



## Future of Africa Podcast Episode 6: Women on the Rise Transcript September 18, 2025

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The views and opinions expressed in this episode are those of the guests and hosts, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the podcast's partners.

And a note on this episode. This conversation mentions incidences of violence which some listeners might find disturbing.

**Mark Leon Goldberg** [00:00:10]

Welcome to the Future of Africa, a special series on Global Dispatches. I'm Mark Leon Goldberg, the host and founder of Global Dispatches, and in several episodes over the coming weeks, we will bring you in-depth conversations designed to explore Africa's future in the context of today's challenges and opportunities.

This series is produced in partnership with the African Union, the Elders, and the United Nations Foundation, and is hosted by the Kenyan journalist Adelle Onyango. I am truly thrilled to bring you this special project of Global Dispatches. We have some amazing guests in this episode and throughout the series. Enjoy!

**Adelle Onyango** [00:01:12]

Welcome to the Future of Africa podcast. I'm your host Adelle Onyango and this is a show where we explore the bold ideas and leaders shaping Africa's place in the world.

Across the continent, young women and girls are rising. We're breaking barriers, we're challenging norms, and reshaping what leadership looks like in Africa. As we approach the 30th anniversary of the historic Beijing Platform for Action, this episode spotlights the power and potential of African women and girls in shaping the continent's priorities and global influence. Joining me are three phenomenal women from different generations and regions.

First up is Ms. Graça Machel, who really needs no introduction, but she's a global advocate for women and children's rights and a member of The Elders. And she's going to be bringing decades of experience advancing gender equality and social justice.

**Graça Machel** [00:02:11]

They have the power; they have the voice. What they need is the space to express themselves.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:02:20]

We're also going to be joined by Françoise Moudouthe. She's a Chief Executive Officer of the African Women's Development Fund. She's a bold feminist leader and she's building movements that send to African women's voices across the continent and beyond.

**Françoise Moudouthe** [00:02:35]

And what is lost then in our stories is our voice. So, for me, it's about centering our own voices in the telling of our stories.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:02:52]

Last, but not least, we're going to be joined by Satta Sheriff, a Liberian climate justice and child's rights advocate, and a rising voice selected by the African Union Youth Envoy. She's representing the next generation of African changemakers.

**Satta Sheriff** [00:03:09]

We can want all the change, but if we do not love where we come from, our roots, it's easier for someone to come and just try to erase us.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:03:19]

Now, through their lived experiences, and powerful insights, we're going to be exploring how investing in women and girls transforms just not individual lives, but the future of Africa itself.

So first off, let's jump right in with Ms. Graça Machel.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:03:40]

It's such an honor to have you on this show, Graça Machel. Welcome.

**Graça Machel** [00:03:49]

Thank you very much for having me on this show.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:03:51]

Since the Landmark Beijing Conference in 1995, how far do you think Africa has come since then?

**Graça Machel** [00:03:59]

We have some sectors in which we made really significant changes, and you can say it is roads of the commands which came from Beijing. At that time, not all African governments had clearly policies, targets, institutional shaping to meet those targets on education, for instance. Today, any government on this continent that has a policy on assets, retention, and success of girls in education. Some of the countries, in fact, they have reached already, I mean, 50% of enrollment in the first years of the systems. Our challenge has been now in retention, and success, and even in transition from primary to secondary or to technical institutions. But it is no doubt that everybody has taken on board the importance and even put laws, regulations, and as I'm saying, institutions to make sure that education is provided to girls. This is one fact.

Today, it's no longer a question of how do we bring women to political positions. I'm talking of government. I'm talking of parliament. And even to judiciary. Policies out there and some countries, in fact, have made very visible efforts to make sure that our governments have a gender balance. Africa has today the highest representation of women in the judiciary. We did have also, I mean, the wonderful news of having the very first woman who was elected as a Head of State. So, these are some good examples. But perhaps I should say the areas where we face much more challenge is the economy. Most of our economies on the continent are based in the so-called informal sector, which means they are not registered.

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

These small businesses, they are not registered, and they're not really acknowledged in the way of how to make them grow. The economy, I think, is one of the areas where not even legislation and regulations are solid. So, the commands are still having to be made.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:07:06]

So, to someone who's listening because we can push for policies to change but policies and governance and systems are made by people, we're the ones upholding them. What do you think we need to change in our mindset as you've touched on when it comes to how we knew women on the continent, just as individuals even?

**Graça Machel** [00:07:29]

I think we need very seriously to give the same value to a girl as to a boy. And that begins in the family. Girls having the same value, the same respect, and the same kind of incentives for a girl to flourish and to thrive. Some of our communities, they believe that, well, they have to promote boys, but in girls, they have to remain at home to support the family. And they even go as far as to believe that they have a right to decide when she should get married. And when she's married, the family she goes to believes they have the right to tell her how many children she should have. The societal norms which we have derive from the fact that it is not given the same value, the same respect, the same kind of incentive to a girl child as we do with boys. And this is a huge impediment for us to achieve equality.

So how do we do this? I think we need to perhaps to have another coming together of the same kind, not in Beijing, but on the continent, where we discuss those things. We challenge these things. Our traditional leaders, they have to be the one to incentive to say, "in my community, I'm not going to accept that the young families which discriminate against girls. In my communities, whatever are the rituals which have to be performed to serve the beliefs of communities and how they build a society and kind of relationship, but they should never violate the rights to a girl."

I'm glad to say that girls begin to be the ones who challenge this as well, but it shouldn't be a fight by women alone. We need men and women to come forward and really to recognize that between a man and a woman, there is no hierarchical value. And this shouldn't have even a hierarchy of power, but they should be complementarity amongst them, and bringing to the family different strengths, of course, but that enriches the family. It doesn't make some inferior to others. And to continue also with the public policy so that this education and this changing of mindset has to be repeatedly reminded to all of us, particularly for those who hold positions of leadership. It's extremely important. So, we

have to have of movement from grassroots, but we need to continue to have movement also in the public space.

**Adelle Onyango [00:10:58]**

When we're looking at African women's leadership and economic empowerment, education, as you've mentioned, what do you think even international partners or regional organizations or even the work that you're doing at Graça Machel Trust, what do you think needs to be prioritized so that we're seeing these commitments from 30 years since then, all the commitments since then, being actualized in relation to African women in education, women's leadership, and economic empowerment, especially.

**Graça Machel [00:11:34]**

They have already plans. They have already even networks which are working on this. They just need to do more, and it will have much more results. Where I think we should prioritize is the economy. Because you look around, you don't find very clear commands which each government should be compelled to implement to make sure that you bring women who are in the so-called informal sector to come into the formal economy. And the formal economy, as we speak, is the one which gives value, which can count what is the contribution of women in GDP. But if they are in informal sector, although they provide stability to our families, millions of our families, they depend on informal sector. But this is not reflected in the GDP of the country. When the government doesn't seem to have clear responsibilities of how to elevate these mediums to former and from the base, the first one we call small and medium enterprise, what are the steps we should be taken to bring them to the big economy. And this is where the Graça Machel Trust comes.

We decided that because we have a privileged space in African landscape, then we should be focusing on raising these issues. So, we start from what you can call the “missing middle” of those women who are in former economy. But it is so small, and they don't manage a minute to grow their business to be of a huge contribution to expand our economy. And we have been training women in terms of how to run properly their business and get it properly organized, how to advertise their businesses to have assets to market, how they should know where to get capital to make their business grow, because that's where we feel we can bring the so-called contribution of African women in the small and medium to become the contribution to the big economy. It will benefit the economy, it will benefit society, it will benefit our political systems to be much more democratic, much more inclusive, and it will lead us to societies which are more stable, and which are respecting the value of each one of its members.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:14:29]

What's currently giving you hope for the future of African girls and women? What's one place that you're looking at and you're like, this is great and it's fueling you?

**Graça Machel** [00:14:40]

When a child sees the surface, I want to be President of my country. It's because one, she knows, there's no limit to what I can achieve. And in that position there, I deserve it. And I want to be there. These are not issues of giving us hope. They're giving us examples of how profound and how high is the transformation, exactly, of the mindset. And the mindset is saying there are no limits to any girl in this continent to where she can go. And I think, in my work, I have found thousands of these cases. It's more than hope. It's examples of what is coming, what is flourishing, not at the eye of everyone. And so, I will finish saying, our responsibility as those who have had, I mean, are going to create those spaces so that these girls, very young ones, adolescents and young women, they need a platform where they can express themselves. They can assert themselves. They can exactly take control of the future they want for themselves, for generations which follow them. So, it's not going to happen. As we speak, there are millions of them, but where are they? How do we get to them? It is our responsibility to create those platforms, so that they will use them, and you, we will find, you, as you talk to me, you will see your sisters of your generation with no difficulty who are in any country where you feel that taking control of the future is not things which are going to happen tomorrow, they are happening now and we are the architects of that transformation.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:17:00]

I just have to say it's been such a pleasant experience having this conversation with you. So many tangible points you've given us and so much value and thank you for the work you do and for making time to be with us on the show.

**Graça Machel** [00:17:15]

Well, thank you for this opportunity and I just want to tell you that you don't have to thank me. This is what we are here to do. For many reasons we have been people who have been privileged and with privilege comes responsibility. So, we are doing the responsibility we have really, I mentioned to you to create those spaces to give you the visibility to have the network which will build the strength of the collective. Because you alone cannot change the world. But in a network, a big network, oh yes, the power you have, the capacity you have, the innovation you can bring together, it's limitless. So, this is what we have to do

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

more and more on the continent to give you the space, give you the visibility, to listen to your voice.

And let me finalize with this. I don't like the word of saying we are "empowering girls". They have the power already. They are very powerful. It's not us to give them neither power, neither voice. They have the power; they have the voice. What they need is the space to express themselves, as I was saying, to network so that they will come with the strength of working together, so that from a dozen of them, you'll have hundreds, you'll have thousands, thousands of, hundreds of thousands, and then you have the millions taking the space which they deserve.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:19:18]

Let's jump into the world of building movements across the continent with François Maudouté.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:19:35]

François, thank you for making time to be with us.

**François Maudouté** [00:19:38]

Thanks for having me.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:19:40]

When we talk about African women and girls, how can we reimagine the way their stories are told so that, yes, they sustainable investment, but we're still honoring their agency, their diversity, their power, and the complexity as well?

**François Maudouté** [00:19:56]

The first thing for me is to think differently about who tells the story. The thing about our stories is that, as you said, they are often told but very often not by us. And because of all the biases around who we are as African women, African girls, African gender diverse people, you know, that story when it is not told by us, it then becomes a story that is so layered with all the biases that people have heard over decades and centuries, and what is lost then in our stories is our voice. So, for me, it's about centering our own voices in the telling of our stories. And once that is done, then the story immediately becomes a story of agency. It doesn't become just the story of suffering or just the story of you know, pain or anything like that because our lives every single day, you look around whether it's in African markets, from Duala to Maputo, it's the same agency that is buzzing, right? So, I think it's

about who tells the story and is that story focused on our voice or on other people's perceptions? That changes the whole story for me.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:21:17]

What are your feelings around sustained investment in terms of telling our stories? How should we be careful that we are not trying to bend the story so that we get the funding and we remain steadfast and very centered in our agency?

**François Maudouté** [00:21:35]

When it comes to our stories and how to invest in how our stories are told, I think the first thing to do is invest, as I said earlier, in who tells the story and not come to people with the storyboard already. I think if you want a story of agency, you must invest in the agency, right? Instead of investor, or this is a story and who can tell that story? You look at who's out there, give them the tools, give them the space because often we even have the tools. You don't need to dictate the story to them. Just say, "look, here is the mic, just do your thing." Theory is not always something that we have written down, but the reality is one that we've experienced. And so, if we look at our lived experiences, not like professional expertise, but really lived experiences as the roots and the core of our knowledge, and our learning, and our movement building, it's a very different story. So, in terms of investment, it's investing... something investing is not even money, it's like pass the mic, you know. Get out of the way and just pass the mic and get out of the way and let people tell their stories.

As somebody who also, I heard the fund I do, the African Women's Development Fund, we are a Grantmaker. One of our strategic pillars is really about investing in a very inclusive and agency focused way in the narratives, the messaging, the knowledge, really the ancestral and agency-focused knowledge of African women, African girls and African gender diverse people. And, just again, like understanding what it takes, what it means to tell that story, making sure that is available and literally get out of the way. And when they don't, give them the space and the opportunities to then amplify. Because it's about telling the story, but we are in a sector where by design, people will not listen. So sometimes it's about the telling of the story, but it's fighting for the space for folks to listen. And so, I think maybe being an investor in that, sometimes it's being a facilitator. Sometimes we don't have the money, right? But what we do have, we have access, we have our own voices, we have connections. And so, what we can do is use all of this to make sure that those stories are not just told, but that they are heard.

**Adelle Onyango [00:24:03]**

This is a very important year, François. It's 30 years post Beijing. This is, you know, a series of conferences that here in Kenya, I still remember my late mom and her friends talking about it. It was even part of slang, you know. It was such a huge event for women, especially in that generation, and now there are things we are able to do because of that.

I just want to know your thoughts on how far we've come in the 30 years, first and foremost, and then looking forward because this show is about the future of Africa. What practical policy, actions, or commitments do we need to see, let's say, African governments do, international partners do, so that we shift the next 30 years and do our part?

**François Maudouté [00:24:46]**

The Beijing Conference, the Beijing Declaration, those were really groundbreaking moments. I think the main achievement for me was this spirit of we can do this for us, by us, with our own. But doing it across different regions and coming together with the collective agenda, I think that was very, very impressive. And when you speak to them now, they talk to you about the small things, the small wins, the small connections. There's a lesson there that we try to change the whole face of the universe, but only the small moves done collectively made that happen. And that's a lesson that I think we all need to continue to learn as we think about how to move the needle in this very incredibly difficult context we are in right now.

I think some of the wins that we've had have been amazing in terms of policy, in terms of framing this basic concept that women's rights are human rights too, you know. Like these are basic things that were put on the global policy scheme, but you know, so I think there's some really key issues around gender-based violence, some issues around economic empowerment is the word that was being used at the time, recognizing girls' rights specifically as an area of work. I think there was some like basic recognition of the key issues as policy issues, not as personal struggle. I think that was very important. That led the way for the way governments organized national policies for this and that.

For me, the three keys for the future will be one, coordination, you know. Inspired by the spirit of our aunties, I call them debating aunties, you know, like that ability to bring our forces, our thoughts together and to coordinate. And sometimes it means not everybody is going to agree but, we need to at least agree on the core of what we're pushing for.

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

The second key for me is sustain the work to be able to see what the resource for this work is going to happen. Because I think one of the issues that we've dealt with since Beijing is that we created our agenda and we made it dependent on people whose agenda is different to fund ours. Like that is something that as the Gen Z said, the math is not mathing. You know, like this is not going to work. You know, we cannot have this objective and use the platforms, use the money, use the spaces created by people who think very differently to advance our agenda. That's just doom to fate. It's just doom. It's not going to happen.

And I think the third thing for me, I think something that we maybe haven't prioritized as much, is movement building. Like the only way through is together. And what does together mean is a question I ask myself, you know. Together doesn't just mean those of us who can quickly come together. We need to build movements from the margins in, you know. And think about centering the voices that we have marginalized for so long, whether because of where they are, of which languages they speak, maybe they don't organize in the NGO way, and yet, you know, the feminists who are moving things in the banking industry are not part of what we call our movements, right. So, this, I think, movement building is exceptionally important. I think it's actually the only way through, and it's the only way that we're going to build the next like 30 years, is to come together in a very intentional, it would be difficult, I think, as well, but I think it's going to be extremely important that we do that. Otherwise, there's no way. It's not going to happen otherwise. So, we have to do the hard work of coming together and invest not just in the work, in the pieces of the work, but in the glue that takes all these pieces together and make it more than the sum of the spots.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:28:55]

In your experience, have you seen instances where the transformative impact of investing in women and girls in Africa worked and really even went past only benefiting the women or the girls, but really benefiting the community?

**François Maudouté** [00:29:12]

I think there's some work around covering the bases. There is this push for innovation, innovation, innovation. Look, I'm all for innovation, but somebody needs to hold the line, right? If we do not hold the line, we'll still have babies dying from FGM, right? So, I think this holding the line work, which is sometimes seen as not exciting, you know, like, not new and shiny, but it needs to be done. I think the work there on social norms, I mean, I'm coming from also the beginning of my care working for a long time on ending child marriage. Some of this work is groundwork, you know, going to the communities, engaging the community leaders, the aunts who do the cutting, the grandmothers who cover up for the cutting, you

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

know, like just going and doing this door-to-door awareness raising. And you know, but maybe the language is different, maybe the approach is different, but the holding the line work is very important. And it changes things because it empowers the individual, it incentivizes the community. And it also like looks at the policies and the legislation, which is very critical, and then you have to look at the services, right? Because if your policy services, if your education services are not there, that's not going to work. So, all of this, like holding the line work, very, very critical, the advocacy as well. So, I think that piece of work is very, very important.

And I'm always excited to see... from an issue to the other, I'm always excited. Because when the work is there, that doesn't go away. And you will see those girls who are in those like empowerment programs that have now become the leaders in, I mean, it's been our board. I'm very excited. We have a new board member who is from Niger and was one of those NGO babies on family planning issues, like doing this groundwork. And when I see a leadership in issues around sexual reproductive and reproductive health and rights, globally. I just see like that work that you do on the ground, you're building up the people who will be the leaders of the tomorrow that we're talking about.

I guess the second thing I'm very excited about is to see the leadership programs. We cannot just assume leadership to be the byproduct of our work. It needs to be invested. So, I'm really excited about the feminist consciousness building schools. We've seen some in East Africa as well for years and years, the AWLI, the African Women's Leadership Institute, and some others that are coming up, you know, in West Africa, in North Africa, we've seen that coming up and up. I think it's so critical because it gives people the bases. But not just the issue. I want to say almost the feminist politics on which the work is being built. I think it's very critical. So, I'm excited to see how this is building up because it's very important that we don't lose the core of the feminist politics as we do the work in a way that is professionalized, and NGO-wise, and funded, and all of these things. So, I think that's very important. And I'm always excited to see this because then when you see those leaders, wherever they end up being, whatever sector, whatever positions, sometimes just in their homes. I mean, the way they change the world around them. And again, I really believe in small changes coming together.

And the last thing that I'm really excited is when I see organizations thinking an entirely different future. I think a lot of us are stuck managing the day-to-day and because it's so overwhelming, it's hard to see what is the future we are moving towards. We need to reimagine that future. I'm excited about organizations like NAWI, for example, which is

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

reimagining the future for economic justice, you know, looking at trade and debt, and really issues that we often like shy away from because like, hey, this looks complicated, but like they can do it, you know. They imagine a new economic order for the entire world that is rooted in the kind of values that we want to see for ourselves and for our daughters and our children in the future. And that's beautiful. So, I think narrative is a common thread across that we have to do. But the other common thread is resourcing. I didn't really understand the importance of resourcing until I joined the African Women's Development Fund. And I realized like, you don't just have to mobilize resources. You have to mobilize the right kind of resources in so much more, you know, bigger amounts, because there's so much work to fund. And then you have to find a way to redistribute the resources in the way that you become the good funding that you are calling for, which means we have to transform our own ways. And that's been the work that I've been doing with AWDF for the past five years or so, to rethink ourselves. You know, and sometimes you have to transform growing pains, but that is for the good of that future we're talking about. So, we have to be willing to do the hard work of looking into mirror and say, how do we become what we're calling for ourselves? And yeah, sometimes it's rethinking our systems, rethinking our processes, rethinking our politics, but always in a way that is in service of the people that we are here every day, that we wake up every day, to serve.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:34:53]

I think in closing what I want to know is, what gives you hope for the future of African girls and young women?

**François Maudouté** [00:35:00]

I think what gives me hope, and what has been giving me hope lately, because it's been a very difficult time, especially to be a leader in this sector and to be asked to inspire hope when you struggle to find it yourself. So, I've been really looking around me and like where are the pockets of joy, where are the pockets of hope, and there's two things that really give me hope.

It gives me a lot of hope to look at the very, very young generation of African girls, African women, African gender diverse folks. Like my daughter is, like, nine. And the things she takes for granted, that she doesn't question her place in the world, you know, the things that she doesn't have to fight. I mean, she will encounter patriarchy in all of the ways, you know, I'm sure she already does in some ways. But her baseline is so much stronger, right. And I think I see this around us. I mean, I see it as social media. I see just see the younger partners that we have, but they will not take no as the baseline. No, they will push for what

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

they know their own, not what they hope they own. But, you know, that baseline is very different, and so we have to protect that baseline from the attacks of the anti-gender and others, because it's just beautiful. It gives me so much hope to see younger people who don't question their worth. They don't question whether being a woman or being African or being black is an issue of their worth. You know, they see the issues, they're like, this is not my issue. This is patriarchy's issue and I'm going to tackle it. I love that it gives me so much hope because it's such an interesting thing to see for me to be in the middle, between my daughter and my mother. And those are just generation after generation. So, I think we need to protect that baseline. And that baseline getting stronger and stronger, even as they keep moving the goal post. But our baseline is getting stronger and that is beautiful to see.

And the second thing that really gives me a lot of hope in this year we've talked about Beijing+ 30, there has been a lot of intergenerational discussions. We at AWDF actually hosted one in March this year and it was beautiful to see. And the metaphor that kept coming back was the metaphor of a relay race, right, that you know the feminist aunties that went to Beijing, they did everything that they could. And it is upon us to take that baton. And what they did tell us that time is don't drop the baton. Whatever happened, even if it's only two steps that you can make, just do not drop the baton. And I think this thing about seeing the baton being handed, for a long time, we saw the intergenerational dialogue space being one of confrontation. And I'm seeing this evolution. And I think the discussions around Beijing help with that a lot, to be a place where we can be safe, even when we disagree, but seeing the continuation rather than confrontation in this. And the intergenerational space, they are not easy, especially to facilitate, but I think they are critically important because these are spaces where we realize that learning doesn't just go one way. You know, there's a lot of kind of learning both ways and then learning sideways. You learn every day from the people you didn't even know were a carrier of knowledge. And so it goes back to the story. I think it goes back to how do we use our stories to redefine who is a teacher and who is a learner, especially at the times where the entire world is facing things that our people have lived with for the longest time. So, who's the teacher now?

**Adelle Onyango** [00:39:00]

Thank you so much for being on the podcast and for the work that you're doing. We celebrate you and I'm very sure everybody who is listening to this is super inspired so, thank you so much.

**François Maudouté** [00:39:13]

Thank you, Adelle, thanks so much for having me.

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

**Adelle Onyango** [00:39:24]

Now let's jump into Satta Sheriff.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:39:39]

Satta Sheriff, it's so great to have you on the podcast and to meet you.

**Satta Sheriff** [00:39:43]

Thank you so much. I'm really excited to be here.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:39:47]

What are some of the experiences that you hold dear to you from that moment, that you saw how you could have an impact on your community in Liberia.

**Satta Sheriff** [00:40:02]

I spent a couple of years in the Children's Parliament before I became Speaker. So, the way the Children's parliament works is that it's like a normal parliament. So, the Liberian government system is modeled after the United States, because you know our entire history. So, we have like a National Parliament where we have the House of Representatives, and we have the Senate as well. So, by the time I got elected as National Speaker, after the national elections, I was the first female after a couple of years. And then I had the opportunity, I had to move, you know, to go to the capital because that's where the Speaker have to reside. So, it meant I had to change my high school. I had an office at the Ministry of Gender, but just because our office was in the government, were still protesting against the government. That was how it happened. So, then the Parliament really helped to build, you know, my foundation in activism, we were challenging the same people who were supervising us, like I said. We would do protests at the police station. If something was wrong, if we send letters to them, they are not listening, we will go there. And if every country in Africa could have something that allows children to learn, to go, how to participate in national conversations and speak up for their rights, it would be really nice. And I think it's one of the best gifts you can give your children as well.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:41:31]

I'm completely there with you and especially since education also allows you to see possibilities for yourself that you couldn't see before, all of a sudden, you're like, wait, so I can be president. I can be in parliament, you know? And these are not things that you even thought were possible for you as a young girl, you know? And so, I'm there with you.

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

**Satta Sheriff** [00:41:56]

And you know, some people will ask you and be like, oh, too much education will make you not get married, you will not have the children you want. I think that's a choice for a lot of women to get to decide what they want, you know.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:42:12]

Exactly.

**Satta Sheriff** [00:42:12]

You have... you can choose, you know. Like, I'm going to get all this education one day, and I want to have my children so that they, too, can have some of the opportunities, so that we can continue this legacy, you know, the African legacy and everything. So, I feel like education is the beginning of it all. And education comes in many forms. There are women, like my mom who did not go to school, but they had a huge influence on who we've become. And so, like also recognizing that some of them who did not sit in like the former classroom also holds so much power. And because there are things that they were able to learn and because of that form of education, they were able to pass something valuable down to us as well. So, education comes in so many forms, and I think it's important that every woman and girl have access to one.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:43:10]

Something else that I don't think very many people get, especially when we're championing for women's rights, be it we want them to be safe. We want women to have financial power. We want dignity even. A lot of times you get pushback because it's seen as a threat. Just as you said like oh now, you're not going to want to get married, you're not going to want to have kids. That's just like one side of the threat. What people never seem to get is that when you ensure that women and girls have these things that we're championing for, it positively impacts everybody. It even positively impacts economies, you know. It's like a win-win for everyone.

Have you had situations where you've seen that tangibly happen? You work to champion the rights of girls, the rights of women, and you've seen the positive impact even beyond the individual women and girls?

**Satta Sheriff** [00:44:13]

Yes, definitely. In 2020, during the heat of COVID, I was in school doing my undergraduate in the U.S. One thing about me, despite being away from home, I feel like that's where my

calling is. So that's where I'm doing a lot of my work. So, I'm still very engaged. So, during COVID, there was a lot of cases of SGBV, sexual, gender, domestic violent cases, rape, and all that. Because there was lockdown, people were in isolation and all that. And there were reports from the UN and all the institutions saying that if people are together, it's common sense.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:44:53]

Common sense.

**Satta Sheriff** [00:44:54]

If people are together, even if like me and someone is in the same place over and over, people start giving people side eyes and all that. And so domestic violence, there were going to be reports, right? But when the government of Liberia was listing the essential institutions, you know, that should continue running during the lockdown, the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection was not listed as an, you know, essential institution. What it meant was cases of sexual and domestic violence was not important, technically, because then how do you report these cases if the social workers are not working, if the women and children protection session at the police station, all of their staff will have this, because those are the issues that they deal with. When I heard the news, I read the list and everything. I decided to write an article with FrontPage Africa, back then, expressing my concerns that the Ministry of Gender is an essential institution and that, you know, just expressing like the normal concern that there are going to be issues, you know, around domestic violence and there are already issues there were reports on the radio. So, I wasn't just talking because I was just like a loud student. No. And so, the Minister saw the article, and she kind of reacted, I don't know. She thought it was like some kind of fight. If I say something, she says something. So, the thing about the news, people that carry the news. And so like, before you know it, we receive a case from one of the counties about, then it was a two-year... there was a case of a seven-month-old baby, and there was a case of a two-year-old that was brutally raped. And she pressed a blade that was used on her. It was so graphic like the moment you describe like everyone in the country, there were conversations. And that was when the government have already listed, you know, the Ministry of Gender, the institution that should be dealing with the case, is not essential. And the Minister is trying to defend the government. And so, then, all other people started talking too, you know, so it wasn't just me now that I was being defiant or like trying to call out the government. And before you know it that grew you know into something bigger. There was another case that came out again, so, the young people decided no, enough is enough. A couple of my other friends we decided to organize a protest a three-day national

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

protest. Because of that, we founded the Affiliation of Women and Children Rights Advocates in the country. And so, what it did, it was like a commemoration of youth groups, women groups, and children's groups, the Children's Parliament, my institution, the National Youth and Children Advisory Board, a couple of other institutions, we decided to come together and say enough is enough. In fact, we just did not want the Ministry of Gender to be open this time around. We said we wanted the President to declare rape as a national emergency. And so that escalated. Other people too saw the need to say, yes, yes, yes.

For three days, my part of the work was writing all the, you know, because I'm away, and my friends are under the pressure and everything. So, for three days, the young people decided to organize a peaceful protest. Already, you know, so protests were happening across the 15 counties, because we already have the structure, we already have friends in the counties from Children's Parliament, that network already existed. And so, because of that three-day protest, of course some arrests happened, the police were policing, doing the things that shouldn't do at some point. But the international media, a couple of other people, they had just joined us as well, and they invited us to a national SG, Sexual Gender-Based Violence Conference. And by the end of the conference, the President of Liberia declared rape as a national emergency. He initially pledged 2 million United States dollars to fight against rape. That was not all. For the first time they established the National Sex Offenders list. Simply because we saw something, the government did not list the Ministry of Gender as an essential institution, called the alarm, said we wanted rape to be national emergency. It was not just imparting rape victims. Now, it escalated to a level where the government started taking action beyond what we were demanding. And up to now the fight against rape is still in the national budget. There are still conversations, although we haven't seen like all the change in the world, but I do believe that that was the beginning of something. And that conversation is continuing. And I want to encourage other young people, when you see something wrong, no matter how small it looks, no matter how far away you are from home. Just be constructive. Do your research and speak up. There are people who are going to join you, and, in fact, they are going to champion that cause more than you. So sometimes you got to take the first step. It might seem scary. It might, you might be listed or caught as a troublemaker or say, oh, this person have shammed off, you know. Like we're all Africans. Sometimes the elders don't want you to speak up. You have to try. You have to say something. Something will lead to something, and something will lead to something.

**Adelle Onyango [00:50:35]**

That is so incredible, and it takes a spark to start a fire. And really honestly, if you're listening and there's something that you've seen that is actually not right, that's happening. Even if you're scared, speak up. Chances are there's many other people watching who also want to have that same impact that you have. And that's just such a wonderful example of how it just takes one person to be courageous enough and the impact will be felt across different communities.

And so when you look at Africa's future, and I keep telling people, yes, it feels like there's so much that's happening right now that is frustrating and makes me angry. Obviously in Kenya, we're having our protests again, really led by Kenyan youth who are just so inspiring. But at the same time, in the middle of that frustration, I'm also like, this is such a wonderful time to be an African and to be an African woman. I can't let go of that excitement and the hope as well. What are you most hopeful and excited for when we look towards the future?

**Satta Sheriff [00:51:50]**

This generation of Africans, they know what they want. A lot of us. We are tired of being labeled as people who don't know anything. We don't know how to speak English, and all that. We are tired of being, you know, negatively portrayed on Google as people who are beggars and savages, and all that. What I see is that this generation of Africans that are getting educated, whether we, some of our education is coming from the West or back home or wherever we are learning from. The thing is we want things to change for the better. When I listen to some young Africans, I'm just so inspired. And it's because that we want better, you know what I mean? And it comes from whether it's from the educational system back home, whether it's from like human rights violation, whether it's from our government, people are demanding change. Young people are not just sitting like crossing their legs, you know. We are the ones holding the government accountable. We are the ones saying that "oh, like look, gone at those days when things were happening as usual. This time around, what do you have in a budget for education? What do you have in a budget for young people?" Of course, there are young people who, I mean there are issues in a youth community and all of that, but that is just a part of the whole. There is a whole bigger picture. And I do think that this is going to spill over. This is going to become something big. And I do think this is going to lead to the United Africa that some of our forefathers believe in. Because there will come a time, let me tell you, I am hopeful that one day, as... I don't know how it sounds... but I'm hopeful that one day the Africans will travel across the continent. When I have visa restrictions, when I have like colonial borders to restrict us anymore, they will be united and we will see the beauty in our skin color, in our

hair, in everything about us. We appreciate the clothes we wear and everything. That we don't allow other people to define who we are, but the essence of us will come from where we come from, because that's who we are as a people. We are diverse, we are beautiful, no matter our skin color, no matter how we speak, we respect each other. And that alone will form the kind of Africa that we're not just go to the table to beg for it but will bring like our ideas and everything that we are. For me that's how hopeful I am. And I do know there are other young Africans that are out there that are just getting educated, that are reading every day to build up their minds. They are not trying to erase what we stand for, that will challenge our leaders but, also, love them enough to hold them accountable and to also want to maintain some of our values. Because we can want all the change, but if we do not love where we come from, our roots, it's easier for someone to come and just try to erase us. So, for me, I have hope, I have faith in this generation, and the ones to come before us.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:55:23]

And you know what, like even as you're talking, I'm just feeling that energy and I'm receiving it. And I hope everyone —

**Satta Sheriff** [00:55:30]

My sister, this is Africa. Our food, our music, let me tell you, it's incredible. One day they are going to see the beauty of it all.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:55:42]

Thank you so much for being on the podcast.

**Satta Sheriff** [00:55:45]

Thank you so much, Adelle, as well for hosting me.

**Mark Leon Goldberg** [00:56:06]

Adelle, thank you so much for a great and really important episode. And I must say, this episode contains one of my favorite lines from this entire series when Graça Machel said she does not like the phrase, quote, "empowering girls." They're already powerful. It's not us, she said, who gives them power or voice. They have the power. What they need is space.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:56:29]

Wasn't that something, Mark? Like, I absolutely resonated with that. Graça is so powerful. And that point about not empowering girls is a powerful reset, if you ask me. And I think it

also came up through my conversation with François, because she really pushed us to reimagine how we tell stories about African women. And I think they both reminded us that African women already have agency, already have power. What we need to do is center their voices, invest in their leadership, and just make sure the stories being told aren't filtered through external biases, which I think is what we're doing on this show.

**Mark Leon Goldberg** [00:57:07]

So, Adelle, I'm keenly interested in your personal perspective on many of the issues raised in this episode. You are a pioneering podcaster and media entrepreneur and have made a career using your platforms to support African women. As someone who was already deeply invested in this topic, what solutions have you heard that most resonated with you here?

**Adelle Onyango** [00:57:30]

I think it's a solution and a challenge, right? That really resonated deeply with me. It's like the acknowledgement that in order to push the needle in the next 30 years, we have to focus on movement building, on intentionally changing our mindset, on how we value women and doing all of this in a very sustainable, strategic way. And I feel like the metaphor that kept coming up was of a relay race, right? And that really stayed with me. Each generation of African women is passing the torch and ensuring that it's never dropped. So that imagery really stayed with me. It captures the moment of both urgency and hope and then challenged me to be like I've taken on the baton, what am I doing for the next generation of African women?

**Mark Leon Goldberg** [00:58:21]

Adelle, thank you again for another great episode in this series. I loved this episode.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:58:26]

Oh, me too, Mark. And if you love this one, the next episode is going to be incredible because we really look at how to ensure that as we're focusing on Africa's future that Africans remain healthy enough to see that future.

**Mark Leon Goldberg** [00:58:43]

Well, I'm looking forward to it. Thank you, Adelle.

**Adelle Onyango** [00:58:45]

Thanks, Mark.

Future of Africa  
Episode 6: Women on the Rise  
Transcript

**Mark Leon Goldberg** [00:58:54]

Thank you for listening to The Future of Africa, a special series on Global Dispatches produced in partnership with the African Union, the Elders, and the United Nations Foundation.

I'm Mark Leon Goldberg, the host and founder of Global Dispatches. This series is hosted by Adelle Onyango. It is edited and mixed by Levi Sharp. You can find all episodes in this series and access episode transcripts at [globaldispatches.org](http://globaldispatches.org).