

HERstory

A short book of personal stories on triumphs, failures, journeys, and female leadership.

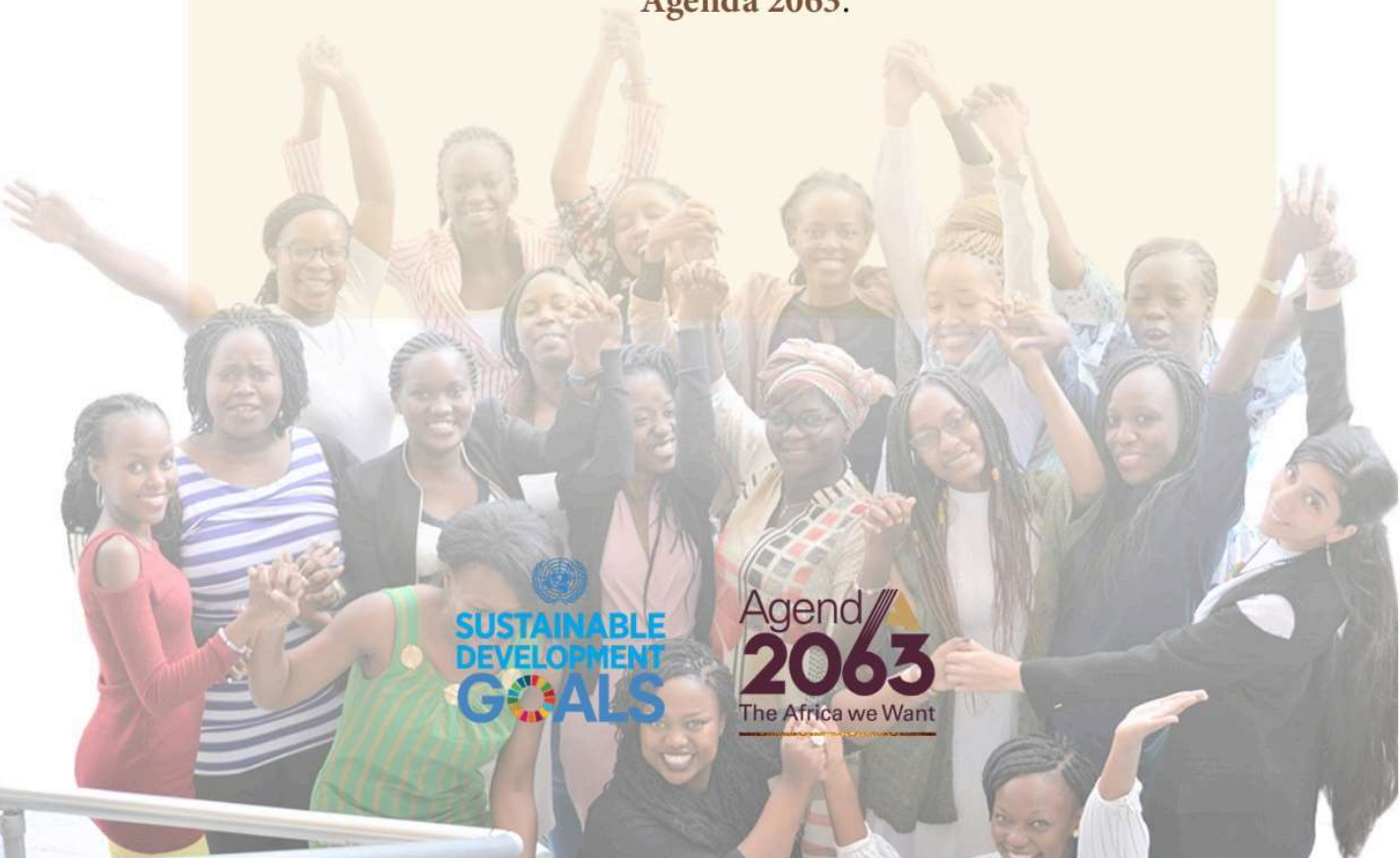


Written by:

The 21 African Young Women Leaders Cohort 1

WHO WE ARE?

The **African Young Women Leaders (AYWL)** are the first cohort of a Fellowship Programme that is jointly implemented by **The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** and **the African Union Commission (AUC)**. The programme seeks to build a new generation of young African women leaders and experts that will serve Africa and the world in designing and implementing development programmes in the context of the **SDGs** and **Agenda 2063**.



DEDICATION

To every SHEntrepreneur.

To every SHExecutive.

To every SHExplorer.

To every SHExperimenter.

To every SHEnabler.

To every SHEverything.

To every SHE.

May our stories be of inspiration to you.



PROLOGUE

The story of Africa as a historical powerhouse is often untold. Instead, the story of our continent is often clouded with inaccurate narratives of perpetual inadequacy and failure.

But, as 21 young African woman leaders, our collective mission is to be a part of the generation that will rewrite this old narrative. Our stories will be seeds of hope for the rebirth of a fulfilled, triumphant and a more affluent Africa.

We are extraordinary young women with extraordinary dreams, born and bred on the same soils as you, stretching from Cape to Cairo. Our journeys attest to the conviction that resilience and determination make dreams a reality.

These are stories of how life's journey has taken us from the embrace of Africa's sunshine through many lands, trials and experiences to a seat among the stars of Africa and the world.

We hope that our stories encourage you to take charge of and set a bold trajectory for your own destiny. We believe we carry with us a message of strength and of beating the odds.

These are snippets of our collective stories. . . .

I was only 3 months in my mother's womb when I was nearly miscarried. My father passed on from cancer when I was 9 months young. Thus, I was raised by my matriarchal mother, a fire and force of a woman who always reinforced me with the confidence of my African heritage, the advantage of my gender and individuality and my duty to serve humanity. Because of her, I grew up knowing I could become anything that I wanted to be in the world.

I am primarily my biggest inspiration and supporter. I have a penchant for learning new things across different spectrums of life. Determination and resilience are the two main core values I display with great mastery during difficult periods. Growing up, I walked 5 kilometres to get to school every day, but because of an enduring thirst for knowledge, I never felt the burden, even as I grappled with Tuberculosis. Our village only had one primary school which was an old building with a few chairs limited to a small group of learners; whilst the rest of us sat on bricks. Consequently, the dropout rate was high and students from my village barely passed the national examinations required to advance to high school.

To make matters worse, I had no electricity to study at night. But it never discouraged me. I would revise my lessons on my way to fetching water and collecting firewood or on my way to the market. Mother always made sure that we had enough lamp oil to dedicate 1 hour every evening to complicated subjects.

As fate would have it, I finished top 2 of my class and consistently ranked 1st – only on rare occasions ranking 2nd. However, I was not able to go into university for 3 years. I sat for the public university entrance exams but was not able to get in, not because I was not qualified but because we had the quota system where they could only pick a certain number of students per district. I slipped into depression, I was tempted to drown myself in alcohol and abuse drugs. I had nothing to do and nothing to look forward to. It was my faith in God that held me back and stopped me from falling into the deep end. I even became a nanny at some point to occupy myself and generate an income. But by his grace, I got an education grant. Then came the time to choose a career path. There is a stereotype that if you are a good student you must join engineering or medical school. I also remember the national university

intake policy was 70% for natural science and 30% for the social field. So, it was logical to think that the natural science job market would be much more prospectively.

Though my heart was not in it, almost everyone around me did their very best to convince me that medicine would be the most ideal career choice for me. Neither remarks nor the policy pushed me back from my choice because I knew what I wanted at heart. I listened to myself drowning out their voices and went with what my soul was telling me. I told them “this is my life and I get to decide my destiny”. My passion determined my decisions. I did not allow other people to make decisions for me.

Filled with ambition and determination as I studied for my law degree in Perth, Western Australia, I was certain that I was on my way to becoming a Human Rights lawyer. Unexpectedly, towards the completion of my degree, I was confronted with institutional racism that effectively crushed my legal aspirations. The strenuous and futile process of trying to seek justice from the law school’s leadership took a toll on my mental health and I made the tough but ultimately fruitful decision to withdraw from law school and enrol for another social science course at a University in South Africa.

I left home to explore non-French-speaking countries. This decision led me to drastically improving my English skills and getting accepted into the University of Oxford. Had I not set out on this PhD road, I would probably not be here, part of the first generation of the AUC-UNDP African Young Women Leaders, engaged and deeply rooted in African and global realities, at the forefront of SDG action and Agenda 2063.

At the time when the offer letter for the fellowship came, I was engaged to be married. I knew that the fellowship was something that I wanted so the decision to leave was not unquestionable. My fiancé encouraged me to grab this opportunity with both hands and run with it. In the patriarchal, stereotypical, misogynistic world that we live in, I am grateful for my fiancé, who refuses to reinforce the barriers and labels that society has created for women. I believe that with more men like him, many women would be empowered to go after their dreams.

Through this unique space, I have learned to serve those I am called to serve and nurture those that will follow. It is laying a foundation for what is ahead and just like a sponge I am soaking in everything I am learning from the UNDP community around me. I have a sense of fulfilment and purpose knowing that the work I do to integrate

gender dimensions has directly or indirectly impacted young women in Africa. I am truly happy to be a part of a programme whose ethos is to shape me for global leadership. The journey has just begun. I hope to continue working in the development space and on the SDGs to reduce inequalities, so that the next generation can have a fairer chance and more equal access to opportunities. So that quality education is not just for a privileged few and that young women like me can know that being born female is a blessing and they too can achieve anything. There are millions of stories like mine, but I should not be the exception where an opportunity revolutionizes a life.

While I work in UNDP now and say jargon like “leave no one behind” and “empowered lives, resilient nations”, I also feel the commitment to create opportunities to make sure that everybody is brought on board and given a chance to empower their own lives and make their own nations and spaces resilient.

Even though at times I was made to believe that in life you need to “go with the flow”, I choose to believe that as you go with the flow you need to find ways to create your own flow. Had I not travelled for my studies and work experience, I doubt anything else would have driven, to such an extent, my ability to discover, learn from and adapt to locations and people from different walks of life and with different cultural backgrounds. As I remain curious about how my story will continue as life progresses, I know that this fellowship path would have played a very critical role in shaping my future and when all is said and done my story will be that of “making change”.

These are our stories.

We are the voices of not one but 21 ordinary young African women who emerged from the corners of a presently distressed but hopeful continent with exponential talent and potential. We come with pockets full of dreams and the passion to rewrite Africa’s history and ultimate destiny.

Yes, we may face defeats and witness the sun set along the way, but we persevere and push forward. Morning has broken and you are the sun rise.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

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**Name:**

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Beninese

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degree in Economics, with optional development policy analysis, then, in 2014, a second Bachelor's degree in Communication for development.

At that time, I needed of money; I needed to have a laptop; I started working in a supermarket and I even worked as a hostess at some events to make a living. One day, while I was still working at the supermarket, I met someone I knew, and he promised that he would top up my money to buy the laptop. I was so happy. The lesson I learned from that experience was that when one is unemployed, do not just stay at home complaining, rather try, and reach out to people by engaging oneself in one business or the other, even checking out job opportunities online.

Later on, in 2016, after an internship, I decided to go for an MBA program in Development Finance at the African School of Economics in Benin, which was taught in English. That was a very big challenge for me, but necessary to have more opportunities in the future. However, to conduct research on my MBA thesis, I travelled to Ghana for my internship at the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in 2016. This internship was done without payment, so I sponsored myself. Luckily, a generous and anonymous colleague paid for my rent throughout my stay. I never knew the person until the day of my departure, the secretary decided to reveal the Good Samaritan to me; that was my supervisor. I couldn't believe it, because he didn't show any

Nelson Mandela said: "It is in your hands, to make a better world for all who live in it."

Marina Sénami Monkoun dit: "Le leadership est un comportement."

"Essaie toujours, tout est possible!"

The Persistent Marina

Marina Senami Monkoun

I was born in Côte d'Ivoire to Beninese parents. My late father was a pedologist while my mother is a businesswoman, she has an attieke restaurant. Attieke is a special dish that Ivoirians eat every day. I grew up in a family of 13 and I am the last born. When I was growing up, I formed the habit of studying. In the year 2009, I completed my secondary education and I obtained my baccalauréat diploma (BACD) in Côte d'Ivoire. Then, I returned to my country, Republic of Benin, to continue my studies at the University of Abomey-Calavi. In 2013, I obtained a Bachelor's



I got an ARES scholarship in Belgium, to do a specialized Master in Microfinance and I graduated in 2019 at Université Libre de Brussels.



Left: I graduated with an MBA in 2016 in Benin, and my mother was there to support me; it was a long and challenging Master journey as the teaching language was English.

Right: In Dakar, Senegal 2017, where I lead my YALI team throughout the write-up, formulation of a GAR (Generated Activities Revenue) project and its implementation in relation to a 28-years-old widow of 5 children. The project was presented to a YALI jury.

sign that indicates that he was the one behind this good deed. His car was older than that of the other employees. This experience taught me never to judge by appearance.

In parallel with my studies, I took up a part-time job in the same institution for two years to be able to pay my tuition fees which were very high and to have money for my allowance. I worked voluntarily in the communal, local, and presidential elections as an observer and polling station agent in my country, Benin in 2016. I enjoy being a civil society activist.

In Benin, I founded an association called Community Hands Together Benin (CHTB) in March 2016. The sole aim of this association is to promote entrepreneurship among young people. Therefore, in January 2017, I was selected in Senegal, to participate in the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), under the “Civic Leadership” component. When I returned to my country, Benin, I decided to lead by example by starting up a business of my own in a restaurant from July 2017 to September 2018, and now my brother has continued with this initiative with some few friends who are mostly students. However, at the same period, I was able to start another internship program from August 2016 to August 2017 at the Ministry of Higher Education in Benin. Luckily, it was a paying one. Then, in the morning hours, I usually went for my internship program and in the evening hours, I was equally occupied with the work in my restaurant.

It has always been my dream to participate in the decision-making in the society with regards to the well-being of people, at a higher level. I decided to specialize in my career in 2018, I applied and got an ARES scholarship to do a master’s degree in microfinance at the Université Libre de Bruxelles in Belgium. In 2019, I went to Bangladesh for three months to conduct research on digital money in the microfinance sector for my thesis with the Ghashful-NGO. During my stay in Bangladesh, I saw the call for applications for the African Young Women’s Leaders Fellowship Programme (AUC-UNDP) and I applied. I prayed and waited to be selected, and on November 4, I got the good news. I was so happy for this opportunity that was given to me by God and I thank Him for my first professional experience in the UN system in its development agency, UNDP, to participate in the implementation of the SDGs and leaving no one behind. Then, I joined UNDP Burkina Faso on 25 November 2019 as a research associate in the Strategy and Policy Unit. My parents, friends, my community, and even people who do not know me very well are proud of this achievement.

Now I am preparing and looking forward for the next step after this fellowship.



Left: This year, the United Nations celebrate 75 years of existence, so I took this picture to commemorate this day. Due to COVID-19, we followed the celebration online in Burkina Faso.

Right: My first mission as a UNDP Fellow with some colleagues during the African Economic Conference (AEC), jointly organized by the African Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Africa and UNDP, held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, from 2 to 4 December 2019. The conference theme was “Jobs, Entrepreneurship and Capacity Development for African Youths”.



The Ambitious Mounirah



Life's true beauty resides in how we perceive the things that come our way, and we need to be sufficiently patient and open-minded to understand them and take proper action.



Amadou Mounirah Mariam Bissiri

“What if”?

What if I had not chosen to leave my home country and my family at age 17 to pursue my undergraduate studies in Paris? What if for the following nine years

I had not settled down in cities, countries, and a continent fundamentally different from where I come from? What if I had let this scary picture, for the teenager I was and the young lady I have become throughout, overcome my thirst of reading more than one page of the world's book?

Had I not travelled for my studies and work experience, I doubt anything else would have driven, to such an extent, my ability to discover, learn from, and adapt to locations and people from different walks of life and with different cultural backgrounds.

My former classmates and friends often refer to me as a “carrier pigeon”. I used to reason that this stemmed from the extensive travelling capabilities of the bird. Then, I remembered the prime feature of a carrier pigeon as being an effective messenger. Am I? Which message(s) have I carried so far and which one(s) do I want to carry further?

I want to believe I have carried a message of strength and beating the odds. Right from three months into my mother's womb – I was nearly miscarried. Growing up, I was almost always “too young”. Too young to be accepted into primary school, into an all-girls boarding school, to be granted a French student visa. Yes, I attended a boarding school, 20 kilometres away from Ouagadougou, the capital city. I was 10 years old. The age average was 12 in the first year of middle-school. Although I successfully passed the admission test, it was on the condition of performing well in the first quarter of the school year. I finished



Leading a session for raising awareness on legal instruments and existing mechanisms for GBV victims to assert their rights @ the University of Sarh (Southern Chad) - March 2020

Receiving my 3rd prize winner certificate for outstanding scientific contribution @ the 3rd edition of the African Energy & Renewable Energy Week (SEERA) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso – April 2019



Last day of class for the MSc students in Energy and Environmental Technology @ the Dept. of Mechanical Engineering of City, University of London (UK) – A few students (non-Africans/non-Blacks) are missing in this selfie with two lecturers in the front row (left and right) – Italy, France, UK, India, Sri-Lanka, Palestine, and of course, Burkina Faso, are represented – April 2016

top 2 of my class and consistently ranked 1st – only on rare occasions, ranking 2nd – until I left for high-school.

What if I had not fought for my place in this boarding school? I probably would not have learnt many of the basics of living away from home. It did help me strive in my first year in France. What if I had not left France to explore non-French-speaking countries – South Africa, England, Austria, and Portugal? I, most probably, would not have drastically improved my English skills, and almost certainly not pursued a PhD. Had I not set out on this PhD road, I would probably not be here in Chad, part of the first cohort of the Fellowship Programme.

I have come a long way toward taking responsibility for and embracing every choice I have made. As a year 1 student in Engineering Science later specialising in Physics, I wanted to become an R&D (research & development) engineer in renewable energy to “bring energy access to my people”. Although my drive for the “R&D” portion faded along the way, I have achieved more than I thought I could and added a further level to it. I am specialising in making optimal use of renewable energy technologies in a complex system

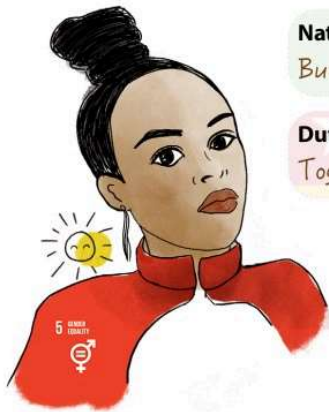
Left: At the College of Arts & Sciences of Boston University (Massachusetts, USA) where my father studied. He was completing his PhD degree when I was born in Burkina Faso. His PhD fellows popped a bottle of champagne to celebrate my birth. This picture was taken by my “American uncle” who happens to be one of my dad’s PhD fellows, as I was just starting my first year of doctoral research back in Portugal - August 2018

Right: Last day of tutoring class with my brilliant student (of Nigerian origin) @ her parents’ house in the East London area. I was supporting her in Mathematics and English. We’ve kept in touch via her mother’s WhatsApp. She is a big girl now and still performing great at school - June 2016

thinking which encompasses engineering modelling, economics/finance and policies.

My experience at UNDP Chad comes as a crucial added value to my academic training and my professional and personal growth. I have learnt that stepping out of one’s comfort zone is a continuous process. Leading a one-hour session with over 300 people on the legal instruments against gender-based violence in Southern Chad, has pushed the limits I had set to myself. I was told that this was great preparation on my leadership path, and that my parents could be proud of their daughter. I hope they are. I am deeply thankful for their unwavering support in honing my education and myself. I want to keep on nurturing the seeds of this Fellowship to grow into a strong and inspiring woman leading meaningful change in my country, my continent, and the world.



**Name:**

Marina Imanishimwe

Nationality:

Burundian

Duty Station:

Togo Country Office

The Opportunity Grabber Marina

Marina Imanishimwe

Issue d'une famille de 7 enfants, je suis née et ai grandi à Bujumbura, la capitale du Burundi. J'ai la chance d'avoir des parents qui valorisent fortement l'éducation et c'est pour cela que nous avons tous pu avoir la meilleure éducation qu'ils pouvaient nous offrir. J'ai fait mes études primaires et secondaires en langue française. Une moitié de ma famille ayant déménagé en Ouganda pour des raisons professionnelles, j'ai décidé de me lancer un défi en faisant mes études universitaires en Anglais et j'ai pu obtenir ma licence en Droit. J'avais toujours voulu, par ma voix et mes actions, apporter la justice à ceux qui sont les plus vulnérables et qui en ont le plus besoin. Je suis née dans un pays qui a connu des guerres civiles pendant un long moment. Comme conséquences de ces guerres, de nombreux orphelins sont confrontés à de malheureux souvenirs, de nombreuses personnes se sont retrouvées sans rien du jour au lendemain, une haine est née entre amis, frères ou voisins. En grandissant, j'ai voulu panser les blessures de ceux que je pouvais atteindre, d'où mon désir d'étudier le droit.



"The journey is yours. Enjoy each and every step." – Unknown Author

"Le voyage est à vous. Profitez de chaque étape." - Auteur inconnu



Ma famille a ensuite déménagé en Ethiopie, toujours pour des raisons professionnelles, mais je suis rentrée au Burundi avec mon père. J'ai eu l'opportunité de faire un stage professionnel au sein de la Cour d'Appel de Bujumbura, à l'issue duquel la Ministre de la Justice m'a nommée pour travailler en tant que « magistrate auxiliaire ». J'avais 23 ans et suis donc devenue la plus jeune magistrate auxiliaire du Burundi. J'ai occupé ce poste pendant une année, et gérer les affaires juridiques au sein du tribunal a développé en moi une passion pour le bien-être des enfants et des femmes. Ceci, d'autant que mon pays est patriarcal et que j'aimerais voir certaines choses ne favorisant pas les femmes burundaises, changer. Par la suite, la Chine, à travers son Ambassade au Burundi, m'a octroyé une bourse pour poursuivre des études de Master en leadership féminin. Cela compte comme l'une de mes plus belles expériences car j'y ai beaucoup appris sur les femmes leaders et leurs différents parcours. J'ai, à l'occasion, eu la chance de rencontrer la Première Dame chinoise, Peng Li Yuan, qui m'a non seulement inspiré de la confiance, mais également démontré un dévouement pour son pays et une humilité assez rare.

La somme de tous ces éléments m'a naturellement



08/03/2020: Picture taken on international women's day with the RR of UNDP Togo, RC of UN Togo, Female staff present on that day, including the only female driver of UNDP Togo, one of the female cleaners and a female security guard.



Top Left: My classmates in China; we were 26 women from 17 African and Asian countries, all under scholarships. Prior that, we were all working for our Governments in different fields. We became sisters till date and created great memories together despite all our differences

Top Right: 08th March 2019, I was invited by the Embassy of France in China to attend their ceremony for "International women's day"

Bottom Left: June 2019, graduation ceremony

Bottom Right: April 2018, I and my classmates visited Shenzhen, one of the top 4 modern and economically rich Provinces of China to get firsthand stories of successful women's organizations



poussée à axer mon mémoire de Master sur une étude du système juridique sur les droits fonciers des femmes burundaises en matière d'héritage. C'était l'opportunité pour moi d'apporter ma voix pour un changement dans ce sens, étant donné qu'une grande proportion de femmes en sont malheureusement victimes. Immédiatement après avoir obtenu mon diplôme, j'ai eu l'opportunité tant rêvée de pouvoir travailler au sein des Nations Unies en tant que Fellow au Bureau PNUD Togo. Le bâtiment du PNUD à Lomé est situé dans une rue dénommée « Rue de Marina ». C'est juste incroyable, tout comme mon expérience globale dans l'organisation. J'ai pleuré, ri, appris, et ai été mise à l'épreuve. Au départ, j'ai fait face à des difficultés de deux ordres. D'une part, je me sous-estimais énormément parce que je travaille avec des personnes ayant une expérience solide dans le système. D'autre part, j'ai été affectée dans l'unité économique du Bureau et étais donc hors de ma zone de confort par rapport à mon parcours académique et professionnel. Tout ceci a alimenté un certain manque d'assurance qui s'est néanmoins dissipé au fur et à mesure de la collaboration avec mes collègues. Plus à l'aise, je travaille maintenant ouvertement et efficacement. Me voir contribuer autant que je le peux dans la réalisation des ODD ici au Togo à travers un certain nombre de projets constitue pour moi une joie à la fois immense et inexplicable.

Mon pays est classé parmi les pays les plus pauvres

du monde et la plupart des jeunes sont confrontés à de multiples défis plus particulièrement celui du chômage et du sous-emploi dont les taux demeurent élevés. Des facteurs contributifs à ces deux défis sont notamment le décalage criard entre forte population et offres d'emploi, la faiblesse de l'esprit entrepreneurial et le manque d'éducation de qualité. De ce fait, je ne prends pas pour acquises les opportunités qui me sont offertes de donner en retour au monde entier en général et à mon continent en particulier, mais aussi de servir d'exemple aux filles qui ont peut-être une vision glauque de leur avenir face aux réalités de leurs pays. Je mûris et deviens une meilleure version de moi-même chaque jour, et j'ai foi que ce n'est que le début. Je suis reconnaissante d'abord à Dieu, le Tout-Puissant, pour sa grâce, puis au PNUD et à l'Union Africaine pour cette expérience assez impressionnante. Une expérience qui nous pousse à contribuer et à rendre notre monde meilleur à travers nos actions, aussi petites qu'elles puissent être. Si cela était à refaire, je choisirais toujours la même voie, en m'améliorant évidemment sur quelques aspects. Toutefois, je demeure immensément reconnaissante pour le parcours déjà accompli et à accomplir dans les années à venir, par la grâce de Dieu.



Early 2020 in my office (UNDP Togo)

Name:Guiadem Kouemegne
Arielle Theodora**Nationality:**

Cameroonian

Duty Station:São Tomé-et-Príncipe
Country Office

The Fighter Theodora



God wouldn't have allowed it unless He had a purpose. Don't just go through it – Grow through it.



Guiadem Kouemegne Arielle Theodora

I am the 2nd of 5 girls, originating from the French speaking region of Cameroon and brought up by my parents who instilled good values and principles in us. I graduated from high school in 2006 with high grades that I was confident would get me wherever I wanted to go. To my greatest dismay, I failed the competitive exam to medical school, and was constrained to register for a B.Sc. in Biochemistry. Simultaneously, I pursued my application for studies abroad and this limited the amount of time I dedicated to ongoing lectures. Despite the tedious process, I was denied the student visa and even after reattempting two more times, there was no improvement. Two years later, I finally gave up and focused on completing the B.Sc. degree.

Contrary to my friends, I had no idea what career I wanted to pursue, so upon graduating in 2011, I

went with the flow and wrote a competitive exam for an engineering school. All my study buddies passed except for me. My alternative option was a professional master's in clinical pathology, but my parents could not afford the fees. My dad registered me for a M.Sc. in Biochemistry and I reluctantly started classes. Two months later, I could not pretend anymore, so I dropped out and took up a well-paid nanny job which was to last for six months. One fateful day, while on a call with a friend, her colleague happened to hear our chat, and being an alumna of the same engineering school, he encouraged me to retake the exam. I made it this time around and obtained a M.Eng. in Industrial Chemistry and Environmental Engineering in 2015. I started my first job and accumulated almost two years of work experience in diverse focus areas.

Things turned out unexpectedly in June 2017; I received a WhatsApp message from a +254..., inviting me for a fully funded youth event. It seemed unreal so after inquiry I was told I was selected from the database of long-listed candidates to the African Union Youth Volunteer Corps (I had applied in 2016 but only made it to the semi-final stage). I gave my consent and successfully made it to the 1st edition of the Pan-African Youth Forum in N'djamena, an event which gathered youths across the African continent to co-create solutions to problems faced by young people in the continent. It lasted three days, but it was enough time for the transformation to occur. I returned home with a boosted mindset and thirst for action. Most importantly, the network I gained through this event was crucial in accessing real-time information about capacity building opportunities, among which being the 19th edition of the World Festival of Youth and Students (WFYS) which I



Left: Graduation ceremony, M. Engineering – Ngaoundere (Cameroon), November 2015.

Right: M.Sc PM3E Graduation ceremony in Nantes (France), November 2019.



The event brought together over 20,000 students and young professionals, to discuss about pressing challenges faced at various country levels, and jointly developing a common vision of the future, as envisaged by the youths. Sochi (Russia), October 2017

attended three months later in Sochi-Russia and the YALI Regional Leadership Center West Africa Emerging leader program. These events contributed to honing my soft skills, and I felt the need for a more focused career path, so I resigned from my job. It did not make sense to my parents that I had resigned from a well-paid job to stay at home, so it was obvious that the only thing that could change their mind, was tangible proof that it was not a wrong move despite everything, which is how the search for something bigger happened.

Eight months later, I had two offers: **MOPGA scholarship** for an M.Sc. in Project Management for Energy and Environmental Engineering PM3E at EcoleMinesNantes-France, and a **5-week professional exchange program in green technologies at Silicon Valley USA**, both scheduled for September. My dad advised me to turn down the exchange program, and focus on going back to school, it was a difficult choice to make as they were both highly competitive and unique opportunities. I accepted both offers and went through with both visa procedures. A month later, I relocated to France, and started classes. Three weeks later, came the time for the exchange program. I requested for a leave authorization, but the Head of Department made it clear that she could only tell me

what was at stake if I were to absent from lectures for 5 weeks and it was up to me to decide whether to go or not. The next day, I informed my HOD of my decision, and left for the USA.

Five weeks later, I was back to school but catching up wasn't easy as I had missed exams and lectures. With a lot of efforts and supportive classmates, I obtained a pass grade at the end of the 1st semester and was exceptionally allowed to re-sit for the exams I had missed. Months later, studies were coming to an end and so was the scholarship. Despite several jobs, PhD applications and interviews, the final answer was always a rejection. I received the AfYWL fellowship advert four times from friends who told me "This is your kind of thing, so try this out". I submitted my application 5 minutes to the deadline and made it to the final selection. Two days after graduation, I relocated to start this new chapter of my life.

The first few months into this dream job where the hardest and I honestly did not feel up to the task. A year later, I look back and realize that it has indeed been a transformative journey. Beyond the UN exposure, the mentoring and networking opportunities, the fellowship provided room to be an actor to the many changes I wanted to see happening. To my fellow African sisters and beyond, my advice is thus: *The only thing you can do better than anyone else, is to listen to your inner voice. Learn to trust your instincts and dare to follow it. It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that things are difficult.*



Installation of roof top solar PV panels in Palo Alto as part of the Techwomen Professional Exchange Program, San Francisco (CA, USA), October 2018.



Celebrating the 75th anniversary of the United Nations, Sao tome, October 2020.

**Name:**

Falmata Mahamat Kana Bady

Nationality:

Chadian

Duty Station:

Madagascar Country Office

The Fearless Falmata

Falmata Mahamat Kana Bady

Je suis née à N'Djamena au Tchad et j'ai grandi dans une famille de la classe moyenne. Mes parents n'étaient pas riches, mais avaient les moyens de nous envoyer à l'école afin que nous bénéficions mes frères et moi, d'un enseignement de qualité. Mon père a toujours encouragé mes études et il a « sacrifié » beaucoup afin que nous puissions étudier.

Après le lycée au pays, j'ai fait des études de droit, plus précisément le droit public à l'Université Omar Bongo de Libreville au Gabon. Mais la vraie question existentielle, je me la suis posée quand j'ai obtenu ma licence. « Qu'est-ce que je veux faire exactement de ma vie ? » Je me suis longuement renseignée sur l'usage que nous faisons de la nature, qui est un cadeau de Dieu pour nous. Je me suis également laissé porter

par une envie profonde de voyager, de rencontrer d'autres personnes, et de me rendre utile non seulement dans ma communauté, mais aussi ailleurs dans le monde. Alors, j'ai trouvé une formation qui allie parfaitement le développement, la protection de l'environnement et les relations internationales. C'est ainsi qu'en 2018, je sors de l'Institut des Relations Internationales du Cameroun, nantie d'un Master en Relations Internationales, spécialité Management environnemental et développement durable. Une autre période marquante de ma vie, est celle où j'ai suivi la formation en Leadership du Centre Régional YALI Dakar. C'était une expérience riche en émotions, en découverte de soi et d'acquisition de qualités de leader dont l'Afrique a besoin. Mais plus encore, durant le YALI, j'ai compris la philosophie de l'UBUNTU. L'ubuntu est, au final, en chacun de nous et laisse entendre qu'une personne ne peut pas se définir sans les autres car, Je suis parce que Nous sommes.

Mon papa a toujours été mon héros. Depuis toute petite, j'ai été témoin de la façon dont il se bat pour sa famille, mais pas seulement, car en Afrique, la famille nucléaire n'existe pas. J'ai pu voir combien de fois il a aidé tellement de gens lorsqu'ils avaient des problèmes. Sa générosité est aujourd'hui ce qui me guide. Car ce qui m'a été donné, j'aimerais pouvoir donner également aux autres. Je m'inspire également de beaucoup de gens qui ont marqué l'histoire du monde, par leur empathie, par leur combat contre

Avec mon papa, je devais voyager le même soir pour mes études de master. Il m'a dit qu'il était fier de moi. P.S: Je ne suis pas fille à papa (rires) mais nous sommes très proches.



« Ne doute point. Tu peux être parmi les meilleurs et tu es capable d'accomplir de grandes choses dans ce monde »



J'étais à Dakar pour la formation en leadership du centre YALI. Imaginez rencontrer des jeunes venant de partout d'Afrique francophone, et ensemble, créer un lien qui vous unit à jamais. Yali un jour, Yali pour toujours.

l'injustice, le racisme, la pauvreté, etc. Mais au-delà de tout, je m'inspire de Dieu, qui est amour, paix et tolérance.

Pendant longtemps, je ne me suis pas arrêtée pour voir ce que j'ai accompli, mais aujourd'hui, je peux regarder en arrière et être fière de moi-même et m'inspirer de ce que je suis et ce que je veux être.

Je pense que le plus grand challenge dans la vie c'est d'avoir la volonté d'être plus qu'une simple femme, d'avoir des rêves et de pouvoir s'y tenir. S'accrocher à un rêve, une mission, c'est d'abord être fort mentalement. Je suis heureuse de ne pas m'être laissée tentée, d'avoir eu le courage d'étudier et d'avoir tenu jusqu'ici.

Ce programme est une aubaine pour une jeune fille africaine aujourd'hui. Car lorsque j'ai obtenu mon master, j'ai été confrontée à la réalité du chômage. J'ai effectué beaucoup d'autres formations pendant ce temps et dans l'espoir d'avoir un emploi stable. J'ai, ainsi, passé un an à la recherche de boulot, avec le stress qui va avec et sans savoir exactement à quel moment cela finirait. Je passais des entretiens mais en tant que jeune diplômée, il me manquait de l'expérience professionnelle.

Quand j'ai vu que le PNUD et l'UA avaient besoin de seulement 20 jeunes filles sur toute l'Afrique, j'ai hésité, mais cela n'a pas surpassé mon désir de postuler. J'ai eu des moments de doute pendant le processus, me disant que je n'allais pas y arriver. Cependant, mon père a dit quelque chose qui résonne toujours en moi : "j'ai le pressentiment que tu seras



Avec les membres du jury à ma soutenance de Master en Relations Internationales



Lors d'un atelier de consultation sur la définition de l'indice multidimensionnel de la pauvreté à Madagascar. De gauche à droite, Louise Sophie Ambite, Spécialiste junior en coordination de l'aide, Faimata Mahamat Kana Bady, responsable d'appui aux politiques ODD, Adamson Rasolofo, Economiste national du PNUD.

retenue, j'ai confiance". Aujourd'hui, je me dis qu'en fait, il a toujours cru en moi. C'est pourquoi, dans des moments de doute, il est important d'avoir du soutien des personnes qu'on aime et je suis, pour ma part, très attachée à ma famille, qui est ma force. Ma faible expérience professionnelle n'a pas été un frein pour mener à bien mes tâches au Bureau du PNUD à Madagascar depuis 12 mois déjà. Au contraire, quand je sais je le fais, et quand je ne sais pas, je gagne en apprenant. J'ai rencontré des personnes formidables qui, aujourd'hui, sont comme une famille pour moi. J'ai gagné en confiance en moi, et je pense aujourd'hui que seul le ciel est la limite, car je compte bien avancer, triompher, gagner, dans la noble mission que je me suis assignée : aider les autres afin de m'accomplir moi-même.



Prête à relever les défis du développement durable avec des collègues du Bureau du PNUD à Madagascar.

Name:

Rawan Taha

Nationality:

Egyptian

Duty Station:

Zambia Country Office



Trust the process. Trust yourself. Work on your stars and your constellation will soon appear. It will take time, effort, and persistence. Just know that you will be set with the stars.

The Rebel Rawan

Rawan Taha

I was born and raised in Saudi Arabia to Egyptian parents. My father is a doctor. My mother a housewife. Like the child of many Middle Eastern families, I grew up thinking of medicine as a superior career or even the only career. I knew I was poetic. I loved Literature, history and geography and hated

Top Left: The last photo I took after quitting my job from the clinic at the slums working for the Egyptian Ministry of Health

Bottom Left: Graduation ceremony Masters of Public Health Swansea University

Right: Dental school

math, science, and physics. Yet, when the time came for that cardinal moment of choosing a university and ultimately a career, my mother convinced me that if I did not want to become a doctor then being a dentist was the second-best option. I prayed about it. I cried about it. I asked a hundred people about the decision. But, I forgot to ask myself what I really wanted.

I went to dental school. Spent 6 of the toughest educational years in my life both physically and mentally. I pushed myself to graduate and worked for 2 years thereafter in a public hospital in the slums of Cairo and knew more day after day that this was not my path. This was not my purpose. And that 'never give up' is terrible advice.

So, I proudly gave up and listened to myself drowning out all other voices. I volunteered for many Egyptian charities to find my calling and discover what my soul was trying to tell me. I particularly enjoyed working with people with disabilities and children and decided I would travel to the UK to pursue a Master of Public Health after obtaining a scholarship for female African leaders in public service.





With Parents

My parents were not convinced, I rebelled. They insisted that I complete a postgraduate examination to get licensed as a dentist in the UK in parallel to my studies. I agreed. I took the exam twice both times exerting my full effort and both times failing the exams.

I completed my master's and returned to Egypt. I felt I was the only one that was proud of myself. Yet, I had to prove my parents wrong. I was unemployed for almost 10 months before commencing this fellowship. These were the hardest 10 months of my life. I felt I should have listened to my parents and that perhaps if medicine was not a superior career then at least it was a stable career.

I cried silently every day in my room. Blaming myself, instead of the system, for my unemployment. I applied for jobs day and night but felt like my applications were being sucked into a vacuum. The only proof I had that I was even trying were my rejection slips. I was falling into depression and desperately needed a way out.

In my despair, I came across the African Presidential Leadership Programme in Egypt that aimed to train youth on diplomacy and development. I got selected and earned a diploma in African studies and leadership. It was during that time that I applied for the African Young Women Leaders fellowship and got selected.

Without the three opportunities in my life that were all for African women, I would probably be still working as a dentist in the slums.

There are millions of stories like mine, but I should not be the exception where an opportunity revolutionizes a life. While I work in UNDP now and say jargon like 'leave no one behind' and 'empowered lives, resilient nations', I also feel the commitment to create opportunities to make sure that everybody is brought on board and given a chance to empower their own lives and make their own nations and worlds resilient.

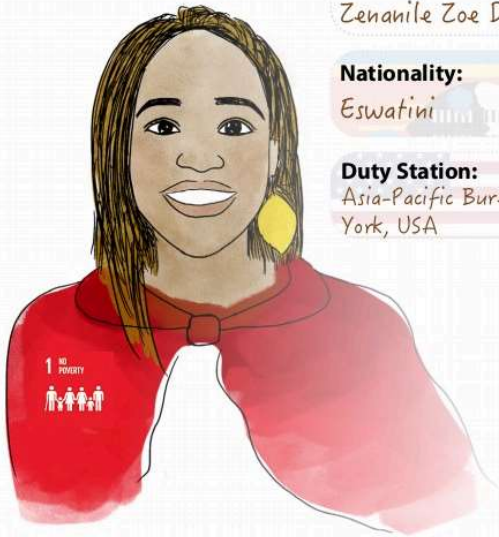
Oh, one last thing, my parents are now proud of me. They do not get what I do, but they know that I serve humanity with humility every day and that makes them proud.



Left: During the African Presidential Leadership

Right: Attending the launch of the Human Development Report with UNDP Zambia

On mission during the training of the Safe Markets Project



Name:
Zenanile Zoe Dlamini

Nationality:
Eswatini

Duty Station:
Asia-Pacific Bureau, New York, USA

The Determined Zoe

Zenanile Zoe Dlamini

I am the second of three children; I have an older sister and a younger brother, making me the middle child. I grew up in Mbabane, the capital city of Eswatini, where I did my pre, primary, and high school education. My parents believe that education is the key that unlocks many opportunities, as a result they invested greatly in our education. They made it their priority for us to get the best quality education that they could afford, even if it meant putting their own dreams and goals on hold for a while. Although education is important for my parents, they never forced us into any career path. They allowed us to choose what we wanted to do and gave us their unwavering support. My siblings and I are very different, and my parents found a way to make us see our differences and embrace them and allow those differences to be what makes us unique. The support that my parents have shown us has been what has pushed me and caused me to believe that all things are possible for me. It is what propels me to move forward and to dream big.

When I was growing up there were certain career paths that were deemed as the desirable ones if



“Do not attach yourself to a person, a place, a company, an organisation or a project. Attach yourself to a mission, a calling, a purpose ONLY. That’s how you keep your power and your peace”

Erica Williams Simon



one wanted to be successful. The likes of medicine, accounting, and engineering. If you did not choose any of these, society made it vocal that chances of getting a job would be slim. Going to university I did not have a definite career choice. Fortunately, the university I went to allowed for me to explore my options before finding the correct one. I have always known that I wanted a career where I can help people, make meaningful contribution to my community, and contribute to making the world a better place for all. It was only after completing my bachelor’s degree, halfway into my honours where things started making sense. It all began when I had to choose a research topic for my research dissertation. I did not want to do research that was meaningless to me, or something that I was not passionate about. But the question was, what was I passionate about? That question was bothering me for weeks until one morning as I was showering, God laid it out for me clearly. Since then, I have been fully aware of my



With my lovely parents during my Master’s graduation in April 2019 (Master of Social Sciences in Development Studies). I made them wear my belts because these degrees are theirs too!



My siblings and I at a family gathering in December 2018

purpose and strive to always find a way to align my passion with my purpose.

At the time when the offer letter for the fellowship came, I was engaged to be married. I knew that this is something that I wanted so the decision to leave was not unquestionable. I was raised in a family where we were always encouraged to pursue our dreams. I remember when I in pre-school my mother went to further her studies at Stellenbosch University, leaving us with my father for a year. It is only now when I understood the magnitude of her decision and the backlash that she probably went through because I was now experiencing it. I was shocked by society's reactions and comments to my decision. It was as though I was being punished for choosing to develop my career. It is interesting how what my mother went through then (twenty years ago) I was now experiencing even after so many years. I drew strength from my mother's journey knowing that if she could do it then so can I. Not to mention that my fiancé (the person whose opinion matters) was -and continues to be- incredibly supportive. He encouraged me to grab

this opportunity with both hands and run with it. In the patriarchal, stereotypical, misogynistic world that we live in, I am grateful for my father and fiancé, who refuse to reinforce the barriers and labels that society has created for women. I believe that with more men like them, many women would be empowered to go after their dreams.

Coming into the UN people had told me that for you to make it you need to choose between your career or a family. However, being part of this fellowship, I have met many incredible women who have shared stories from their own journeys and experiences, their mistakes, and lessons they have learned to show me that anything is possible.

I have learnt the power of having support and being surrounded by people who believe in you. In our many interactions with the fellowship coordinators and the RBA regional director, they have always emphasized how much they believe in us as the next generation of young women leaders. Having that support has made me believe in myself even in moments of weakness. Being part of this fellowship has opened my eyes to see that the world is full of possibilities for me. I don't believe that anything in life just happens, so I am certain that this chapter of my life and all the people I have met and connected with have a specific purpose and that makes me look into the future with so much excitement!

Our first day at UNDP Headquarters in November 2019, with the RBA regional director Ms Ahunna.



My family and I during my graduation for my first degree (Bachelor of Social Sciences) at Rhodes University in 2017.

My wonderful fiancé and I.



Attending the International Women's Day celebration at the UN General Assembly Hall in March 2020.

**Name:**

Chaltu Daniel Kalbessa

Nationality:

Ethiopian

Duty Station:

Africa Bureau, NY, USA

The Resilient Chaltu

Chaltu Daniel Kalbessa

Where you were born and raised should not be a precondition for your big dream. As far as you have passion in your heart and persistent in the process and mostly faith in God, you are all set to realize it.

My people proudly call me Caaltuu although the English pronunciation is Chaltu. I hail from the Oromoo tribe in Ethiopia, in a small village called Shambu. I moved around a lot as kid because of my parents' work, both of whom are civil servants. My mom is a teacher at a public college and my dad serves in an NGO. Growing up, my parents were my rock, they



My childhood picture with my lovely family. Me standing next to mom and my big sister standing next to dad.

fully believed in me. I attended both primary and secondary schooling at a public school. My parents wanted to enroll me into private schools, which are renowned for better quality education, but our town was unfortunately too small to provide us with that privilege.

I remember my classes were always crowded with about 60 students per class. I attended shift classes on a monthly basis, and we were expected to finish pending coursework by ourselves. Luckily, my mom and dad have always helped me with my homework, bought me extra books and assigned me private tutors. My dad always tells me that education is the best he can be inherent to me and the means to a better future.



With my friends during my graduation for my first degree (Bachelor of Economics) at Addis Ababa University in 2015.

After I passed the national exam, I chose social science which was a shock to everyone who knew me. They exhorted: "Chaltu you are a good student; you should join natural science". There is a stereotype that if you are a good student, you must join engineering or medical school. I also remember the national university intake policy was 70% for natural science and 30% for the social field. So, it was logical to think that the natural science job market would be much more prospective. Neither my people's remarks nor the policy pushed me back from my choice because I knew what I wanted at heart. I told my dad "this is my life and I get to decide my destiny". I was fortunate enough to know exactly what I wanted at age sixteen. Your passion should lead your decision, not what people think is better for you or what the situation tells you. I joined a social science preparatory school, scored well in the university entrance exam, and joined the best university in Ethiopia.

After graduating from my first degree in Economics, I shortly joined the banking sector for a few months.



Graduation day for my Master degree (Development Policy) at KDI(Korean development Institute), South Korea, 2017.

It was my intention to get into graduate school, so I began to apply for scholarships. I submitted 3 applications and to my surprise, I scooped all 3. I decided to go with South Korea's KDI Scholarship for master's studies in development policy and that was a life changing experience for me. I returned home with the desire to join an international organization which works on development issues in my country. As a young, fresh graduate, such an opportunity seemed impossible, until my one-page letter reached the offices of different UN agencies based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. My letter was very honest and simple but good enough to portray my passion, my dream and story. Although it was a request letter for sponsorship to attend the Youth assembly at the UN Headquarters in New York, it unlocked my dream career path. They say if you cannot find any opportunity, then you should create one for yourself. I think that is what I did with that letter. A week after I submitted my letter to UN agencies in Ethiopia, I received a call from UNDP in Ethiopia, seeking my availability for an appointment with the UNDP Country Director. I was in disbelief. I finally met her; her name is Louise. I was so inspired to see a woman in such a big leadership position, but I was more amazed by her faith in youth and interest in creating

opportunities for them. Resultantly, UNDP Ethiopia offered me an internship. My nine-month internship was a period of learning and self-discovery. As an unpaid intern, I appreciated the importance of a strong support system. My family was there to support me. If it were not for them, I am not sure how that would have gone. I was fortunate enough to be retained by UNDP Ethiopia as a national UN Volunteer and served for 7 months. During these times, I acquired firsthand experience of development work. I travelled to the remote areas of my country which gave me a better understanding of the developmental context of my country.

After serving as an intern and UNV, becoming one of the African Young Women Leaders Fellows at UNDP Africa Headquarters in New York is a dream come true. I always dream with ambition, but I never knew that it would be this powerful. Development is very personal to me having grown up in a small Ethiopian village experiencing the real face of development be it poverty, inequality, and insecurity. But for the upcoming generation, especially young people in my continent, I wanted them to experience the bright face of development. That is why I wanted to become a lead development expert, that is why I chose social science-economics and development policy and joined developmental work thereafter. I believe this fellowship is not only preparing me to become a lead development expert but it is also shaping me into a prominent leader in the development field and propelling me towards attaining my dream not only for my country and continent but for the world at large.

At United Nation (UN) Secretariat building, New York, USA (2020)



During my UN Volunteer assignment at UNDP Ethiopia in 2019.



During my field mission to one of the remote areas in Ethiopia (Gambella Region) for my internship work with UNDP Ethiopia in 2018.

**Name:**

Amanda Kaduah Yahaya

Nationality:

Ghanaian

Duty Station:

Rwanda Country Office

The Intelligent Amanda

Amanda Kaduah Yahaya

The Northern part of Ghana is where I was born. A place that is among the least developed parts of Ghana, and often does not receive its fair share of the development pie. A beautiful place but one whose culture I would describe as “deeply steeped in patriarchy”. My mother had three daughters and no sons so that did not help matters and though she prayed for sons, they never came. My father already had a son, and we grew up together. I do not recall incidences where we were treated differently by my parents, except the obvious stereotypical gender roles when it came to chores, but there was always a deep-seated feeling within me that there was a difference. That I had more to prove simply because I was female. At about age 5, I moved to the capital Accra for school because schools there were much better than those in the north. I was among the lucky ones, one whose parents could afford to give her quality education. I was a good student and I developed an interest in science, mostly because I found that I was good at it. And like many children that are good at science, being a doctor almost automatically becomes the career path of choice. When asked what I wanted



Have faith and work hard. The path is not always visible to you from the start but if you trust the process and trust God, you'll be amazed at the places you'll go.



to be when I grew up, I would say a doctor because it seemed to make the adults happy. All I knew at the time was I wanted to help people and I thought perhaps this could be my way to do so. Suffice to say, being a doctor was not in the stars for me.

I got my BSc degree in Biochemistry and after graduation, I started my National Service (a mandatory 1-year work placement by the government) at the Environmental Chemistry unit of CSIR-Water Research Institute. Initially, I was upset about the placement; I knew nothing about water, it was not what I had hoped for, nor was it directly linked to my degree and quite frankly I just was not interested. I tried to get a different placement and when that



During my National Service at the Environmental Chemistry unit of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research - Water Research Institute, Ghana. The initially unwanted work placement that led to a great opportunity. - December 2016



Receiving my MSc degree from my professors. - April 2020

did not work, I reluctantly went to work. My time there however gave me a different perspective. I developed a greater awareness and appreciation for the environment and the nexus between environment and people. I realised my dream to help people was not lost and that working to improve the environment was also essentially working to improve the lives of people.

From this initially unwanted posting, came an opportunity. A friend told me about a master's programme he thought would be good for me, based on the work I was doing. I applied, was accepted and awarded a scholarship by the Dutch government. I moved to the Netherlands to study Environmental Science with a specialisation in Water Quality Management. For my thesis I got to travel and work in rural Mozambique. It was there, working with research and government institutions, NGOs, and local communities that I realised, this was it, international development was my path. I

remember returning to the Netherlands, visiting a friend and sitting at a train station telling her about my experiences in Mozambique and about how I wanted to work with an international organisation like the UN doing the kind of work that impacts lives and truly gives me a sense of purpose.

A couple of months after I graduated, after many job applications, a lot of frustration and prayer, I saw the poster for the fellowship, and applied. Today, I work for the UN just like I told my friend on that day at the train station, and I do work that helps people just like I always wanted to as a child. And through this fellowship journey and beyond, I hope to continue working in the development space and on the SDGs to reduce inequalities, so that the northern Ghana's of the world can have a fairer chance and equal access to opportunities. So that quality education is not just for a privileged few and so that girls like me can know that being born female is a blessing and they too can achieve anything.



The friend I visited after my trip to Mozambique and told I wanted to work with the UN. Sitting and talking on a similar day just like this, that fateful day at the train station.

Working in rural communities in Mozambique for my MSc thesis on assessing water quality in the small water storage structures these communities use. - December 2018



Working with UNDP Rwanda towards achieving the SDGs and empowering lives. - September 2020

**Name:**

Julia Ojiambo

Nationality:

Kenyan

Duty Station:

Liberia Country Office

The Powerful Julia

Julia Ojiambo

My name is Julia Ojiambo. I was born in Nairobi, Kenya and raised along with my three siblings in a single parent family. My mother is someone I dearly consider, an epitome of what a power woman is. I spent most of my formative years in Kenya and later moved to the USA and Europe where she served as Kenya's Ambassador to the UN in New York and recently, as Deputy Secretary General of the Commonwealth in the U.K. These exposures, among others, have taught me the importance of cross-cultural communication and living abroad.

My life is greatly influenced and shaped by my family's revered history. Both my grandparents—Professors Hillary & Julia Ojiambo, made great service contributions as Kenya's first Cardiologist & Founder of the Kenyan Cardiac Society. In post-independent Kenya, my grandmother served as the first woman Assistant Minister. She was also the first



My Grandmother and the second gentleman to her left is my Grandfather. She is pictured giving a presentation on a family life project meeting hosted by UNFPA.



"Born for a time such as this" - Give your very best to every moment, every task, every engagement and every challenge.



Kenyan woman to attend Harvard University. My story is shaped, in part, by the shoulders on which I stand—my family of achievers, staff and mentors at my work base. They have taught me the importance of education, hard work, and paving the way for others. That is why I have a specific interest in mentoring young female professionals from Africa into the UN. Additionally, growing up in a society where I have seen women hold an unequal status has shaped my interests and life endeavours.

In 2018, I graduated the University of Oxford with a master's degree in International Human Rights Law. I took an interest in the program as a prerequisite to addressing some of the gross human rights' violations (especially against women) in Africa. I also hold a bachelor's degree from Hunter College in New York. Today, I can truly say that my educational background has vastly influenced my professional career and continues to do so in new and enterprising ways. As a development practitioner with a forte in IHRL, I have great confidence in being an effective team player, seeking practical and lasting solutions in the field.

My greatest inspiration is my mother, I must dearly confess. I simply admire her dedication to hard work, confidence, free spirit, her balance between the personal and professional life and her unwavering



This is a picture of me, on graduation day and on completion of my final examinations with my classmates, at the University of Oxford.

Liberia has been a place of great discovery. This is me spending downtime at the top of a building named "Ducon" that was destroyed during the civil war.



1. 2. This is a picture of me at the UNDP Country Office Liberia. The hand sign stands for women's empowerment and gender equality. The SDGs in the background remind me daily, of the important mandate of the UNDP.
3. Sisterhood formed in the course of the fellowship. This is me and Zenanile Zoe Dlamini, when she visited Kenya.
4. Pictured here is me leading a group of young girls in a breakout session on the International Day of the Girl
5. This is a picture of me presenting at the Annual Academic Conference of the UN in 2019, at Stellenbosch South Africa on the topic "Human Rights and Democracy: Where does Development fit in?"
6. Last dinner with a section of my classmates at New College, Oxford University.

faith and belief in God. As a fellow, amongst 21 young and brilliant women, I find great inspiration also in my niche of professional peers and mentors at the UN & UNDP. Importantly, I am primarily my biggest inspiration and supporter. I have the penchant for learning new things across different spectrums of life. As such, determination and resilience are the two main core values I display with great mastery during difficult periods.

My own challenges in the past (and even now) has been dealing with stereotypes and cross-cultural biases. In addition to that, a one-year "unpaid" work experience immediately after grad school quickly left me frustrated with the labour system. Yet, amid these conditions, what kept me going is knowing I had a purpose to fulfil. I kept firm determination and resilience in seeking new employment opportunities. I submitted my application to the UNDP Fellowship and was accepted. Liberia, since 2019, has been a place I call home. I have learned to be more understanding, respectful, and empathetic of others. These challenges, in a nutshell, have taught me to always pick myself up and push through. They have also strengthened my ability to be patient and resilient. For these, and much more, I am thankful.

If I could go back in time, I would learn to embrace and live fully in each moment. There were lessons to be learned and growth that needed to happen. Rather than rush to live in the next moment, I would take the chance to embrace each moment I found myself

in, not rushing to experience life's next moment. But I am indeed grateful to GOD and for having my mother, family and host of friends and professional colleagues at various points in life. They all play a major role.

The biggest "AHA" moment for me is my move to Liberia to work for the UNDP. The last year has been a period of tremendous growth and deep revelation both personally and professionally. The journey and various moments in 2020, has reinforced the important lessons of alignment and gratitude.

Two takeaways I wish to share from this Fellowship experience:

- 1) Effort, hard work, and commitment to task, invariably lead to good ends. This goes without noting that the UNDP has been a good fit for me. It is a professional learning hub that encourages growth and appreciates the contributions of its employees.
- 2) Serve those you are called to serve and nurture those that will follow. This, I hope to do with young women leaders to follow.

There is a definitely decent level of transformation in my thinking, much of which I owe to this Fellowship. It offers a new lens to envision an exciting future with countless possibilities. It teaches the importance of process and patience—and though one is born out of the other, they are both equally required for any endeavour.

**Name:**

Fiona Mhone

Nationality:

Malawian

Duty Station:

Bangkok Regional Hub

tattered novel by Author John Grisham called “The Street Lawyer”. Its fate was going to be tearing the pages and using the papers to start a fire for cooking meals. But for some reason, I could not bring it to the kitchen. I read it instead. The story in the novel was about a lawyer who made a change in his legal career from working for one of America’s top commercial law firms, to becoming a lawyer for street people (social welfare lawyer) after a chance encounter with a homeless person. That was when I started to dream. I started to visualize the stories of the characters in that novel and thought how cool it would be to have a vocation that has such a positive and powerful impact on less privileged people.

The Inspirational Fiona

God puts you in a position of power and privilege so that you can help those around you. That is how you make the world a better place.

Fiona Mhone

I was born in Malawi. My parents had me while my mother was still pursuing her university education so when she got a scholarship to go and study her masters in Germany, she left me with my grandmother. My dad and I joined her a year later. We stayed there for five years and returned to Malawi in 1998.

We moved a lot, but I spent a large portion of my childhood at my maternal grandparents’ home. As the oldest female among my siblings, I was tasked with the house chores and babysitting my younger siblings. When I had time to myself, I loved to read. One day, my uncle brought home an old and

I did my secondary school at a boarding school in my hometown (my father’s village) and finished in 2009. I was not able to go into university until 2012. To say, the three years I stayed at home were the toughest years of my life is an understatement. I sat for the public university entrance exams in early 2010 but wasn’t able to get



This was taken in Mainz, Germany. My first rodeo with living on foreign soil.

At the hostels in boarding secondary school.





My bachelor's university graduation photo in England.



At UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub.



Taken at Office of Legal Affairs in New York during my internship.

in, not because I wasn't qualified but because we had the quota system where they could only pick a certain number of students per district. My parents could not afford to send me to a private university, so I just stayed at home. I slipped into depression, I was tempted to drown myself in alcohol and abuse drugs. I had nothing to do and nothing to look forward to. It was my faith as a Christian that held me back and stopped me from falling into the deep end.

My breakthrough came in 2012. My mother secured a job at the African Development Bank so that meant we had to leave Malawi again. As part of her employment benefits, I got an education grant and after weighing my options, the best choice (or so I thought) was for me to go to England to study international law to broaden my horizons once I began job searching. I studied hard and got my degrees but I was not successful with securing a job in England, so I went back home.

Last year, I got an internship with the Office of Legal affairs at UNHQ in New York. One day after work, I went to a networking event at UNHQ and met a lady who works with the AU. We exchanged details and she invited me to her office the next day. We started talking and she asked me what my plan was after the internship. I confided in her and confessed that I felt uncertain, I had qualifications to start a legal career

back home, but my job prospects were very slim. The internship also mad me realise that I needed to adjust my career trajectory. I would not get the sense of fulfilment I was looking for if I continued the path I was on. She later sent me a link to the fellowship ad that was released on social media and thought it would give me some clarity on what it is I really wanted to do. I applied and here I am.

One year into this fellowship, my life's purpose is becoming clearer. I am more convinced than ever that this is where I need to be right now in my career journey. I am inspired by how passionate people in the UNDP are about the work they do. I wish to carry that passion, knowledge and experience I have acquired so far and infuse it in any endeavour I pursue when I go back home. But more importantly, I aspire to be a catalyst for positive change and contribute to the development of my community, country, and continent.



Your dreams are valid no matter how bold. Chase them and never give up. It doesn't matter whose child you are or how many bumps stand in your way. If you dream big and aim high, you'll definitely end up somewhere between, if not farther.



Name:

Julia Negumbo

Nationality:

Namibian

Duty Station:

Asia-Pacific Bureau, New York, USA



The Daring Julia

Julia Negumbo

I was born in Namibia shortly after its Independence in 1990. I grew up in the poverty-stricken township of Oshakati. My dad was a truck driver and my mom a supermarket worker. As with many others who were born into the colonial regime, my parents only managed to complete primary education. Despite their circumstances, they put their blood, sweat and tears into our education. But it was really my aunt who ignited my curiosity and aspirations. Nangula was her name. At the tender age of 10, she courageously

fled the country in search of freedom from colonial rule. That awarded her the opportunity to complete her secondary and university education in Cuba. She was the only person in our family with a university degree. She spoke Spanish, a language I had never heard of before. That fascinated me. Through her, I learned that beyond the slum we were living in lied a world full of endless possibilities. My twin sister and I would ask her about her encounters in exile. It wasn't too long before she realized how curious we were and began buying us books to read. It became apparent to everyone that she was my favorite aunt. So, when she came to live with us shortly after she fell ill with tuberculosis, I was always by her side. Dreadful as it was, it came as no surprise when I fell victim to the infection. After months on an intense treatment regimen, I recovered. Aunt Nangula on the other hand wasn't so lucky. She sadly succumbed to what the



Julia's parents' house where she was raised. This picture was taken 2 years after the flood crisis.



*University of Namibia,
School of Biological
Sciences, BSc
Microbiology, 2011*

*May 2017: MSc,
Biotechnology and
Business Management
Class of '17. Warwick
Uni, UK*



doctors termed as “multi-drug resistant TB”. I wanted to understand why it took her life and not mine. After all, she was stronger, and I was just a kid. The doctors explained that she had the more aggressive form of TB, but I still needed to find closure. My father, who always drove us to school in his work truck passed away later that year from liver failure and my mom was left to take care of us alone. Life was tough, but I knew there was a way out: school. Every day, my twin sister and I walked 5 kilometers to get to school, but because of that enduring thirst for knowledge, we never felt the burden. We then continued our secondary education at a boarding school in a small village some 60 km away. Oshakati experienced heavy flooding, which forced mother to relocate to a remote village. It wasn't easy starting a new life from scratch, but little by little, we helped mother build a millet farmstead. This was able to put dinner on the table but not take us to university. However, I managed to get a government grant to enroll at a local university for a BSc degree in Microbiology, which essentially is the study of infections like tuberculosis. I was finally able to find closure. As a fresh graduate, I joined a local biotech factory as a laboratory staff but two years into it, I realized that a bigger challenge awaited me out of that lab. I wanted to forge innovation and opportunities for those behind me.

I knew that it was up to my generation to change the Namibian narrative. The plan was to start a youth-led bio-innovation enterprise but I lacked the necessary business acumen. To my delight, I became a recipient of the prestigious Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue an MSc degree in Biotech, Bioprocessing and Business Management at the University of Warwick. This was a truly life-changing experience as it allowed



UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS Executive Board Meetings at the UN Secretariat in NYC, USA. February 2020.

me to develop a global perspective of business, systems and development. So, I was convinced that an international career would be a fulfilling one. I once heard that with discipline, drive and determination, nothing is impossible. That determination landed me a traineeship at the European Commission's Joint Research Centre in Italy. As the only African trainee at the site, I was impelled to immerse myself into the EU bubble. As a result, I made friends from every niche of Europe and had the most adventurous time of my life. Upon my return to Namibia, I took up an internship at Namibia's biggest innovation hub while I figured a way to build that youth-led enterprise. Through this experience, I was exposed to the numerous deprivations faced by young entrepreneurs. I felt a sense of responsibility towards shifting the paradigm. When I came across this fellowship opportunity, I knew it would be the perfect foundation. This is why I'm here. And I can boldly tell you today that I have found the answers and that I am ready to unleash youth championship home. The overpouring of encouragement and empowerment from different UNDP leaders has nurtured my confidence to take up space and rise in any situation! It was the audacity of hope that took me out of the slums of Oshakati. It was the audacity of hope that led me to this point. So, fellow young Africans, as Barack Obama would say: “Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope. In the end that's God's greatest gift to us”.



Pictured with my best friends at the EC's Joint Research Centre, Ispra, Italy, 2019.

**Name:**

Temilola Adeoye

Nationality:

Nigerian

Duty Station:

BPPS, New York, USA

The Creative Temi

Temilola Adeoye

Born in Egypt, raised internationally I had no clue that I would follow the same footsteps of my parents. I lived in Egypt till I was 4 years old and returned to Nigeria. Again at the age of 8, I moved to Brazil where I lived for an additional 4 years before returning again to Nigeria. Of course, who doesn't like to travel at a young age and meet new friends. At the age of 15, I became tired of the back and forth moving. Once again I moved to South Africa where I lived for an additional 6 years before moving to the United Kingdom to pursue my master's degree.

Living the diplomatic dream is all fun and games when you are young, however as I got older I was tired that all my friends were scattered around the world making it difficult to keep up with them. In university, I really wanted to study business administration but however decided on getting a degree in international relations



Pictured during my master's graduation from the University of Manchester, UK, December 2018

at the University of Pretoria, where I graduated with 15 distinctions. After my undergraduate degree, I felt the need to pursue a master degree outside of South Africa. I decided to continue studying on the path of international development at the University of Manchester. The only mistake that I made was not having a specialization. However, this was not a big deal.

After graduation, came the burdensome hunt for looking for a job. As usual, the typical 2-year requirement for an internship was depressing. However, I decided to volunteer at an NGO in Addis Ababa, where I gained valuable work experience in international development. Despite volunteering, I

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God"

continued to look for jobs related to international development. It was not easy, as I faced many rejections. I continued to persevere and finally after a year of searching for jobs I was able to get this fellowship.

I have currently lived in 7 countries and counting, although this might sound great it was not easy. One thing I realised was that, perseverance is key. After I finished my master's degree, I was extremely upset about not finding any work. With that, I decided to volunteer for an NGO – which was great, and this created the pathway for work experience. I have learned that there is nothing too impossible for women to do, yes you might face hurdles and challenges in life but keep on persevering.



Pictured on my undergraduate graduation at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, April 2016



Pictured with UNDP colleagues, including Mrs Ahunna Eziakonwa (Regional Director) on my first day at my fellowship duty station (New York, November, 2019).

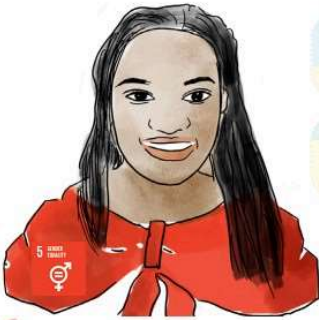
Attending a meeting at the ECA in Addis Ababa during my internship with Save the Children, Ethiopia, October 2019

Name:

Marie Claire Nishimwe

Nationality:

Rwandan

Duty Station:Regional Service Centre,
Ethiopia

When you are determined to work hard with confidence and the right attitude, your background, sex or economic status will not be a barrier to your success.



The Courageous Marie-Claire

Marie Claire Nishimwe

I was born and raised in the rural village of Kiryamo, situated in Gakenke District, northern province of Rwanda. My mom was a teacher while my father was an agronomist. Both were determined to give my six siblings and I quality education. However, it wasn't under the best circumstances. Our village only had one primary school which was an old building with few chairs limited only to students in grades five and six; whilst the rest sat on bricks. Consequently, the dropout rate was high, and students from my village barely passed the national examinations to advance to high school.

Having an educated mother, particularly a teacher, was advantageous for us. She taught us to use every

possible opportunity to study hard. For example, because we had no electricity to study at night, we would revise our course works on our way to fetching water, collecting firewood, or on our way to the market. My Mother made small notebooks for us (called *ikarine* in Kinyarwanda) to carry in our pockets or hands while carrying jerrycans of water. She and my father always made sure that we had enough lamp oil to dedicate one hour every evening to complicated subjects.



Marie Claire's primary school in the village. This picture was taken this year, eight years after the Government of Rwanda built a modern school in the village.

In 2005, I passed the primary school national examinations and proceeded to a boarding school outside my home village. To reach the school, I had to walk for almost four hours carrying my bags. Nonetheless, not once was I discouraged from going to school. I just wanted to excel and make my parents proud. In 2008, my father retired, and my mom became the sole bread winner of the family. At the time, my four siblings and I were still in school. This required us to study even harder to pass well in the examination and be eligible for bursaries. In 2011, I passed the secondary school national exams with



I was born and raised in this village called "Kiryamo". We used to cross that small hill to fetch water. Because we had no electricity, our mom advised us to revise our course works on our way to the river.

This picture was taken in the office two months after I accepted the USD 44 monthly salary as a bookkeeper. Two years later, I was promoted to finance and administrative officer at USD 400 and given a recommendation to pursue my master's degree in South Korea.





Receiving my Master of Development Policy at KDI School of Public Policy and Management

excellent grades. Following that, I was awarded a government scholarship and offered a place at the National University of Rwanda, where I graduated as the best female economics student.

Upon graduating, I worked as a part time bookkeeper (working one day per week) for Sustainable Health Enterprises (SHE), a non-governmental organization. I received a below than average wage and many of my friends expressed their disappointment that, as a university graduate, I had accepted such a position. Even with this, I continued working with the same organization and two years later I was promoted with a ten-fold salary increment to a Finance and Administrative Officer. Six months later, I was awarded a scholarship with a recommendation from SHE to pursue a Master of Development Policy at KDI School of Public Policy and Management in South Korea.

After obtaining a master's degree, I feared returning to Rwanda without a job as I had resigned from my previous one. To make matters worse, my friends in Rwanda warned me that it would take me at least a year to secure a job. With this hesitance, I opted to seek employment in South Korea and got a job in a mask factory. Although I received a good salary, which was approximately five-fold of my previous job in Rwanda, I still wasn't content because I always aspired to impact people's lives on my continent. After a two-month stint in the mask factory, I courageously

packed up and returned to Rwanda, eager to find my dream job.

During my job search, a friend forwarded me an advert for a new African Young Women Leaders Fellowship programme. Scheming through the advert I realized that I had met all the requirements and decided to apply, and here we are! Today, I am proud to be one of the 21 African Young Women Leaders, currently advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment on the continent. I have a sense of fulfilment and purpose knowing that the work I do to integrate gender dimensions has directly or indirectly impacted young women in Africa! I know other young women see their backgrounds as an obstacle to success, however to them I want to share our administrator Achim Steiner's words "Power, money, and privilege are not a precondition of leadership, only the ability to learn, listen, and transform others are."



Top Left: With my classmates during the KDI School sports day. All of us wearing the KDI School T-shirts

Bottom Left: After graduation, I worked in this mask factory for two months because I was afraid to come back to my home country without a job. Though it was highly paying, I realized that packing masks was not my dream job, I packed up and came back to Rwanda to find my dream job.

Right: I was coming from the office, happy and proud to work with UNDP on advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment on the continent.

Name:

Aminata Ndiaye

Nationality:

Senegalese

Duty Station:

Guinea-Bissau Country Office



The Strong Aminata



L'échec n'est qu'une opportunité de se poser, de s'interroger, de sortir de sa zone de confort, d'oser concevoir de nouvelles trajectoires, et finalement de repousser ses limites au-delà de l'imaginable.



Aminata Ndiaye

Quel exercice complexe que celui auquel je dois me livrer : restituer succinctement mais fidèlement des décennies d'aventures humaines en seulement quelques lignes ! Je tenterai néanmoins de relever le défi. J'écris ces lignes depuis Bissau, la capitale de la Guinée-Bissau où je suis basée depuis 12 mois déjà en qualité d'African Young Women Leader Fellow. Cette expérience unique, faite de rencontres inespérées, de défis inimaginables, d'enrichissement professionnel et personnel sans commune mesure, a irrémédiablement fait de moi une femme plus forte, plus résiliente et plus compétente.

Je suis née et j'ai grandi à Dakar, la capitale sénégalaise. Je suis l'aînée d'une fratrie de 6 enfants. Ma famille a toujours eu foi dans l'école et n'a jamais lésiné sur les moyens pour nous permettre d'avoir une scolarité exemplaire. Ainsi, dès l'école primaire, j'ai enchaîné les écoles privées de référence.

Cependant, je me perçois véritablement comme un pur produit de l'école publique sénégalaise. Classée deuxième meilleure élève du Sénégal à l'issue du concours d'entrée en sixième, j'ai fait partie des 30 filles du Sénégal qui ont intégré en 2006 le collège et lycée d'excellence réservé aux filles, Mariama Ba de Gorée. Le meilleur élève du Sénégal étant un garçon, j'intégrais cette institution prestigieuse avec la conviction intime que j'étais la plus brillante de toutes. La désillusion a été aussi rapide que brutale : j'étais classée 12e sur une classe de 29 à la fin du premier semestre. C'était ma première rencontre



Retour à Mariama Bâ (à Gorée) après le défilé de la fête de l'indépendance du Sénégal, 4 avril 2009.

avec l'échec. Ce fut douloureux. Ce fut honteux. Et ce fut amer. Depuis lors, j'ai appris à apprivoiser mon rapport à l'échec et à y voir simplement une opportunité de se poser, de s'interroger, de sortir de sa zone de confort, d'oser concevoir de nouvelles trajectoires, et finalement de repousser ses limites au-delà de l'imaginable.

Au terme de 7 années à Mariama Ba, j'ai intégré Sciences Po Paris où je me suis spécialisée en Relations internationales. C'était le début de l'autonomie à seulement 19 ans. Ma mention «



Photo officielle d'adhésion à l'Association Sciences Po pour l'Afrique (ASPA) prise au jardin de Luxembourg à Paris, septembre 2014

bien » au baccalauréat sénégalais ainsi que la bourse de Sciences Po m'assuraient un niveau de vie décent sans le secours des miens. Le fossé entre mon ancien et mon nouveau monde était aussi immense que le firmament et allait du climat aux grilles de lectures du monde en passant par les rapports sociaux. J'ai appris progressivement à appréhender, déchiffrer et décoder ce nouveau monde qui a fini par m'être étonnamment familier.

C'est durant cette période de ma vie que le pouvoir de l'éducation dans l'élargissement du champ des possibles, quelles que soient les limites que le monde extérieur pouvait placer en moi, a pris tout son sens. Grâce au programme d'échange qu'offrait mon université, j'ai pu revenir dans mon continent pour une année d'échange à Stellenbosch University, en Afrique du Sud, pays que je rêvais de visiter depuis toute petite. D'un point de vue professionnel, j'ai pu décrocher un stage puis un emploi dans la capitale de l'Europe, Bruxelles, tout en travaillant sur un pays africain, la RDC.

Cette période de ma vie reste également fondatrice d'un point de vue personnel. J'ai fait la rencontre, sur les bancs de Sciences Po, d'un camarade de classe pas comme les autres qui deviendra plus tard mon mari. Il disait avoir été séduit par ma "curiosité en classe". Il a été, depuis mon lors, mon soutien indéfectible. J'ai eu écho du fellowship grâce à mon mari. En parfaits rêveurs, on prenait déjà pour acquis le fait que je serais stationnée aux Etats-Unis pendant qu'il finirait sa thèse dans notre nouveau pays d'adoption.



En retraite stratégique avec mes anciens collègues à Gand, en Belgique, juin 2019

Deux mois après ma candidature, il s'est avéré que je serais déployée sous des cieux bien éloignés des Etats-Unis. La joie de l'admission en tant que fellow a pris le pas sur l'appréhension de la séparation avec mon mari. Je n'ai pas hésité une seule fois à accepter le poste. On est tous les deux convaincus qu'une relation de couple saine repose essentiellement sur la possibilité de chacun des conjoints à réaliser ses rêves.

Un an après mon choix, je suis ravie de pouvoir modestement servir une cause qui m'est chère : le développement de ce continent mien, l'Afrique. Ce fellowship est une expérience unique qui offre l'opportunité aux jeunes femmes d'un continent trop souvent minimisé, étiqueté, réduit à des maux, de démontrer qu'elles valent non pas plus, certainement pas moins mais juste autant que les autres.



A l'occasion de la célébration du UN Day à Bissau, octobre 2020.



Name:
Mathabo Mohwaduba

Nationality:
South African

Duty Station:
Africa Bureau, NY, USA

The Authentic Mathabo

Mathabo Mohwaduba

“morning has broken”

I was born in a mining city called Emalahleni “the place of coal” in the province of Mpumalanga “where the sun rises”. The city’s long history of coal mining and processing dates to 1890. Coal mining continues to take place in the city and surrounding regions, serving as one of the primary sources of power for South Africa and neighbouring countries and a key coal exporter to the continent and the world. Although there have been many economic benefits

A mine site visit in Mpumalanga as part of my master’s degree in Extractive Industry law (mining, oil and gas) with a focus on Africa. Photographed with two fellow students, friends and lawyers from Zimbabwe (left) and Namibia (center) (Delmas, South Africa, 2018).



The Chambers of the Chief Justice of the Republic of South Africa: At the Constitutional Court of South Africa with my judge, Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng (center) and chamber mates and fellow lawyers. (Johannesburg, South Africa, 2019).

My mother says the day after I was born, just before the sunrise of democracy, Chris Thembisile Hani, a pro-democracy South African freedom fighter, was assassinated. She continued to say, “it’s always darkest before dawn and as one sun set, another rose”

(paraphrased and translated from IsiZulu)

derived from the mining unfortunately, the city has not escaped the treacherous claws of the tragedy of the commons.

I am told that both my parents were dedicated and excellent public-school teachers. I have seen my now-retired mother in action, and I can confirm. My father, on the other hand, passed on from cancer when I was 9 months young. Thus, I was raised by my matriarchal mother, a fire and force of a woman, alongside my four older siblings. My mother always reinforced me with the confidence of my African heritage, the advantage of my gender and individuality and my duty to serve humanity.

For as long as I can remember I’ve always felt the urgent need to serve a greater purpose. At some point my peers in primary school called me “Mathabo Mbeki”, always keen to get my hands dirty and provide solutions.

Once, I was watching a South African legal series

called Sokhulu & Partners when I saw a small firm of 2 African men and an African woman making incredible contributions to their communities by challenging the most powerful unscrupulous persons and unjust and questionable principles and practices in the highest court. I was encouraged to do the same. Thus, I pursued a law degree at the University of Pretoria. It was not easy, especially with a lack of financing. South Africa has the highest levels of inequality in the world and being part of the imaginary middle class was not helpful; too poor to afford one's own education and too rich to qualify for funding. It was the most difficult time. I got student jobs so that I could add to my income and continued with the jobs even when I received a government bursary, because I enjoyed the financial independence and value add I made. I also did volunteer work on weekends teaching in township schools in Pretoria, contributing to supporting those left behind mostly because of a lack of resources and socio-economic disadvantages. In my final year I also worked at the university law clinic providing legal aid to the those that could not afford it. After my LLB I pursued my master's in Extractive Industry Law in Africa in the same university, the reasons leading back to what I'd witness in my home city. Thereafter, I was appointed by the Chief Justice of the Republic of South Africa to clerk for him at the Constitutional Court of South Africa. I was involved in life-changing rigorous processes that led to ground-breaking cases like *Freedom of Religion v The Minister* speaking to the chastisement of children and *Tshabalala v The State* speaking to redefining rape, very key for South



My grade 12 class and I after a Saturday session in the Mamelodi high school where I volunteered as a tutor on weekends. (Pretoria, South Africa, 2017).



Me on Robben Island, the island that imprisoned hundreds of political activists including former president Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, Walter Sisulu, Govern Mbeki and many other courageous freedom fighters. (Off the shore of Cape Town, South Africa, 2016).

Coffee Ceremony: This picture was taken during the induction week of the AFYL Fellowship. Me on the left; Gloria Kembangazi, fellow from Uganda (center); and Ethiopian coffee maker and hostess (right). Photograph taken by Rawan Taha, fellow from Egypt (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2019).



Africa the rape co-capital of the world.

When applying for the fellowship I was thirsty for a programme that spoke to me as a proud African woman who was and will likely continue to be predominantly surrounded by male leadership examples professionally. A woman who wants to serve her continent well, not by imitating men but by being herself. I am humbled by the contribution I have been enabled to make to our continent and especially its youth and women through UNDP's Regional Bureau for Africa. To every African child, the marginalized youth and all those women often told to stay in their place: Your place is whichever space you choose to occupy, your dreams are valid and very possible. Yes, we may face defeats and witness the sun set along the way, but we persevere and push forward. Morning has broken and you are the sun rise. We are the ones we have been waiting for.



Name:
Camilla Hebron Malakasuka

Nationality:
Tanzanian

Duty Station:
Istanbul Regional Hub, Turkey

The Brave Camilla

Camilla Hebron Malakasuka

As a young girl I didn't have a clear picture of who I wanted to be, but I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and that is "to make a change". Whoever I was going to end up being, I had to make a difference and be the difference. As I grew older, I went from planning to be a lawyer to falling in love with economics, and that's the road I took. After completing my master's degree, I was set to face the wrath of unemployment. Walking into the job market I knew the exact type of work I would prefer but given limited opportunities and the fear of unemployment, I was ready to explore beyond my pre-conceived preferences. I then applied for jobs in different sectors within my field to start off my career journey and acquire the much-required experience. I remember coming across so many jobs that excited me and thinking to myself "this seems interesting", well that was until I scrolled down to the requirements and saw the years of relevant work



Success isn't about how much money you make. It's about the difference you make in people's lives.



Bachelor's degree graduation



Master's degree graduation



Picture taken at UNDP Istanbul

experience required. There were simply not many opportunities for graduates in the areas of work that I had genuine interest in.

After some months, I was fortunate to get a job at a commercial bank as a treasury middle office analyst. I had never dreamed of working in a bank, but I was so thankful and excited to start my first job. My first job was a blessing in every way, but it was not a fit for my long-term plans. I knew that I could not relax and so I kept an eye out for opportunities and kept applying. This time, unlike when I finished graduate school, I was specific to what I was searching for. After many applications I came across the AfYWL fellowship advert, I remember being excited as I knew this would be an amazing opportunity. This was one of the very few opportunities where I felt accommodated by the requirements and so I went on and applied then got selected.

Most people around me did not understand my decision of resigning from a good permanent contract job after only year and go for a one-year fellowship. This taught me two things, the first being that not everyone understands your destination

and so not everyone will understand the route you decide to take, this shouldn't stop you. The second is choosing what drives you, no matter how brief, is worth the risk and this has become more apparent over the course of my enriching experience in this program. Even though at times I was made to believe that in life you need to "go with the flow" I choose to believe that as you go with the flow you need to find ways to create your own flow. I am thankful for this fellowship because it has given me a start at a career I had dreamed of since I was 14 years old.

As I remain curious about how my story will continue as life progresses, I know that this fellowship would have played a very critical role in shaping my future and when all is said and done my story will be that of "making change".



Name:
Gloria Kembabazi

Nationality:
Ugandan

Duty Station:
Regional Service Centre,
Ethiopia

The Passionate Gloria

"It takes courage to endure the sharp pains of self-discovery rather than choose to take the dull pain of unconsciousness that would last the rest of our lives"

Marianne Williamson

Gloria Kembabazi

From the heading of this story, one would think it to be such a short journey: from Uganda to Ethiopia, but that is, indeed, not the case. This is a long story of how life's journey has brought me from the Pearl of Africa through many lands and experiences to the Cradle of Mankind and Land of Origins – and how I believe it is taking me even more enrichingly further. I am inspired by success; any achievement lights up my spirit. There is magic in realising that any challenge -

any obstacle is there to be surmounted. I hope that in my story, you too, find some inspiration.

I was born and raised in western Uganda to parents for whom education was a gift and not a given. Looking back now, I often think how differently my life could have panned out had any events happened differently in one of the preceding generations. They say the accident of birth determines many things in one's life such as nationality and chances in life. In my case it was not an accident but God's own purpose. In different ways, both my parents strove for their education and attained their professions with excellence. It is with that same dedication, passion, and many loving sacrifices that I was raised and educated.

Due to a family crisis when I was just beginning school, a decision was made that I should go to boarding school while my family navigated it. Perhaps, it is from that period of my life that I was prepared to go through boarding school later-on in high school and



5th from left. With colleagues of the Convasity Fellowship during a learning visit at African Union Headquarters, Ethiopia, 2017.

attend University over 400km from home and later move to different countries for further studies and work. I often think that it is that same quality of being grounded yet having many branches that extend far and produce fruit which flourishes in different soil, that has enabled me to explore and reach for various opportunities.

As I wove through my university years studying law, I realised that what I loved about my studies more than the legal principles and theories was how versatile law was. It is the one field of studies that exposes you to so many other disciplines. Because of it, I realised that I wanted to work in a multidisciplinary and international setting. So, I joined an honours leadership development programme, started teaching leadership and entrepreneurship in three different high schools, joined a student organisation, and took part in an international mooted competition.



With fellow trainee colleagues at European Investment Bank, Luxembourg, 2019.



Selfie during LL.M studies class break, Germany, 2017.

From there, I studied and passed the Bar following which I enrolled for my Master of Laws during which I also joined the CANVASSITY Youth Leadership Fellowship Programme on good governance and democracy in Africa.

At this point in my life, I was yearning for a truly international first career experience and was pleased when I was accepted for a traineeship at the European Investment Bank in Luxembourg. It was towards the end of that, that I applied to the AUC-UNDP Africa Young Women Leaders Fellowship, looking to further my international career growth and experience. I was accepted and posted to Ethiopia. So far, my journey working with the UNDP Regional Programme for Africa has exposed me to many aspects of UNDP's work ranging from migration-development nexus, to informal economy, inter office learning, communications and knowledge management. I am truly happy to be part of a programme whose ethos is to shape me for global leadership. The journey just began.



The 3 of us African Young Women Fellows posted at UNDP Regional Service Centre, Ethiopia, 2020.



Name:

Pezu Catherine Mukwakwa

Nationality:

Zambian

Duty Station:

Regional Service Centre,
Ethiopia

The Peaceful Pezu



You will tell a story of triumph. Trust the process, for what you thought was rejection is redirection and orchestration towards the path of your destiny.

Pezu Catherine Mukwakwa

Filled with ambition and determination as I studied for my law degree in Perth, Western Australia, I was certain that I was on my way to becoming a Human Rights lawyer. Unexpectedly, towards the completion of my degree, I was confronted with institutional racism that effectively crushed my legal aspirations. Upon discovering that other African students had experienced similar issues, I raised this with the law school's senior leadership. Despite my efforts, this did not result in any tangible change. This strenuous process took a toll on my mental health and I made the tough but ultimately fruitful decision to withdraw from law school.

I then enrolled for a double degree in Criminology &

Criminal Justice and International Relations in South Africa. However, I had promised my mother that I would return to law school and complete my degree once I had graduated with the double degree because I knew the financial sacrifice she had made for me to study in Australia. Ironically, I never returned to law school and my mother, proud of the path I have taken since, never insisted.



Taken in Perth, Western Australia, this is one of the few good moments I have from law school. I had made a presentation on an area of law I was passionate about (September 2013)

Upon completion of my double degree, I interned at The Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre, a place of memory, education and lessons for humanity. Working there sparked my interest in the politics of memorialisation and prevention of atrocities and genocide. With the intention to understand the inter-relationships between conflict, peace, security



My master's graduation day in Bradford, United Kingdom (December 2018)



At Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village in Rwamagana, Rwanda. I was awarded a scholarship for an International Study Program based in South Africa and Rwanda to understand the contemporary histories of post-genocide and post-conflict societies. It was through this program that I also became aware of the work of The Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre (July 2015)

and governance within transitional and/or conflict-affected regions and countries, I pursued my master's degree in African Peace and Conflict at the University of Bradford. It was whilst sitting in that classroom in Northern England that I had a eureka moment. This is when I began my purposive journey, which was to serve my continent and its people through efforts to promote peace and security.

Equipped with theoretical knowledge from my master's degree, I applied for a position with an African peace and security institute in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Working there, I had the opportunity to apply my theoretical knowledge into practical work as a Peace and Security Researcher focused on the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts in Africa. Having understood the nature of peace and security issues on the continent, I began to realise that these issues cannot be separated from sustainable



At the 8th Tana High-level Forum on Peace and Security in Africa in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. A highlight for me was a wave from one of my favourite statesmen and Pan Africanist, former President of South Africa Thabo Mbeki (May 2019)

development. While these linkages between peace and security and sustainable development became evident to me during this time, I did not have the tools to build on that realisation and connect these areas conceptually and programmatically. I particularly wanted to cultivate the skill of being able to engage programmatically in the field of peace, security and sustainable development.

When I came across the African Young Women Leaders Fellowship opportunity, I knew that it would be an unparalleled possibility to gain the insights I was seeking and a momentous steppingstone for my career development. Looking back, I also realise that this experience and the fellowship's emphasis on the ability of young African women to affect the continent positively, has enabled me to rebuild my self-esteem and self-confidence which had suffered immensely due to the early experience of racism. This fellowship has also reaffirmed my ample capabilities and my conviction to make an impact and bring about transformative change on our continent. I am a young woman leader, engaged and deeply rooted in African and global realities and part of the next generation of leaders and experts to drive the SDGs and Agenda 2063. I believe in what Toni Morrison said: "you are your best thing"; and I add to that, that while African countries are faced with a myriad of challenges, my fellow African Women Fellows and I are one of Africa's promises!



Standing next to a banner that illustrates an area of work I have been involved in since the start of my fellowship at the UNDP Regional Service Centre for Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. (January 2020)

Name:

Achievement Dhlakama

Nationality:

Zimbabwean

Duty Station:Africa Bureau, New York,
USA

The Dedicated Achievement

Achievement Dhlakama

“It makes a difference where and when we grew up. The culture we belong to and the legacies passed down by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievements in ways we cannot begin to imagine.” Born to a young couple in Zimbabwe’s capital at Glenview Maternity Clinic, the story of my birth is as common as many you can find in modern day Zimbabwe amongst young people born in the early 90s. However, the name that I carry is a unique one made more peculiar by the



“You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So, you must trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You must trust in something - your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life”

Steve Jobs



fact that it was given to a first-born female child in a society that then had a veneration for the male child. It thus can be safely argued that when I was born my parents were one young couple living a fulfilled dream through the birth of a child. This fulfilment was consistently demonstrated by them both through the encouragement and support they gave to my passions, to mention a few - playing soccer (am only good at watching the game), love for books and an attempt at becoming a builder during my O’level studies (I was all about fighting stereotypes). Because they never made my being female a shortcoming, I grew up knowing I could become anything that I wanted in the world. I thus lived my name a big dreamer and high achiever.

Reading and listening to stories shaped much of my childhood and fed my dreaming spirit, and I believe it’s also the reason I never excelled at STEM subjects the arts were my passion and I knew at a very tender age that I would go to law school and equipped with a law degree I had a shot at changing the world. As they say, experience is the best teacher, with age and



Of the many passion's achievement has, she spends some of her free time in the fields manning a small chicken and horticulture project she co-owns.

In the fields with her chicken.





Since soccer is now just a dream, hiking has become another favorite. This picture was taken at Domboshava Mountains and caves some 40km outside Harare. August 2019

more exposure it dawned on me that whilst the law is a great tool to bring change, influencing policy and development strategies for my country became more important to me than corporate litigation, a facet of the law I enjoyed and was good at. A thirst to be engaged in something bigger than myself made me reroute my career from corporate legal practice to development and humanitarian entities. Whilst my parents had a good understanding of my work as a lawyer this new path was unfamiliar territory for them, they never dissuaded me from this new path partly I guess they were secure in the comfort of knowing I had that law degree to fall back on if all fails.

In a country with a very high unemployment rate, I was one of the few privileged ones who got various opportunities to work with different organisations gaining professional experience whilst pursuing my passion. An opportunity working as a Programmes intern in 2018, with the UN Refugee agency UNHCR reaffirmed my resolve in my new career trajectory and offered me a platform to learn and broaden my understanding not only of the work done by the agency but the entire UN system.

I took these past academic and professional experiences to my journey with the AUC-UNDP AfYWL fellowship programme in 2019, and the lessons learnt during this programme with 20 other fellows are nothing short of transformative. As a fellow working with the Strategy Analysis and

Research Team (SART) in the Regional Bureau for Africa in New York, I have had the opportunity to expand my knowledge in sustainable development and have gained immense awareness on the work that the entire United Nations system does mostly out of the public eye and how this work has a direct impact on the lives of ordinary folks like myself who become beneficiaries of initiatives such as this leader's fellowship programme.

Achieving most of the milestones in my life be it personal, academic, and professional would not have been possible without the relationships around me. Whilst hard work and perseverance have been important enablers in pursuing and fulfilling my dreams, forging, and maintaining the right relationships around me through friendships, family and professional acquaintances have taken me further.

After this fellowship programme, I intend on going back to the continent and pursue my career's journey there. I hope to engage with more young people especially young women and share with them the many lessons that I have learnt elsewhere in the world to inspire them and hope my story unlocks the potential, they already possess within them.



Rarely seen version of Achievement the Lawyer!! Photo taken at HIGH COURT OF ZIMBABWE HARARE 2017

**Name:**

Kudakwashe Rejoice Chingono

Nationality:

Zimbabwean

Duty Station:Africa Bureau, New York,
USA

The Inspirational Kuda

Kudakwashe Rejoice Chingono

I was brought up in a Christian household, one that valued education and hard work. My dad is an Electrical Engineer and my mum an entrepreneur. They are the two most supportive people I know who really taught my siblings and I the importance of perseverance and integrity. Growing up I wanted to become a lawyer but that all changed when I came across Development Studies.

Development studies shaped the trajectory of my profession by opening my eyes to the endless possibilities for the African Continent and most importantly the endless opportunities for females in the world. The need for a world that has women who take up positions of leadership and influence. While Development as a concept is very ambiguous,

Life is not about how fast you get to the top or gain power, instead life is about the choices you make every day, the lives you impact around you and how you will be remembered when you are no longer there.

I believe that every step we make to better the lives of citizens especially the most vulnerable is all part of this ambiguous concept. Development is about the people. The very need for Development is what inspires me, by that I mean the ability to progress and move forward making positive strides. Re-writing our stories as we know them, the stories of Africa, the stories of the world. Knowing that there is a chance to right the wrong and shape the world into something better. Knowing that Africa for instance can have connectivity in all places, access to clean drinking water, access to food and education. That a young girl in the heart of Africa can dream of a brighter future for herself. Now that's Development to me.

I am inspired by women in my family, my mother, my aunts and my sisters. The reason why they inspire me is because of their strength, resilience and their ability to multi-task and their heart to keep giving to other people around me. These women are wives, mothers, employees, employers, and they make it all look easy. They portray a beautiful and very important strength of womanhood- The ability to do many things at once and do them well. They show the beauty of compassionate leadership, transforming leadership, and ensuring that their legacy lives on way long after they are gone.

A challenge I faced after University and before getting this job was unemployment. I was unemployed for a year and a few months. I had just completed my



My Honour's graduation.



From Left to Right:

In the Lowveld in Zimbabwe, doing my Master's Dissertation on Sugarcane Value Chains.

My second week in New York at Time Square

A picture of me getting the Investec Rhodes Top 100 Award for Leadership at Rhodes University in South Africa.

My Master's Graduation in 2019



master's degree and I thought surely, I would get a job easily, but that was not the case. What got me through this season was knowing that rejection is just but redirection, if one door shuts another one will surely open. You just need to build mental strength and keeping knocking on doors until one eventually opens. Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing in that season of my life. The season of my unemployment taught me a lot. It taught me patience, strong will, determination, persistence and most importantly strengthened my faith to trust God to do things in His time. That kept me going until a door was finally opened for me and that door was the African Young Women's Leaders Fellowship. It was the break I needed.

My main takeaway from this fellowship is that, the world needs me and you, from whatever corner you are in, to make a positive change. If we all take ownership and responsibility to see things being done differently, we can be part of the change we want to

see in our countries and in the world. This fellowship made me see the importance of involving youth in the new world order that is being shaped. Many African countries do not amplify the voices of the young and women. However, these are the very people that the world needs to bring about social, economic, political and environmental development. I look forward to continued equipping and growing in what lies ahead for me. This fellowship is training ground for me- it is laying a foundation for what is ahead and just like a sponge I am soaking in everything I am learning from the UNDP community around me. To every young girl reading this, I want to say: your destiny is not written for you but by you. Be open-minded, work hard, listen carefully, speak when asked to speak. Be like a sponge and soak in all the lessons you learn in every opportunity you get. You are a phenomenal woman, there is something unique about you. Never let fear stop you from reaching your goals, go after your passion and purpose not power, and enjoy every single moment of it.

Call for SHE Stories

If you want to share your story with us and the world

please write to:

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