leadership and political participation, & UNSCR 1325. Also, in 2007, VOND established a Multipurpose Women’s Community Center in Nyala - South Darfur, where women were trained in health, computer, livelihood skills and on the improvement and accessibility to safe water supply and adequate sanitary services integrated with hygiene promotion program. VOND cooperated with the Dutch Women’s Council (NVR), in organizing an international knowledge sharing meeting of women leaders from 8 conflict areas in the world in 2008. We invited five women leaders from Darfur for that occasion.

VOND has contributed to the development and implementation of the Dutch national action plans on UNSCR 1325, for almost 12 years, especially related to programs on Women Peace and Security in Sudan. Funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2013, VOND organized training for 16 Darfuri women leaders of CBOs whom we selected consciously from the five states of Darfur as core partners, and we also trained 10 women journalists in Khartoum. For the implementation of the second Dutch National Action Plan known as NAPII, VOND implemented its program; LEAP thus; Women’s Leadership for Peace Building in Darfur in 2015 and 2016. LEAP was to enhance the capacity and ownership of the 16 women leaders; to strengthen them and equip them to participate in peace building and security agenda and to expand the women’s voices, leadership and participation.

LEAP was composed of six learning events for the 16 women leaders and more than 50 affiliate women from the CBOs. We helped the 16 women to create a platform called WAP-Darfur, which is the Darfur Women Alliance for Peace and succeeded in creating a mediation committee from these Darfuri women, together with VOND’s representatives which is unique in Darfur. We mediated in tribal conflicts and organized dialogues with community leaders, native administrators, war lords, combatants and community women leaders (Hakkamat, Mayarim and Sheikhat). We have worked out four cases; in North Darfur in April 2015, South Darfur in September 2015, West Darfur in April 2016 and in Central Darfur in December 2016. This work was highly recognized and appreciated by the communities, by the government officials and the international NGOs in Sudan.

Further, VOND was funded once more by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to implement the NAPIII program called P4ALL (peace for all) in 2018-2019, in a consortium led by VOND. The project was entitled "Youth for Social Cohesion" also known as Y4SC. The project focuses on the creation of an enabling environment for the youth. It engages them to build resilience, social cohesiveness and security in their communities and be actively involved in peace building and reconciliation processes. While targeting 25 young males and females who are unemployed university graduates, the project seeks to capacitate young Sudanese youth with life-communication and critical thinking skills to strengthen them in building resilience against recruitment by extremism and fighting militias and involvement in conflict prevention. Through a series of 5 events thus; learning events, forums and workshops with a well worked out agenda, youth in Nyala have been trained and capacitated to participate in the process of peace building.



Which events or observations impacted your life and perspectives as a girl child growing into adulthood?

Probably spending a long period of my life with girls of my age in boarding schools. As I spent most of my education time in boarding schools and only spent time with my family during the school holidays.

How have the places where you grew up influence your identity and perspective as a person?

Growing in a village makes you a simple person who becomes used to weighing things wisely, I guess.

What dreams and goals did you have when you were growing up and how have you achieved these? If not, why did they change?

During the times of my childhood, education of girls was extremely unfamiliar with my village community. Girls get married when they are minors. I was dreaming of escaping early marriage and to reach the highest possible level of education. I performed very well and my father was encouraging me all the time, resisting my mother's disapproval because she just wanted me to stay with her. My uncles were in interrogations and objected to the education of girls. Since it was customary to marry girls at young ages, this would have been my fate at that time.

What are some of the opportunities that you received which moulded you into the woman that you are now?

Good education and working opportunities.

Identify and describe the challenges you encountered in establishing the woman that you are today. How do you classify these experiences in your life story?

I had to cope with the separation of my parents and resist the challenges of getting married at an early age. It was normal to have girls married to their cousins or even to become second, third or fourth wives to older men. I was lucky in that sense, and that was probably because I was the first born to my father and I was doing very well in school as he valued education very well. Therefore, my father supported my refusal to marry my cousin. Nevertheless, my father was not strictly against the idea of girls' early marriage because, on the one hand, he married young girls himself. On the other hand, he married off some of his daughters at a young age; one of my sisters was married to an elderly man when she was only 12 years old. She was the fourth wife, and she became a widow when she was thirty-two years of age.

What are some of the important values you have, which helped you to be successful?

Resiliency, good behavior and preservation of honor are things that convinced my father to keep supporting me all the time.

How did you invest in your life to become the person you are now? What limitations did you have to conquer?

I was very patient and resilient. I had to adjust my life to my father's continuous marriages and divorces, and bear dealing with step-mothers and half sisters and brothers. I had to endure the envy of my brothers, and sisters because of my success in education, and my father's psychological and financial support.

Can you walk us through the journey to your career success? What was your first job and how have you developed to be a success in your career?

I got a decent job immediately after graduation, but I had to leave the country to join my husband who got a scholarship. We have lived in The Netherlands since then. In the Netherlands, my career took another dimension. I completed my master's degree, returned to Sudan and worked as a lecturer in Umdurman university.

I had to join my husband again on sabbatical leave, also, to pursue my Ph.D. Meanwhile, my children grew up and demanded more attention. I spent more time with them, putting them on the right track of education. Thereafter, I established my small business and the Foundation.

What inspired your career path and have you always known what path you wanted to follow?

I haven't always known what path to follow more than getting a good career, being independent and helping my family. Then a war broke out in my region Darfur, the former regime in Sudan succeeded to turn the war into tribal conflicts. The tribes of my parents fought each other for four years, this motivated me to establish the Foundation as a means to start helping my people in Darfur. I was inspired by the work of the Sudanese women leaders of the community-based organizations who are supporting the women at the grass roots to cope with the consequences of the war. The foundation VOND "Darfur women in The Netherlands", is an act of solidarity with the women leaders in Darfur.

What were the challenges you faced towards climbing the ladder of success in your career and how were you able to overcome these challenges?

There were different challenges, such as providing support for the needy people, implementing ambitious projects and finding funds for my organization. I am doing my best to cope with these challenges.

What do you love about your career and why?

I love my freedom. Working for myself gives me freedom and satisfaction.

What are the risks or oppositions that come with your line of career and how have you kept your motivation alive?

I was eager to find a job in The Netherlands. This was extremely difficult, especially for me as a Muslim lady wearing a veil. I studied IT when it was booming in the year 2000. It was a career change and I found the opportunity. Nevertheless, it was stressful to continue, I stopped working. First, to spend more time with my teenage children, and second, to form my own business and luckily, it worked.

In Africa and the world as a whole, women are often overlooked or considered inferior. Has this ever been a problem for you, or in any way slowed down your progress, or does it rather push you to achieve more?

Well, as I stated earlier, this had been a problem which I solved by changing my career. It pushed me to achieve my goals.

How have you been able to impact or influence women with your career?

Our work is about the empowerment of Darfuri women leaders to become peace builders. Together, we have formed a women meditators committee. We have created a unique and innovative mediation method which is short, sharp and powerful. We have mediated between conflicting tribes in Darfur. Our mediation style was replicated by other women leaders in Darfur, and also in another Sudanese conflict region; Kordofan. It is also used by the local authorities of Darfur to replace their own method in dealing with many conflict cases.

Living in a male-dominated world, it may be difficult for some women to pursue their career or achieve their goals. How do you keep your focus thriving to excel in life?

I experienced the difficulty, especially working in the IT world, which is a male-dominated sector. It needs enormous effort to excel in career and life.

How do you balance personal life with your demanding career?

By slowing down my career when I needed to spend time with my children, then I increased my career engagement after they grew up.



Can you tell us your life story?

My parents divorced when I was one year old. My father took me to live with him at the age of four. My parents lived in different areas. At the age of seven, my father put me in school against a strong protest of my uncles and relatives because the education of girls was unfamiliar. I was allowed to travel to my mother during the first school holidays on the condition that my mother should bring me back to school which she refused.

My father travelled to her village to bring me to school, which was already open for three months. We escaped at dawn while my mother was sleeping, and we reached the city. My mother filed a lawsuit against him, because he took me at the age of four and only allowed me to visit her after four years. He argued against her refusal to send me to school as agreed. The judge asked me to write down some letters to prove my enrollment in school. Accordingly, my father won the case under the condition to bring me to her during school holidays. He took me back to school, and he refused to comply with that condition. I was only able to visit my mother at the age of ten. I graduated from university, then I got a decent job as a financial inspector. I married and accompanied my husband to The Netherlands. My parents were re-married during that period. After obtaining my master's degree, we returned to Sudan, I worked as a lecturer in the university. My husband moved back to The Netherlands for his work. I took a sabbatical leave later to join him once again, and to pursue my Ph.D education. During that time, the Arabic department of the Dutch world broadcast, where my husband was working, was closed and my husband became unemployed. I also lost my job as an AIO (assistant in training) in Twente university. I tried hard to find a job, as it was very difficult, for a person like me. Luckily, I was able to enroll in a one-year IT education which gave me the privilege of getting a decent job. As it is also hard to work in the private sector environment, and that was combined with the future of my teenage children I resigned my job with no regret. My husband also found a job, first at the Saudi embassy and later, up to date, in the Ministry of Justice. I spent time helping my children, they performed very well and are now happily achieving their careers and marriage. We established a small business; embassy services which I am still managing and I also established the Foundation VOND.



“when you educate a boy, you educate a man, but when you educate a girl, you educate a nation.”

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Do you have any ethical values or personal beliefs that have directed or direct your path towards your achievements?

My religious orientation and belief are guiding me towards my achievements.

What is your passion, greatest strength and motivation?

Helping others who need my help is my passion. Taking care of my parents and extended family members gives me strength. I was there for my parents when they needed me, I stayed with them during their last days and attended their funerals. I am still taking financial care of some of my half brothers and sisters and my niece; who is a widow and a mother of five children.

Which female leaders in history or present times have inspired you to be the person you are? How have they impacted you?



I am inspired by the Liberian women and the role they played in bringing peace to their country. This motivated me with the empowerment of the Darfuri women leaders, and leading the mediation interventions.

Do you classify your successes as your final destination or do you still aim at stretching your potentials and contributing to the good of the world?

I am still aiming to stretch my potential to contribute to the good of the world.

What is your ideology on women empowerment and how does it improve the society?

Women should be empowered and share every aspect in life. They should be the decision makers as they are the caretakers for their households and the ones who raise and educate the children. I strongly believe in the proverb that: when you educate a boy, you educate a man, but when you educate a girl, you educate a nation.

What issue on women's rights do you think should merit adequate attention and how can we achieve the solution?

Women can be powerful agents of peace. This needs adequate attention through continuous lobby and advocacy. Women are capable of making peace in their own way, as women's interests are simpler than the pursuance of power, or wealth, or political gains. Women succeed in making peace sustainable because they want to maintain normal life, such as having their kids go to school.

COVID-19 has merited the attention of the world and governments. From your career perspective, what is your view on the measures being taken by the government of your country of origin? How does this impact women, society and human rights?

The government of Sudan acted a bit late because they are overwhelmed with internal complications. If we can believe what is circulating in the media about Corona cases in Sudan, then the situation seems to be manageable because only few people are infected. Yet, I am afraid that there is a great deal of ignorance and a sense of stigma as some of those who are diagnosed deny the infection.

What advice will you like to share with any woman that aspires to be like you?

To believe in yourself, and your capabilities, and don't hesitate in pursuing your career and the things that you are passionate about.

With your knowledge and years of leadership experience, what parting message do you have for women and girls that will empower them to pursue their goals, quicken their potentials and enable them to stretch and achieve their visions?

Let us help each other as women, encourage each other and value each other's work and performance.

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Women can be powerful agents of peace. This needs adequate attention through continuous lobby and advocacy. Women are capable of making peace in their own way, as women's interests are simpler than the pursuance of power, or wealth, or political gains. Women succeed in making peace sustainable because they want to maintain normal life, such as having their own family and making sure their children go to school.

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THE STORY OF AYA CHEBBI

Aya Chebbi's story is the one that teaches African women to stand up for themselves and defend their rights and future. She has had to 'heal and liberate her body and mind by learning and unlearning again'. There is a point in life where women have to break the traditions and patterns of society, including the psychological ones. When a woman keeps mute about her natural rights, moral rights and legal rights, it is an inaction which has the consequence of affecting not just one woman but all because, inaction is also an action. Aya Chebbi has been one of the consistent voices for the youth in Africa.



Can you tell us about yourself Ms Chebbi?

I am a Pan-African feminist.

What is your career and relevant academic qualifications?

I am a product of the public education in Tunisia. I did my primary, secondary, and college education in Tunisia. I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from University Tunis El Manar and then went on to do a Master's degree in 2015 in African politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. Currently I serve as the first Special Envoy on the youth of the African Union Commission Chairperson, his excellency Moussa Faki Muhammed.

How have the places where you grew up influence your identity and perspective as a person?

I am an only child to a religious conservative Muslim extended family. But I rebelled from an early age and made radical choices (in the perception of others) about how I want to live, what I want to wear, study, work and believe; with the help of a supportive father. I was born in a village on the Tunisian- Algerian borders where certain traditions were practiced on girls. Very young, I experienced patriarchal abuse, psychological violence and discrimination, and has since carried out my childhood traumas and turned them into resistance, fights and search for liberation.

Activism started for me by standing up for my rights within my extended family and society, then healing and liberating my body and my mind by unlearning and learning again, then grew into action for the collective and becoming a political voice.

I spent my childhood years in eight different cities in Tunisia, following my father who served 40 years in the Tunisian Armed Forces. I had to move to a different city with my parents every two to four years. Living in that mosaic childhood, has built the human I am today, a nomad, curious about new cultures and experiences, immersed in diversity and activist for unity.

What are some of the ways you invested in your life to become the person you are now? What limitations did you have to conquer?

I had a vision for peace, so I travelled to over thirty countries in Africa where I was able to support, train and even work with a vast number of social movement leaders, feminist groups, artist collectives and youth activists across the continent on nonviolent mobilisation, blogging and leadership all of which I learnt by doing. This also led to crossing colonial borders and living with people I have never met before. I experienced Africanity in this sense and I felt at home in every corner of Africa. I began to see myself as a bridge, across languages, cultures, stories and beats, across the Sahara, which is a place meant to bridge us not divide us.

Can you walk us through the events of how have you developed to be a success in your career?

I matured into a political voice in 2010 during the revolution which we called 'Revolution of Dignity' because we revolted for dignity and freedom. This revolution made me believe that change was possible. We took to the streets, to fight for freedom. Without regard to drawbacks of history such as depriving women of equal opportunities, we decided to re-write this history and make it right for the next generation. I recognised that we should stop watching and blaming systems of oppression and instead, take responsibility for our future. I started with my blog; 'Proudly Tunisian', which is read by millions of people, reporting to the world what was happening in my Tunisia, advocating against injustice and stimulating debate and informed policy on issues of gender-based violence, spotlighting issues of rape, racism, and unequal inheritance, whilst documenting our contribution as young women. Through this initiative, I found power in my voice.

Also, the more I travelled, I realised that, in our shared marginalisation as African youth, we could develop a sense of common identity and even a critical consciousness that would enable us to challenge the status quo and to lead, and this is how Afrika Youth Movement (AYM) was established. I created a Facebook group on 7 August 2012. I then added inspiring youths which I met and trained. Later, I launched the first Google Hangout with a vision to build a bold African youth community and bridge North Africa with the rest of the continent, on July 15th, 2014. We shaped the vision and mission of the Afrika Youth Movement through inclusive online participatory dialogues, social media conversations and some series of Google hangouts for the first six months. I came across several inspiring young Africans who availed themselves to work with me to make this vision a concrete reality and were willing to turn their frustration, anger and consciousness of political and economic struggles into a collective positive action for Africa. At the moment, AYM has grown from 500 online members to over 10,000 grassroots leaders from forty-two countries across Africa and the Diaspora.

What were the challenges you faced towards climbing the ladder of success in your career and how were you able to overcome these challenges?

Although AYM has celebrated many victories. For instance, we have supported youth elected into office, prevented violence during election times, protected human rights defenders, changed the narrative and radicalised more youth to our pan-African movement. However, we have also gone through hard times in the last decade, where youth around me lost hope in peace, because of the rise of terrorism on an unprecedented scale, which caused young activists to fall into desperation and depression. Some of the youth even channelled their energy into violent extremism. For example, my 22-year-old cousin was recruited by Daesh.

I launched the Africa Inspire Project when I realised that young people need to see models and positive stories to reflect on their understanding of violence and its impact. I proceeded and produced my first long documentary called 'Kenya's Conscious Transformation'. I made this documentary with one camera, a tripod which was broken and a cheap microphone. The documentary centred on the role of youth and women in the peacebuilding process of the 2013 elections compared to the previous 2007 post-election violence. I promoted Kenya's model which chooses peace instead of violence. Since then, the documentary has been screened and debated in many African countries, schools and universities. In November 2018, I was appointed as the first African Union Youth Envoy.

How have you been able to impact or influence women with your career?

I have created many platforms for young women to speak out and have access to the digital space. One of them is the 'Voice of Women Initiative' which is a feminist collective where we train correspondents from around the world, to document the stories of ordinary women doing extraordinary things. As a feminist collective, we laid the groundwork for a new culture of debate. The use of online tools and the conquest of the digital space is key to my activism work and in revolutionising the way we campaign and organise activism.

Can you tell us your life story?

I come from a village in the northwest of Tunisia, where a traditional ritual called 'tasfih' also known as 'the locker' is practiced on girls. This ritual is believed to safeguard the virginity of girls and prevent them from having sexual intercourse. When I turned nine years, thus, even before entering puberty, tasfih was practiced on my cousins and I. I was dragged into a room, whereby an elder scratched my knees seven times with a razor blade, and further made me eat seven dried grapes dipped in the blood from my knees. While eating the grapes, I was told to repeat the words; "I am a wall, and he is a thread" and "blood from my knee, close my little hole." This spell is usually lifted the day before the girl's wedding day. He is a wall, I am a thread" are the words which ought to be repeated whilst lifting the spell.

I would say that going through tasfih was the start of a long-term trauma for me. Our bodies may heal from physical pain when violated but the psychological trauma and the damage that occurs in the mind becomes a challenge. Also, there was no time for me to heal since society does not consider trauma healing essential in the growth of children. I cried that night and realised that I had gone through some form of violence because of my gender. After some years, I became convinced that practices like tasfih were weapons of patriarchy used to keep women trapped in inequality. It was from that moment that my activism, thus, standing up for my rights and challenging traditional norms began. I have been perceived as a rebel in my extended family since then because I have lived differently from what the culture and society expects. I am the only child to my parents. My father who is a retired Colonel, Major who served 40 years in the Tunisian Armed Forces, impacted in me a strong sense of self-worth and the innermost conviction that I deserve the same chances in life just like everyone and he paved the way for me. Although we had our fundamental disagreements, yet, he provided protection for the consequences of my "radical" actions. My father nurtured my courage to be bold, and truly, it really takes a lot of courage in our societies, as young women, to speak up. When I think of a feminist man, I think of my father.

What are some of the important values you have which helped you to be successful?

The values of Pan Africanism, freedom and dignity.

How do you balance personal life with your demanding career?

As the Millennials, I think we have more tools to balance and manage our time and responsibilities. I try to live by my rule of five every day; I read, I write, I mentor, I meditate and I act. I try to find between diplomacy and activism, time for me to reflect, meditate and share with other young people through mentorship.

Do you classify your successes as your final destination or you still aim at stretching your potential and contributing to the good of the world?

There are never ending lines of dreams and success. Even the success I reached and where I am today changed me, I have moved from resistance, activism to building and bringing alternative solutions that work.

To be an effective change-maker, one needs to move from the space of noise-making and complaining about how things are not working, to use our platforms to bridge the gap between youth and the African political system, which the youth is challenging and should keep challenging, including the African Union. Therefore, I will always be Aya, the revolutionary, radical feminist activist. I will always speak truth to power. I will always push for progressive, more inclusive and more empowered positions for young people across Africa. I believe there is a lot to do yet.

What is your ideology on women empowerment and how does it improve the society?

Towards the world where gender equality is a reality, a world where women own their own narratives, because our struggle is a struggle for voice. Being feminist is being an everyday activist, it's when you do not only speak for yourself, but also try to change the reality of women around you, who don't have the same privileges and access to education, health, and even the internet.

What issue on women's rights do you think should merit adequate attention and how can we achieve the solution?

Fear holds many girls back from education. There are girls in every region of the world who face sexual abuse from teachers and trusted adults. Others face abuse in the home that erodes their sense of worth and their performance in school. In conflict regions, there is violence and instability to contend with.

We need to make our homes, schools and communities safe spaces as by addressing root causes of violence, refusing to remain silent, and providing trusted spaces for girls to speak up and escape violence, we can give these girls a fighting chance at a future. So although we have been set backwards, we shall strive to be in the front lines. We have to continue to set our countries on a constitutional path of maturation and our societies are aware about Gender Equality. Women are half of society in their quality and in the productive force in various fields. There can be no victory for a nation, half of which is paralyzed.

What advice will you like to share with any woman that aspires to be like you?

We need to understand as young women that we are lucky, because we have role models. Many African women in leadership positions around the world, where those women themselves hadn't got the chance to see women in leadership before. We also have to be ready for cracking space for leadership. My generation of young women need to provide more space and mentor younger women to come to the space. I don't want to see rooms any more with just me as the only female on the table. I want to see it 50/50.

With your knowledge and years of leadership experience, what parting message do you have for women and girls that will empower them to pursue their goals, quicken their potentials and enable them to stretch and achieve their visions?

Women and girls, my message to you is to find your own identity and live your mission. You need to know who you are, what you stand for, and what are your values. Believe in the power of Pan Africanism because there is no Pan Africanism without Feminism. Be coherent, find your true self, keep going however, challenges you will find and even failure you pass through. Your power is in your radical self, find it.

“

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Photo derived from UNICEF

Second Hand Book Project- A Project of the Women Empowerment Team Supporting Girls Education

By Azizat Sulaimon

Centre For African Justice, Peace and Human Rights

The Centre for African Justice, Peace and Human Rights is a Non-Governmental Organization (CAJPHR) based in the Hague, Netherlands. We focus on four specific projects:

- Sexual Violence against the Male Gender
- Women Empowerment
- Right to Quality Education
- Capacity Building

CAJPHR was established in 2017 and founded by Ms. Sophia Ugwu a legal practitioner based in the Netherlands. The board members are Ms. Sophia Ugwu as the chairperson, Mr. Takeh Sendze as the treasurer, and Ms. Adesola Adeboyejo as the Secretary [1]. We carry out different projects aimed at restoring and sustaining peace, justice and human rights in Africa.

For more information about our organization and our projects kindly visit our website @centreforafricanjustice.org

Women Empowerment Team

The Women Empowerment Team is a subsection of the CAJPHR that is tasked with the responsibility of managing, creating and organizing programmes aimed at empowering young girls and women to be able to pursue their dreams and make valuable changes to the society.

[1] Centre for African Justice, Peace and Human Rights, 'What We Do' <centreforafricanjustice.org/about/> accessed 1 April 2020

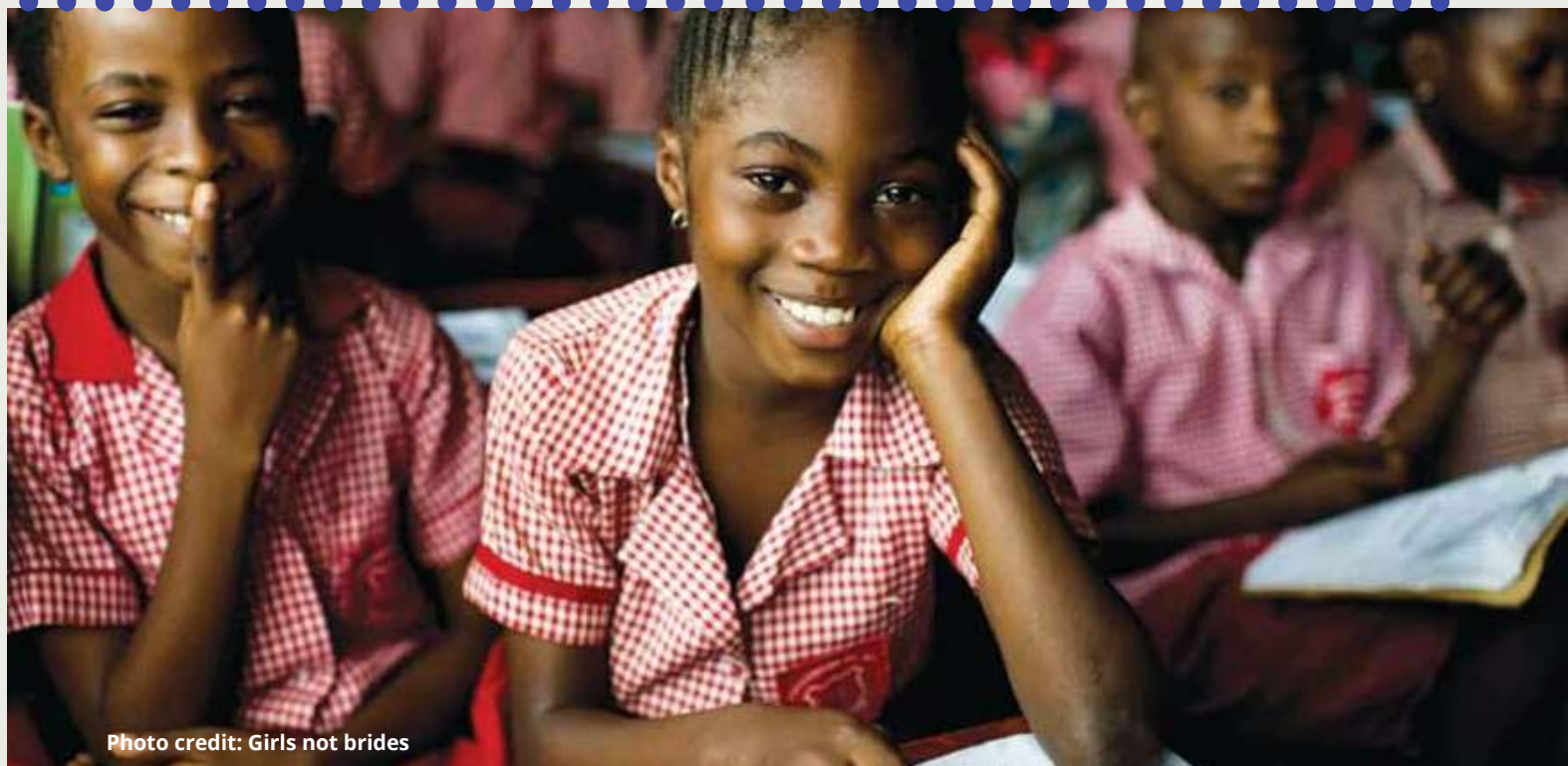


Photo credit: Girls not brides

The two major sections of the women empowerment project are; women empowerment as an instrument of peacebuilding and empowering women through education. The first project aims for women to become agents of peace in society while striving to achieve their highest potentials in life. The second project aims to empower women through education. Our team work towards providing resources and opportunities to women in Africa. The women empowerment team has partnered with some schools in the Netherlands to collect second-hand books to help educate less-privileged women in need of academic support. Some of the schools are; The International Institute of Social Studies and The Hague University of Applied Science. Also, the team was able to publish their first magazine issue that discusses issues affecting women in Africa and empowering women through capacity building.[2]

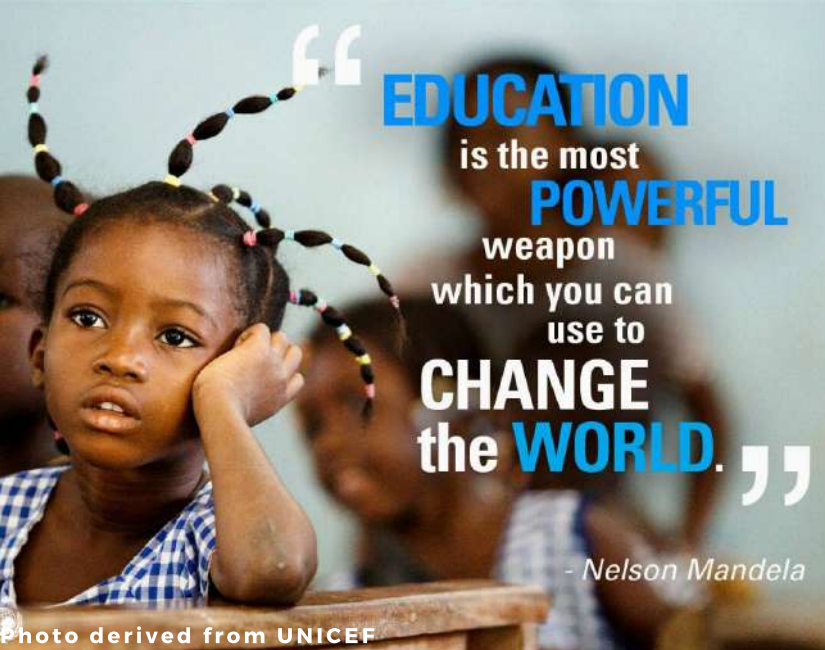
Based on our vision and goals, the women empowerment team of CAJPHR decided to embark on a project aimed at providing young girls and women the necessary reading materials to improve their education. We believe that the greatest means of empowering women is through education.

Second Hand Book Project

The second-hand book project is a project that was planned and organized by the women empowerment team of CAJPHR. The project was aimed at young girls and women struggling to go to school or acquire the necessary materials needed to aid their education. The purpose of this project was to collect books to reach primary and secondary school libraries and universities in Africa. The targets were schools where the girls there do not have adequate access to reading materials which may help facilitate their study.

The project is also aimed at less privileged girls and girls with disabilities as it also targets girls who are not able to continue with their education due to financial difficulties or cultural barriers among other reasons that may deprive them of proper education. Most of the books we were able to gather were for tertiary education and they include; adult literature, relevant textbooks on arts, sciences, humanities, and social studies. The CAJPHR will be supporting the education of these women by donating the books to their schools and libraries. We were able to gather a total of 133 for the tertiary level. We aimed for both primary and secondary levels but unfortunately, we couldn't get partnerships or donations for these sets of books. So we could only aid the shipment of the books we collected for undergraduates. In the future, we hope to get partners to help with materials for both primary and secondary levels.

[2]Centre for African Justice, Peace and Human Rights 'Women Empowerment Team'
<centreforafricanjustice.org/women-empowerment/> accessed April 1 2020



Second Hand Book Project- A Project of the Women Empowerment Team Supporting Girls Education

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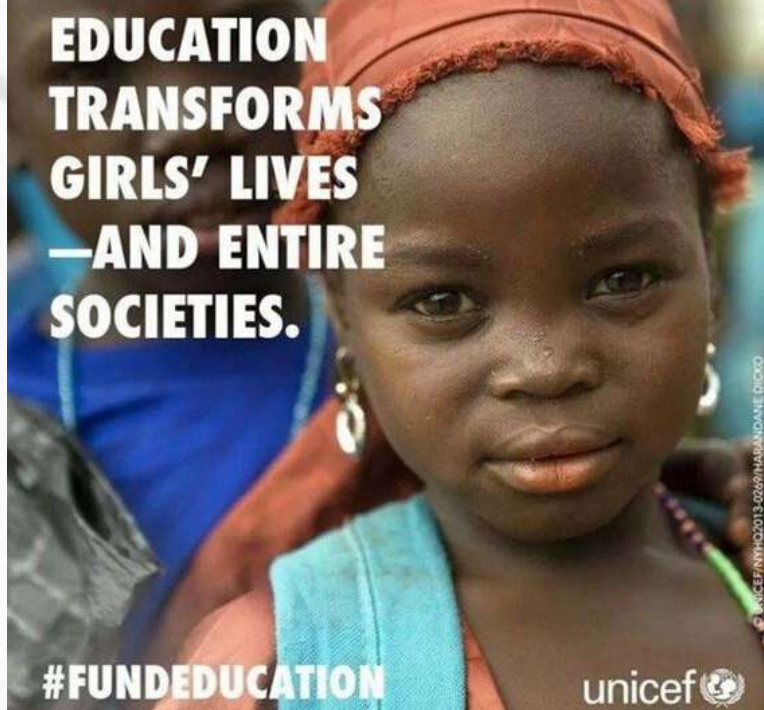
The project was a success due to the commitment and contributions from the team of CAJPHR, the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THAUS) and the International Criminal Court (ISS) who provided second-hand books from their libraries and the help of one of our partner who facilitated the shipment of the books to Nigeria, in the person of Dr. Emmanuel Ekpenyong.

This project was a part of the 2019 project on the list of the women empowerment team of CAJPHR and we have been able to achieve this with the effort and commitment of the women empowerment team of the CAJPHR and noticeable collaborations with institutions that were willing to be a part of this significant project. The objective of the women empowerment team is to empower women and girls and to provide them with the necessary tools to actualize their greatest potential. There is no better way to achieve this than through education. That is why the project is directed at improving the education of these young girls and women. The focus for the project was West Africa, specifically Nigeria, and we may be looking into other parts of Africa, probably East Africa or North Africa in the nearest future.

The members of the Women Empowerment Team who embarked on this project were Cynthia Ngozi Kamara Njoku, Sami Bottu, Ibrahim Mohammed, Azizat Sulaimon and Veronique Mirre-Gervais. This project has been a success because of the zeal and dedication of our team members and the immense contributions of our partners.



**EDUCATION
TRANSFORMS
GIRLS' LIVES
—AND ENTIRE
SOCIETIES.**



Second Hand Book Project- A Project of the Women Empowerment Team Supporting Girls Education

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Education as a Tool for Empowering Women

Girls' education goes beyond getting them to school. It also about ensuring they have the right materials and facilities to aid their learning and complete all levels of education to acquire the right skills that will equip them and prepare them for the competition in the labor market. Also for girls to be able to survive in the changing world and make positive decisions that will impact their lives and contribute to their communities and the world as a whole. This is why CAJPHR has decided to support the education of these girls .[3]

The education of girls is a strategic development priority. Women who get educated tend to be healthier, effectively participate in the formal labor market, and earn higher incomes.

According to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, "about 130 million girls between the age of 16 and 17 are out of schools" and 15 million girls of the ages of primary school level from sub- Saharan Africa will never even enroll in school."[4] By supporting the education of the few who get to enroll in school, we will be reducing the number of school dropouts, early marriages, unwanted pregnancies among other threats to the development of women.

In the past, women were not allowed to access education. As women were often limited to domestic activities and marriage. We need to understand that education is very important for women because women are the mothers of the future generation and future generations may not be educated when women are not educated.[5] History has shown that "if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation". [6]



[3]World Bank, 'Girls Education' (25 May 2017)><www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation> accessed 29 March 2020

[4]Laura Paddison, 'Educating Girls:The Key to Tackling Global Poverty' (Guardian, 4 October 2017) www.theguardian.com/opportunity-international-roundtables/2017/oct/04/global-poverty-child-marriageeducation-girls> accessed 30 March 2020



Photo derived from UNICEF

Second Hand Book Project- A Project of the Women Empowerment Team Supporting Girls Education

By Azizat Sulaimon

Education is an important aspect of empowerment. It is crucial to let women understand what the problem is, how they can impact in the best possible way they can. It is not possible to fix what you are not aware of or create a better condition for yourself without having the tools to aid that. The women empowerment team believes that everyone regardless of gender, race or religion should have access to education. We are willing to do everything in our capacity to equip women with the instrument they need to succeed.

Educated women have better access and opportunities in the labor market, which will, in turn, reduce the isolation of women, increase their chances of earning more. Studies show that if every girl completes 12 years of education, the rate of child marriage will drop by 64% and health complications from early pregnancy, such as early births and childbirths would be reduced by 59% and 49% respectively. Also, educating women can help boost the economy of a nation.[7] Education makes a woman aware of her rights, values, and potentials and protects her from being exploited, abused or devalued.

Barriers to Girls Education

In most parts of the developing world, access to education is made available to everyone. However, that is not the case in Africa. It is bad enough that most children do not have access to proper education and it is even worse for girls, as a majority of them may never enroll in a school.



Photo derived from UNICEF



[5]Olumide Idowu, 'Education as a Tool for Women Empowerment' (9 Decemeber 2017) <<https://c21stnigeria.wordpress.com/2017/12/09/education-as-a-tool-for-women-empowerment/>> accessed 1 April 2020

[6]Tinuola Aina and Annah Bengesai, ' Role of Education in Women Empowerment' (Empower Women, 23 November 2016) <<https://www.empowerwomen.org/en/community/discussions/2016/11/role-of-education-in-women-empowerment>> accessed 1 April 2020

world's poor are
women.
-UNDP

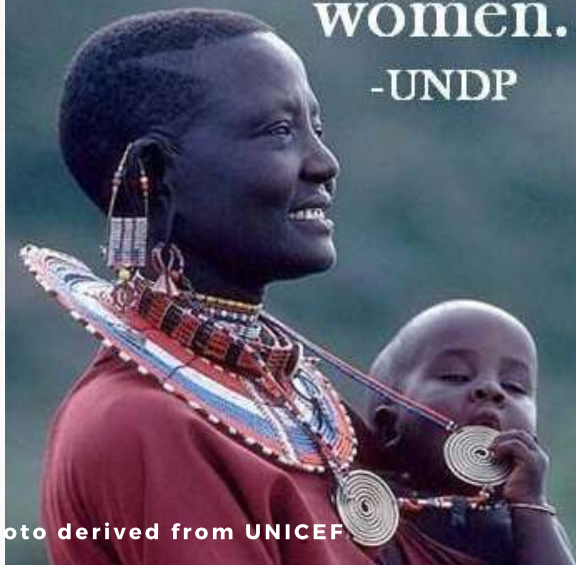


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Girls often face challenges that prevent them from accessing educational services. This may be caused by poverty, cultural practices, and norms, fragility, and violence. Education for girls is important as every child needs to be able to exercise their basic human rights, especially access to education. CAJPHR believes that educating girls is a priority and it is crucial for the survival and well being of every woman. It is also one of the effective ways of improving the economy of a nation and tackling climate change. [8]

Conclusion

Poverty remains a critical factor that determines whether girls can have access to education in their country. In Nigeria for instance, only 4% of poor young women in the Northern region are literate, compared to 99% of rich young women in the South East region. The majority of the girls who are left behind are often from remote areas, low earning families, belong to a minority ethnolinguistic group or disabled. Other reasons that may deprive girls of going to schools are early child marriage, cultural norms and practices, and violence.

We appreciate all the contributions and donations of all our partners towards the completion of this project and every member of CAJPHR who contributed to this project.

We believe these books will be of utmost support to the education of our beneficiaries. We will make sure to update you all as soon as we receive feedback from these girls.

We aim to continue on this path by providing materials aimed at supporting the education of girls and creating platforms to empower women.



Photo derived from UNICEF



[7]Ashleen Knutsen, 'Women Empowerment Through Education' (Your Dream, 6 June 2018) <<https://yourdream.liveyourdream.org/2018/96/womens-empowerment-education/>>
[8]World Bank, 'Girls Education' (25 May 2017)> <www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation> accessed 29 March 2020



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