From Day One

An Agenda for Advancing Women Leaders in Africa

Leaders are born; yet many born female in rural parts of sub-Saharan Africa go unrecognized largely because, from day one, women and girls face a political, cultural and social environment that inhibits their development into well-equipped female leaders.

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All across the globe, leadership programs designed and led by civil society, governments, and the international community seek to imbue leadership skills in women and girls. The potential impact of these programs, however, is undermined by the extremely gendered political, cultural and social practices of society. Aspiring and existing women leaders face their own unique challenges, such as lacking appropriate training and financing, violence, and issues including media coverage and fake news. More than 60% of Africa's population lives in rural areas[1] where these challenges, especially to young girls, are the most pronounced. In order to ensure women in Africa have the same opportunities as men to become leaders, African leaders and the international community must address the unique challenges facing women and girls to become the leaders they were born to be.

Despite the continent's long and rich history of female leaders, particularly pre-colonization, the political, social and cultural systems and beliefs do not currently promote leadership qualities or aspirations in young girls. Concerted efforts over the last two decades have expanded access to quality education and health for many, but women's political participation must also be a priority for the sake of good governance. To continue driving progress further and for more of those born on the continent, half of the population cannot be sidelined in decision-making.

If only half of potential leaders are identified and supported, then policy solutions remain only halfway-forged. African leaders primarily, as well as the international community, have a responsibility to speak out against the challenges facing women and girls to reach positions of leadership and support initiatives to eradicate them. This is particularly incumbent upon traditional and opinion leaders in the community, who must lend their

THE WOMEN IN PUBLIC SERVICE PROJECT

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About the Women in Public Service Project

The Women in Public Service Project will accelerate global progress towards women's equal participation in policy and political leadership to create more dynamic and inclusive institutions that leverage the full potential of the world's population to change the way global solutions are forged.

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About the Author

An entrepreneur, activist, politician and philanthropist, Her Excellency Joyce Banda served as the President of the Republic of Malawi from 2012-2014. She was Malawi's first female president and Africa's second. Prior to assuming office, President Banda served as a Member of Parliament, Minister of Gender and Child Welfare, Foreign Minister, and Vice President of the Republic of Malawi. While serving as Minister of Gender and Child Welfare, she championed the enactment of The Prevention of Domestic Violence Bill (2006), which provided the legal framework to support the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls.

President Banda is credited for turning round an ailing economy which was on the verge of collapse in April 2012. She instituted a number of economic reforms which led to significant economic expansion: Malawi's rate of economic growth rose from 1.8% in 2012 to over 6.2% in 2014. Under President Banda, Malawi's operational industrial capacity improved from 35% in 2012 to 85% in July 2014, and the foreign exchange import cover was increased from one week to three and a half months in July 2014. In the areas of democracy, good governance, and rule of law, President Banda repealed a number of draconian laws which weakened essential democratic institutions, infringed upon civil liberties, and restricted the freedom of the press.

President Banda's unwavering commitment to the promotion of women's maternal health and reproductive rights led her to establish the Presidential Initiative on Maternal Health and Safe Motherhood, which spearheaded the fight against high maternal mortality rates and the promotion of safe motherhood in Malawi. During the two years of her presidency, Malawi registered considerable success in the areas of maternal and child health, reducing the maternal mortality ratio from 675 deaths per 100,000 live births to 460.

As one her first actions after taking office, President Banda sold the multi-million dollar presidential jet, and donated 30% of her salary to the Malawi Council for the Handicapped (MACOHA), an organization serving individuals with disabilities.

President Banda regularly serves as a panelist and motivational speaker at international conferences and fora, and has spoken at the International Conference on Women in Beijing, Harvard Medical School and the John F. Kennedy School of Government, the London School of Economics and Political Science, the New African Woman Forum, the Women Deliver Conference, and George Washington University among others.

President Banda was named one of the world's most powerful black women by Forbes in 2013 and 2014, and one of the 100 most influential people in the world by both TIME and Forbes. In 2014, CNN named her one of the most inspirational woman in politics.

In 1997, President Banda founded the Joyce Banda Foundation International, which seeks to transform villages in Malawi through their work in supporting women's economic empowerment, education, maternal health and HIV/AIDS programs, leadership training, and support for human rights. In addition to this, she also serves on the Board of Nutrition International in Canada, and is a Board Member of the Tana High Level Forum for Peace and Security in Africa. She was recently appointed Member of Counsel of Former and Serving Female Heads of State along with Prime Minister Theresa May. She is currently a Distinguished Fellow with the Woodraw Wilson Center and Center for Global Development.

President Banda holds a M.A. in Leadership from the Royal Rhodes University of Canada, a B.S. in Gender Studies from Atlantic International University (U.S.), and a diploma in NGO Management from the International Labor Organization (ILO) Center in Turin, Italy. Jeonju University of South Korea conferred a Honorary Doctorate Degree in Economics for Her Excellency in January, 2013, and Wheelock College conferred an Honorary Doctorate Degree in Education for her in May, 2015.

voice and authority to the promotion of new traditions that ensure that every child in Africa, boy or girl, is socialized in a way that encourages them to become the leaders they were born to be.

This paper seeks to address the ways in which the girls and women who are born to be leaders are prevented from reaching their potential in sub-Saharan Africa, and proposes recommendations to ensure that more African women are represented in leadership and decision-making in government and elected office across the continent. Women's political empowerment is vital to make good on the promise to implement the Beijing International Platform for Action of 1995,[2] and the more recent commitment made by all 54 countries in Africa to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Beyond that, gender parity in decision-making is critical for the sake of economic development, good governance, and peace and prosperity on the continent overall.

Female Leadership in Africa: An Historical Look

Prior to colonization, women holding positions of political leadership on the African continent was not without precedent. Africa can boast many formidable female leaders as far back as more than 3,000 years ago in Ancient Egypt such as Nefertiti.[3] Women held positions of political leadership in the Kingdom of Kush (Ethiopia) during the Meroitic period, and one Queen, referred to as Candace of Meroë, is said to have prevented Alexander the Great from expanding further south beyond Egypt in his conquests.[4] Amina ruled Zaria, in what is now northwest Nigeria, for 34 years in the 16th century and was known as a brilliant military strategist.[5] And Yaa Asantewaa, Queen Mother of Ejisu in modern-day Ghana, led the resistance against British colonialism after shaming the male leaders for entertaining the idea of surrender.[6] However as Africa opened up to trade with outside groups, colonization and warfare turned social, economic and political norms on their heads, all with gendered consequences.

The intersection of gender and colonization in Africa, particularly how colonization impacted women's political participation, is understudied. While it is unlikely that patriarchy was an unfamiliar concept in pre-colonial Africa, the introduction of European systems rapidly institutionalized it into new governance structures.

After the defeat of local systems of government, the formation of new ones largely failed to acknowledge the critical role of African women politically and economically. The impact of colonialization on African women varied, though "women's precolonial political activity was generally disregarded" as it was the men, specifically elite men, who were consulted by Europeans in the establishment of customary laws.[7] As such, women in Africa were institutionally subordinated to men, and largely stripped of the political and economic autonomy they had previously enjoyed.

In the waves of rising demands for independence in African countries after World War II and beyond, female political leaders emerged in the struggles, reclaiming a portion of their African heritage. Women such as Rose Chibambo, Graça Machel, Winnie Mandela, Joice Mujuru, Lillian Ngoyi and Albertina Sisulu were instrumental in the fight for autonomy from colonial rule and influence in Africa.

Women's participation in liberation struggles in Africa led to more engagement of women in political spaces.

Furthermore, women's participation in liberation struggles led to more engagement of women in political spaces, as Joice Mujuru served as a government minister and Vice President of Zimbabwe, Rose Chibambo was the first woman deputy minister in the new cabinet after Malawi became independent, and Lillian Ngoyi was the first woman elected to the executive committee of the African National Congress in South Africa.

Africa has a long and rich tradition of matriarchal communities and women leaders born on its land, leaders who have led religious and political revolutions, changing the course of history. It would be a mistake to assume Amina or Yaa Asantewaa were mythical beings part of a long-lost era, or that women like Albertina Sisulu are anomalies. These women were born leaders, and many more female leaders are born each day. This rich tradition of female leadership is to be honored and preserved, but we will fail to do so if we do not recognize and remove the many barriers still facing women leaders today, and the girl leaders born today who will aspire to be changemakers tomorrow.

Leaders Are Born

Many children display leadership capabilities very young, sometimes as early as five years old, suggesting that leadership is a quality, or a collection of qualities, with which some are born. Several studies estimate that, regarding the qualities that make a leader, about 30 percent are hereditary and the other 70 percent a result of human development.[8] Leaders are generally characterized as having certain traits: charisma, confidence, and intellectual intelligence. Beyond these traits, other scholars offer that effective leaders tend to exhibit high levels of emotional intelligence, which includes traits such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.[9] Of this culmination of qualities which make a leader, many may be developed over time. Though for some individuals, leadership traits reveal themselves at a shockingly young age, which suggests that at least some qualities are hereditary, and that leaders are born.

Malala Yousafzai, a young advocate for girls' education in Pakistan even after being violently attacked by the Taliban at 15, is a well-known example of a born leader.[10] On a trip to Cameroon with her family at 7 years old, Mongai Fankam was troubled to learn that many children carried their school supplies in plastic bags because they

could not afford backpacks. Now an 8th grader in North Carolina, she is the founder of the *No Backpack Day* initiative, which has donated more than 5,000 backpacks with school supplies to children in Cameroon[11] and encourages students to donate supplies to other children in need in the U.S. and around the world.[12] Malala and Mongai are inspiring examples of young leaders who became dedicated, with the support of their families, to expanding opportunities for the underserved at an early age, demonstrating that leadership can start at birth and arises not simply from training.

At 15 years old, Alessia Alessandra de Borbón has a record of philanthropic leadership that rivals that of many adults. When she was seven years old, Alessia Alessandra suffered a traumatic car accident in her home state of New York. In the hospital recovering from her injuries, she noticed that there was not a children's trauma wing. After recovering and with the support of her family, Alessia Alessandra donated an area in the trauma centre dedicated specifically to children. This was just the first of many charitable endeavors she would lead. As a member of the Montessori Model United Nations for several years, Alessia Alessandra is dedicated to improving the livelihoods of those around the world. To that end, she established the de Borbón Foundation, creating partnerships with three separate foundations to help her achieve positive change for others on a global scale.

Some women, such as Natasha Annie Tonthola, emerged as leaders and advocates for change in spite of experiencing socio-cultural practices that are often physically or psychologically harmful. Natasha, like many girls in her village in Malawi, underwent a "cleansing" ritual at 13 called *kusasa fumbi* during which a local man is hired to have sex with a young girl.[13] It is believed that the practice marks the transition from childhood to womanhood and protects girls from infertility and disease, when in fact the girls are often exposed to early and unwanted pregnancy, as well as HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.[14] Despite undergoing the ritual and escaping an abusive marriage she entered into when she was only 15, Natasha's leadership traits were not to be squashed. She is now a community organizer and advocate against these practices, and formed an organization to provide sanitary pads to girls, the lack of which often keeps them from going to school.[15] For her work, she was shortlisted for the 2016 Nelson Mandela- Graça Machel Innovation Award.[16]

Engaged at five years old, Kakenya Ntaiya displayed natural leadership traits by bargaining with her father that she would undergo the traditional practice of female genital cutting on one condition.[17] With the knowledge that most girls from her village in Kenya are married after the ceremony and don't finish school, she negotiated with her father that she would undergo the ritual as long as she could finish high school afterwards. Kakenya displayed her innate leadership traits, her confidence, intelligence, and motivation at a young age to stay focused on her goal, and bargain with the head of the household in order to achieve it. After extricating herself from the engagement and convincing the village elders to allow her to go to college in the United States, Kakenya returned to Kenya and started the first primary school for girls in her village in 2009.[18] Kakenya, calling upon personal experience to identify how some traditions can pose barriers to

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girls, took her initiative a step further: in order for children to enroll, their parents must agree not subject their daughters to genital cutting or early marriage.[19]

These young women, and likely many others, are displaying leadership qualities such as confidence, emotional and intellectual intelligence, motivation, and empathy at a shockingly young age, suggesting that leaders are indeed born. Many girls have emerged as leaders in spite of political, cultural and social barriers that can hinder their ability to capitalize on their leadership traits. But these girls represent the tip of the iceberg, a small handful of the young women who, if the barriers were removed, would be expanding opportunities for other girls, and advancing political and social change for their communities writ large. Addressing and removing the barriers still in place for most girls in rural areas of Africa, and for emerging and aspiring women leaders, will ensure that young women such as Natasha and Kakenya are not exceptions to the rule.

Challenges for Female Leaders

Challenges Facing Young Female Leaders

Girls in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the rural areas, are often undernourished[20] and undereducated,[21] and cultural practices such as child marriage,[22] breast ironing,[23] *trokosi*, and other "cleansing" rituals[24] have serious ramifications. Young women leaders also struggle to be taken seriously and may be overlooked in favor of boys, or others who are older and thus perceived to be better equipped to be leaders. These discriminatory, not to mention physically and psychologically harmful, social norms, practices, and perceptions are the core barriers to young women becoming leaders.

Millions of girls in Africa are born with leadership qualities yet in rural parts, these traits are being socialized out of them through challenges such as lack of quality food and education, failure to protect them from harmful traditions and, most importantly, the perception in the home and community that a girl is not meant to lead.

Many young women are displaying leadership qualities at a shockingly young age.

In most rural parts of Africa, a son is regarded higher than a daughter and the false gradation of value seeps into the socialization of boys and girls. If a family has limited resources, the boy will go to school and the girl will not, and perceptions of a girl's worth typically limits them to the domestic realm early on, and into adulthood. Girls carry the weight of responsibility to overcome not only the disproportionate treatment, but the roadblocks they place in the path to become the leaders they were born to be.

Girls often go undernourished and underfed, which can impact brain development. Men and boys are typically served first, and given the most nutrient-rich meals, while girls often eat last and least, receiving food of lower quality and only after the males have eaten. The Food and Agricultural Organization identifies this issue to be of particular concern in South Asia and Africa, where women and girls are more likely to die of malnutrition than men and boys, largely due to "social and economic inequalities between the sexes".[25] And because boys and girls are often separated in the home, daughters cook the food with their mothers to serve to the men and boys, reinforcing the notion to both boys and girls that the well-being of the male takes precedence.

Similarly, boys' education is prioritized over that of girls, especially when resources are limited. According to UNESCO's 2016 Global Education Monitoring Report, this gender disparity is the

most prominent in Africa at the secondary education level. Of the 10 countries with fewer than 80 girls enrolled in lower secondary education for every 100 boys, 7 are in sub-Saharan Africa and this is drastically exacerbated by conflict and extreme poverty.[26]

Labor is also shared disproportionately among boys and girls. Girls are raised to primarily perform in the domestic sphere, sometimes literally carrying the burden of household chores on their head such as fetching water, and taking care of other children while boys are not expected to perform these tasks. Without the responsibility of household chores or taking care of their siblings, boys are encouraged to be children, spending time with schoolmates, while the girl is committed to work in the house rather than playing as a child should.

In addition to carrying the burden of household chores and not fed or educated as well as boys, girls across the continent from rural areas are often subjected to harmful cultural practices that that can often further the cycle that inhibits a girl's social, political and economic potential, as well as leadership potential. Child marriage, practices that seek to alter or remove part of the female genitalia such as breast ironing and female genital cutting (FGC), [27] and other "cleansing" rituals can produce a litany of physical and psychological ramifications that pose barriers to producing women political leaders. Undergoing these practices can pose serious risks to physical and mental health, as well as limit a girl's autonomy, and stifle her confidence and sense of self-worth, which are critical traits for an effective leader.

Despite the many commendable programs seeking to train and equip women leaders, many of them focus on those between the ages of 10 and 14, which is too late for peak impact. By the time many girls in Africa are in this age group, their education and general well-being is being treated as secondary to that of their brothers at home. They may have already undergone *kusasa fumbi* and other cleansing rituals, or are married. Instead, we must supplement initiatives that focus on the girl with those that focus on changing perceptions of the family and community, and the eradication of harmful practices that are meant to stifle a girl's autonomy. Without the active support of family and community at home, the leadership traits borne to so many girls on the African continent remain suppressed and unrealized while they are not taken seriously.

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The perceptions of the roles and abilities of women and girls are at the root of these practices, adopted and perpetuated by family members and community who underestimate the impact of women leaders. With each of these practices, which have a multiplier effect on girls and compound their vulnerability, parents and community leaders determine the future of these girls, and the likeliness they will become leaders. As sons spend time with their fathers, allowing them to engage with other men in political discussions instead of doing household chores, they learn about current events and build confidence in their right to discuss them. Traditional perceptions translate into law, as land, titles and power usually pass patrilineally, and boys are groomed for the responsibilities ahead. The perceptions of women and girls' ability to lead is not only limiting for girls early on, but has lasting impacts for women aspiring to be political leaders.

A lack of political will prevents many of these barriers from being eradicated. National leaders from Africa's 54 countries signed a commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, one of which is to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."[28] Achieving these goals takes more than signing a piece of paper at the UN, and more than merely saying that gender equality is important. Without the political will to prioritize gender equality and proper allocation of resources to protect and empower women and girls, the other challenges will remain.

Challenges Facing Existing and Aspiring Leaders

Existing and aspiring women leaders face unique challenges in acquiring the appropriate training and financing, and building the skills and networks necessary to become elected and appointed officials. Other issues such as violence and media coverage, including fake news, disproportionately affect women leaders, and again, political will is needed to strengthen efforts towards empowering women.

Reaching a position of leadership, and carrying out that position effectively, requires certain leadership traits, but it also requires technical skills and financial resources. Without the active recruitment and training of women for positions of leadership, aspiring leaders often lack the resources and skills to run for office. If the research done on American women is true for others around the world, women are much more prone to self-doubt when assessing whether they have the qualifications to run for office,[29] and need to be asked, on average, "seven times by seven different people" to run for office.[30] Furthermore, many training programs exist that are not appropriately tailored to the context in which they are working. Training programs and networks are critical to building the skillsets of women leaders, though they are the most impactful when they are designed for, and exist within, the appropriate context. Organizations offering training to women leaders exist in nearly every country. It is these organizations that best understand the barriers and opportunities for women aspiring to positions of policy and political leadership within their own systems, and it is these organizations that are best equipped to provide trainings that are tailored to their specific historical, cultural and political contexts.

Women's networks are key to equipping and supporting women leaders.

Women's networks are key to equipping and supporting women leaders, both aspiring and current. Women's networks can provide a hub for resource-sharing, as well as advocate for funding of female candidates. Without these networks and an environment that allows them to flourish, women candidates or officials are without the support usually needed to build the necessary resources, skills and contacts to become effective leaders. Initiatives out of parliamentary bodies and civil society organizations connect women leaders, allowing for the sharing of best practices and resources. These networks can also play the critical role of providing validation and encouragement in the absence of receiving that early on and the base from which a woman in public service draws her support. In Malawi, the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Gender Coordination Network trains women candidates, and helps them raise funds, as well as serving as a watchdog to hold the countries accountable that ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa in 2005.[31]

Female candidates are frequently underfunded. This is true in the U.S.[32] and Brazil though in the latter, research has linked underfunding to a general perception that women are less experienced in political spaces since elected offices have been overwhelmingly held by men.[33] Economic empowerment and political empowerment are directly linked- the National Association of Business Women in Malawi is an organization that works to economically empower women in Malawi. Since its founding, four of its early members, including myself, went on to become cabinet ministers, members of Parliament, and even Malawi's first female President.

Violence and threats of violence can be fatal to women's political aspirations, and even to the women themselves. From Bolivia to Uganda to Iraq, many female politicians face intimidation, harassment, violence, and even death for being politically active[34] in a space traditionally dominated by men. The murder of Jo Cox reinvigorated this discussion on a global scale,[35] and the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) #NotTheCost campaign is drawing attention to the high numbers of violence against women running for office. The #NotTheCost campaign declares that women should be able to be politically active without experiencing any form of discrimination, harassment or assault.[36] As Madeline Albright rightly said, "When a woman participates in politics, she should be putting her hopes and dreams for the future on the line, not her dignity and not her life."[37]

In addition to violence and threats of violence, the media can hinder women's participation in policy and politics. Media coverage of female leaders around the world tends to be extremely gendered, producing disproportionate commentary on a woman's body shape, outfit, age, or general appearance rather than her credentials, political platform, or ability to appeal to her constituents. Michele Bachelet, President of Chile, recalled how the Chilean media called her "fat" during her campaign, while her larger opponent was "powerful."[38] U.S. media coverage of women candidates is overwhelmingly focused on their appearance, which, whether positive or negative, damages her campaign. Research shows that "appearance coverage damages voters' perceptions of the woman candidate" no matter what is actually said about her.[39] The media coverage of Sarah Palin's bid for Vice President in 2008 and Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign in 2016 were rife with gendered overtones and blatant sexism,[40] which detracted the focus from their political positions while objectifying the individuals.

Fake news especially targets women candidates, often displaying them in a negative light. Aside from factual inaccuracy, this type of coverage reinforces the ingrained notion that women are unfit or unprepared for political leadership. Seeking to delegitimize their campaign, fake news does more harm than only spreading misinformation to the public. It also sends a clear message to the target, and viewers, that women's presence in a traditionally male-dominated space is unwelcome, and will be met with hostility and efforts to discredit their achievements due to their gender. Fake news coverage that seeks to cast doubt over women's ability to lead effectively reinforces the idea that women leaders, like young women, are not to be taken seriously as compared to their male counterparts.

With these challenges come enormous opportunities for training and equipping existing and aspiring leaders, and for empowering the younger generation. Those in power currently have a responsibility to speak out against the barriers facing women and girls, and lend their support and resources towards removing them. Changing mindsets and behaviors are at the core of combating these challenges, both for women and girls. And to do so, we must engage male community leaders, and appeal to tradition, to enact that change.

Networks should be strengthened and supported, which provide important resources for emerging leaders and young women seeking mentors. More research and data is needed around the representation of women in a variety of sectors and countries, and at which levels. Data collection and analysis will show where women are in political leadership globally, and elucidate where there are gaps to fill. Additionally, research around the impact and perceptions of women as leaders is needed to analyze what impact filling those gaps may have on society. Lastly, legal reforms will protect and empower women socially, politically and economically from day one to enhance their ability to capitalize on the leadership traits with which they are born.

Recommendations

1. *Enhance political will to empower girls, and appoint qualified women to leadership positions*

Political will is critical for the following recommendations to produce results. Those currently in positions of leadership must lend their voice and support to initiatives and reforms that expand and protect the rights of women and girls. National leaders should promote the rights of women and girls by actively endorsing and promoting training programs, expanding initiatives to engage young women, and launching public service announcements and campaigns against harmful practices. Without the active engagement of political leaders, progress towards gender parity will be undermined.

Those in positions of leadership can also ensure that they practice what they preach by implementing a gender balance in their cabinet. Those with the responsibility of appointing qualified individuals should make a concerted effort to identify, through networks and civil society organizations, qualified women for available positions. As women's presence and participation in local government improves attitudes towards women leaders generally,[41] this sets a precedent that empowers more women to seek positions of leadership.

2. *Mobilize rural leadership, families, and communities to promote the change of mindsets and behavior around women and girls*

In communities where men generally have decision-making authority, socio-cultural behavioral change will start with the male heads of households, chiefs, and tribal leaders. Without the buy-in of local authorities, legislative change and advocacy on the part of the international community lacks teeth. Many communities are still patriarchal in nature, and failing to engage male community leaders in social mobilization programs threatens backlash. Instead, programs promoting socio-cultural change must engage men, chiefs of villages, and whole communities, to trigger the necessary perceptions around women in leadership that will lead to behavioral change.

Tostan, led by Molly Melching, is one such organization whose methodology is geared towards widespread socio-cultural change in six African nations: Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, and The Gambia.[42] Through a process called "organized diffusion," Tostan ensures that for every one direct participant in their Community Empowerment Program (CEP), about 10 people are indirectly reached.[43] The Community Empowerment Program is a three-year community-led education program, which focuses on topical areas such as human rights, access to education, child protection, good governance, and the empowerment of women and girls.[44] Through the CEP, many women have become community leaders and are using their new role to advocate to local officials for health campaigns, schools and roads, and manage community grants and micro-credit systems to support local businesses.[45]

Similarly, Women for Women International (WfWI) has piloted programs in Afghanistan, Nigeria and others that engage men in discussions on masculinity, gender-based division of roles and the impact of empowering women on a community.[46] One local leader in Afghanistan, Ghulam Rabi, now advises men in his community against selling their daughters in marriage since going through the program.[47] In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), 56% of men surveyed said that they "talked with another man about women's rights and the need to prevent sexual and gender-based violence" before going through the WfWI program. After the program, the number soared to 92%.[48] As we work towards gender equality, we must recognize where power still resides and work towards our goal equally among men and women. A recent Atlantic article reiterated the critical role the father can play in encouraging leadership in women,[49] and my own father did so by encouraging me to go to school and protecting me against harmful traditions.

Changing perceptions around girls will expand their access to education and put a higher premium on an educated girl than previously. Additionally, access to education should also include rights education for boys and girls, beginning at the preschool level. Teaching boys and girls, side by side, about the rights that all individuals have to live a healthy, prosperous life will early on allows children to build confidence within themselves, and respect for others. THINK EQUAL is a global initiative that prioritizes equality studies like literacy and numeracy, and constructs and delivers equality curriculum for children to combat the discriminatory mindset that leads to violence, negative stereotypes, and prejudicial judgements.[50] Since its inception in 2016, THINK EQUAL has secured commitments from 117 schools across the world.

3. *Strengthen networks between current and emerging leaders*

In the absence of the normalization of female leaders, it is imperative that aspiring and current women leaders are part of strong networks that can provide the necessary support. International and regional networks provide research and training, and advocate for greater participation of women in elected and public office. Networks also offer mentorship that provides young women with role models, which many credit as being critical to their decision to strive for leadership positions in public service. Mentorship programs that match young women with role models can help cultivate leadership skills in girls, and ensure they have a constant ally. The Women in Public Service Project at the Wilson Center is currently partnering with Global Give Back Circle to match girls in Rwanda and Kenya interested in becoming political leaders with mentors from all over the world who have policy and political experience. Through this and other programs, girls are encouraged and validated which may be in the place of, or in addition to, encouragement from the family and community leaders.

4. *Allocate resources towards data collection and analysis and research around women and leadership*

We cannot know where we need to go if we do not know where we are. We need data to examine what the situation is for women and the impact women leaders have on a society to better advocate for change and support evidence-based initiatives. As long as we live in the world of anecdotes, programs that promote women's leadership will remain underfunded in the absence of measureable impact. The collection, analysis and dissemination of data and information around where women sit in government, in various sectors and levels, will help to first provide a clear picture of what progress has been made while elucidating

where more information, and more women, are needed for the sake of parity.

The data can also tell us how increased participation of women in politics affects perceptions around women as leaders, and affects outcomes of other policies. In addition to improving attitudes towards women leaders generally,[51] women's political participation has increased the priority of issues of gender equality, reproductive health, and violence against women in Latin America[52] and elsewhere.[53]

5. *Create the legal environment to advance women in positions of leadership*

Holding institutions accountable through legal and structural reform is a critical aspect to protecting women and girls, and removing barriers to leadership. This includes repealing laws that impact women negatively, such as those that limit women's economic and social empowerment, restrict land rights and access to property, restrict travel or otherwise prevent a woman from entering or leaving legally binding agreements without the co-signature or sponsorship of a male family member.

Legal reform must also include the passage of new laws that: penalize abuse, harassment, and discrimination on the basis of gender; impose strict sentencing against domestic violence, rape and harmful practices; raise the legal age of marriage, and; introduce structural reforms that encourage women's participation. Quotas and other structural reforms that create space for women's participation can also buttress socio-cultural change by validating the importance of women's meaningful engagement at an institutional level. By removing the barriers facing emerging and current women leaders, we empower them to enact changes that benefit the next generation, and most especially those girls born to be leaders who face their own unique challenges.

Conclusion

Women in Africa have succeeded in spite of barriers such as societal norms and lack of support, but we need to remove barriers for the next group in order to achieve gender parity by 2050. Leaders are born; yet many born female in rural parts of sub-Saharan Africa go unrecognized largely because, from day one, girls are born into a political, cultural and social environment that inhibits their development into well-equipped leaders. Despite many effective leadership programs, their potential impact is undermined by the extremely gendered and usually harmful ways in which girls are socialized.

Africa's rich history of female leaders is one not only to be celebrated, but furthered. There is enormous potential on the continent. Mongai Fankam, Alessia Alessandra, Natasha Annie Tonthola and Kakenya Ntaiya are only a handful of examples of what girls can achieve, but reminders that many other girls could be leaders if barriers were removed to allow them to flourish. These challenges are not insurmountable, but the political will and changes to mindsets must come first. And quickly, before more young girls who are born leaders, with enormous potential, become suppressed and invisible through the widespread practice of silencing and delegitimizing their voices.

Women leaders are not a monolith, nor is the idea of women's empowerment. Solutions to the barriers facing women and girls must be contextually appropriate, and engage different ages, communities and sectors in order for them to have lasting impact. Legal reform, education, trainings, mentorship, the building of networks, eradicating harmful traditions, and engaging male family members and community leaders are some of the ways we can empower both those who are leading today, as well as those who will lead tomorrow.

Local and national leaders in Africa, and the international community, must lend their voice and influence to removing the barriers facing women and girls to reach positions of leadership. It is particularly incumbent upon local, national and traditional and opinion leaders in the community to support initiatives to eradicate them. Every child in Africa, boy or girl, should be provided with the opportunities to become the leaders they were born to be. The peace and prosperity of the continent may very well depend on it.

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22. Girls who are married young tend to come from impoverished families, whose health and physical strength may already be compromised. These girls experience frequent and premature pregnancies without prenatal care, leading to a higher rate of maternal and infant mortality, and other long term health problems for both mother and baby. Marrying the daughters off at an early age also promises to bring in a dowry from the husband's family in some countries, easing the financial strain of an extra mouth to feed while bringing in additional supplementary income. Beyond the deep impact early marriage has on a girl, her family, and her community, it hinders a girl's ability to take advantage of any leadership potential she may have been born with.

23. Breast ironing, practiced in parts of Cameroon, involves the pressing or massaging of heated objects on a girls' breasts to hinder their growth and is usually performed by their mothers or other female family and community members. The practice, performed on nearly 4 million girls, is meant to delay the signs of puberty to protect against rape, and other forms of unwanted and nonconsensual male attention. Aside from the excruciating pain that girls experience in undergoing these procedures, usually without anesthesia or sterile utensils, the physical and emotional trauma can carry grave short and long term consequences.

24. In addition to kusasa fumbi, other cleansing rituals exist that target girls, whether or not they are the ones needing to be "cleansed." Trokosi, or "wife of the gods" is a tradition found in Ghana in which young girls are sent to a local shrine as "a form of atonement" for a family member who commits a crime or social infraction. The girls are usually subjected to exploitation, physical and sexual abuse under the priest's direction and, although the practice has been outlawed, more than a thousand young women and girls are still enslaved.

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