



# UBUNTU



THROUGH THE EYES OF AFRICAN YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS

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“ Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.

- Nelson Mandela



# ABOUT THE AfYWL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

The African Young Women Leaders (AfYWL) Fellowship Programme is a flagship initiative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the African Union Commission (AUC). The Fellowship cultivates a new generation of young, African women leaders to drive change towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063.

The Fellowship rests on three pillars:

1. Equipping outstanding young, African women leaders with the leadership skills and experience to advance the SDGs and contribute effectively to decision-making in public, private and multilateral institutions at home and abroad;
2. Creating a diverse pool of talent to enhance UNDP's organizational efficiency and contribute to more responsive and effective policies and programmes;
3. Developing a network of African young women professionals that engages in promoting innovative, sustainable and inclusive development through South-South development exchange.

The first AfYWL cohort (2019–2021) consisted of 21 fellows selected from 20 African countries and deployed to 20 UNDP offices globally. This storybook captures the experiences and personal reflections of the 38 fellows that make up the second cohort (2022–2023). Originating from 22 African countries, the fellows have been deployed to 26 UNDP offices in Africa, Asia, Europe and USA.



# WHY UBUNTU?

According to some, Ubuntu is defined as “humanity towards others”. Other sources indicate that the term translates as “I am, because we are”, or “I am, because you are”. In this storybook, you will encounter many more interpretations of this term, as each of us from the second cohort of the African Young Women Leaders (AfYWL) Fellowship Programme provides her own personal interpretation of Ubuntu. Whatever the words chosen, the meaning remains the same: that humanity is fundamentally interconnected, that we all form part of a greater whole, and above all – that our individual wellbeing is fundamentally tied to the wellbeing of others.

During the course of our fellowship and within the sisterhood that we’ve forged, we’ve experienced the power of Ubuntu first hand. Ubuntu is our North Star: a principle that will continue to guide us and remind us how we, as young, female African leaders, can shape positive change in a world beset by challenges.

In this storybook, we reflect on our journeys and those who helped us along the way. Ubuntu also reminds us that our successes are not just about individual achievements, but also about paying it forward, lifting up others and shining a bright light wherever we go. We recognize that as young, African, women leaders, we have a responsibility to use what we’ve learnt during our fellowship to support and mentor others, to advocate for vulnerable communities, and to work towards building a more just and equitable society.

We’ve all learnt from our diverse duty stations, sometimes in challenging ways, that Ubuntu also means being open to learning from differing perspectives and experiences. It means fostering strong relationships with family, friends and community members. We find hope and inspiration in the knowledge that we are part of a larger community of people who are working towards a better future.

As fellows, we have also reflected on the meaning of Ubuntu on a personal level; recognizing the value and dignity of every individual we come across, and never missing an opportunity to embrace – and, indeed, to celebrate – our shared humanity. As you read our stories, we invite you to join us in this celebration.



# AHUNNA EZIAKONWA

**UN Assistant Secretary-General, UNDP Assistant Administrator and Director of the Regional Bureau for Africa**

Each generation faces challenges that seem, in one way or another, wholly unprecedented. Previous generations faced liberation struggles, famine and active nuclear warfare, while today, we grapple with the impacts of a global health pandemic and climate change. There are also challenges that seem so asynchronous, it's hard to believe they persist. These include poverty, gender equality and chronic development deficits.

While some challenges linger and others evolve from one era to another, each generation is called on to rise to the same task: to face the challenges of their day, to tackle them head on, and to leave behind a world that is in some way better.

Doing so takes boldness, courage and a relentless commitment to a greater purpose.

Looking at the second cohort of the African Young Women Leaders (AfYWL) Fellowship Programme, it would be easy to believe that these qualities are quick to come by. Each one of them is so poised, graceful and strong, that they make leadership seem effortless. Yet we know this is not the case. Being a leader, and especially being a young, African woman leader, means the odds are often stacked against you. And when we read the personal narratives of the 38 Fellows so beautifully presented in this storybook, it's clear that each of these young women worked hard, with humility and boldness, to slay her own dragons and offer her best self to a greater purpose.

Dear Fellows, we know it's been a rollercoaster ride for you — equal parts terrifying and exhilarating. You are already making a change. You've done the Fellowship Programme

proud, but more than that, you've been fierce champions for your communities, countries and the continent, in your service to fulfilling the development goals identified by both UNDP and the African Union. You are living examples of how women, how Africa, can lead the world to adopt a better path.

Over the past year, each one you faced many obstacles — and you did so with grace and gravitas. This is how grit is forged. And this is how we pave the future for young women leaders like yourselves. You've got a voice now. You have a seat at the table. Remember that the world is hungry for your energy, determination and resilience. Leaders are listening to that voice that is so fresh, so authentic.

The AfYWL Fellowship is a mere chapter in a lifelong journey where you will achieve many great things. You have also formed an unbreakable sisterhood. The theme of Ubuntu, which you had chosen for this storybook, could not be more apt, as together, you paint an incredible picture of a continent — of 'one Africa'.

Remember that you are not just working towards achieving your own goals, but you are also contributing to the broader development and prosperity of the African continent. You are part of a generation of young leaders who are working towards a better future for all Africans. Your leadership will inspire and empower others, and your impact will be felt for generations to come.

Be there for each other and rely on each other. We have so much faith in you. Leaders like you are the weavers of that golden thread that binds together nations, genders and generations to make human civilization meaningful. You are the architects of tomorrow. You are the future.



# DR. MONIQUE NSANZABAGANWA

**Deputy Chairperson  
African Union Commission**

To our young African women leaders,

You are the future of Africa — and it is up to you to drive the continent towards achieving the ambitious goals that have been set out by the African Union, the United Nations and other global organizations.

Through your experience in the African Young Women Leaders (AfYWL) Fellowship Programme, you were uniquely positioned to contribute to the achievement of these goals. You brought a fresh perspective and a wealth of talent, energy and passion to the table. You will also drive innovation, create new opportunities, and lead the continent towards a brighter and more prosperous future.

A key goal for our continent, and for the world, is the promotion of women in decision-making processes, as well as in development efforts. As young African women leaders, you have a critical role to play in achieving this objective. You must take an active role in shaping the policies and decisions that affect your communities and your countries, and ensure that the voices and perspectives of women are heard and taken into account.

Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 are two ambitious development plans that have been set out by the African Union and the United Nations, respectively. These plans aim to tackle some of the most pressing challenges facing the world today, from poverty and inequality to climate change and environmental degradation. As you forge ahead, I urge you to take ownership of these goals and work towards achieving them in your own communities and countries.

The AU's One Million Next Level Initiative is another important initiative that has been launched to help young Africans develop the digital skills they need to succeed in today's rapidly changing world. Whether you are interested in entrepreneurship, technology, education, healthcare, or any other area, you must be willing to invest in your own personal and professional development.

Achieving these goals will not be an easy task. You will face many challenges and obstacles along the way. You may encounter discrimination, prejudice or sexism. You may struggle to access the resources and support you need to succeed. You may face opposition or resistance from those who fear change or are threatened by your leadership.

But do not be discouraged. You are not alone, and you are not powerless. You have the strength, resilience and determination to overcome any obstacle that comes your way. You have the support of your AfYWL cohort, who are working towards the same goals as you. And you have the backing of global organizations, such as the AU and UNDP, who are committed to helping you achieve your full potential.

I urge you to be bold, brave and persistent. Dream big and work hard to make your dreams a reality. Never let anyone tell you that you cannot achieve your goals or that you do not belong in leadership positions. Your voice matters, your perspective matters, and your leadership matters.

I wish you all the best in your journey as young African women leaders. May you continue to inspire, innovate and lead the way towards a brighter future for Africa.



*Ubuntu represents humanity. And emotional memory lies at the heart of Ubuntu. In my vision of humanity, we must cultivate our emotional memory. So let's commit to this!*

# ABIBA ISSA MOUSSA

**FROM:** NIGER | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP EQUATORIAL GUINEA

## My story

It all happened in one afternoon. I don't recall the exact date, but we were at Niamey's La Fontaine High School at the start of the 2014–2015 school year. I was in my senior year, and the history and geography classes were, as always, packed with debates. The theme of the day was: 'The future of Niger in light of the social and security context in the Sahel'.

One hour, one class, one professor, and a simple debate changed the course of my life. My classmates and professor were pessimistic about the future of West African countries. How could a country with such a young population, harsh environmental conditions, and security threats of this magnitude survive? The tenacious pessimism of this group baffled me. Why was I the only one of the 26 people in the room who thought Niger had a promising future? Yes, we are facing numerous challenges, but, after all, we are Nigeriens, and we are resilient. For days, I couldn't stop wondering how I could be involved. What can I do to avoid this? How could I halt the disaster scenario advanced by my peers?

This debate has made me reconsider my future plans. At the time, I wanted to become a pilot. I had even received my aeronautical training certificate. But on that day, I started looking for academic programmes adapted to the needs

of my region (human rights, peace, governance, and environment). I developed an interest in public international law and went on to become a human rights lawyer.

## Challenges at work

My main challenge can be summarized in one word: Spanish! Working in a country and office where I don't speak the language has been my biggest challenge. This was something I was aware of prior to my deployment. Even though I'm doing better than I was six months ago, I still have a long way to go.

Every now and then, I get a small reminder. This summer, in a restaurant, when I was trying to place an order in Spanish, the waiter kindly stopped me and said: "Don't try to speak Spanish, you can speak to me in French or in English."

## My fellowship journey

I arrived in Equatorial Guinea determined to improve both my technical and Spanish skills. However, nothing went as planned. The first few months of the fellowship were overwhelming and unanticipated in many ways. I had not realized that my social skills and adaptability would be my most valuable assets. The human experience is crucial to

the first months of the fellowship, both in terms of settling in the country and my integration into the workplace.

### My favourite African proverb

It is not an African proverb, but rather a quote from a brilliant African author that I prefer to pick: "Knowledge is the only fortune that one can give entirely without diminishing it in any way". These words by Amadou Hampâté Ba have stayed with me since I was a child, thanks to my mother, who was a teacher. This remains my mantra to this day.

« Le savoir est l'unique  
fortune que l'on peut entièrement  
donner sans en rien la diminuer »

Amadou Hampâté Ba

### A proud moment

For the time being, I am most proud of the support I am providing to the development of the draft tax code. Participating in the creation of a more inclusive tax system that is gender-sensitive and concerned with youth and vulnerable individuals is an honour and a source of motivation for my future missions.

### Hopes and dreams

Dear Sisters of the Future,

I hope for you an Africa of choice. A continent where you could thrive regardless of the voice you choose. A continent where you will not be assigned an identity, but where the only existing identity is the one you build for yourself.



### A letter to myself

Dear future me,

Stay a drama queen for all the little inconveniences in life! This way, you will be resilient in the face of compelling upheavals.

Lovingly,  
Your past self



### Three favourite things

Two things that define me the most are food and cinema. I watch absolutely everything. From telenovelas to films d'auteur. Let's say I practice cinematic bovarysme! And when it comes to world cuisine, I make it a point of honour to discover the best restaurants in the cities I visit. If I weren't a lawyer, I would certainly have chosen a job that allowed me to be a filmmaker by day and a culinary guide by night.

Another thing that defines me, and which I take everywhere with me, is my karaoke mic. I've been bringing it on all my trips (even to Kigali) for almost four years. Whether it is to



call a friend lost in an airport or to animate a party with the fellows, this microphone has accompanied me throughout my social life!



*Ubuntu means that my humanity is not embedded in me as an individual - rather, our humanity depends on the humanity we grant others. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other.*

# ABIGAIL CEESAY

**FROM:** THE GAMBIA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK

## My experience so far

Being assigned to the Bureau for Management Services (BMS) at the UNDP Headquarters has been a blessing in disguise. At first, I was disappointed that I had not been assigned to an African country office, but seven months later, I am grateful. BMS is often underappreciated but critical, as it enables efficient and effective programme delivery.

## My story

I was born to a Gambian father and a Dutch mother, the eldest of their three daughters. My mother instilled in us the importance of becoming highly educated and accomplished, whereas my father, who was rather strict, impressed on us that we should always use our privilege towards the transformation of Africa.

Our parents understood how important it was for their African daughters growing up in the Netherlands to always strive for excellence. My siblings and I were raised to believe that although we must work extremely hard to reach our dreams, everything is possible.

My dual nationality meant growing up in two different worlds. I wondered why my cousins in The Gambia could not enjoy the same rights and experiences as my cousins

in the Netherlands, and grew up finding the world unjust. As a child, I did not really fit in at school and felt outcasted by my peers. I did not understand why, and wondered whether it was because I was African or too outspoken. In hindsight, it might have been a combination of both.

Growing up, I admired revolutionaries like Patrice Lumumba, Bob Marley, Joana Gomes, Thomas Sankara, Marcus Garvey, and Nelson and Winnie Mandela. They inspired me to dare to think differently and fight for independence, justice and equality. Above all, they instilled in me that daring to fight for righteousness means daring to be an outcast and not to be liked by others.

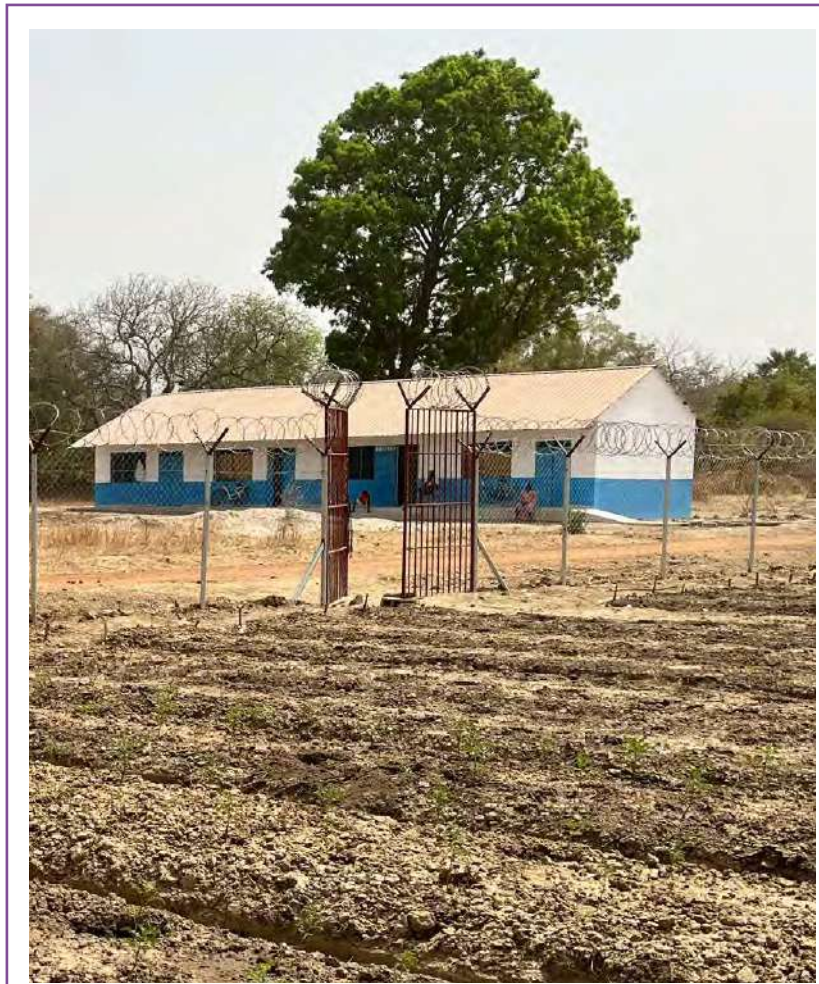
Finding my path was not too difficult. I believe in destiny, and my destiny was decided long before I was born. I am extremely fortunate to come from two powerful families and to have parents who made incredible sacrifices for our family and passed their strength down to my siblings and me.

My father is the eldest of twenty-five siblings. I am now the eldest of eight siblings. In our culture, we believe that the eldest child must succeed to open doors for their younger siblings. The torch has passed, and I am ready to take on that responsibility. Today, I am proud to be an African Young Woman Leader fellow. I have grown tremendously, and I am ready to utilize that to enable others to grow.

I recognize that my future is bright and that I am responsible for creating opportunities for those who are not as privileged as I am. Despite remaining an outspoken young African woman, I no longer feel like an outcast.

My journey thus far has shaped my character and prepared me to rise, but only by lifting others.

In the near future, I look forward to moving to The Gambia, or possibly another African country, to do my part. I do not believe in advancing a country or continent's development from elsewhere. I want to do many things, of which I know one thing for sure: I want to start climate-smart farms to foster agricultural development, boost job creation, and drive pro-poor economic growth.



## Challenges at work

In all honesty, I do not encounter actual challenges in my work. Although I sometimes feel overwhelmed because of, for instance, a heavy workload, I prefer to perceive challenges as learning opportunities. Time constraints mean that I now have the opportunity to learn how to manage my time more effectively. Not being sure how to fulfil tasks or reach particular objectives means I will have to reach out to colleagues to learn new things. Life and work are all about learning.



## My fellowship journey

My fellowship journey has taught me a lot, and I have grown immensely. I have had the privilege to experience what it is like to work in arguably the most prestigious and representative international organization. The most important thing this fellowship journey has taught me is that the time to act is now.

The time for me to make a positive impact on everybody around me, and the world, is now. Many young people, including me, are apprehensive about taking the actions required to fulfil their passions. However, throughout my time at UNDP, I have met young people from all walks of life who dare not only to think differently, but to act, because they have a vision. Meeting these people has influenced and inspired me. Now, I am no longer apprehensive.



## My favourite African proverb

“Ñit ni lay garabam”, which is Wolof for “people are medicine for people”. We are living in increasingly individualized societies, where people often feel alone or helpless. I picked this proverb because it signifies the ability and duty of people to support and help each other.

## A proud moment

I am passionate about enabling young people, particularly from the Global South, to unleash their full potential and leave a positive mark on the world. Therefore, the achievement that I am most proud of thus far is the youth mentorship programme that I co-founded called the IMPACT Youth Mentoring Programme.

## Hopes and dreams

My hopes and dreams are a peaceful, prosperous and unified Africa. Africa must rise – and I am convinced our continent will rise. Whatever we can do as Africans to contribute to our advancement, we must do.

This is not a choice, but an obligation. I aspire to dedicate my life to the rise of our continent and encouraging others to do so. Africa is the richest continent in terms of natural resources, and, as a consequence, it's the most exploited continent. It has long been time for Africans to take control of our land, resources and future. As Africans, we must build an Africa for Africans.

## Three favourite things

1. My family means everything to me. Without them, I would not be where I am today. They love, nourish and motivate me and are always honest with me.



2. Farming. My father was a farmer, and my family roots in The Gambia are in farming. I am passionate about farming and wish to one day have many farms in my country to feed the nation.

3. Nature. Being in nature brings me peace and happiness. This is why I am passionate about the environment and climate change.



*Ubuntu means interconnectedness: a total, unbridled and undeniable recognition of another person's humanity and dignity.*

# ADJA SY

**FROM:** SENEGAL | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP REGIONAL SERVICE CENTRE FOR AFRICA, ETHIOPIA

## My experience so far

At the time of writing, I have been in Addis for seven months. Addis is also known as Africa's political capital. It is an incomparable and enriching place. I feel privileged to be surrounded by great minds working to actualize the Africa We Want. The Ethiopian culture, resourcefulness and creativity make Addis a place that has inspired me.

## My story

One of my earliest memories is being woken up, as a child, by my mother. She would gently call my name and tell me to wake up. For many years, even when I woke myself, I would still hear her voice – calling my name, telling me to wake up. This memory stirs emotions of safety and warmth in me; and my mother continues to represent those things for me. She showed unwavering presence, support and loyalty – which I have always looked for, and gratefully have found, in other women. There were times when I failed to believe in myself, but my sisters and friends persevered in believing in me, and carried me when I could not do so myself.

I believe that the dominant ideology about love that popular culture has generated is skewed. Popular culture would

lead you to believe that romantic relationships take precedence over all other forms of love and connection. I want to preach about the equal, if not greater, love between sisters and friends, and the love of and for community.

I want to preach a broader definition of love – defined in direct opposition of fear – as the foundation to build and serve communities. It is easy to act and react from a place of fear.

It is easy to reject what we do not know, and those who seem foreign. Choosing love takes courage. My sincerest hope for myself, and for all African women, is to have the courage to choose love always.

The desire to live and love courageously has taken me to unexpected places, into unexpected encounters. A friend recently asked me how life feels at the moment. I love this question. I told her that life feels very full at the moment – just how I like it.

I love fun, and discipline where it matters. I believe in kindness as much as I believe in boundaries. I hate when it is 39 degrees and humid in Dakar, and I hate cold, dark Brussels winters. I will never say no to dessert, and I will intentionally nourish my body. One thing I want people to know about me is that I value balance.

## Challenges at work

The main challenge I face in my work is staying in the present. The work at UNDP is demanding, and the pace is fast. It can be very difficult to stay in the present while simultaneously planning for the future and managing competing priorities. I am learning to distinguish between what is urgent and important; what is urgent, but not important; what is not urgent, but important – and what is neither. Furthermore, I am learning to ask for support, and to be specific about the kind of support I need.



## My fellowship journey

This fellowship has taught me that the most defining skills that will help me in my career aren't those I learnt in my studies, but rather come from my ability to connect meaningfully with people and create impressions.

I have learnt the importance of keeping calm, because it is not a question of whether challenges will arise, it is a question of when they will arise. I have seen leaders emanate reassurance and steadfastness in the face of challenges, and I hope to lead like that.

I don't know what the future holds, but I know that for myself and for all my sisters, it will be great. I personally feel like there is truly nothing I cannot do.



## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

If you want to go fast... go alone  
If you want to go far... go together.

I picked it because it echoes my belief in community. It also reflects my vision of success. My definition of success is one in which not only I benefit. I also do not believe that success is achieved alone, and I wish there were more nuanced and inclusive narratives of success. My vision of success is one where I certainly benefit, but others do too. And finally, the people who contributed to my success should feel recognized and appreciated.

## A proud moment

I am really proud of my independence. I started living alone at 19 years old, and developed a sense of responsibility and a strong work ethic as a result. My freedom and independence are precious to me.



## Hopes and dreams

My main hope and dream for myself, for all women, and for all people, is to be free.

## A letter to myself

Dear future me,

I hope you are healthy and happy. I hope you are gentle and kind with yourself. I hope you are even more fabulous, and that you live a full life. I hope you chose love courageously and to love fiercely.

With love,  
Younger me

## Three favourite things

1. Coffee and ataya. That first sip of coffee in the morning brings me genuine joy. I spend days making and sipping ataya, and I love it.
2. Coasts and islands. I am happier close to the water.
3. Making my friends and loved ones laugh. I feel particularly proud and rewarded when I make my father laugh.





*Ubuntu means that difference and unity are complementary. Our differences and diversity can help us with the difficulties we face. Ubuntu is creation. With creation everything becomes possible.*

# ATIKA NAJAR

**FROM:** LIBYA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP MADAGASCAR

## My experience so far

I really appreciate my office. I had a very warm and comforting welcome from my colleagues. I am a specialist in aid coordination within the Strategy and Policy Unit, which allows me to work on many projects and which makes my missions even more interesting.

## My story

I have always felt, since I was a child, that I was hiding a secret. Not intentionally, but just because I felt that people who did not know this secret would not understand, and would not recognize its beauty. This secret is my country, Libya, which I have come to know on my own. I like to see Libya as a young woman of my age who only wants to be understood by others, and me as her closest friend, who listens to her talk about her pains, joys and fears for the future – and, above all, her dreams.

I first got to know her through my grandparents, because they have a long history with her. They knew her strength by fighting for her freedom and her culture against the Italian colonization. My parents knew her resilience from a time when, despite self-doubt, she had to adapt and set an example. And now I know her personally as the representation

of hope; even amid doubt, chaos and pain. She keeps her strength in all circumstances. She innovates and adapts to her era. She marks her place, while many want to take it from her. She seeks unity with her peers and wants to help her mother Africa to shine brightly.

This is my secret, which has grown with me and built my identity as an African Libyan woman – as well as the woman I aspire to be. I did not grow up with her geographically, but even though I was away for a long time, our paths always crossed through my professional and personal aspirations in development. And, like a gift from heaven, this fellowship appeared on my path to make me grow, to push me to my limits, to educate and strengthen me.

Today, I share my secret more and more with the world while connecting with my Africanness.

I am also getting to know other girls in Africa, who are teaching me other things about myself, such as my independence, assertiveness and acceptance of my vulnerability.

Most of all, these experiences have shown me that Africa is so diverse, and so innovative, that I can't see myself working and becoming the leader I want to be anywhere else but with her. I am becoming a young, African, Libyan woman leader.

## Challenges at work

I believe that all challenges teach us something about ourselves. A key challenge I try to overcome, especially in a country office context like Madagascar, is work overload and managing this pressure without feeling incompetent. To be more strategic and efficient, I apply the rule of “one thing at a time”. This rule is simple. You close your inbox, and don’t do anything else before finishing the activity you had prioritized. I’m still learning how to deal with this pressure, but I’m becoming more efficient and I have greater confidence in my ability to manage my missions.

## My fellowship journey

My position requires a good understanding of the international and governmental actors involved, as well as the institutional, economic and social context of the country. It took me some time to feel confident – yet, the same things I was afraid of at first, I appreciate the most today. Working and interacting with so many different people has improved my public speaking skills, and taught me different ways of communicating.

Through the fellowship, I have also discovered other areas of interest. For example, I helped coordinate a forum to promote green and blue entrepreneurship in the south of Madagascar – the most isolated region. Seeing projects from vulnerable communities confirmed to me that entrepreneurship is essential for economic advancement. The talents of today will create the jobs of tomorrow.

## My favourite African proverb

أم الدلال لا تفرح لاتحزن , meaning “The mother of the one who does not take risks, will neither be sad nor happy”. This Libyan proverb means that if you don’t take a risk, you will never know if the risk was worth it. My philosophy is that accepting challenges is the most human way to learn about yourself and find your way.

أم الدلال لا تفرح لاتحزن

## Hopes and dreams

My professional dream is to be an economic adviser for an international or state institution. My wish in general is to be fulfilled in what I do, and never to feel stuck or limited. To a young girl, I would say to always go for it, and believe in herself.

For me, this is the key to personal and professional success. If you don’t believe in yourself and your abilities, you block yourself – because everything is possible. To the African women of tomorrow, I would say fight for your dreams, even if you are told that your dreams are too big.



## A letter to myself

Young Atika,

When you were 16 years old, you wanted to make an impact in the world, but you didn’t know how. You had questions about your abilities, because you were comparing yourself to others.

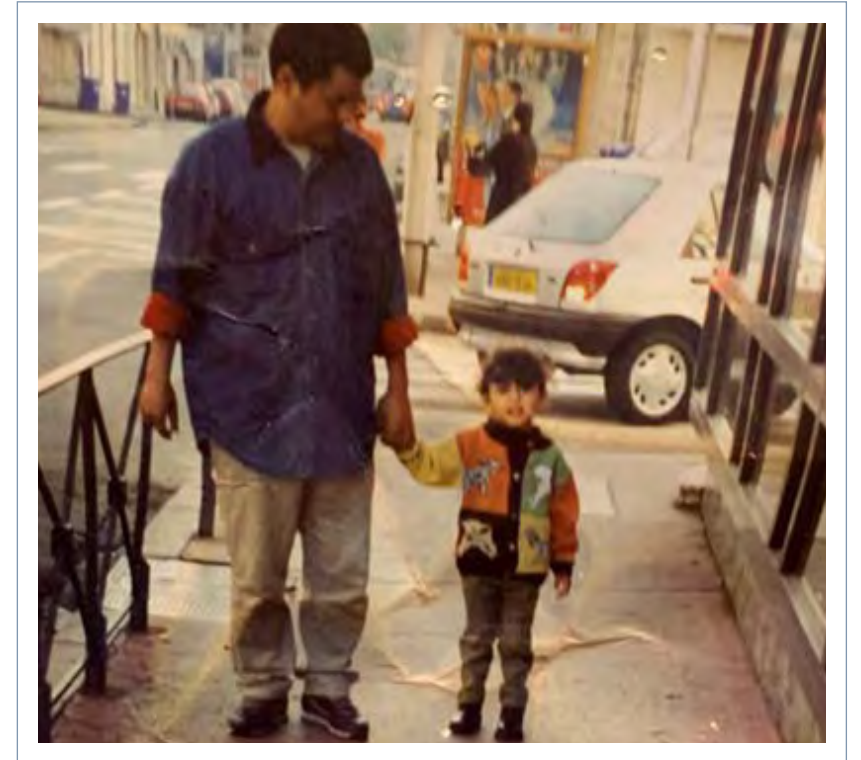
Everyone is different, everyone has their own path. You did the right thing creating your own map. You will make mistakes, but you will learn a lot and you will improve. You will not let yourself be guided by fear, even if deep down you have doubt.

There will come a day when this fear will only be an old memory. Be yourself, never lose the humanity that your parents instilled in you, because it is what makes you rich. You will be proud of yourself – don’t doubt it.

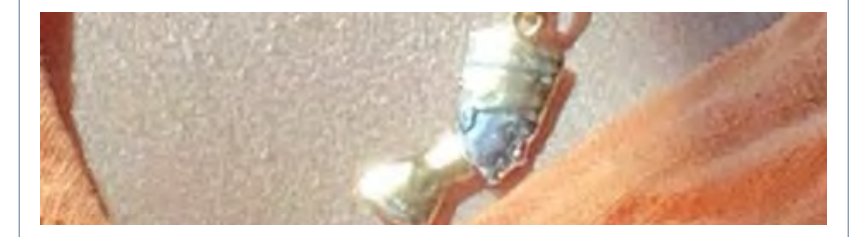


## Three favourite things

1. A picture of my father and me on my first day of school. It reminds me of where I started and where I want to go.



2. My Nefertiti necklace that I bought on my first trip alone to Egypt. Nefertiti was a symbol of female strength during ancient Egypt. Buying this item in Egypt itself was important to me to further mark this journey.



3. Bay leaf. I take this everywhere with me, because my mother puts them in all her dishes. Bay leaves are typically used in Libyan dishes. It reminds me of my origins and the women in my family.



*In my perspective, Ubuntu means humility, kindness, togetherness, and a sense of unity. It means treating other humans with compassion and respect.*

# AYAK WEL

**FROM:** SOUTH SUDAN | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP DJIBOUTI

## My experience so far

As I write this, I have been in Djibouti for seven months. I like the peace and serenity of Djibouti and Djiboutians are very kind and welcoming. It is a beautiful country with a thriving blue economy. In my free time, I enjoy going for walks by the riverside and going on road trips with friends.

## My story

I was at the gym on a Friday evening when I received the email with an offer to participate in the African Young Women Leaders Fellowship Programme. When I read the email, I was so excited and immediately contacted my father to share the good news. I chose to share with my father first because his input is important to me, and I look to his guidance to make decisions.

While I was filled with so much excitement, I also felt anxious about navigating a place unfamiliar to me, 12,000 kilometres away from my family and support network.

Accepting the fellowship also meant that I would have to resign from my employment at the time, which further contributed to my feelings of uncertainty and nervousness. I knew that deciding to resign from stable employment in

which I had several years of experience – and where I had built solid experience and relationships – would be a huge leap of faith. However, I am glad to have made this decision, because being part of the fellowship has contributed so much to my personal and professional growth.

I learnt that it is through taking a leap of faith and making decisions that are tough that we truly grow and evolve. I am grateful for this experience – and especially to the challenging days – as this is where most of the transformation has happened for me.

A dream I had when I was younger was to be involved in work that advances social justice and reduces inequities. I feel as though this fellowship has permitted me to realize my dreams.

The last seven months have taught me so much about myself and being part of the team at UNDP Djibouti has taught me valuable lessons that will inform my future. I am witnessing how UNDP's strong capabilities are maximizing development impact in Djibouti, and I am glad to have contributed to this agenda.

## Challenges at work

One of the challenges that I have actively been working to overcome is a language barrier. French is the working language in my duty station. As an anglophone, it was initially quite challenging for me to adapt due to this barrier.



## My fellowship journey

I have grown abundantly in the last seven months of my fellowship. My fellowship journey has been transformative and impactful at both the professional and personal levels. I have learnt so much about UNDP's game-changing work and I am proud to be contributing to the organization's mission in a purposeful way.

At the start of my fellowship journey, I made a commitment to contribute to advancing gender equality by combating discrimination and the systemic oppression of women and girls in Djibouti. I am happy to be fulfilling my commitments through my work in the last seven months. I look forward to what the future holds... it is looking bright!

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is: "If you think you're too small to make a difference, try spending the night with a mosquito." I picked it because it reminds me to never play small; that I'm destined for great things. This proverb also reminds me that I belong, and that I should not be afraid to take up space.

*"If you think you are too small to make a difference, try spending the night with a mosquito."  
- African proverb*

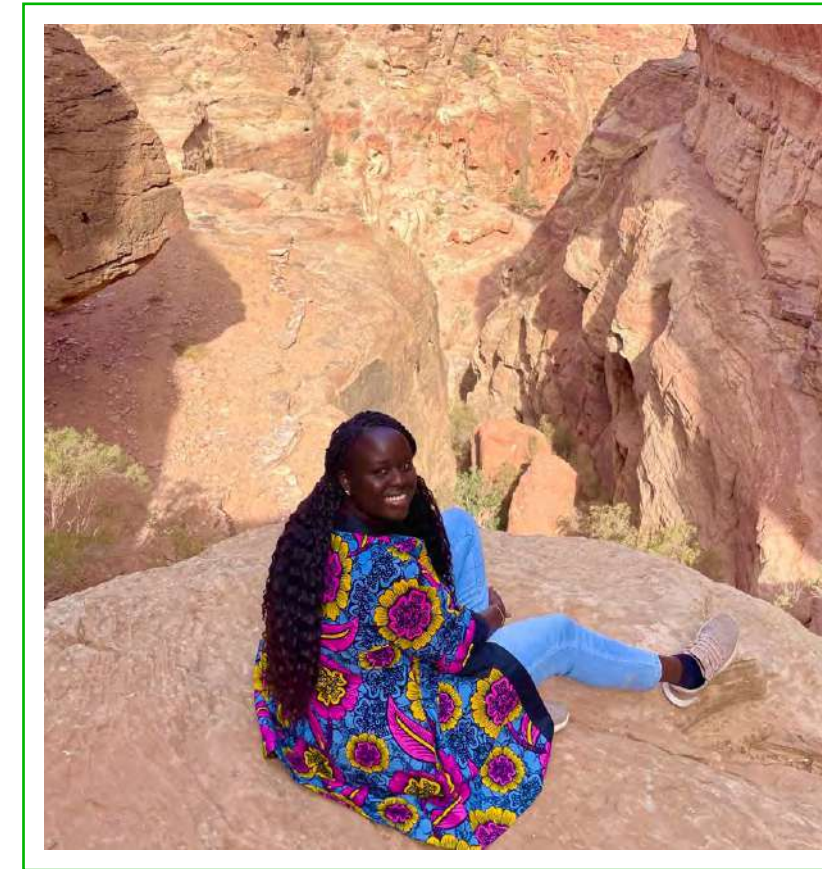
## A proud moment

I am proud of my accomplishments as the gender team leader in my duty station. I was appointed to this position within the first week of my assignment. I am thrilled that my Resident Representative was able to see my potential to lead the gender team at the country office. In this role, I lead gender-mainstreaming activities within the office and within project cycles.

## Hopes and dreams

My hope for the future is that Africa will become a global powerhouse. I believe that Africa is a continent full of hope, potential and opportunities that are pending the proper solutions of its resilient populations.

My hopes and dreams for my future daughters is that they would grow up in a healthy Africa, in an Africa that is thriving and permits them to realize their desires.



## A letter to myself

Dear Younger Ayak,

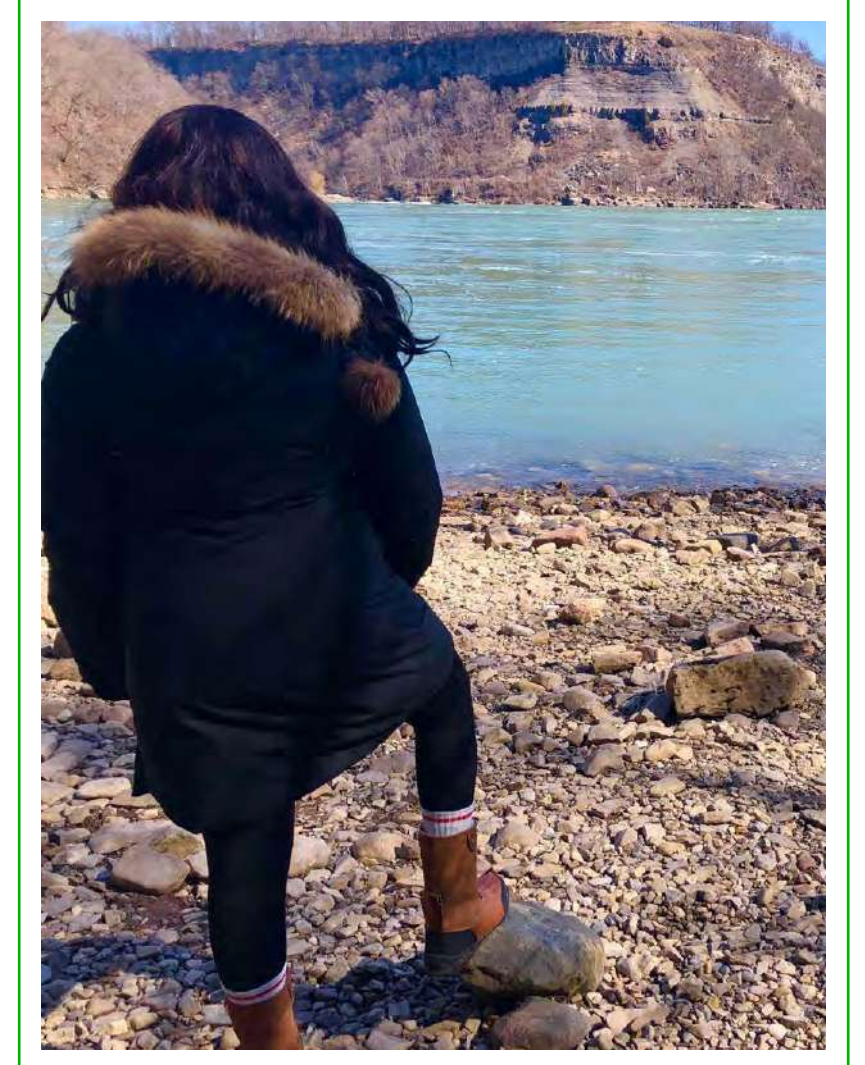
I want you to know that you are capable of doing anything you set your mind to. You are a hardworking and brilliant young woman – know that your dreams are valid. I would like for you to know that you are destined for greatness; do not ever let fear or uncertainty cloud your mind. Focus on your dreams, because they will surely become a reality. You will accomplish many great things as you grow. Remember to always be proud of your upbringing and identity as a South Sudanese girl. Let the prayers and wishes of your ancestors guide you, because you will reign victorious!

Sincerely,

Older Ayak

## Three favourite things

1. Nature. I love spending time in nature and going for hikes. This is my favourite activity because nature brings me peace and joy.



2. Travel. As an adventurer, one of my favourite activities is travelling, especially within Africa. Travel allows me to learn about different cultures within Africa.

3. Spending time with my AfYWL friends. My AfYWL sisters have been so graceful to me and bring me so much joy and support. We have built a network of sisterhood, for which I am extremely grateful.



*To me, Ubuntu means humanity,  
treating people with respect,  
humility and empathy,  
upholding the golden rule:  
"Do unto others the  
way you would like  
to be treated..."*

# BOITUMELO GABANKITSE

**FROM:** BOTSWANA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP SOUTH AFRICA

## My experience so far

I am currently based in Pretoria, South Africa. I absolutely love it. I find it different to my country, yet also familiar. The beauty of this country lies in its diversity. Different tribes, races and nationalities, yet brought together by their love of their country, the rainbow nation. As for Pretoria, this is the place to be in summer. The jacaranda trees paint the city purple: pure bliss.

## My story

Being born in a land of diamonds, you are forced to sparkle. They call Botswana the Diamond of Africa – after all, we are among the world's top diamond-producing countries. Diamonds are formed under intense heat and pressure. Similarly, the challenges and adversity we face shape us into strong and powerful beings; diamonds in human form. This is how I see every African. As for me, I am a diamond in the rough.

I was born to a mine security officer and a teacher, with five siblings – one boy and four girls. We lived in a mining town. The schools had a great education programme, which made us explore different interests. This is where my love for science began. I always thought I would go into mining, but life had other plans.

One evening, my parents brought home news that would mark a turning point in my life. My father had lost his job. We moved from the mining town to a village, and went from having electricity to using candlelight to read; from having running tap water in the house to fetching water from the community standpipe with a wheelbarrow. There were a lot of defining moments that I can compare to the intense heat and pressure of a diamond-forming environment. This phase of my life built the character and drive I have today. Although I never struggled in school, I now had to be intentional with my schooling.

I went on to study geology and environmental science. My first internship was at an environmental consulting firm. I travelled to various villages, interacting with communities. In the stakeholder engagements, I got to hear the different life stories and challenges facing people. My heart began to yearn for change. I developed an interest in community development and now wanted a career with impact. I furthered my studies while still working full time, and graduated with a master's in environmental sciences.

After completing my master's, I joined a project to supply villages with water; coincidentally, including my home village. I then moved on to join the UNDP AfYWL Fellowship Programme, which is the best thing to ever happen to me. I feel like I have found what I have been longing for: a purposeful

career, creating impact on the ground, touching the lives of thousands of people. As an African, my only wish for Africa is prosperity. Africa is a land of gems; so are the people and their spirit of humanity, Ubuntu.

### Challenges at work

Of all my day-to-day tasks, programme management has been most challenging, for someone coming from a mostly technical background. It's been a deep dive into the ocean, but I am getting there, one stroke at a time. I even enrolled in a course on programme management. The secret lies in having the courage to tackle challenges head on and asking questions along the way. We have a saying in my home language: "Tsela ya motho ke molomo". It means that as long as you are able to ask for directions, you will always find your way.



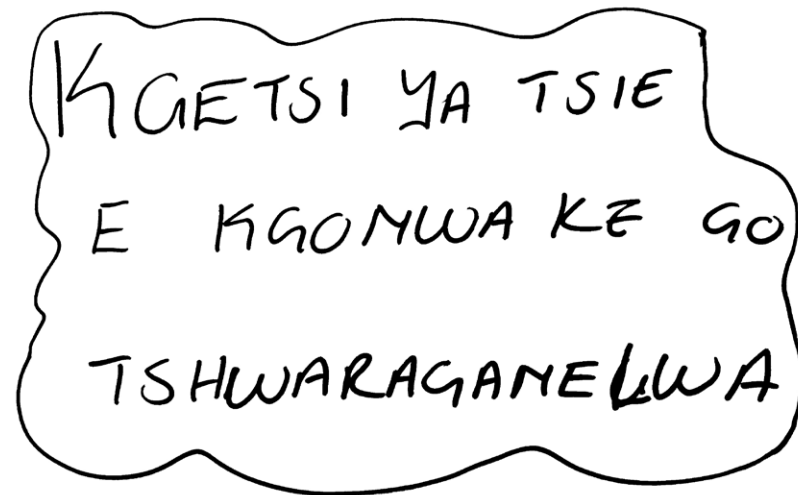
### My fellowship journey

This fellowship has taught me to be open-minded; that there is growth in discomfort. Moving and working in another country teaches you a thing or two. From getting lost and making new friends to adapting to a new work environment; you realize that even with the greatest planning skills, things don't always go as anticipated. In time, you start to embrace these imperfections, you find balance in the chaos, and you develop the confidence to do anything. The experience has made me stronger, more adaptable and resilient.

I have learnt so much that I need to take back with me to my home country. I plan to be a change-maker, leading a life of impact. This fellowship has equipped me with skills and tools to effect change.

### My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is "Kgetsi ya tsie e kgonwa ke go tshwaraganelwa", which is Setswana for "many hands make light work". The spirit of collaboration and teamwork is taught and expressed in most of our African norms, and the greatest deeds and milestones ever achieved have been through teamwork.



### A proud moment

Being one of 38 young ladies selected out of over 5,000 applicants for the AfYWL Fellowship. It's like a dream come true, only this one came early. But because it came early, I now have dreams and future aspirations beyond the self.

### Hopes and dreams

My dream is for a purposeful career ahead, and I hope for bigger and better opportunities after this fellowship. I have confidence in the doors that will open as a result of this fellowship, including the opportunities that I aim to also create. My dream for my daughter is for prosperity, a fulfilling life with peace and happiness. My responsibility is to create an enabling environment for these dreams.

My dream for all girls in Africa is for them to have access to free education, equal opportunities and to take up leadership positions. Women are powerful agents of change.



### A letter to myself

Dear Boi,

I am proud of the lady you have become and the changes you've made. The world may have never ending problems, but you tried – and now the outputs have a ripple effect. Other young people were inspired by you and have now joined the change-maker race. Remember when you started your journey in environmental sciences, when the climate change crisis was getting worse, and the impacts were heavy on vulnerable communities. At the time you had only hoped to tackle climate change, accelerate climate action, while building adaptable and resilient communities. You started building your skills and experience, acquired your doctorate, sharpened your digital skills, and now you are creating an enabling environment for other young people.



### Three favourite things

1. My master's graduation.
2. Seeing the ocean for the first time through a transboundary water-management project between four countries in Southern Africa, as part of the fellowship. A picture of the river mouth, where the river meets the sea.
3. My trip to Kigali for YouthConnekt Africa and the AfYWL leadership training.



*As a young African woman leader, Ubuntu means togetherness, sisterhood and strength. Throughout my life, I have always lived a community lifestyle and experienced the power of working as a team.*

# DAIZY FUNJUH

**FROM:** CAMEROON | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP TOGO

## My experience so far

My duty station is Lomé, in Togo. The people are very friendly, and the cost of living is low. I love it here.

## My story

Growing up, I wanted to become a dentist. I remember how devastated I was when I discovered that I couldn't make it to medical school. Today, I am super grateful that I ended up doing both my bachelor's and master's degree in environmental sciences. I have grown to understand that everything happens for reason.

I grew up in a lovely home, and we always lived with extended family members, which greatly shaped my ability to work within a group. I grew up in a small, mountainous town in Cameroon called Buea. It is known as the land of legendary hospitality, and the area is blessed with the most fertile soil in the country due to the active volcano. My happiest days as a child were during the annual mountain race, when participants from all over the world would come and race to the summit of Mount Cameroon. I am passionate about a lot of things, and over time I realized I am very good with my hands. I love creative arts: designing, millinery and sewing. I am also very happy when I am cooking, dancing,

hanging out with friends and family, or watching comedies. An interesting part of my academic life was going to an all-girls secondary boarding school for seven years. This institution instilled great virtues in me, especially unity, love and sisterhood.

Over time, what has kept me going has been God and my family. A key moment for me was when I was accepted into the AfYWL Fellowship Programme. I will forever be grateful for this life-changing platform. My dream for the future is to live an impactful life, where I can give back to the community and contribute enormously to building climate -resilient communities. I want other African women to believe that their dreams are valid, and that they can make it big on their continent.

## Challenges at work

I grew up in the anglophone part of Cameroon, and completed most of my education and research in English. Working in French has been slightly challenging, since it is my second language. Another challenge I encounter is the fear of public speaking. I got a lot of help with this from my colleagues, who keep creating a safe space for me to express myself. Another platform which helped a great deal was the leadership training in Kigali. I was able to diagnose the root

cause of my fear, and benefited from a masterclass on the art of public speaking.

## My fellowship journey

Being an AfYWL fellow has been about growth. Receiving the offer letter was a day I will never forget. Then came the induction programme in Addis, which cleared all my worries and prepared me for the remarkable journey ahead.

Madame Ahunna made two statements, which are engraved in my heart: “A purpose-driven life will get you far”, and “People will always remember how you made them feel”. Those words have been my driving force ever since.

When I arrived at UNDP Togo, I was filled with a lot of anxiety — but having the most amazing supervisor and colleagues created a very safe space for me to spread my wings. The fellowship has expanded my network in ways I never imagined. It has pushed me to dimensions I did not think I could attain.

## My favourite African proverb

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together”. This deeply resonates with me and the theme of ubuntu.

It states how much we can achieve as Africans by working together to promote unity, defend state sovereignty, eradicate colonialism, promote international cooperation and coordinate policies.

If you want to go fast go alone  
if you want to go far  
go together.

## A proud moment

The achievement I am most proud of is making it among the top 38 out of 5,254 applicants for the second cohort of the AfYWL Fellowship. Within the fellowship, I am most proud of creating the office English club. The club has not only acted as a learning environment, but has also been a safe space for members.

## Hopes and dreams

My hopes and dreams for myself is to live a very impactful life, where I can give back to the community and contribute enormously in building climate resilient communities. For my future daughter, my hope is that she will never be afraid to dream big, and to never allow her marital status to define her. For other women in Africa, I want them to believe that their dreams are valid, and that they can make it big on their continent.



## A letter to myself

Dear future Daizy,

I know you have so many dreams and inspirations, and you want the world — especially Africa — to be a better place. Take one day at a time, and keep hanging on to God, family and the friends who helped you get this far. Always learn to take up space, and do not shy away from taking up challenges, because that is where you learn.



Always remember where you come from, and never forget to give back to younger girls and your community. Stay brave and true, and be your kind self.

## Three favourite things

1. My religion. My religion comes before every other thing, because it gives purpose and meaning to my life. Most aspects of my life are being shaped by my religion. My religion is my continuous driving force and motivation.

2. Peace. Both internal and external peace is one of my favourite things, because it signifies freedom. My region has been undergoing civil unrest for several years, which has greatly affected everyone’s livelihood. Our prayer ever since has been for peace.



3. Sisterhood. Sisterhood can create strong connections that can last forever, while also bringing a sense of belonging to people who might feel isolated and alone.



*I am who I am because people like my father made sacrifices, so I am forever indebted to serve humanity. That is my interpretation of Ubuntu.*



# DANIELA NIANDUILLET

**FROM:** CÔTE D'IVOIRE | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP REPUBLIC OF CONGO

## My story

One gloomy afternoon, she looked out her window. The reflection of her skeletal face frightened her. The knots in her lower abdomen were expanding. She was afraid to admit it, but a wind of change was on its way.

“I resign,” she said, and it felt as though her world came crashing down. For two years, she had been working tirelessly — giving all she had, surpassing expectations, always eager to learn and helping others any way she could. Nothing ever seemed enough. She felt unchallenged, pressured and exploited.

October 2016, she booked a one-way ticket. As she boarded the plane and fastened her seatbelt, she sighed deeply: a sigh full of relief and hope. After 10 years, she was going back. She was grateful for the life she’d had in the USA, but something kept tugging at her heart. A need to go back and change things. No matter how small, no matter how challenging. A need to shake up the status quo.

Being back on the motherland wasn’t what she thought it would be. She was challenged by realities she’d long forgotten, and didn’t feel equipped to deal with them. She felt unworthy and underserving, but she pushed through. Despite many failures, she carried herself — and carried on.

Growing up, her family was constantly moving. This afforded her a humbling international experience, made rich with interactions and learning opportunities from the various cultures and people she encountered along the way. Originally from Côte d’Ivoire, Niger and Senegal, she moved to the USA in 2006, where she completed a Bachelor of Science in business administration.

Her first job was working for a big retailer as a sales manager. This was a rewarding experience. However, that tugging feeling, that knot in her lower abdomen, was a constant reminder that she needed to do more. She decided that she wanted to work in the humanitarian sector and give back to developing countries.

This is what motivated her original return to the motherland. The transition from sales to humanitarianism was hard. She had to go back to school, where she obtained a first master’s degree in international education, and a second one in international project management, with various internships along the way.

## My fellowship journey

Going to Congo Brazzaville was scary. Picking up her life once again was unsettling, but there had to be a reason why she was chosen for this. She had to take that leap of faith.

She was eager: filled with zeal and ambition, ready to be a change-maker. A little too ambitious at times. She needed to adapt, adjust and reimagine.

Through the AfYWL Fellowship, she was able to promote the inclusion of the Congolese youth in the National Development Plan using strategies for driving discussions and promoting social change.

She was able to impact women's leadership through multiple activism channels, and to support the Accelerator Lab in identifying, exploring and testing innovative solutions to drive international development. She learned that she is capable, and she grew in so many ways.



## My favourite African proverb

Two favourite quotes are: "Education is key, but the lock has changed," by Dieudonné Kini, Deputy Resident Representative, UNDP Congo, and "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world," by Nelson Mandela.

"Education is key, but the lock has changed."

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

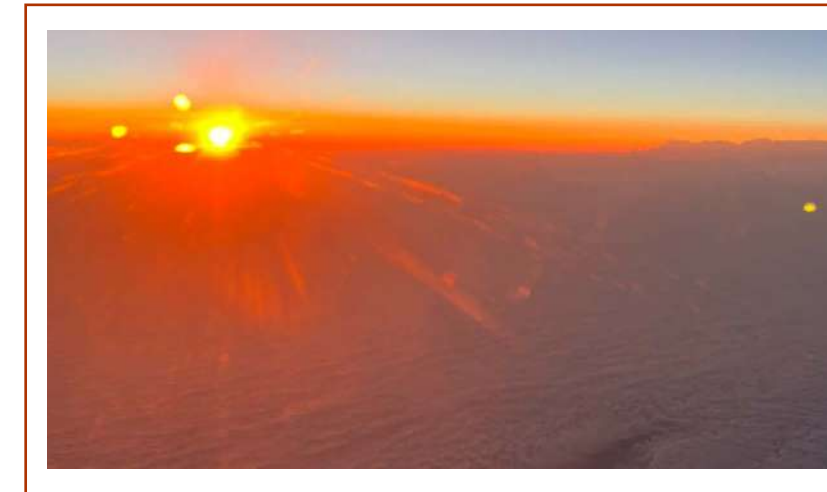
## A proud moment

She is proud of her achievements, and will no longer be held back. She is proud of empowering over 400 young women through coaching and mentoring. She is proud of teaching masterclasses on leadership and identity. She is proud of her ability to adapt to changing environments, and to build meaningful and effective relationships.



## Hopes and dreams

A world full of hope, peace and love.



## A letter to myself

Dear Daniela,

I know things have not been how you imagined they would turn out these past few years. You have endured so much. Yet when you thought all was worthless, when you were at your lowest, that's when you saw the light. When you let go and let God.

You are still traveling through a rough part of your life. There is a lot of uncertainty as you write this. But remember that faith and hope have gotten you out of this so many times before. You know that God loves you and has a plan for you. You know that there is no fear in love, and you know to always keep pushing, even when you feel tired and overwhelmed.

I know you sometimes feel hopeless, confused and undeserving. I know you are afraid – of failure, of not reaching your full potential, and of settling for less. I know that sometimes it's hard to find faith, but I pray you will be able to. Remember the younger you: simply fearless, with so much ambition

and drive. I pray that you regain that strength and energy. Don't allow anyone to take away from your joy, or most importantly, from you.

I want you to be happy. To have energy. To have drive. To have motivation. To give back. To help others. To be selfless. To be kind to yourself. To be hopeful. To be forgiving. To love unconditionally. To be loved unconditionally. To be cherished. To be wanted. To matter. To be valued. To be challenged and to challenge yourself. To succeed.

I want you to excel in your career and to create the balance you have always wanted, so that you can create the impact you always dreamed of. Know that you are not alone, and that you are not too much. You are wonderfully and beautifully made.

You always wanted to work in an environment that will allow you to flourish professionally, where you will be guided and challenged to reach your full potential under strong mentorship. May God assist you and provide you with overwhelming opportunities that will allow you to reach your full potential.

You got this, and I love you.

You are enough.

## Three favourite things

Travelling, baking and quality alone time.





*I hope that African people continue to build a shared sense of purpose that fosters unity, collective action and sustainable development. Africa, through its children, will save itself. This is what Ubuntu means to me.*

# DATCHA BYANGOY

**FROM:** DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK

## My experience so far

Pushed out of my comfort zone, I've had to unlearn, relearn and adapt so I could become a better version of myself. This fellowship has allowed me to continue tailoring a key skillset as I move forward in my career path.

## My story

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the second biggest country in Africa, is one of the wealthiest in the world, with a significant number of minerals. This comes with a major difficulty; the so-called resource curse, which is one of the multiple causes of violence.

I was born and raised, along with my four sisters, by a single mother in a country at war. This came with specific challenges for my family. This is not a unique story: millions of people in my country, in Africa and in the world have experienced and continue to experience this hardship. Limited access to basic social services, gender-based and sexual violence and scant access to resources are but some of the many challenges people face.

While my personal upbringing shaped my life choices, opportunities and lack thereof, it is not the important part of

my story — and certainly not the part that defines me the most. Where I am heading takes precedence over where I come from, and my real story resides in how I got here despite it all.

Because of the political instability and the burden of a heavy colonial legacy, the DRC relies significantly on foreign aid to drive both humanitarian and development activities. Growing up in a small city in the eastern part of the country, I had the impression that the people working for international organizations had a better life than the rest. They seemed well educated, drove better cars and lived in bigger houses. I wanted what they had. I wanted a better life.

Although this was my first contact with foreign aid, I experienced a shift a few years later. My focus moved completely from the material incentive to the human component. Meeting people who had left comfort and family behind to work in fragile contexts echoed something deep in me.

Why would these people risk it all to “save us”? Why do we have to wait for other people to come save us? Why can't we save ourselves? These became the most important questions of my life. My quest for answers has since constituted my north star.

My mother managed to send us to school, which later allowed me to secure internships and short-term jobs in local and international organizations. I gained valuable work experience, but not enough to meaningfully shape the lives of the people in my community. I would either have had to wait for years to attain seniority or get a degree from an internationally recognized and well-established institution to gain “legitimacy”. I did not have the luxury of time, the latter constituted my best option.



## Challenges at work

I consider myself to be someone who quickly adapts to changing contexts, however, I struggled to find my space after joining the UNDP Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean. I didn't have any knowledge of the regional context, nor did I have the background to work on digitalization and innovation projects. Additionally, I joined during a transition in management, and Spanish is not one of the languages I speak.

For a few months, I doubted the relevance of my choice to leave a perfectly stable job to join the fellowship programme. I don't agree with the idea that one must go through fire to learn, but I recognize that challenges build a strong character. My buffer against total discouragement was my sense of purpose as

well as the circumstances of my upbringing. I am the descendent of a “warrior” who never gave up on hope, even in her darkest days. I owe it to her — and to all women like her — to honour the sacrifices she made for me to be here.

As I type these words, I am happy to say that I managed to fully integrate into my team and my work. My supervisor gives me the space to express my ideas and manage my projects as I see fit under her leadership guidance.

## My fellowship journey

A master's degree funded by the British government to attend a British university allowed me to be eligible for the AfYWL Fellowship. As I was ready to embark on a journey to Vienna to work on a youth employment project in Africa, I got confirmation that I was selected to be part of this programme. I saw an opportunity to help shape the continent's narrative on gender equality and women empowerment.



A few months ago, I started to participate in trainings on ‘Futures’, a study that “applies different approaches to thinking about the future” and “... factors that could give rise to a great range of possible futures, events and behaviours”. I was reminded once again that there are tremendous opportunities in uncertainty, and it is up to us to make something out of it.

When we surrender to what is, we are able to see value in each circumstance and grasp the lessons it bears. By doing so, we choose our own reality that influences the future we want to live in, and help to shape it for ourselves and for the next generation.

## My favourite African proverb

The reason I picked this piece of poem is because it speaks to me in terms of sacrifices that many strong women made -and continue to make every day- so myself and many other young women can be here. They dared to dream of a world where choice, freedom, justice and equality was possible.

*"I Stand on the sacrifices of a million women before me thinking: What can I do to make this mountain taller so the women after me can see farther."*

*Legacy - Rupi kaur*

## Hopes and dreams

My hope is that Africa seizes the opportunities of these uncertain times to pursue the achievement of greatness for its children. Through initiatives such as the AfYWL Fellowship. I hope that African women and youth continue to be empowered to take the lead in a powerful transformation of the continent.

## A letter to myself

Dear younger me,

On a lightless night, sitting on the veranda of your childhood home in Bukavu, I wish I could tell you that the world is a better place now. A lot has happened in the last few

decades. Humans continue to suffer from manmade and natural catastrophes just like they used to, if not more. You experienced things that you were not supposed to at a very young age, and I am so sorry for that. Life handed you some very bitter lemons, but you did not let them define you and prevent you from becoming who you aspired to be. Instead, you used them to choose a career path that would allow you to influence narratives. Your love for justice and fairness is still burning inside of you.

You are not quite there yet, and it's ok. The most important thing is that you are trying, and that's what matters. Each new day brings you closer to the bigger goal. Is the world a better place now? Definitely no! One thing is sure though: it gets easier. For now, I want you to stop worrying about all the “ifs” and the “could-have-beens”. Allow yourself to rest, allow yourself to just be. Tomorrow is another day.

## Three favourite things

1. Working out, because of the visible and invisible benefits I get from doing it.
2. Travelling, because I get to experience the richness of different cultures while growing as a person.
3. Dancing for fun.





*Ubuntu refers to behaving well towards others or acting in ways that benefit the community. I will say it means being altruistic, charitable.*

# DOMINIQUE NGNINGPOGNI

**FROM:** CAMEROON | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP CÔTE D'IVOIRE

## My experience so far

I am currently based in Côte d'Ivoire. It is home to some of the most hospitable people, and one of world's greatest ever Catholic churches, the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace in Yamoussoukro. It also has a rich cuisine. Attieke and grilled chicken has become one of my favourite meals.

## My story

I rarely open up to strangers. I usually share my story, my challenges, and even my joys with a handful of people; one or two close friends and some family members. Society has taught us that being completely open in every situation may be inappropriate, yet we have the power to change things by being open. There is always that one person who understands us or who experiences the same struggles, joys and challenges.

My story is a story of a young Bamileke from Fotouni village, born in Yaoundé, the political capital of Cameroon, a central African country. Because of her father's job, she then moved to Bafoussam, a small, semi-urban city. Here, she attended the government bilingual high school, until she went back to the capital city for university and graduated with a Master's in Biology.

Of course, university was not all about lectures, reading and studying, but also about going out, attending social events, making friends and clubbing (don't tell my parents that!). It was after those years that I focused more on my Christian faith. This was not really welcomed by some family members, due to a false assumption that Christianity can affect African cultures and values. Whether the Christian faith is compatible with African cultures and traditions is a long debate, but if there is one thing I am sure of, it is that my Christian faith helped me to overcome many challenges and achieve my dreams.

I remember six years ago, I drafted my first proposal, seeking funds to study the influence of climate change on endemic fish in Cameroon. I was contacted by the selection committee a few months later to provide additional information. They were taking a while to get back to me, and my colleagues were stressing me out regarding the outcome of the proposal. I started praying and said to God that if I got a favourable answer by the end of that week, I would truly believe that my prayers are indeed heard. When they contacted me few days later with a favourable response, I was delighted. That moment was one of the most important turning points in my career and personal life as it has opened many other professional doors. It's not to say that I have always received positive answers to my prayers, or that I was not working hard to get there, but I knew from that day that I can rely on my Christian faith for hope when I am feeling challenged.

## Challenges at work

My main challenge today at work has been to choose an area of expertise and become an expert. Working under the Inclusive Growth portfolio has many thrilling subjects, such as the blue economy development, carbon markets, renewable energy, food security, climate action and more. I want to know all of them deeply, and I have difficulty focusing on one. I have been working on narrowing the list by ranking them based on my long-term goal and personal life mission, with guidance from my country office Resident Representative, the Deputy Resident Representative as well as my direct manager.



## My fellowship journey

Being able to work on solving some of the most important issues facing today's world has been a dream come true. As I ensure project oversight and quality under the Inclusive Growth portfolio at the country level, I realize how important it is that we consider pressing issues. I got to witness the impacts of climate change on rural women's income-generating activities, and that was heart-breaking. Thankfully we were able to strengthen their business through an initiative run by one of our projects. When I look at these experiences and see how everyone brings 'a piece of the puzzle' to build and shape a sustainable world, I feel hope. It has led me to believe that no stone we add to this edifice is lost, and I will no doubt continue to add mine.

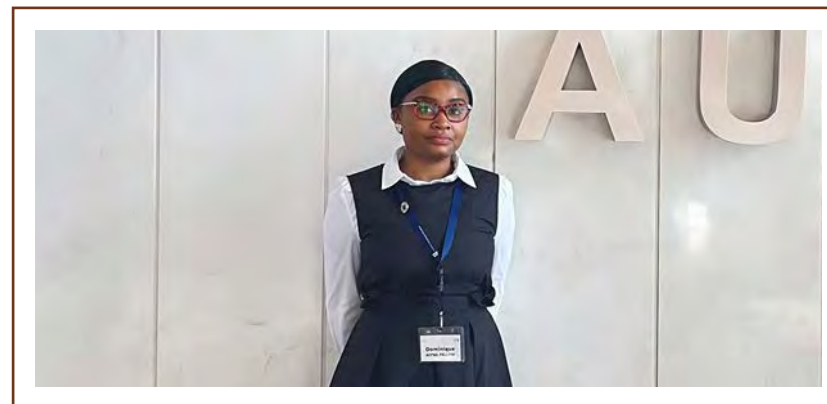
## My favourite African proverb

My favourite proverb is "Pouo tchu ki le kui le pouk", which is in Fotouni language (from West Cameroon) for "A single hand can't tie a bundle". This proverb is about togetherness, and how we cannot do things alone. If we all show kindness, help others and work together, we will build a more resilient world.

A SINGLE  
HAND CAN'T  
TIE A  
BUNDLE

## A proud moment

Becoming a woman driven by the Christian faith. This has been, and will continue to be, the foundation for all the personal accomplishments I have achieved so far. Honestly, I can't list all my proud moments, because each achievement has its own story, struggles, challenges and euphoria. Yet one thing is common: my faith.



## Hopes and dreams

I wish to fulfil my personal life mission (I won't share it until it's all set). I wish that one day in my old age, I will be able to look back and say: "God! I have made it!" with a smile on my face. To my future daughter, I hope her struggles are less than mine and wish her to fulfil all her dreams by loving and respecting God and others. My wish for all girls in Africa is to understand how it is important to value themselves and take up space everywhere they go. I wish they will get to know their inner strength and unleash that to enlighten the world.

## A letter to myself

Dear future me,

Remember all the challenges you have overcome and all the joy you have embraced. Remember that you're bright, intelligent, dashing, inspiring, and most importantly, a woman of God. You are not a shadow in this world, but a light that is meant to enlighten your peers. You are amazing and unique in every way possible.

Dear me, remember your mission. Are you already working on that? If no, remember you have made mistakes in the past, but haven't we all? Don't let them hold back your plan. If yes, be proud and celebrate — both big wins and small wins — celebrate, because you deserve every inch of it.

## Three favourite things

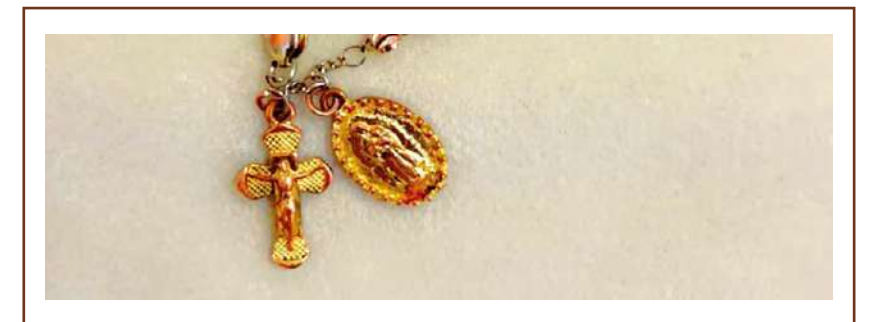
1. My bible. I have had it since 2005. It was a gift from my godmother from when I was getting baptized. For me, it is the most precious and valuable book in this world... full of wise words and advice, and a true day-to-day guide.



2. This dress. It was a gift from my elder sister for my first job interview in Canada. I got the job every time I wore this dress to an interview. I am not a superstitious person, but I truly think there is something with this dress.



3. My bracelet. It is a special gift from a special person in my life. I always have it on my wrist. It reminds me of wonderful moments spent together. It is also very useful for a quick prayer.





*To me, Ubuntu is togetherness; the acceptance of each other's ideas, ways of life and values, and bringing all of that together to benefit the collective whole.*

# EDDA NENIWA

**FROM:** MALAWI | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP NAMIBIA

## My experience so far

I love living and working in Namibia. It is very different from my home in terms of population, and I have been enjoying the 'small population life'.

## My story

I was at work when I found out that I was successful in my application for the AfYWL Fellowship on 10 February 2022. I was working full-time at a bank, and part-time volunteering for a small youth-led organization dealing with HIV and gender equality. The smile that email brought to my face was bright enough to light the whole office! I am very sure the customer in front of me was wondering what I was smiling about, but all they did was smile back. This was the moment I knew that my life was about to change and take the direction I had always dreamed of.

Growing up, I always wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to help people and I thought this was the only way I could contribute significantly to changing people's lives. But God had other plans. I had a passion for helping women and children specifically because I thought they also deserve to have the rights, confidence and opportunities to contribute to their societies, just like everyone else. I was fortunate enough to be

accepted into a college that fuelled my passion and gave me skills that have been helping me, and will forever contribute to my mission of uplifting women and making sure their voices are heard and acted upon.

I was born in a family of four and raised by my grandparents, but for some reason I always felt I wanted a bigger family. I had so much fun when my cousins visited, or when my grandfather took the whole family to the farm during maize season. I am naturally an introvert, but when I find people who accept me and are a safe space for me, I become the funniest person. This sense of family also drives me and makes me feel like helping other people is just a human characteristic that everyone should have.

My goal is to help in women's economic empowerment in my country; to give them power so that they can occupy spaces where they will be heard. I believe that economically empowering women helps reduce gender-based violence. African women are faced with so many social and economic constraints, but dynamics are shifting. It is up to us to leverage these new opportunities to create a future where the next generation of African women are not looked down on, but are rather seen as champions for change.

## Challenges at work

The main challenge I have experienced has been adapting and building relationships with stakeholders. Being a new person and having never worked at such a big organization, it's been a bit tricky to know what information I can and cannot share with different stakeholders.

Creating a good working relationship with stakeholders and implementing partners is important to me, because I feel that having a good relationship leads to trust, which leads to more successful projects or programmes and more future collaborations.



## My fellowship journey

This journey has taught me so much, including speaking up and contributing to conversations. The fellowship has instilled in me the confidence that my ideas can contribute meaningfully, even if just by opening someone's mind to a possibility.

I have always been shy and speaking in public was not for me, but during the leadership training, co-fellow Tamiwe Kayuni reminded us that only by speaking out can you contribute to change you want to see.

For the future, I want to use all the skills that I gained during this fellowship from the country office, as well as the training sessions that we have received from various people, to advance my career in gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as teaching other people what I know now.

## My favourite African proverb

"The fact that you have two feet does not mean you can climb two trees at the same time." I picked this proverb because it shows me that being human is okay, and seeking help is a strength. You can have massive dreams, but you can't achieve them by yourself.

"The fact that you have  
... two feet does not mean  
you can climb two  
trees at the same  
time."

## A proud moment

For me, my proudest moment must be being selected for this programme. I always wanted to work with the UN and applied to a few national vacancies, but I never made it through. Little did I know there was something better awaiting, and that God was moulding me for a better position that would change my life.

## Hopes and dreams

For myself: I hope to have the courage and confidence to push for my goals and the things I want to achieve while focusing on helping others.

My hope for my future daughter is that she will be proud of her heritage, her gender and able to speak out for her beliefs and dreams. For all girls in Africa, I hope that they will know that we are strong, resilient, intelligent, beautiful and driven, and there is nothing we can't do.



## A letter to myself

Dear Edda,

Congratulations for taking the first step towards achieving your dreams! May you use this chance to change the lives of others positively and contribute to the development of your country. Use this chance to be the one to open doors for other young African women to places where they can

be heard. May you always be humble, courageous and the driver of change for the better, and remember to always stay true to your values and never stop dreaming big. Always remember the "woods may be lovely, dark and deep, but you have promises to keep, and miles to go before you sleep".

## Three favourite things

1. I love to cook! That comes with a love for eating as well, but cooking is the main goal. It keeps my mind calm and relieves my stress at the end of the day.

2. I also love to read all kinds of novels. My first book to read in high school was The Magician's House series, which made me feel like I could escape reality into a world of excitement and colourful dreams.

3. Last, but not least, is listening to country music.





*To me, Ubuntu means helping a sister, brother, friend or stranger in need, no matter where they come from, and believing that we are one.*

# ELEANOR EWI

**FROM:** CAMEROON | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP REGIONAL SERVICE CENTRE FOR AFRICA, ETHIOPIA

## My experience so far

At the time of writing, I have been in Addis for seven months. I have adapted to the country, but not the food. I easily adapt wherever I find myself, as I know what I want and what I am searching for.

## My story

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. I can trace my own leadership back to secondary school. I was the class delegate, and in my final year of high school I was voted to be the senior prefect girls leading over 2,000 students. I was born and raised in a religious family that values education. My father was a veterinary doctor and my mom a housewife.

My dad passed away in 2013, as I was preparing to write my advanced level examination. That was the toughest year of my life. I felt like there was no need for me to continue my education, since my dad had been my inspiration. But my mom encouraged me to keep up with my dad's dreams, and I decided to continue with my studies. I had a BSc in Banking and Finance. I had dreamed of working for an international organization. I remember a lecturer had mentioned that the International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC) would be the best place to continue my master's.

A year after my undergraduate, I applied to do my master's degree at IRIC. However, they could pick just a certain number of students and I wasn't among them. I felt like a failure, because that was the first time in my life that I tasted what it means to fail in terms of education.

The following year, I took up the challenge to apply for the same entrance examination again, and this time I was accepted. I had spent the years after my BSc trying to make a living, and I learned to persevere and stay resilient. I completed my Master's in International Relations.

Afterwards, I applied for so many jobs. I faced many rejections, but volunteered to work for an NGO and after some months, I got a job as a financial advisor at an insurance company. I felt like I wasn't fulfilled and needed to do more to make an impact. That was when I received the link for the AfYWL Fellowship from an aunt based in the US. I applied — and here we are today! I feel more fulfilled, making an impact as a young African leader and achieving my dreams. To all young African women out there, you need to believe in yourself and persevere, for nothing good comes easy.

## Challenges at work

Before the fellowship, I always shied away from leadership roles. Yet people would push me to lead teams and said I look like a leader. Also, public speaking would make me nervous and leave me tongue-tied when talking. I shared this with my supervisor, and we came to the conclusion that the best way for me to overcome this would be to do more presentations. This really helped me to develop my self-confidence, public speaking and leadership skills.



## My fellowship journey

Being surrounded by people who believe in me, the fellowship has made me believe in myself. It has changed my perspective on life, as I feel like I am beginning to understand my purpose. It has also taught me that everyone deserves to be given a chance to show what they are made of. We are all born with the knowledge; we just need the right space to show what we know. I have learned new

things every day. I always wanted to be in the development space. This fellowship is not only training me to become a trade expert, but also an expert in the development field. I would wish to stay in the development space to combat inequality, fight against poverty and continue working on trade within the African Continental Free Trade Area, where I get to interact with women and youth-led entrepreneurs.

## My favourite African proverb

“A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to redeem them from starving. They all have food in their own houses. When we gather in the moonlight on the village grounds, it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. Therefore let us continue with the team spirit and enjoy the power of togetherness. Let’s smile, not because we don’t have problems, but because we are stronger than the problems.” I picked this proverb because everyone is important according to their own unique purpose, and unity is a great strength.

*When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. Lets smile not because we don't have problems but because we are stronger than the problems.*

## A proud moment

I am most proud of my public speaking. I am an introvert, very shy and not confident to speak in public. But now I make presentations in seminars and capacity-building workshops.



## Hopes and dreams

My hope for me is to discover my purpose and achieve it. To stay in a developmental space, and to contribute to the development of Africa — especially the one continental Africa market. I want to greatly contribute to making this a reality. For my future daughter, I hope that she will grow up to realize her potential, be a person with integrity, have faith and fulfil a purpose. My hope for all girls in Africa is to believe yourself and your dreams. Learn to overcome challenges, go for the opportunities and no matter how many times you fall, always rise up and continue.

## A letter to myself

Dear future self,

I know we are in this together. I just need to share a few words to make you feel inspired and loved. I like the fact that you now believe in yourself and gradually discovering your purpose. I hope you will become more confident, vibrant and courageous.

You should meet your fears and convert your weaknesses to your strength. Do not let people put you down or affect how you feel about yourself. Build connections with people. Learn to continue networking.

I know you like to maintain a low profile, but dress up and look beautiful every day. Above all, stay true and make an impact wherever you go.

Dear self, we still have a lifetime together. I love you.

Yours sincerely,  
Me





*Ubuntu - I am, because you are. To me, ubuntu is a call for solidarity. It is the profound sense that every person should act with compassion and human virtue in order to uphold one another.*

# ELENA TEIXEIRA

**FROM:** ANGOLA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK

## My experience so far

I enjoy being stationed in New York because it's been a completely new environment for me. The City of Dreams lives by its name, with endless possibilities and a wide variety of diverse people. The exposure to large, impactful projects (and people) has given me a significantly better grasp of the development world.

## My story

"It will all be worth it!" This is what my mother repeatedly told me whenever I questioned my path and the challenging road it had been. Without a doubt, she was right.

I was born in Luanda, Angola during the Angolan Civil War. My father, who is Spanish, was living in Namibia at the time. This allowed my mother and I to move to Namibia for what would be my home for the next 17 years. Though neighbours, Angola and Namibia are jarringly different countries. Angola is densely populated and more tropical, whereas Namibia is a large, sparsely populated country, with vast savannahs and deserts. Fortunately for me, I was able to experience both during my upbringing.

The constant exposure to different cultures played a crucial role in defining who I am today. I feel like I inherited my devotion to development from my grandparents and parents. My Spanish grandparents had briefly relocated to Angola as doctors to pursue their dreams of humanitarian work in the Global South. On the other side, my Angolan grandparents pursued their own dreams in entrepreneurship, farming, agriculture and teaching.

After my primary and secondary education in Windhoek, I completed a Bachelor of Science in Economics at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. Surprisingly, an internship during my undergrad cemented my goals and passion to work in development. The internship was with UNICEF Namibia, where I worked closely with the Namibian government to produce a yearly report on education statistics and analysis. Having taken a deep dive into this sector, I began to critically question development disparities.

This pushed me to pursue a Master of Science degree in Political Science from the University of Amsterdam. Shortly after, I formed part of the European Union Delegation to Namibia, after which I worked as an economist at a private firm. Then I received the life-changing news that I had been selected to participate in the AfYWL Fellowship. The essence of the fellowship aligns deeply with the factors that motivate me. Growing up in an environment

where I was able to understand the development challenges faced by millions of Africans continues to drive my passion for economic development and equal opportunity. My hopes and dreams have been supported vigorously by my family and friends, who also offer me a deep sense of motivation.

### Challenges at work

One of the main challenges that I've encountered in my work is the escalated need to perform and deliver under pressure. Given the large influx of demand required from the Regional Bureau for Africa as the largest bureau in the UNDP, "the work never stops". This sometimes means working prolonged hours. To mitigate some of the effects this may have on my mental health, I try to find ways to establish a good work-life balance. It is incredibly important to take care of one's mental health, and I've been trying to make this a priority for myself.

### My fellowship journey

On a personal level, my fellowship journey has taught me that I am much more capable than what I had originally thought. I have always been surrounded by incredibly supportive family and friends, however self-doubt can creep in when you are placed in unfamiliar surroundings. Nonetheless, having had the privilege to work closely with inspiring leaders, such as Regional Director Ahunna Eziakonwa, has taught me to believe in myself.

On a professional level, being fully immersed in the world of UNDP has taught me a lot about the intricacies of structural development transformation. Interacting with development experts from various fields has equipped me with knowledge that will contribute to my plans of working in development economics, and contributing to policy frameworks in Africa.

### My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is: "Chance all; see what destiny yields". It is an Angolan proverb which is translated from Umbundu. It resonates deeply with my personal belief of moving with faith and not with fear. What is meant for you, will not miss you. One should trust that process and give it your all to see what destiny holds for you.

Chance all; see  
what destiny yields

### A proud moment

Having been selected for the AfYWL Fellowship Programme has been one of my proudest achievements. The opportunity to experience such an incredible network of people — including global development leaders, practitioners and other AfYWL fellows — has opened doors to endless possibilities and knowledge.



never dies. I urge you to believe in that flame and to continue to fuel it with the things that make you grow, glow and burn brighter. Please remember that you can use that light in dark rooms, and you can also use it to ignite others without taking away from your own.

### Three favourite things

1. My grandparents' house. My grandparents' house in Lobito, Benguela, has always been a symbolic place of community and shared family values.
2. My journal. My journal is a safe space where I am able to express myself in ways that are healing and inspiring — without boundaries and without judgement.
3. AfYWL scarf. This scarf represents my fellowship journey and the sisterhood that has formed because of it. It reminds me of the strong support system that I have gained.

### Hopes and dreams

As an African woman, I want the world to know that we are able to contribute uniquely towards reimagining a people-centred development approach that can accomplish tangible sustainable development for all. Young African women, despite being affected by a magnitude of challenges, are also a driving force behind innovation and scalable solutions that may inspire change.

My hopes for the future of my daughters and all girls in Africa is that they can live a fruitful life of value and fulfilment, and for them to boundlessly pursue their own dreams. I wish this for myself as well.

### A letter to myself

Dear (younger) Elena,

If I could give you one piece of crucial advice, it would be to stay true to yourself and never allow anybody to dim your light. Despite adversity and travesty, that light in you





*To me, Ubuntu means I am because of people before me and I will graciously pass the baton to those after me.*

# ELSIE TOO

**FROM:** KENYA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK

## My story

I was an all-rounder from a tender age. In fact, my family nicknamed me ‘counsellor’ due to my all-knowing nature. Despite this, I missed the drama auditions in my primary school and did not end up in the coveted list of students who represented the school in competitions. Our drama teacher from school would also adjudicate the church competitions, where I was a main character, and this marked the foundation of my confidence. Mr Kunani taught me to raise my head and voice and maintain eye contact without fear when delivering solo poems before crowds. He coached me to be expressive and catchy. I nailed the competitions and won awards both in school and church.

Overtime, these attributes shaped my vibrant personality. My parents, who are both primary school teachers at public institutions, cultivated the best in me and encouraged my three siblings and I to reach for the stars. Overall, I was above average in school and worked hard. My childhood dream was to become a flying doctor. After high school, I joined the University of Kabianga to study a Bachelor’s in Environmental Health, a field that focuses on multi-disciplinary preventative health.

Before graduating, my best friend and I set up a small food enterprise to earn some income during a compulsory

unpaid government internship. The enterprise did very well, and we gained practical tips for running a small business. During the internship, I rotated in various public health departments in the County of Busia, while landing short-term data collection jobs in the field of water and sanitation. In no time, I attended my first interview for a paid Internship at the USAID Kenya Integrated Water and Sanitation Project, and landed the position.

After three months, I was a county specialist in the same organization. I was 23 and felt clueless and very intimidated to work with government officials. However, I was intentional about learning and doing, and had immense support from everyone around me. My interactions in the field were immeasurably fulfilling and fed my purpose for sustainable development impact. This experience catapulted my fully funded Commonwealth scholarship at the University of Glasgow to study a Master of Public Health, and gave me mentors who have been instrumental in my career growth.

Undertaking a master’s abroad was challenging, but expanded my academic perspective immensely. For instance, the academic writing skills I acquired from my dissertation enabled me to package my fellowship application better. I always say that I am a product of people who gave me chances in spaces I felt were ahead of me, and hope to do the same when I have the capacity.

As I continue to write my story, I remain steadfast in my resolve to meet my purpose, and hope that God will keep me healthy and strong.

### Challenges at work

Initially, I found it challenging to adapt to an unfamiliar subject area. Being aware of this before I started the fellowship helped me to embrace everything as a learning process, even though I knew it may be uncomfortable. I also struggled to adjust with the turnaround time of task completion, but learned that not everything is a tick-box, but rather a process made from an interplay of numerous factors.

### My fellowship journey

In the beginning, Crisis Bureau felt like swimming in uncharted waters, but it turned out to be a mash-up of firsts with an amazing team. My previous professional experience was awash with field experience at the enterprise and household levels, whereas I am currently at the HQ.

Among other things, I coordinate SURGE workshops where UNDP staff are trained to support country offices during crisis. Sitting at the Crisis Academy, I have enjoyed learning the crisis language across the six current academies and found a complementary experience that continues to enrich my career in the development world. At a time when the world is reeling from COVID-19, conflicts and climate change, being at the Crisis Bureau is an experience that is feeding my curiosity.

### A proud moment

I was proud to co-lead the development of the Multi-stakeholder Nexus Essentials Course for the Nexus Academy with a colleague based in Geneva. Being my first fellowship assignment, I was thrilled to work with a young person with matching zeal and work ethic. Our co-creation sessions were energy-filled and always productive.



### Hopes and dreams

I aspire to be an expert who will contribute to changing the narrative around development finance in Africa and beyond. I strongly believe that we can fully leverage on existing institutions to fund our developmental agendas and create a better future for our children to thrive. At a personal level, I hope to live a day at a time by embracing what life has to offer. In a world that is constantly inclined towards figuring out the next big thing, I hope that I will never forget to revel in the joys present in every breathing day.

### A letter to myself

I know of a girl from Burnt Forest, Kenya, who was never afraid to step up. Her determination was acquired from the mother, while the smile and gentleness were her father's. Some days she woke up with concrete plans, other days she felt confused. Either way, this girl was aware that growth is a process that only makes sense when there is patience. The girl would occasionally look back and marvel at the journey she has covered. That girl — Elsie Too — only chased the skies.



### Three favourite things

1. Working out consistently in the gym on weekdays helps me to maintain a routine and keep my mental and physical health in check.
2. I love to cycle. I did a challenge with our head of team in September 2022, where I covered 63 kilometres at a record speed of 20.4 km/hr.



3. Watching superhero movies awakes my inner child and excites me in ways that I hope aging will never alter. I admire the depth of creativity and watch them repetitively. DC characters are my favourite.



*To me, Ubuntu simply means humanity. It is being humane and having the ability to show humanity to yourself and others.*

# ESTHER BANSAH

**FROM:** GHANA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP REGIONAL HUB, TURKEY

## My experience so far

I have been based in the Istanbul Regional Hub for the past seven months. Istanbul is such a beautiful, vibrant city, with so much history. What stands out the most for me is the opportunity to work with a multicultural team, diversely talented and impressive by all standards in an area that I am passionate about, namely inclusive growth.

## My story

As a child, when anyone asked me what I wanted to be, I would quickly reply: a professor! At other times, I wanted to be a mathematician. Of course, my answer changed every time according to my newest interest or preference, which is not surprising for any child.

This trajectory continued somewhat. I studied economics, geography, maths and French in high school, then went on to major in statistics and economics at university, and somehow became a finance analyst with an accounting qualification. I seemed to be going round in circles. These circles got more complicated as the days went by. I began to think of myself as a “Jack of all trades and a master of none”.

When I had an epiphany that I would be better off working

directly to help people, I felt like I was jumping into yet another trade. However, after much soul searching, studies and talking to several experienced professionals and course advisors, I came to the realization that every background was relevant in its right to helping people, if that is what you wish. You could have a background in politics, diplomacy, linguistics, security or even quantum physics and still contribute meaningfully to humanity and development.

I have by no means fully discovered myself, nor do I know what I will be tomorrow. But instead of considering myself as the disparaging Jack of all trades, I would rather say that I am a continuous learner. Or even better, I offer myself a complimentary version of being a “Jack of all trades, master of none – but oftentimes better than a master of one”. I look forward to tomorrow, becoming a better version of myself, and to keep learning and mastering a new skill as always.

## Challenges at work

The main challenge I encounter in my work is imposter syndrome. I tend to second guess myself because I have no prior experience in development. This takes a toll on my ability to deliver on tasks and diminishes my accomplishments, as I view them to be inadequate. I have, however, learnt to overcome these feelings of self-doubt through meditating

and self-reassurance. I have also taken to the act of asking for feedback from my colleagues and supervisor. Finally, I took a course on a structured approach to problem-solving, which has given me a fresh perspective on how to channel past knowledge and experience to solve problems.

## My fellowship journey

One of the recurring lessons I have learnt in this fellowship journey is the lesson on resilience. Resilience in the face of grief, resilience in the face of adversity, and resilience in the face of self-doubt. From the personal loss I experienced right before the fellowship, to navigating bureaucracy and settling in a new country, to finding my place in a new field, I was reminded of the need to ask for support and help and accept it graciously when it comes. For me, the AfYWL Fellowship represents a launch-pad for understanding development and delving deeper into innovative finance tools that contribute to achieving the SDGs, and particularly, in the areas of reduction of poverty and inequality.



## My favourite African proverb

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” This African proverb, quoted by Chinua Achebe in his “Art of Fiction” interview in 1994, can be interpreted in several ways. The one that stands out the most for me is the need for non-dominant groups to tell their own stories if they are to overturn power structures.

Until lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter

## A proud moment

I am most proud of my personal growth: from being a shy and introverted person, to challenging myself to do things I was previously uncomfortable with and afraid of.

## Hopes and dreams

For myself, I hope to realize my full potential and not let fear be a hindrance to being my authentic self and achieving my dreams. For my future daughters, and all girls in Africa: I hope you live in a world where your gender and skin colour are not a disadvantage to you.

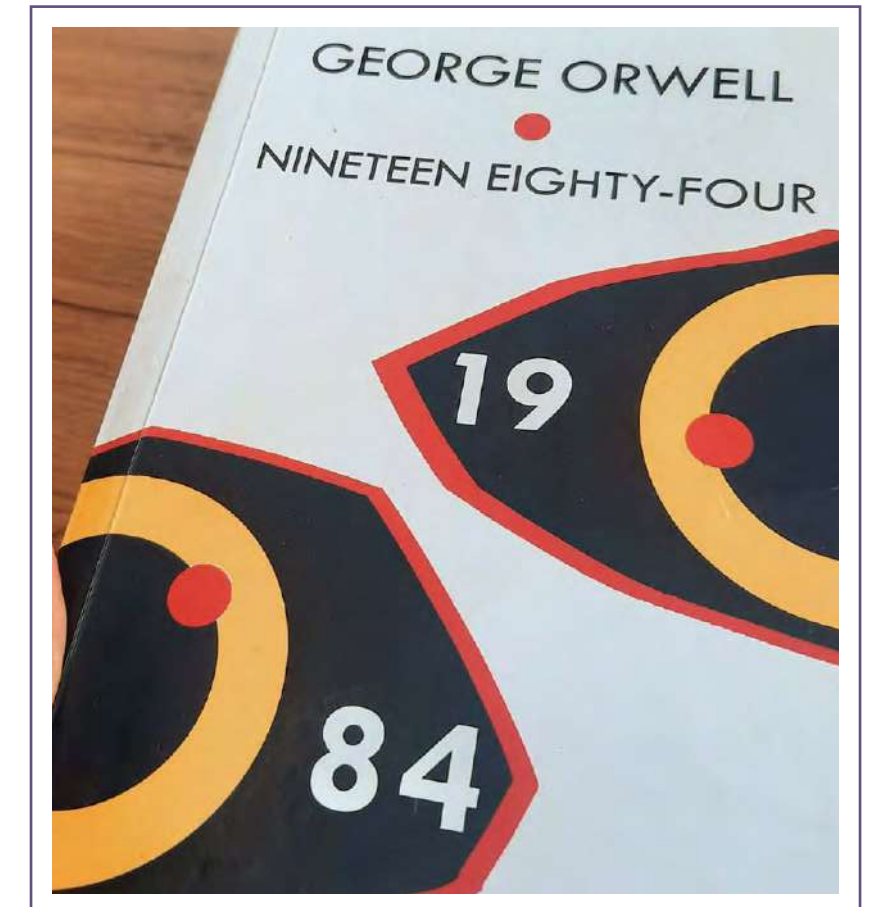
## A letter to myself

Dear younger me,

It is difficult to think what you would have wanted me to talk about specifically, since I am you, and at the same time, I am also not. So here is a piece of advice I think you will need. You are not a superwoman because you don't need help, but because you have incredible abilities to do things. Do not be shy to ask questions, that is how you will learn and change the world around you. Do not feel like you need to follow what everybody else does to experience a sense of belonging. Keep having an opinion. You are off to a great start.

## Three favourite things

1. Family. My family is an integral part of my identity and the closest ties I have. They keep me centred and offer me a place of constant security and unconditional love. Through them, I have been able to go through the most disastrous times. They have also been the centre of my best times.
2. The Bible. As a Christian, the Bible has served as a source of wisdom, encouragement and comfort in the different stages of my life.
3. Books. With books I have gone around the world and back. They have opened my world to imagination, ideas and endless possibilities.





*To me, Ubuntu signifies togetherness and the ability to sacrifice one's own needs for the sake of others and the sake of a common goal.*

# ESTHER MPAGALILE

**FROM:** TANZANIA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP REGIONAL SERVICE CENTRE FOR AFRICA, ETHIOPIA

## My experience so far

I have been in Addis Ababa since March 2022, and it has been an incredible experience. It is a privilege to be in the political capital of Africa, and in a country that is full of culture, hope and love.

## My story

Born in the United Kingdom and raised in Tanzania, I believe my journey to internationalism was set in stone long before my existence. From the age of one to 12, I lived in a small town in Tanzania, where I formed a connection with my beautiful culture and traditions that I carry with me 'til this day. Not long after my 12th birthday, my family and I moved to Italy, where I stayed for seven years before moving once more to England, Ghana, and now Ethiopia as an AfYWL Fellow. Throughout my journey, I have evolved with my identity as a young, African woman in a foreign environment. This has brought endless lessons and opportunities, as 12 years later, I am confidently growing to be a strong African young woman leader.

My educational experience has been one of privilege, underpinned by hard work, discipline and support from friends and family. After finishing my primary education

in Tanzania, I began my secondary education in Italy and pursued my higher education in England. With no breaks in between, I have grown to become a lover of academia and a curious student of life, passionate about economic development and unlocking the potential of African youth.

Driving back home from a parent-teacher conference in 2016, I asked my parents to name the one subject they think I should take in high school. On the count of three, answers came in at once: economics, biology and music. With much to discuss and five years later, I was graduating with an MSc in Emerging Economies and International Development. Now, my goals include equipping myself to become a strong development economist for Africa, by pioneering impactful research and tools for policymakers within the public and social sectors.

With a part of my story in mind, I say to you, my fellow sister, look within yourself. The problems that you think you might have the answers for are inside of you. Do not look to the left or the right, but believe and trust in what is already within in you. Do not be afraid to ask for help. This is not a sign of weakness, but shows that you are wise enough to recognize the goodness of those around you.

## Challenges at work

The main challenge I face in my work is the expectation that one should be able to bear everything and walk gracefully, regardless of how rocky the road may be. This is highlighted by the notion that the ability to withstand pain is strength, which is debatable. I have learnt to stand strong and overcome this challenge by being aware of my environment, clearly communicating my competencies and most importantly, looking at every challenge as an opportunity for growth.

## *My fellowship journey*

This fellowship has taken me out of my comfort zone in a way that I have never experienced. The biggest lesson I've learnt is the power of a shared vision. Working on the Inclusive Growth Team, where over 10 different nationalities, cultures and academic backgrounds are represented, I have learnt that human differences should never be a challenge when the passion for sustainable development is the north star.

Additionally, this fellowship has fast-tracked my career development by providing opportunities to learn, contribute and display my talents within a supportive and encouraging environment. Beyond living in a country outside my own, I have been able to connect with a multitude of individuals who have committed their lives to achieving the aspirations set for by our global development agenda. For this and more, I will be forever grateful.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is “Elfu huanzia moja”, which is Swahili for “A thousand begins with one”. I picked it because it highlights the importance of small beginnings and discipline when aiming to achieve big dreams and goals.

## A proud moment

In this fellowship, I am most proud of being part of the management of the first cohort of 25 UNDP volunteers working towards the creation of new data that maps Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063.

## Hopes and dreams

For myself: I hope to remain grounded in my goals and fervent to realize the Africa We Want. May the longing to offer myself — ubuntu — be with me wherever I go. For my future daughters: I hope you will never set a limit to what you can achieve, even if the world hints otherwise. Always remember that “there is no failure except in no longer trying”. For all girls in Africa: You are walking behind trailblazers who have paved the way for your success. Simply continue from where they left off, and pursue your dreams with gratitude, wisdom and determination.

## A letter to myself

Dear Esther,

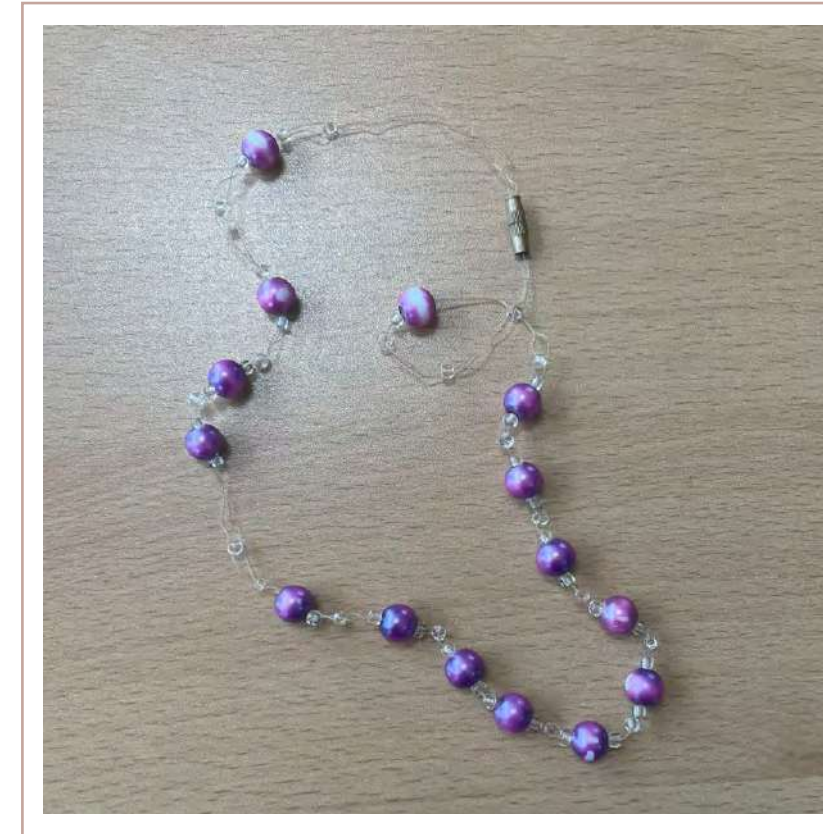
I'm so proud of you. Who knew that a small girl from Morogoro, Tanzania, would start a career at the United Nations at the age of 23? As you continue this journey in international development, remember that there is time to grow, learn and achieve everything you want.

Do not be distracted by the negative but use every opportunity to shine a light of positivity and optimism. Remember that Africa is a continent full of wealth, power and hope, so be part of the story that brings that to life.

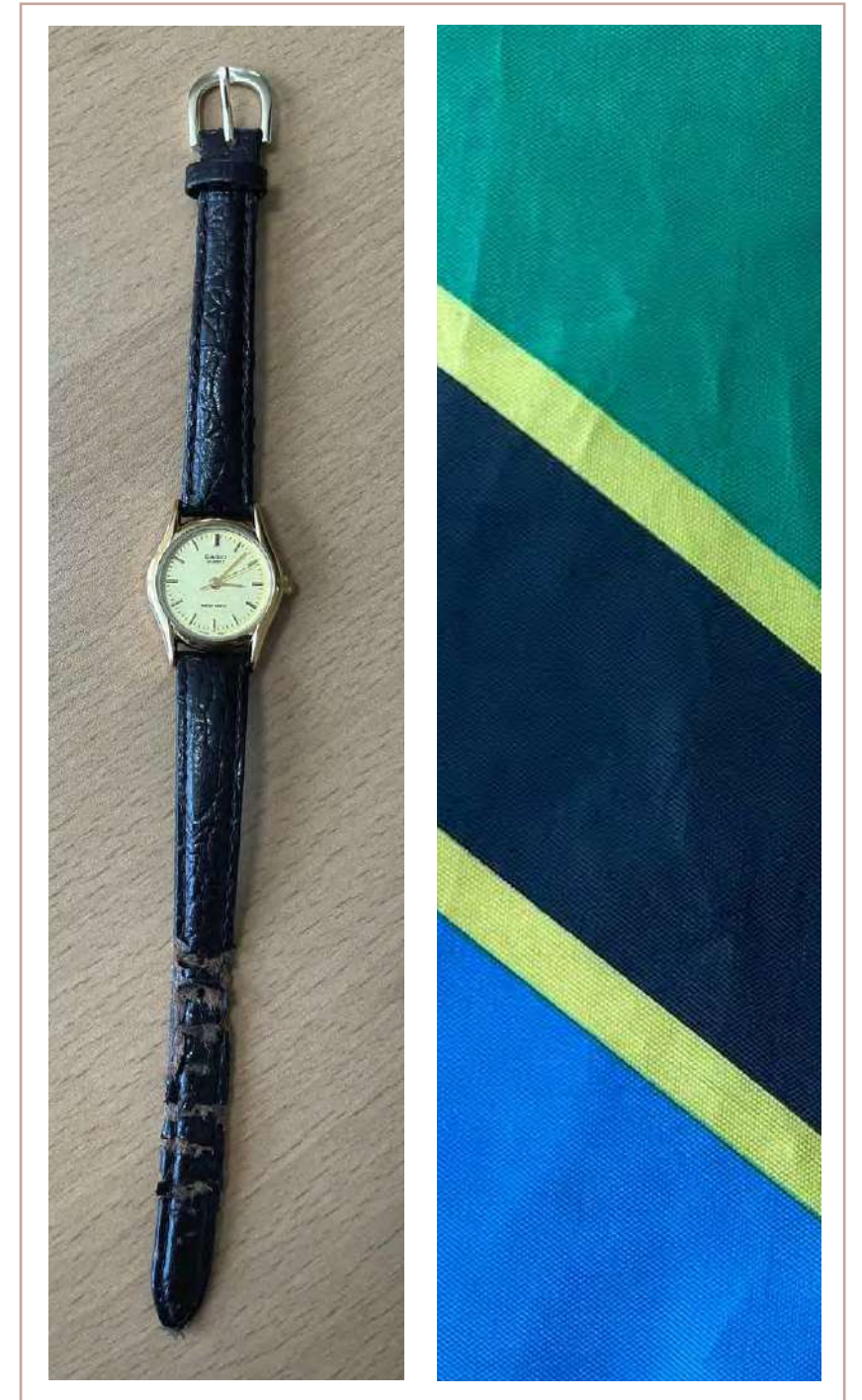
Finally, let Matthew 6:33 be your north star.

## Three favourite things

1. Necklace given to me by my grandmother during my confirmation. The necklace has transparent and purple beads, which symbolize the importance of being open and regal, respectively. This necklace reminds me to carry myself with integrity wherever I go.



2. Watch given to me by my mother as a gift for finishing school. This now stands as a symbol to pursue learning and continue down the path that celebrates the achievements of others.



3. The Tanzanian flag, reminding me to carry my country with pride everywhere I go.



*To me, Ubuntu means unity. Not just unity in terms of togetherness, but unity that is birthed from being intentional about building relationships and developing deep care for each other.*

# FRANCHESCA BERU

**FROM:** ZIMBABWE | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP CABO VERDE

## My experience so far

I am stationed in Cabo Verde, in the capital – Praia. Cabo Verde is an archipelago consisting of nine inhabited islands. I reside on the island of Santiago. What I love most are the beautiful, warm and fun-loving people.

## My story

Receiving the final email informing me that I had been selected for the fellowship and assigned to Cabo Verde was an overwhelming experience. Waiting almost seven months for the final letter was an anxiety-filled experience, so receiving the letter was somewhat surreal. I was at home alone and had just finished my private, loud and crazy praise-and-worship sessions. When I saw the letter, I started jumping and just thanking God.

My journey has been full of hill-top highs and valley-low moments, but I can trace back and see all the ways God has carried me. I was born and raised in the bustling capital of Zimbabwe — Harare. I come from a multicultural family, and growing up, I was always exposed to new environments and people. My family moved a lot. I went to three primary schools and two secondary schools, as my mother was always looking to improve the quality of my

education. Meeting new people and making new connections was something I had to learn fast. I guess this explains why I'm so friendly; sometimes to my own detriment.

As a teenager, I fell in love with sciences, particularly chemistry. I went on to study towards a Bachelor of Chemistry and Biochemistry at Rhodes University in South Africa. After my undergraduate studies and working in the private sector for two years, I received a scholarship to study my Master's in Environmental Sciences in Russia. I packed my bags and moved to the colder, northern latitudes on a whirlwind memorable adventure. Thereafter, I worked for a global health, safety and environment firm. Although I enjoyed my work, my desire was always to transition to international development and work on environment and climate projects. I wanted to use my scientific knowledge and love for chemistry and biology to help save the planet.

Now I find myself at the UNDP in Cabo Verde, and I am forever grateful for every season that led me here. I am motivated more than ever to believe in the power of my dreams and to go after them ruthlessly, but also remembering to trust and believe that "God will fulfil His purpose for me" (my favourite Bible verse, Psalm 138.8). I want to encourage every African woman to keep believing and striving for better. To keep reaching for new heights and becoming their best selves. As the saying goes, "It's

not about what we attain, but who we become and what we can contribute”.



### Challenges at work

My main challenge at my duty station has been the language barrier. Most people in Cabo Verde speak Portuguese and Creole, so it can be difficult to catch all concepts when attending meetings or workshops where English is not the main language. To overcome this, I started attending Portuguese classes at the Portuguese Cultural Centre. These have been a tremendous help.

### My fellowship journey

My fellowship journey has taught me to be resilient, and that I can and will get through anything as long as I rely on God and put one foot in front of the other. This realization has made me more excited for the future and what's to come. I am facing the future knowing that I will overcome any obstacles that may come my way. I am more adventurous when considering future prospects, as I am excited to venture to new locations. In the near future, I am hoping to take

up new roles in different countries. This fellowship helped realize that there is so much to gain both personally and professionally from living and working in unfamiliar places and spaces.

### My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is a Zulu proverb: “When a home is burnt down the rebuilt home is more beautiful”. This proverb resonates with me, because I have been through quite a few setbacks and lost things and people who were dear to me, and have had times where I lost all hope. Through it all I have witnessed and continue to see and believe that God is rebuilding me into my most beautiful self.

### A proud moment

The achievement I am most proud of is making it into this fellowship programme and having the courage to move to an island I knew very little about, and carving out a life here. I have always wanted to work in development, and contributing to the work of UNDP has been such a rewarding experience.



### Hopes and dreams

My hopes for myself are that I continue to grow in wisdom and character, and be a woman who radiates, kindness, compassion and love. I wish to continue working towards scaling up energy access and in climate action. My dream for my future daughter and my sisters in Africa is that they would always believe that they are on this earth for a purpose. My dream for them is to always get back up and dust themselves off when they fail. As the Bible says, “A just man may fall seven times, but he rises again”. My dream is for all African women to find out what they really want for their lives and not what society dictates they should desire, and once they have found that, to align their words and actions to achieve it.



### A letter to myself

Dear Future Me,

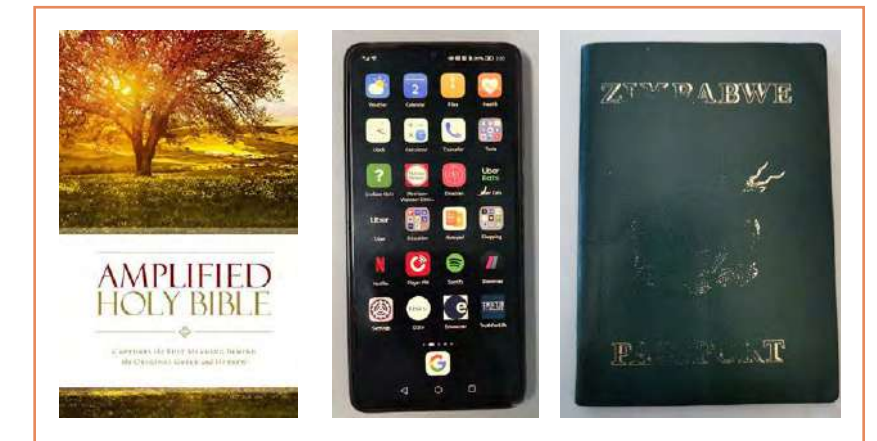
I am proud of how far you have come from the year of my writing this letter — 2022. I know you are out there, being

an amazing, vibrant person, and I know you have not let go of your faith in God and your love for people.

I am certain that you have kept your word to yourself and have grown in wisdom and character and as an African woman leader. I am proud that you have lifted other African young women along with you, and that you have been a voice for the marginalized and under-resourced.

### Three favourite things

1. My Bible. When I turned 16, I decided I wanted to know more about God and my Christian faith. One thing that has been vital to the person I am today is reading my bible. It is my place that I can run to for wisdom, guidance, and comfort.



2. My phone. Besides keeping me connected to those I love, my phone has been my greatest learning tool. I enjoy learning about everything and anything and I love listening to podcasts.

3. My Passport. My only explanation is I love travelling and this little book has allowed me to visit many places. You can tell from how worn out it is in this picture.



*To me, Ubuntu is a spirit. Looking after each other as humans with kindness, acceptance, tolerance, fairness and equality of all, regardless of gender, race or social status.*

# GHADIR RAGHNI

**FROM:** MOROCCO | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP TUNISIA

## My experience so far

Tunisia is a beautiful country. The human side of people and their warmth makes this place feel like home. Tunisia is not very far from Morocco, which made it easier for me to bring my dog, Wave, with me. My team in the office is very supportive, especially my supervisor, who always finds time to listen to me and advise me career-wise despite her packed schedule.



## My story

Ghadir is an identity in progress. I am what I was in the past, what I am today and what I will be tomorrow. I am what's been given to me from culture to language, education and values transmitted by my family and school. I am also what I have criticized and decided to drop or change in my personality. I am all of my relationships, both the healthy and the toxic ones. I am this body that carries me around and makes me suffer at times. I am my dreams and my most intimate thoughts. I am this skin that some choose to identify me with.

Life blessed me with an amazing, loving and caring family. My parents made my brother Houssam, my sister Oulaya and I their priority. My mother always says: "In a world where you can be anything, just be kind". Mom is my biggest inspiration. She is the real definition of love and sacrifice.

My father's life has always been about mountains, hiking and bikes. So, we grew up between the beautiful Atlas mountains, camping and wandering barefoot in forests and beaches. I can still feel the morning sun kissing my skin, hear the birds sing and smell my father's delicious tea and eggs with thyme.

My grandfather, Haj Omar, my closest friend and soulmate – who is probably watching me from the skies right now and is hopefully proud of me – used to tell me: “You are a flower that shines in the sun. You are a free bird who will fly high and that knows no borders. You are one who wants and can, just like me.” He was right. I saw myself in him just as much as he saw himself in me. He is the first person who came to my mind when I received my AfYWL acceptance email, and I dedicate this experience to him.



I love my Moroccan culture and its colours. A culture that puts family first. A culture where we eat together at lunchtime and the whole family gathers around couscous on Fridays at my grandparents’ house. My grandmother never went to school or studied music, but her beautiful voice and rhythms still resonate in my mind and give me the energy I need in my lowest times.

These are hints from a young African woman’s story.

### Challenges at work

Joining a UN agency as a young professional can be intimidating at times. The idea of letting my team down or not living up to my supervisor’s expectations makes me anxious.

To overcome this challenge, I have decided to open up to my supervisor and colleagues about things I don’t understand, ask for their guidance and try to learn as much as I can. With the support and encouragement of my team and my determination, I was able to transform my anxiety into curiosity and a big appetite for learning.

### My fellowship journey

My experience has been enriching in so many ways. It taught me a lot of things about myself, but also about my continent and the world. Things I might have been naïve about and that I am now able to see with constructive, critical eyes. It gave me a seat at the table to express myself and carry some unheard voices, but it also equipped me with concrete ways to implement the change I want to see in myself, my community, my continent and the world.

My main discovery would be that as different as we might seem, with our diverse shapes and forms, skin colours, languages and religions, backgrounds and cultures, in the end, we are similar in the most beautiful ways. This ranges from the most obvious ways, namely being African, young, women and leaders, to the deepest ones, such as our struggles, challenges and vision for our continent.

### My favourite African proverb

My favourite African proverb would be:

إِذَا خِيَابَتِ دَابَّاتُ تَزْيَانِ

or “Ila Khyabet daba tezyan” (in Moroccan darija-Arabic). This can be translated as: “After the rain comes the rainbow”. I love this saying, because it says a lot about the positive attitude of African people and our faith, and it also gives hope for a brighter future.

### A proud moment

I am proud of myself for being alive with a healthy mind and body. I have been through difficult times that made me lose hope. However, these things made me the strong and determined woman I am today. A woman who’s invested in becoming a better version of herself and who’s determined to help and support other women and youth in whatever ways she can. I am also very proud for making it into this amazing fellowship.

### Hopes and dreams

I dream of a future where we will all be equal and not stigmatized because of our skin colour, language, body shape and gender. A world where we focus on what unites us rather than our differences, because diversity is humanity’s most beautiful feature. Women in Africa and the Arab world have been oppressed and marginalized enough. Their beautiful voices, vision and potential have been turned down long enough. It is time we create a safe space for them and give them a fair chance to shine and lead the world.



### A letter to myself

Dear strong and persistent Ghadir,  
Look at you! Where you are standing and what you are achieving right now. I am so proud of the woman you are and the person you are becoming. You are making your way through after everything you have suffered. You are now someone that people look up to, who inspires them and who draws a smile to their faces. You are a free woman. Free from judgments, toxicity and stress. After feeling stuck in one place, you finally found your way out! You are booking flights and sleeping at airports again! Travelling the world and doing a job that gives your life meaning. You are beautiful, you are kind, and you are passionate. Listen to your heart and follow your gut feeling.  
Now is your time to shine!  
I love you.  
Sincerely,  
You

### Three favourite things



1. My support system: My family, my godmother, my dog and my friends. They give sense to my life, they believe in me and continue to teach me how to love and how to be loved. Wave is not only my dog and companion. She is my daughter and saviour.
2. My passport: its pages carry more than visas and stamps. They carry my stories, memories and experiences.
3. Surfing and CrossFit. These activities are equal to therapy for me. When I practice them, I disconnect completely from the outside world and connect with myself.



*In my country Ubuntu is the name of a game of hopscotch. The goal is to enter the circle of the other participants. Thus, to me, Ubuntu means to see oneself in others, to put oneself in their place.*

# GLORIA KPINSOTON

**FROM:** BENIN | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP GABON

## My experience so far

So far I have had an amazing experience in my duty station Gabon. I feel that I am useful, and I am learning a lot from a professional point of view. Gabon is also a country with beautiful landscapes.

## My story

At the age of 10, my father and I made a stop to greet a friend of his who was working at one of the international institutions in Cotonou, Benin. I can't describe the feeling of joy I had sitting right at the reception desk of the institution. On the way back to the car, I told my father that when I grow up, I will work in such a structure. Nine years later, another friend of my father's came to visit me where I was studying in another country. He told me that he was working for an international organization, so I asked him how to get there. He replied that I am on the right track and working to graduate.

My mother is a retired social worker. She worked for women's empowerment and took care of social cases in the rural areas, where she served with grants from development partners. I knew from very early on about the benefits of development aid.

My educational path is not a straight line. One must always keep one's goals in mind, despite difficulties. One can achieve one's goals and still be a sweet and accomplished woman at the same time. I've learned that being an introvert doesn't mean you're shy and doesn't prevent you from making an impact. I am amazed to be in front of learners, sharing my knowledge. The satisfaction of seeing them evolve in their learning is very gratifying.

Not having forgotten my dream as a little girl, I experienced deep joy when I saw the email announcing my selection for the fellowship, working to contribute to sustainable development.

I can't talk about myself without mentioning my best friend, the one who is always there for me: the Lord. The Lord is my strength. I am able to set an example for my younger brothers and make my parents proud. I come from a modest family, but my family has always accompanied and supported me in my choices and my studies. The joy I felt in their eyes when I announced my selection for the fellowship is part of my motivation.

## Challenges at work

For me, the main challenges are in the follow-up of the administrative tasks with collaborators and in the context of the long UNDP procedures. With a little empathy and patience, I can better follow the tasks with my colleagues and understand the importance of the procedures.

### *My fellowship journey*

This fellowship revealed to me my leadership skills, even though I am an introvert. Indeed, in my interactions with partners, I found that I was doing well, and my supervisor had good feedback. One of many examples was an occasion where I participated, alone from UNDP, with government partners in a mission that examined weather stations along the coastal zone of the country, as part of the response to climate change.

At the beginning, I was wondering how to behave in front of all these men — being a woman and the youngest. Despite the difficulties we experienced during the mission, my supervisor had good feedback on my conduct and management.

I always wanted to understand how an international institution works and the fellowship has been a gateway in this regard. I have also been able to create a network of experts and young women in my area of interest.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is “sáls lágm kòabgá tì kùri ké báké” in Mossi, a Burkina Faso language. The French translation is “cent glissades n’empêchent pas la tortue d’entrer dans la mare”. I picked it because the meaning of the proverb, “one hundred slips do not prevent the turtle from entering the pond”, reflects my determination. Despite my obstacles, I achieved one of my life’s goals, namely to work for an international institution like the United Nations.

Sáls lágm  
Kòabgá tì  
kùri ké báké

## A proud moment

I am proud to have successfully defended my doctoral thesis. It was a long journey of four years, but I made it. I wrote a research project based on the results of my master’s with the support of my supervisor. Then I submitted the project to a funding call, and my project was selected. Later, it was necessary to look for complementary financing and a laboratory equipped for the analyses.



## Hopes and dreams

For myself: I hope to become the sweet and accomplished woman I dream of, and from a professional point of view, to continue working so that we can leave a healthy environment for our children.

For my future daughter(s): I hope my daughter will understand that she is unique and that she needs to be the best version of herself. Also, that she shouldn’t be hard on herself, like her mother was.

For all girls in Africa: I dream of a world in which girls in Africa don’t have to choose between being married or pursuing her education or her career.

## A letter to myself

Dear younger me,

You have to enjoy the present moment, because every moment counts and is an important piece of the puzzle of your story. You must be determined to fight for your goals and be patient. In fact, it is often the last key of the bunch that opens the door. Keep your faith: faith is the assurance of what we hope for, and the certainty of what we do not see. You must always dare, so as not to miss any opportunity. You will feel a sense of satisfaction when you see the young woman you have become.



*To me, Ubuntu means 'African greatness'. Africa is so diverse in terms of language, culture, food and so much more. However, we Africans have one voice that unites us all.*

# GLORIA NYANG'IYE

**FROM:** KENYA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP MALAWI

## My experience so far

I have been enjoying working at UNDP Malawi as a communications analyst. I am passionate about digital communications, and this opportunity has widened my scope on digital storytelling about development projects.

## My story

If somebody told 13-year-old Gloria that she would one day be among the top 40 fellows out of the 5,254 applicants who applied for the second cohort of the AfYWL Fellowship Programme, she would have never believed it.

When I think back to where I was, where I am now and where I want to be, I continue to evolve in each season I go through. From a young age, my parents taught me and my siblings that life is like a racetrack, however, everyone is in their own lane of life. This advice reminds me constantly to focus on my own journey and avoid comparing myself to others.

Something that most people don't know about me is that I was the only black girl in my secondary school from 2006 to 2009. In 2006, my family moved to England for three years, as required by my dad's job assignment. This was

the beginning of an interesting trajectory in my life. In those three years, I quickly matured mentally and emotionally, especially as a result of the challenges I faced with certain students and teachers. That experience gave me a renewed perspective on life, which contributed significantly to my drive and determination to always try my best in everything I do.

On 28 August 2022, my dad forwarded me a message from his high school alumni WhatsApp group. It read "Call for applications: second cohort of the AfYWL Fellowship Programme", along with the candidate requirements, the deadline date and a link to apply. I took a leap of faith, not knowing where my feet would land.

Six months later, I was having dinner on a Friday night while watching TV when I got a phone call from an unknown number at 19:12. I answered calls from unknown numbers because I was job hunting and did not want to miss a single opportunity.

I answered the call, not knowing that it was Partnership Coordination Specialist, Sophia Abra, announcing the acceptance of my application to the AfYWL Fellowship. At that exact moment, I experienced a mixture of shock, gratitude, confusion and excitement. Everything moved

so fast because I had less than 48 hours to be in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for the one-week induction and, after that, be deployed to Lilongwe, Malawi, for 12 months.

## Challenges at work

My AfYWL journey has been an ebb and flow of wins and lessons. Living and working in another country miles away from home took some getting used to, and the first three months were an adjustment period for me.

At times, the homesickness affected my motivation at the office, but I have overcome that challenge by seeking strength from God, family and friends. I am a firm believer in the fact that hard work pays off. As the saying goes, “Nothing worth having comes easy”.

I also carve out time to focus on myself. I believe it is essential to take care of your physical, mental and spiritual health.

## My fellowship journey

Being part of the AfYWL Fellowship is not only a great career opportunity; it is a calling to make a positive difference in the lives of other people. During my time at UNDP Malawi, I have had the privilege of interacting with people of different ages and backgrounds. I have been inspired by the innovative ideas, motivation and drive these people have shown in their pursuit of success.

At the end of the programme, the next step is for me to use the skills I have acquired to tell more stories about development through digital communications. I am especially passionate about African storytelling. I want to empower people in local communities to tell their own stories on digital platforms, without the need for Western media to tell their stories using a biased angle.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is, “He who refuses to obey cannot command”. This deeply resonates with my values, because a leader may have great leadership qualities, however, they should be humble enough to submit to authority in other contexts. This proverb also resonates with the “humanness” aspect of the Zulu word “ubuntu”.

He who refuses  
to obey cannot  
command.  
- Kenyan Proverb

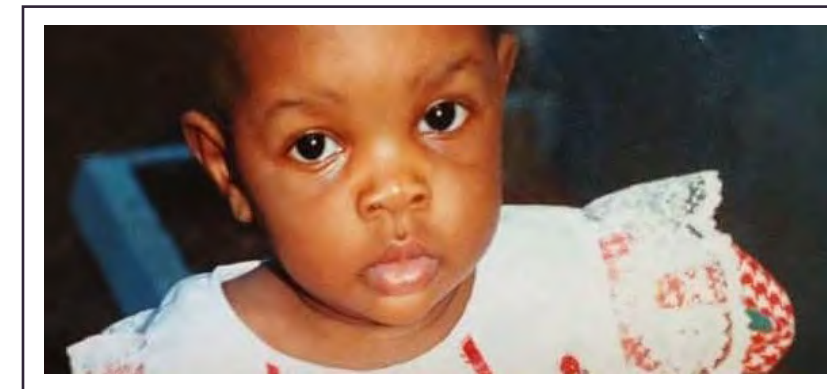
## A proud moment

My proudest life achievement so far is qualifying to be in the second cohort of the AfYWL Fellowship Programme. The application process was vigorous, and I have a deep sense of gratitude knowing that I am one of 38 young African women who have so much zeal, passion and drive.



## Hopes and dreams

I hope for continued peace of mind in every aspect of my life, because whenever things are falling apart on the outside, I seek to be centered on the inside. I desire the same for my future daughter. I pray that she will be God-fearing and sure of herself. Record-breaking Kenyan marathon runner, Eliud Kipchoge, famously said, “No human is limited”. This is the attitude that I wish for all girls in Africa. With passion, determination and sacrifice, African girls are capable of achieving great things.



## A letter to myself

Dear Gloria,

You are 13 years old, and you feel lost, insecure and not “cool” or pretty enough. If you could meet yourself at 26 years old, you would be in awe. You have overcome all the challenges that you thought would destroy you.

You’re currently spending so much time worrying about what could go wrong, instead of trusting God for what could potentially go right. Even though certain things aren’t working out for you right now, the lessons you’re going to learn from this season of your life will still apply 13 years later.

You’re going to experience even more challenges on your journey to the age of 26, but every time life knocks you down, you will bounce back stronger and wiser than before.

## Three favourite things

1. My Bible. I got my Bible on Sunday, 12 April 2009, and it is my most prized possession. The word of God guides my steps and protects me, and I do my best to maintain a close relationship with God.



2. My family. I love my family deeply, and I am so grateful for my parents who have set a good foundation for my siblings and I to thrive. Additionally, my siblings are the most genuine and loyal friends I have.



3. Sunsets. They are beautiful to look at and they give me a feeling of calmness. This beautiful golden hour moment was captured on the way to a field mission in Blantyre, Malawi.



*To me, Ubuntu means putting selfish desires away and forming a spirit of togetherness to achieve a common objective.*

# GRACE VANDERPUYE

**FROM:** GHANA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP RWANDA

## My experience so far

I have been working with the UNDP country office in Rwanda since the beginning of April 2022. In Rwanda, I get to see and feel the resilience and strong will of the people of Rwanda. At a time when Africa seems to have a crisis in leadership, Rwanda stands out as exemplary and has re-energized my spirit. Based on what I see here, I have great hope for the continent of Africa.

## My story

My name is Grace Djanma-Aki Vanderpuye. Born on a rainy day in a country which was the first in sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence from colonial rule, I always believed — even at a young age — that there was more to life than living and dying when one's time is up. I come from a family of four, which includes my father, mother, my big sister and myself. I have always desired to be a key player in formulating policies that address poverty and inequality. This interest led me to studying political science for my undergraduate and public policy for my graduate studies.

I call myself The Game Changer. One of my favourite subjects in middle school was social studies. An aspect of this subject which amused and heightened my interest was history. I was very excited to learn about Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen mother of the Ejisu Kingdom of the Ashanti Region of Ghana. She fought for her kingdom when the men were afraid to. I saw in her a woman who, although she did not win the war and was later exiled, changed the game. This motivated me to change the status quo wherever I find myself.

As a child, my happiest moments were when I was invited to recite a poem at events. I always looked forward to mentoring and inspiring younger women, and I am glad this is my current reality.

## Challenges at work

Over the past few months at work, when I get burnt out, I take long walks while listening to a podcast.

## My fellowship journey

The African Young Women Leaders (AfYWL) Fellowship Programme has taught me the importance of being open to learning. I watch colleagues who are ahead of me career-wise, and see how open they are to learning and self-improvement. This inspires me to become the best version of myself. A key thing I have learnt is that although one may not be prepared or have knowledge about certain tasks, it is important to see these tasks as opportunities to learn and make one's mark.

This fellowship has given me the opportunity to contribute to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 1 which is the focus of my mission. I also have access to an array of networks, which I believe would propel my career in the field of sustainable development.

## My favourite African proverb

"Tikoro nkc agyina" is an Akan proverb from my motherland Ghana. It means: "One head does not go to the council". The meaning of this proverb enhances my understanding of what ubuntu means to me personally.

Tikoro nkc agyina  
"One head does not go to  
the council"

## A proud moment

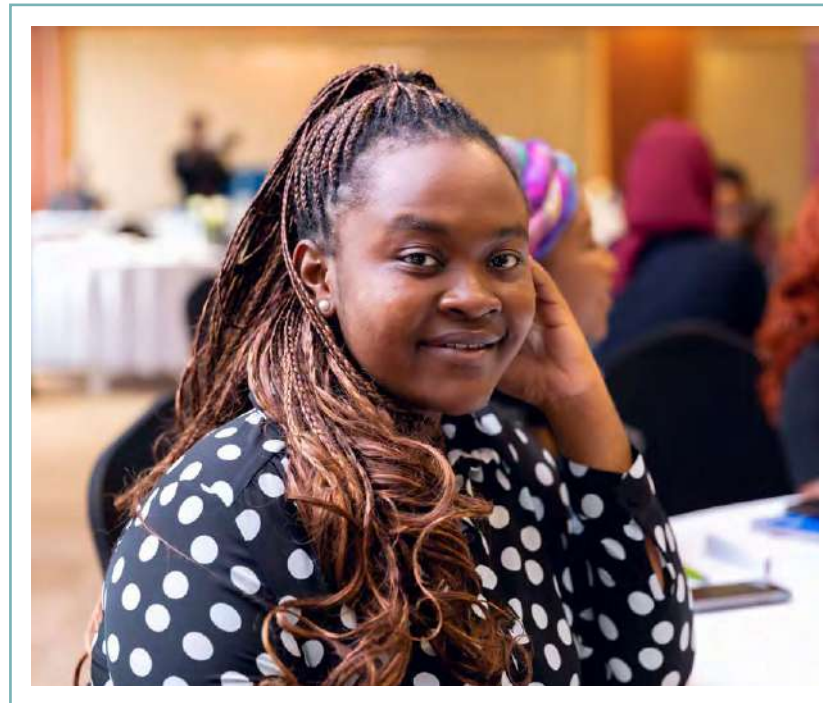
I am most proud of applying for UNDP's Greening the Blue Initiative and being awarded a \$42,000 grant,

which the Rwanda Country Office used to buy an electric vehicle. I was given a significant opportunity and responsibility to apply for this competitive funding, which I successfully delivered.

## Hopes and dreams

My dreams and aspirations for the future is one where I find myself in a society devoid of any obstacles against women and girls. A future where I can mentor younger women to become the best versions of themselves and influence policies and programmes on the continent of Africa.

My hopes and dreams for my daughters is a future where they will not be scared to dream big and be ambitious. A future where they will be safe from any form of harm. My hopes and dreams for all girls in Africa is one where girls and women would take decisions concerning their lives and wellbeing, and find themselves in leadership positions where they will serve as examples to generations after them.



## A letter to myself

A message to my future self is: "Even when the going gets tough, stay consistent. Believe that the God who brought you this far will not forsake you. You are going to meet some obstacles on this road of life, do not be perturbed. Keep your eyes focused on the goal".



## Three favourite things

Faith, family and friends are three things that are of special significance to me. Throughout my life, my unwavering faith in God has kept me even when all hope seemed to have been lost. My family and friends have always been there to support me in every way possible.

I am excited about what the future holds for me and young African women on the continent.



*To me, Ubuntu means humanity. Humanity is one of the values that drives my life as a leader. We only have one life, and I have decided to put mine at the service of humanity.*

# INES DJONZO

**FROM:** CAMEROON | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP REPUBLIC OF GUINEA

## My experience so far

There's a Guinean adage that says that Guinea does not attract, but it retains. The people are warm and caring. My colleagues integrated me easily and were there for me when I was sick, when I was looking for a house, and every morning to take me to the office and bring me home in the evening.

## My story

I was born a princess, I grew up like a queen, but life made me become a warrior — and in each of my fights, I learned how to be a winner. The story of my life is one built on faith and resilience. A divine walk with God as my instructor.

I was born in the North-West region of Cameroon. I grew up a bright girl, always first in her class. For a long time, I believed that being a winner meant always being the best. In my second year of university, I took a national exam, and everyone thought I would be the first. When the results came out, I was neither the first, nor the second, nor the third... but the fourth. Despite a good grade, I thought I had failed. One of the biggest lessons of my life is that winning does not always mean being the best, but rather giving the best of ourselves in everything we are

intended to do. And yes, I had given the best of myself for this exam, so I had won. Since then, I have called myself “Ines Winner”, and I give my best in everything I do.

I hold an MBA degree in International Business Management, obtained in China. I am committed to fighting violence against women and girls, and to help advance their rights in society. I also want to build the next generation of young leaders: ambitious, resilient, strong and committed to the development of our continent. Africa would develop a thousand times better if we included our young talents in this process, and gave them the kind of opportunities I had access to as part of this prestigious programme.

I have authored two books, and my mission is to inspire, encourage and motivate millions of people to fulfil their destinies by divine principles through my “Inspired by Winner” programme.

My model of a strong African woman is my big sister, Stephanie. She inspires me in many ways. She is a devoted, faithful and loyal wife, an incredible sister, a worthy daughter of Africa, and a hardworking and virtuous woman. She has gone through many health challenges, but she got up and continues to believe in God. She inspires other women with cancer to move forward.

I want every woman who reads this story to understand that every battle she lives now is a bridge to fulfilling her destiny: to rise up like a warrior, win her battles, and inspire the world like my sister.

## Challenges at work

The challenges I encounter at work are mainly due to my shyness. I find it difficult to approach people, especially to ask for feedback. For this, I work a lot on myself, and make an effort to approach my colleagues to find out what needs to be improved. Another challenge is networking. I now make an effort to approach people who can help me in my destiny and to whom I can also be of help. When we evolve in an environment like ours, we have to surpass ourselves.

## My fellowship journey

This fellowship is for me: the right opportunity at the right time. I spent three difficult days at the airport on my way to the induction in Addis Ababa. It taught me to understand that when you know you are on the right track, you have to persevere despite difficulties. This gave me a clear vision of the future, of what I want to become, and how to proceed to get there. The leaders I met and listened to during my fellowship allowed me to understand that dreams do come true. You have to believe in them, be curious and learn continuously in this world which is constantly changing. Above all, you have to remain honest and faithful to your values.

## A proud moment

What I am most proud of today is to be in the final process of publishing my second book, which deals with violence against women. It is a project that is close to my heart, and it makes me happy to know that I will contribute to the fight against violence against women and girls.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is: "It takes a village to raise a child". This has a special meaning for me; the education of a child is not limited to the level of the parents. Thinking of ubuntu, which for me means humanity, we must all come together to contribute to the prosperity of Africa.

*"It takes a village to raise a child"*

## Hopes and dreams

For me: I hope to inspire millions of people, and especially women, through the programmes and projects that I will put in place. I hope that my life and actions will serve humanitarian causes.

For my future daughter: I hope she will do better than me to bring her stone to the building of the world. I hope she will remain authentic in this world that continually tries to change us.

For all girls in Africa: I hope that they each find their purpose in life, and for them to know that they are queens and never let anyone make them believe otherwise.

## A letter to myself

To my present self:  
Dear me,

I know everything you have been through helped to make you the woman you are today. I don't know what will happen in the future. So, I want to talk to the ongoing woman, the one who has managed to stand out among more than five thousand applications... Your devotion to humanity



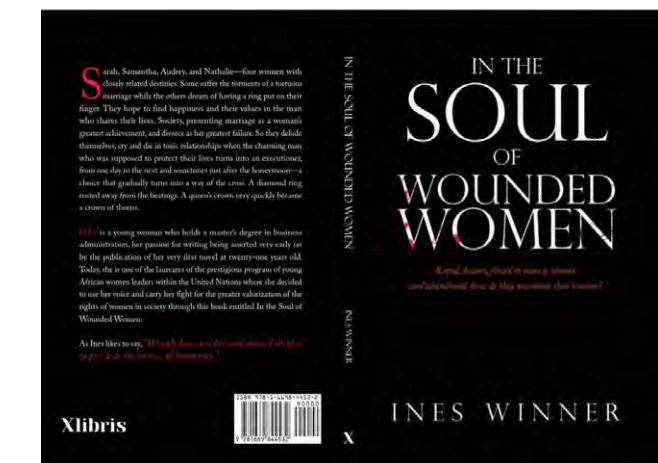
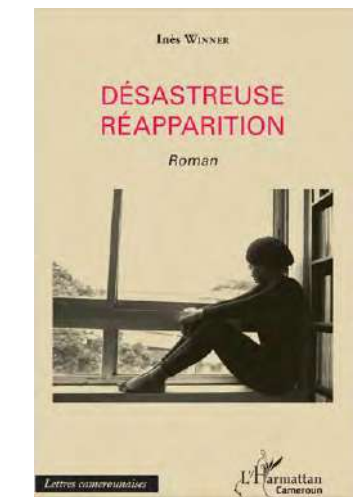
and justice challenges me, the woman you are on a daily basis and who, despite the challenges, keeps her authentic heart, fascinates me. I wish you, my dear, to proudly fulfil your destiny, and that God makes possible all these beautiful dreams that are growing in you. You deserve it and you deserve all the beauty this life has to offer, because beings like you are very rare. You are a priceless gift of God to humanity.

With lots of love,  
Ines Winner

## Three favourite things

My Bible: It represents the word of God, and is a way for me to remember his promises for my life. Every night, I open it and it occupies a special place in my bed by my side. It is a protection for me.

My books: Writing has been my first passion since I was a teenager. Looking at my books reminds me that dreams do come true if you have the courage to pursue them.





*To me, Ubuntu means a moral obligation of duty to the welfare of others in a sense of a shared mutuality. It means to be human, and how we, as humans, should behave towards others.*

# JEMIMA ERASTO

**FROM:** TANZANIA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP GHANA

## My experience so far

It's been exciting to be new in a place, to push myself out of my comfort zone and to meet new people. Every day is a learning day, and I like that. I am working with a diverse group of people. The programmes are very interesting, and I get to contribute to fantastic work. Ghanaian food is still a challenge, but I've learnt to adapt.

## My story

When I was in primary school, I was subjected to a lot of bullying. This stirred in me the thought of pursuing a career in law so I could help others who had been victimized in similar ways. That never materialized, but I am confident that my desire to serve people started from this experience.

From a young age, I understood that I enjoyed helping people. It started from a very personal level, where I would just help my siblings to do something and that filled me with joy and contentment. Throughout my journey, I have had people who have really invested in my growth — from family, friends and mentors to strangers. My upbringing has had a significant impact on who I am and who I am becoming.

I think I have been very fortunate to have learnt from a very young age the joy of serving people. That realization defined and shaped the course of my life. As a young woman, it has not always been easy to be seen as capable and equal to my peers. Because of that, I have taken interest in working with women and youth who are often left out of the development agenda.

My vision for the future is of a continent where everyone has equal access to resources, opportunities and the basics of life. Africa is such a rich continent; it does not make any sense to have people live below the poverty line. So, I imagine a day when there is equality in all aspects of life, and everyone benefits from the wealth that is available.

Knowing that I can make a difference and help those who are less privileged motivates me the most. Every day, I wake up knowing that I can help people, make an impact, and add value in a meaningful way because of my experiences and skills. That drives me to do more and be more for my continent.

One of the most significant events in my life was the death of a person very close to me. The loss altered my life in numerous ways, both positive and negative. Another highlight was receiving my master's degree.

This, I believe, was a confirmation of what I wanted to do with my life. And it felt like a defining moment for me in the career path I wanted to take. I am grateful for these moments because they brought me here.

## Challenges at work

One of the challenges I have encountered is fitting in and finding my place within the teams. People already have well-defined roles and projects they are working on, and it has been hard for me to find a project I could work on and take ownership of from start to finish in a meaningful way. To overcome this, I have built personal relationships with team members, and communicated my interests openly. I have also demonstrated my skills, made myself available and I stay open to support whenever the team needs an extra brain. I have also been very proactive in learning about what other team members are working on and I see now that they involve me more.

## My fellowship journey

This journey has taught me a lot of things, including the importance of self-awareness. It has really opened my eyes to who I am as a person and a leader, and also who I do not want to become. Being in a country office really shows you the work that you do on the ground. And for me, seeing the contribution I make and the impact I create among local communities, young people like myself and women entrepreneurs has truly affirmed the career path I am taking.

I can really apply my skills to build sustainable impact. It has opened my eyes to the riches of the continent and showed me that even though as countries we are different, as people, we are all the same. The key things I have learnt are to be resilient and adaptive. To always know what I bring to the table, show up and to always do my best.



## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is “Kuishi ni dhamiri”. The proverb means that what makes a life worthwhile is having a purpose; an aim. This message resonates very much with this me, because having a purpose means I have something to wake up to everyday.

## A proud moment

I would say climbing Mount Kilimanjaro. The climb requires significant physical and mental preparation, determination and perseverance. Standing at 19,341 feet (5,895 meters) above sea level, Kilimanjaro is the highest peak in Africa and one of the most challenging mountains to climb. So, reaching the Uhuru Peak, the highest point on Kilimanjaro, is a momentous accomplishment.

The mindset required to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, such as determination, perseverance and resilience, can certainly be applied to everyday life and help us overcome challenges. By drawing on these experiences and lessons learned during the climb, I have managed to cultivate a mindset that helps me achieve goals and navigate difficult times with greater ease.

## Hopes and dreams

For myself: That through whatever I do, I get to always add value and create sustainable impact. That I always strive for equality, and use my voice and skills to bring positive change wherever I go.

For my future daughter(s): To know that she is enough and that she can do and be anything she wants. The world is her playground.

For all girls in Africa: That they see their potential and won't need external validation to be great people and change makers. I hope they know that there is enough for everyone; no need to be a gatekeeper of opportunities.

## A letter to myself

Dear future self,

My intention has always been to bolster you with all the love and support you need for the next chapter of your life. I hope that has helped you weather the storm in ways you never imagined possible, and that you continue to astound people with the boundless nature of your compassion for the world.

Don't regret a thing. Everything worked out exactly as it should. All the puzzle pieces fit; all the paths make sense. All the people were meant to be. All the successes and failures, and heartwarming and heartbreaking moments, were all worth it. No regrets.

You were, are, have been, and always will be yourself, and that's what matters above all. Don't lose track of what's important to you. I hope you continue to live a purposeful life, and beyond that, I hope you never forget to be grateful. You should be so very grateful. Keep going!

## Three favourite things

1. Traveling: I love traveling. Traveling is always a great idea. I am an avid learner, so traveling allows me to learn about cultures, meet new people and it exposes me to a lot of new things.

2. Journal: As an introvert, I always need a safe place to express myself, and journals have been that for me for as long as I can remember. I get to think and make sense of things by journaling.

3. A book: Books have always been my escape from reality. When I feel sad, down, or when I just need a new reality, books have been there. I can confidently say that I am an avid reader. Books have helped me expand my horizons and experience things beyond my reality. I strongly believe that writers are superheroes.





*Ubuntu is a life choice.  
Kindness, humility and  
compassion are a choice. You  
may think you're  
doing it for others, but you  
are the one who'll have a  
good night's sleep at the end  
of the day.*

# MAKEDA YESHANEH

**FROM:** ETHIOPIA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK

## My experience so far

I love my duty station, New York City, because it introduced me to new adventures and made me a stronger person.

## My story

When I received the email notifying me that I had been selected as a fellow, I had to double check that it was really intended for me. After checking for the hundredth time, I told myself that dreams do come true. It may not be the way you have planned, but somehow, somewhere it does happen.

At a young age, I aspired to become a lawyer to help defend those that have been treated unfairly, especially women. My knowledge of the legal field was very limited. I assumed it was appearing before court and citing laws and debate on whatever the dispute was. Once I joined law school, I had the opportunity to explore other areas of law, such as business law and international development (specifically sustainable development).

Once I completed my Bachelor of Laws degree, I knew I wanted a career in international development. It took me four years after completing my LLB to find that path

through the AfYWL Fellowship. I worked as an associate at two law offices that practice Ethiopian business law, did an LLM in Rule of Law and then worked as a liaison officer at the National Election Board of Ethiopia. It was not a straight path, but each step led me to this amazing fellowship.

At UNDP, working for the Bureau of Policy and Programme Support's governance and gender teams has been an exciting journey. I have worked as a facilitator, conducted research and analysis, helped organize workshops, engaged in discussions with donor countries, reviewed projects and so much more. There's also a project that focuses on women leadership that I am learning so much from. I have also realized that data and information are essential for planning and implementing projects. Having a team of people who are willing to help at any time is also great — which is what I have observed at UNDP. It is the collective effort towards progress and results.

At a personal level, the fellowship has bestowed on me a responsibility I bear to my fellow African sisters and brothers. I am here because I am from Africa and I am a woman, which means I represent a whole continent and I need to give it my all to prove myself and my Africa!

## Challenges at work

Although most of the colleagues I have come across have been amazing, I have seen some people not respect one's opinions or ideas. I used to take these things personally and it used to affect my work environment. Now, I have realized that when people look down on you, it reflects what they think of themselves and it's nothing personal towards you.



## My fellowship journey

The fellowship journey has taught me that we have a long way to go to achieve Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063, and to create a better world for everyone. Thus, devoting oneself to achieving those goals — not only as a career, but as a way of life — is vital. The minor decisions that we make in our daily lives (such as recycling, eating healthy, smiling to a stranger on the road) are all essential for our lives today and for future generations.

### My favourite African proverb

“He that beats the drum for the mad man to dance is no better than the mad man himself.” This quote reminds that we are responsible for not only what we do, but also how we react to and support others.

### A proud moment

Being selected for the AfYWL Fellowship Programme, a partnership between the African Union Commission and UNDP, has been a proud moment.

### Hopes and dreams

I hope to achieve success both in my career and personal life. On the work front, I want to dedicate myself to ensuring women and girls around the world have equal access to education and work opportunities. It is necessary to change social norms and to give women a greater decision-making role. At a personal level, I hope to lead a sustainable and eco-friendly life with respect to our planet and the future generation.



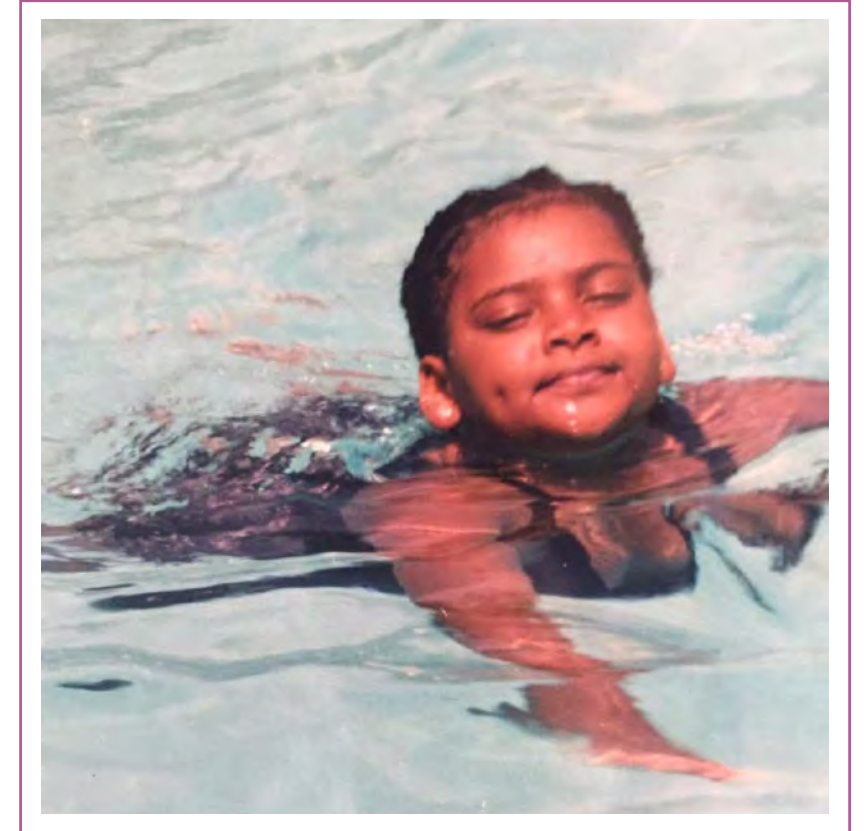
### A letter to myself

Dear younger self,

I just wanted you to know that the prayer we made and the extra effort we put in (both at school and work) are finally paying off. We still have a long way to go, but I have learned to enjoy the journey now — rather than seeking happiness of the unknown future. One thing remains the same though, we will work harder for a better tomorrow.

## Three favourite things

1. Reading books, especially biographies.
2. Swimming and running, for exercise and leisure.
3. Spending time with loved ones. It's great to have quality time with family and friends.





*Ubuntu means selflessness, togetherness, supportiveness and unity. It means always doing good to others, even when I am not being watched.*

# MERCY NYAMUTSWA

**FROM:** ZIMBABWE | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP THE GAMBIA

## My experience so far

I am stationed at the UNDP country office in The Gambia, also known as the smiling coast of Africa. I work under the ever-vibrant Governance Unit, which I joined in April 2022. It has been a truly amazing experience for me.

## My story

I am a loner. I love ice-cream! I studied law and took a great deal of interest in international human rights law and public international law courses. These courses made me realize that my passion is to work in the human rights and development fields.

Soon after graduation and after due registration with the High Court as a Legal Practitioner, I practiced the law and handled various criminal and civil law matters. I also worked at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, where I assisted with the implementation of statelessness and refugee-related activities.

I undertook a Master's degree in Constitutional Law and Human Rights to sharpen my skills in the human rights arena. Although this strengthened my passion for human rights, my thirst for development work went unquenched.

I then went on to enrol for a Master's degree in Human Rights, Peace and Development. This degree helped me to familiarize myself with broader aspects of the development field as well as the relationship between human rights, development, peace and security.

My goal is to become an international development and human rights expert involved in solving the world's development and human rights related issues. I aspire to see a better developed Africa with zero poverty, where there is an ultimate protection and promotion of human and peoples' rights.

The glass ceiling is said to be difficult to break. That is true, but it does not mean that it's not breakable. I see women breaking it every day. I am deeply motivated by other women (especially African women) who are occupying spaces and climbing that corporate ladder regardless of the patriarchal societies and backgrounds they come from. A disadvantaged background should never define who one becomes.

Being African or black is not a barrier to achieving one's dreams as an African woman. I always draw inspiration from Naomi Campbell, so elegant and successful, yet so black! Hard work pays off, but patience is always key. Young women should continue to empower themselves

through education and continuous professional development. I believe that anyone can occupy any space if they are determined.

## Challenges at work

Challenges are always there to make us stronger. What is this world without challenges? Having to work and learn at the same time (meaning having to step out of my comfort zone) proved to be challenging, but I have since learnt that I can never go wrong if I invested extra hours and extra effort. Nothing beats the joy of achieving things I never thought I would achieve. I also swear by the support I get from my colleagues; they have held my hand since day one and have taught me everything I know.

## My fellowship journey

The fellowship has taught me the importance of hard work, patience and the need to continuously develop myself. It further helped me get out of my comfort zone and made me realize that anything is doable if one puts their mind to it. I have met high-profile women who proved to me that the sky is not the limit and that the glass ceiling is breakable.

Equipped with both personal and professional skills, I am more than ready to contribute to the development of Africa and the world. The fellowship offered me a great networking opportunity, and most importantly, it has set a clear path for me to become an outstanding development and human rights expert.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is “Gudo guru peta muswe vadiki vakutye”. It means “As an older baboon, you must always keep your tail down so that the younger ones can respect you”. It teaches about humility and leadership. The proverb essentially means that you can still be a good leader

without making others feel inferior. The proverb resonates with me in that I aspire to be a selfless leader.

Gudo guru peta  
muswe kuti  
vadiki vakutye

## A proud moment

Being selected as one of the fellows out of thousands and thousands of applications is one of my most outstanding achievements. It paved the way to my much-aspired development career and has given me so much hope and assurance that anything is doable and achievable if I work hard.

## Hopes and dreams

My dream is to become an exceptional development and human rights expert who will help eradicate poverty and promote and advance human rights worldwide. I also aspire to be a prominent businesswoman. I wish for my future daughter to become whatever or whoever she wishes to be: the sky is never the limit.

Women in Africa should always push for the betterment of themselves. If they see something they want, they should go and get it because it's all doable and attainable. More importantly, women should lift each other up, a candle loses nothing by lighting another candle!

## A letter to myself

Dear younger me,

You are precious, never let anyone make you feel the opposite. Be kind to yourself, be kind with the words you say to yourself. Always remember that no one is perfect, perfection is an illusion!

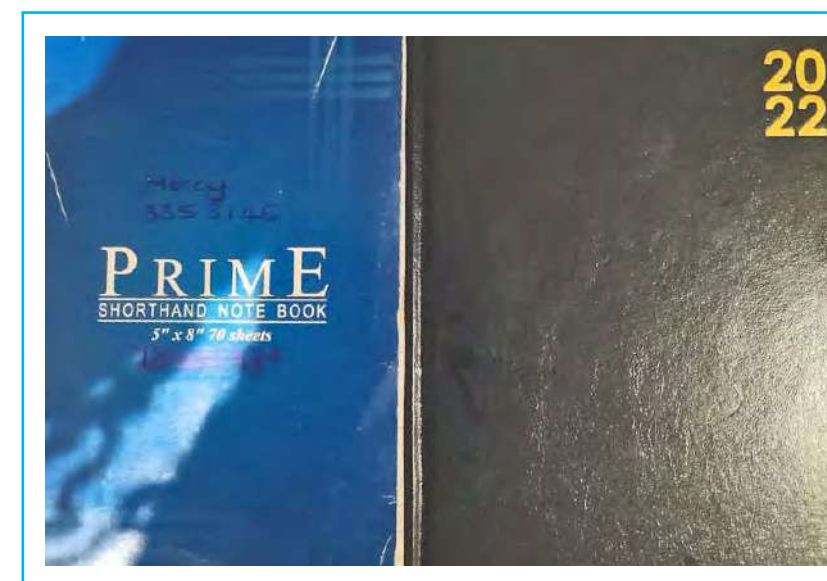
Dear Mercy,

Stop worrying about what people think about you. Stop blaming yourself for the mistakes you have made in the past, take lessons from them instead. Be authentic, patient and positive. Always be yourself, you are the best version there will always be.

Love yourself, always! And smile more, it's not the end of the world.

## Three favourite things

1. My diary and to-do list notepad. I swear by these two to help plan my day and week. These tools have helped me improve my time-management skills.



2. My string bag and cream. These remind me of the friends I have made during the fellowship, a big reminder that I should work even harder to be able to afford finer things in life.



3. A Gambian dish — superkanja, fufu and rice — taught me about adaptability and diversity.





*To me, Ubuntu means shifting our thinking and our actions from what is beneficial for us individually to what is beneficial for us all collectively. It means putting the wellbeing of others at the heart of any action.*

# MONA MOUSTAFA

**FROM:** EGYPT | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP LAO PDR

## My experience so far

This was the first time I've been exposed to life in an Asian country. Everything is completely different: the culture, the food, the weather and the architecture. People are warm, easy-going and friendly in general. Language can be a barrier, but there is always a way of communicating — even with only a smile! Learning about the history of the country, and how most Lao people have gone through the adversities of the Indochina war, has been eye-opening.

## My story

As a little girl, I had an inquisitive mind. I would ask questions about the environment, politics, history, human progress and our big home that we call Planet Earth. My family was very supportive and had high expectations of me. However, I struggled to define what I would like to do, because I was interested in so many areas.

I ended up pursuing a degree in English language and literature. A few months after graduation, I landed my first job in the government sector. From a societal point of view, this was a huge success. In the beginning, I was excited to start my professional journey, but after a while,

I knew this wasn't my purpose. During that time, I happily cofounded a local association that supports education, science and innovation. At that point, I articulated my passion as something that can help to inspire hope.

Then it was time to leave my job and the country to pursue a Master of Business Administration in the US. I was awarded a prestigious scholarship, recognizing the next generation of young female leaders. I interned with a local non-profit organization that supports immigrants and refugees. That experience also made me feel connected to my call.

Upon completing my degree and returning to Egypt, for the first time, I went through a season of unemployment. It was an uneasy time, but I knew I needed to do my part and trust the process. Then I was selected to be an African youth volunteer for a programme managed by the African Union. It was a life-changing experience, and my first time to be closely connected with my African identity. I had the opportunity to meet an amazing group of African youth from all over the continent. Moving forward, I was selected for the second cohort of the AfYWL Fellowship Programme.

Leading a purpose-driven life, the fulfilment of contributing to others' lives, acquiring knowledge and embracing a growth mindset are my "why". I have learnt that you don't

have to have it all figured out. You need to let yourself experience more. This is how you can learn about yourself and what you would like to do. Life's trajectory is not linear. It comes with setbacks and challenges. No matter how many times you fall, never give up on yourself and always keep pushing forward towards your life purpose. It is going to take time and energy. Be persistent, don't judge yourself on the journey, and don't expect instant results.

### Challenges at work

The first challenge for anyone who pursues an international career is to adjust to a new environment. Transitions, whether personally or professionally, come with uncertainty. I knew it was important to reflect on how best to navigate such a transition. I was cognisant of the fact that it would take time to settle in, and that I needed to understand the context first and embrace a beginner mindset. I ensured that I was proactive, in terms of approaching my colleagues, asking questions, and stretching my mind to build new expertise.

### My fellowship journey

This fellowship is another step in my pursuit of acquiring transformative life experiences. In retrospect, it has been an incredible roller-coaster challenge. Since day one, the journey has been challenging and stretching me in the most unexpected ways. However, one thing is certain; in the process, I am learning more about myself.

My resilience has been growing. I learnt to embrace my doubts, act in uncertainty and cope with disruptions. With every challenge, I needed to remind myself of my "why": of my passion for service and the joy the development work gives me. It isn't easy when you are positively growing, developing and expanding. Life feels exciting and yet challenging. The process may not always be streamlined, but is uplifting. It is a time for immersing myself in intensive learning and expanding my horizons.

### My favourite African proverb

**قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم  
"خير الناس أنفعهم للناس"**

Prophet Mohamed said, "The best of people are those who are most beneficial to people." I picked this teaching by Prophet Mohamed that really resonates with the meaning of public service. He emphasizes the message that one should be actively and sincerely involved in beneficial deeds for others. It means to have a positive influence and act in the best interests of other people.

### A proud moment

If a year ago anyone had asked me where I would be next year, my answer would never have been my current status! Since I started this fellowship, I have been learning a lot about myself and the fellows who have different backgrounds, and how we have bonded as a group, as well as about the UN, Africa and about the world and Asia.

### Hopes and dreams

I aspire to contribute to implementing interventions that effect change and disrupt the status quo to make it right for the next generation. To my little nieces and my future daughter, I wish for you to achieve anything you want in life. I wish you strength, courage and wisdom to face life's challenges. I wish you would read this one day and you know that I love you so much, and will forever be your number one supporter! What I wish for all girls in Africa is to believe in their dreams and to become everything they want to be. I wish for them to push their limits, and to fulfil their potential.



### A letter to myself

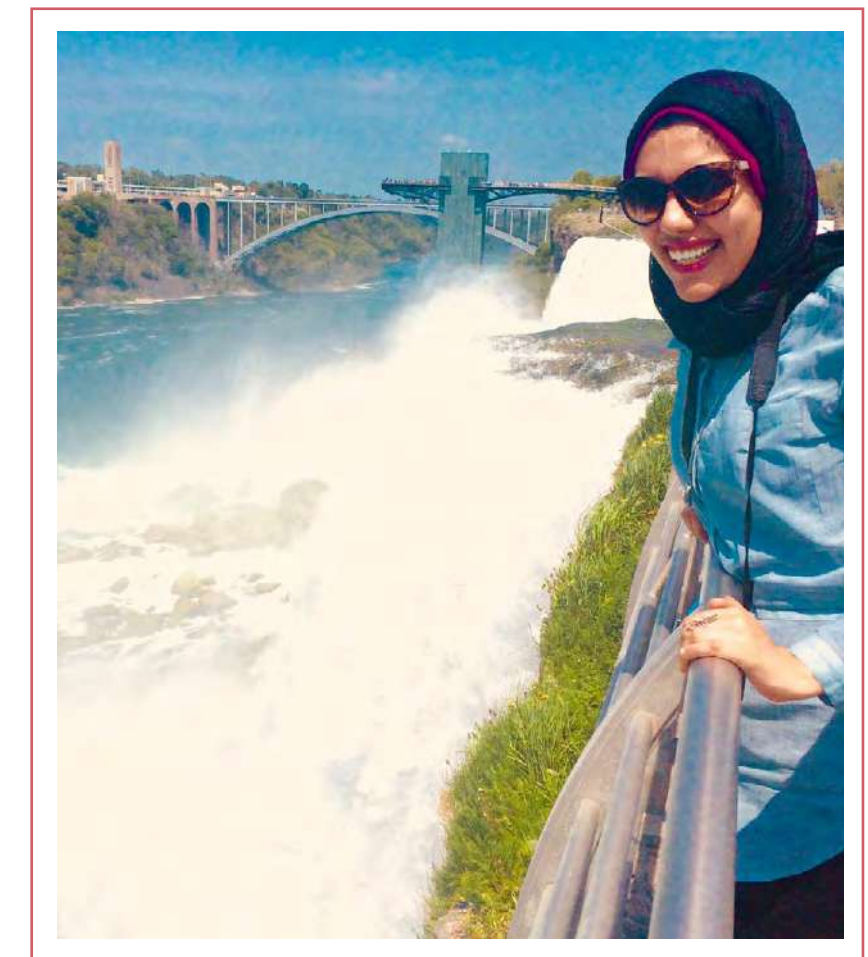
Dear younger me,

Be bold, be faithful and be persistent!

Don't let your doubts hold you back from stepping out boldly into the world. Choose faith instead of fear. Know that wherever you go, Allah (God) will be with you. You are never alone. Even when life takes a different turn, be faithful that it will make sense soon. Be true to yourself and whatever you are doing, listen to your inner voice and let it lead you. Focus on living fully in the present. Find gratitude for who you are today. Do your best, stay persistent and consistent. Don't rush the journey.

### Three favourite things

1. My passport case with the quote "Travel when in doubt". I love this quote, because it reminds me to push myself out of my comfort zone and allow myself to explore other possibilities. In many instances, this means going solo and very far away!
2. My AUYVC and Agaciro bracelets. Being an African youth volunteer linked me deeply to my African identity. Agaciro is the name of my cohort and is a Kinyarwanda word, which means dignity or self-worth.
3. My notebook. I love to reflect and capture daily thoughts and feelings.





*Ubuntu to me means,  
"I am because we are",  
because through interacting  
with other people, I have  
become conscious of my own  
being, my duties,  
responsibilities and  
privileges towards myself  
and other people.*

# MUMBE MWANGANGI

**FROM:** KENYA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP CAMEROON

## My experience so far

I am based at the Cameroon country office. You have to be here to experience it. I just love its cuisine, the authentic African food.

## My story

"Your name is Mumbe, right?" A colleague asked. He went on to explain that in Ngemba, a language spoken in the Southwest region of Cameroon, it means child of the chief. Something which surprises me is how my name has different meanings in different cultures across the continent. I am named after my grandmother. In my perspective, African names are not just signs but also symbols that encapsulate one's nature, as well as the intimate relationship between the namer and the named. In my community, the Akamba tribe of Kenya, Mumbe is used as an adjective that infers something is well made.

Identifying with my Kamba name and my Africanness implies freedom, which is a deeply religious transaction. Over time, through interacting with others, I have become conscious of my being, with a reflection of duties and privileges and responsibilities towards myself and other people. This has shaped me to be deeply concerned

with the issues affecting others. I also hold to the notion that life is a series of assignments, and this has propelled me to take tasks aligned with my interests.

Although I have a background in international relations, interacting with children from underserved backgrounds opened my eyes to the inequalities that exist in terms of access to quality education. Many children go to school every day, but they are unable to acquire basic literacy and numeracy competencies.

Drawing on research that has been done in this realm, I cofounded Nyansapo AI, which harnesses the revolutionary power of artificial intelligence to assess the literacy and numeracy competencies of primary school-going children. I also worked with various international non-governmental organizations, with leading roles in programme management.

Joining UNDP Cameroon as an African Young Women Leaders Fellow in April 2022 has been a great learning experience. Although my fellowship is centred on mainstreaming gender within UNDP operations, I have also had the opportunity to work on areas that I am passionate about, such as sports diplomacy, disaster risk reduction and digital development. My hopes for the future are to have a career which is centred on driving the development agenda, with a focus on gender

equality and innovation. I might not have all the answers right now, but I believe that these pieces somehow come together to build a better future.

## Challenges at work

I work on gender, which is a cross-cutting issue. This prompts me to collaborate with different teams. Additionally, the office is implementing the Gender Equality Seal, which has over 50 targets. Due to the fast-paced nature of this role, I have encountered challenges in prioritization. With time, I have adopted various techniques to improve prioritization and efficiency. I have learnt to identify what is important and urgent for my work. I am also building on being more flexible and adaptable. Knowing when to narrow down and ensure sustainable levels of demand and efficiency has brought a feeling of accomplishment in my day-to-day work.

## My fellowship journey

The memory of being selected for this fellowship invokes a sense of joy and happiness. During the application process, I somewhat struggled with imposter syndrome. I remember almost quitting during the application process, by downplaying my work with the assumption that other young women across the continent have accomplished bigger goals and would be selected for this position.

The fellowship has taught me that I am enough. Not enough to stop unlearning, learning and relearning, but enough to start putting my best forward to ensure that I achieve my wildest dreams.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is “Nzungi ya kuasa isungaa isyaisye isua”, meaning “A dancer from a far land dances with their eyes on the sun”. I picked it because I believe that as a young African woman, it is critical for me to be true to what I value and also be aware of how this shapes how I perceive the world. Directly translating the Kamba proverb, I perceive myself as a dancer where I have learnt and grown through my interactions with other people and assignments while at the same time being true to my inner self (sun) which is critical to my perspective of ubuntu.

Nzungi ya kuasa  
isungaa isyaisye  
isua

## A proud moment

Recognition by the African Union and European Union Digital for Development as being among the top 10 young women working to increase ICT for Development in Africa.

## Hopes and dreams

My hopes for the future is to have a happy and healthy life, which is centred on taking up assignments that make the lives of others better. For my future daughter, I hope for her to be true to her inner self and aim for the sky to reach her wildest dreams. For all girls in Africa, my hope is that they will be a dynamic force in revolutionizing things that are important to them.

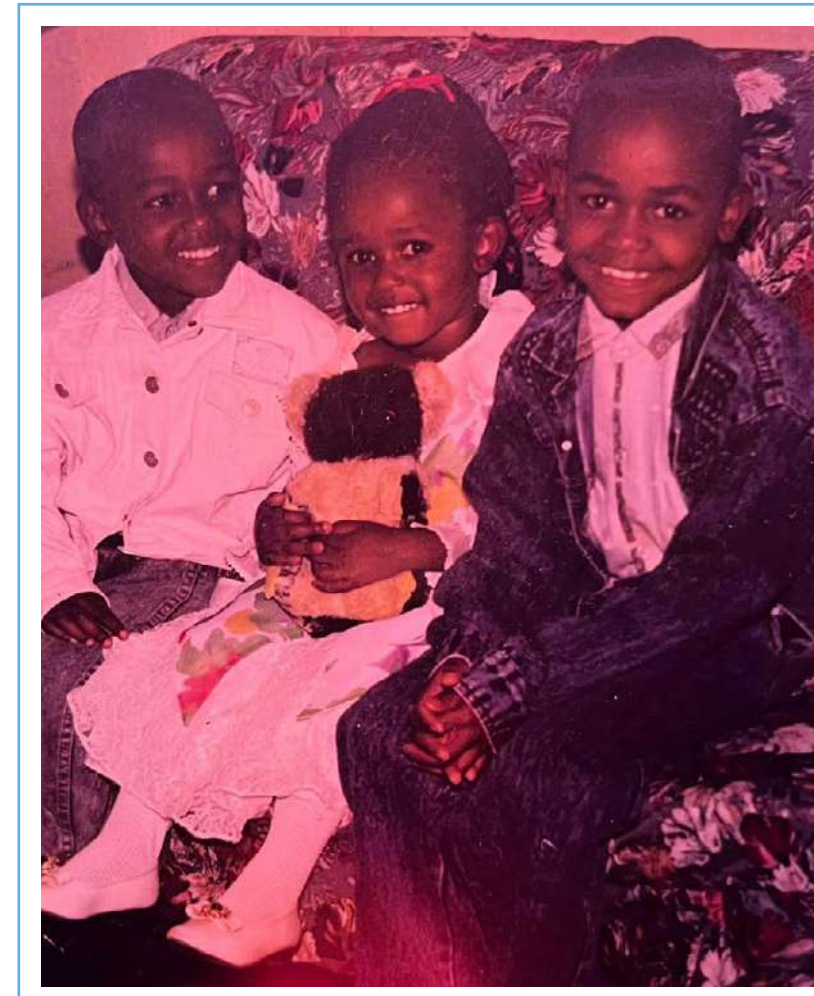
## A letter to myself

Letter to my younger self:

Everything eventually works out the way it was supposed to. Sometimes you might be inclined to feel sad or lost if things don't work out the way you thought they would. But if you make the effort to stay motivated along the path you started, the sky is your limit.

## Three favourite things

Memory 1: An old photo of my siblings and me, which represents something which brings happiness in my life.



Memory 2: A teacher implementing the Nyansapo Project, which represents a community of likeminded people and an innovative project that I previously worked on.



Memory 3: Wild fruit. This one is two-fold. It represents a future project I would like to work on as my community is often affected by food insecurity, and just having wild dreams.





*To me, Ubuntu means cooperation, solidarity, pan-Africanism, benevolence, togetherness.*

# NISRINE MBARKI

**FROM:** MOROCCO | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP NIGER

## My experience so far

I have been working in Niger for six months. While the security situation is sometimes complex, Nigerien people are really funny and I've had some great moments.

## My story

Thomas Sankara said: "You can't accomplish fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. In this case, it comes from non-conformism, from the courage to turn your back on old formulas, from the courage to invent the future. It took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with extreme clarity today. I want to be one of those madmen. We must invent the future." I think about this quote almost daily.

I grew up in Nice, in the south of France, surrounded by friends from the African, Arab, East and South European diasporas and raised by my mother in Moroccan Arab culture. I quickly became aware of the influence of the social environment on the physical and mental health of the people around me, which led me to grow up wondering how to fight against economic inequalities.

My studies in a preparatory class for the literary "Grandes écoles" were intense. I found myself in classes full of sleep-deprived students from privileged backgrounds competing against each other. This made me seriously question the school system. What kind of individuals and what kind of economies were schools building? What place was there for creativity and joy? These questions sparked my interest in alternative pedagogies and neuroscience. At the same time, my studies at Sciences Po Aix, Wellesley College and MIT allowed me to think about economic systems that are fairer for all. I found in the cooperative system a model that seems extremely promising.

My discovery of methodological holism, the post-colonial field of study, intersectional feminism, and interfaith dialogue has been crucial to the construction of my identity. For the past eight years, I have been involved in the fight against educational inequalities and racism, for the protection of the environment and for the valorization of African and Afro-diasporic cultural productions.

I have often been perceived as "not African enough", "not Arab enough", "not French enough" from all sides. Fortunately, I have always found incredible comfort in the arts, such as literature, painting and poetry. French rap, mostly carried out by the African diaspora, soothes

and motivates me tremendously. Art allows us to tie together eclectic identities to produce something harmonious, of which we can be proud, and to create a heritage.

Overcoming the obstacles placed in my path has been exhausting. Fortunately, while working at UNESCO, and through French associations supported by the African diaspora, I met wonderful, inspiring and caring women, who made me what I am today. I will forever be grateful to them.

## Challenges at work

Very little information is available online about Niger. When I arrived, I was not fully aware of the culture, the customs, the social organization, the taboos... In Niger, people take time to open up to others. Fortunately, Abiba, a Nigerien AfYWL fellow, helped me discover all these subtleties. For the past six months, we have been talking almost every day on WhatsApp. I am truly grateful to have met her. It is sometimes difficult to be heard as a young woman. I think that at times like this, you have to get closer to the people who are most receptive to innovative ideas and finding ways to implement them.



## My fellowship journey

This fellowship has been an incredible opportunity for me. I realized how necessary it is to constantly adapt one's mode of communication to the cultural contexts of each person. This experience also allowed me to realize all the potential for development in Niger and Africa. In the future, I would like to contribute to the empowerment of women and youth by focusing more on the importance of education and culture as a factor of economic development and fulfilment.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is "Pour qu'un enfant grandisse il faut tout un village" ("It takes a village to raise a child"). This proverb sheds light on the importance of a fulfilling environment, of cooperation and connection to allow growth. It also shows how important a holistic approach is in education. Learning is the result of an ecosystem of individuals.

## A proud moment

I'm proud of maintaining my honesty and integrity, and staying cheerful despite life's challenges.

## Hopes and dreams

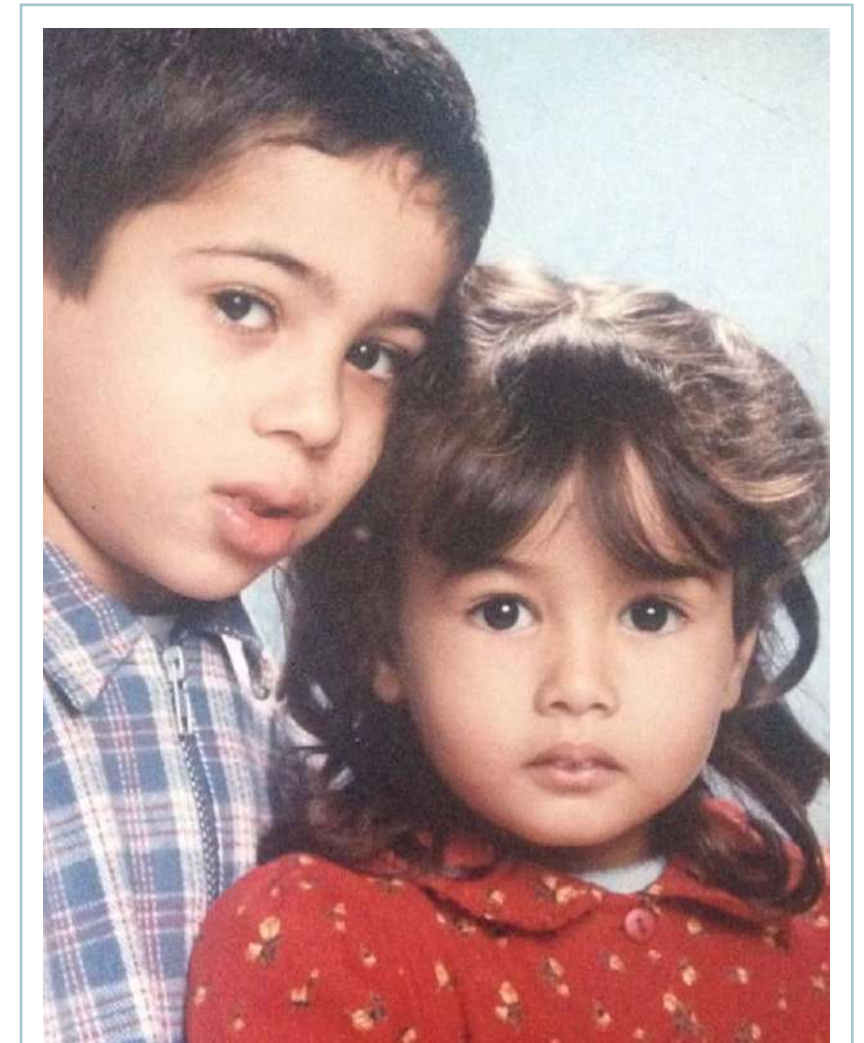
I wish myself rest, a house in Morocco, olive oil, the Mediterranean Sea, art, a vegetable garden, and lots of laughter. I wish myself many trips to African countries and new friendships.

To my daughters, as for all young girls in Africa, I wish them not to encounter the same obstacles as I did. I wish them ease, sisterhood, fulfilment. I wish that they could live in a lush environment; and that they would be at ease in their bodies and minds.

## A letter to myself

Dear younger Nisrine,

Thank you for enjoying the sun and the beach in Nice so much... and for your incredible friends. You left me with wonderful memories, which I remember when things aren't smooth. Thank you also for all your efforts. Without even realizing it, you are paving a wonderful path. Continue to always find the time and the means to do what you love. However, I would advise you not to waste your energy convincing people. Just lead by example as best you can. I love you and I'm proud of you.



## Three favourite things

1. A Palestinian dress that I bought near Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, when I was an au pair with an incredible Palestinian-American family.
2. A portrait of Zinedine Zidane: because he is the pride for the North African diaspora in France.
3. My notebooks: I write and draw, especially when I travel. My whole life is recorded in these notebooks. It's so good to read them again and see how everything can change in life.



*To me, Ubuntu simply means live and let others live. Treat people with the dignity we demand. For me, it is also the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity.*

# NTAMI EBORTY

**FROM:** NIGERIA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP REGIONAL SERVICE CENTRE FOR AFRICA, ETHIOPIA

## My experience so far

I love the cultural heritage of Addis. It offers an intersection point for Africans with different sets of traditions and values.

## My story

My name is Ntami Eborty, and I'm a proud Nigerian woman. Growing up in Nigeria in the 90s was fun. I remember sharing a room with my younger sister; our bed was often littered with toys. We had plenty of arguments, but had enough time to always talk about our dreams and aspirations, which kept changing with each passing year.

Through my teenage years, I remember collecting fashion magazines and wanting to become the next Naomi Campbell. Though I ended up studying law for my first degree, I don't think I fell too far off from also becoming a model. To this day, I remain a fashion enthusiast and my friends say the world is my runway. Who says I can't become all that I choose to be?

Just because I am famous in my circles, people are often surprised to find out that I could be shy and introverted. I really do love being by myself in my tiny space. It was on one of such occasions of introspection at my Abuja

home that I received the email that would change my life forever; that little kid who grew up with nothing but toys, hopes and aspirations had been selected for the AfYWL Fellowship Programme. Truly, dreams come true!

When I completed my MSc degree in Human Rights and Diplomacy, all I wished and prayed for were opportunities like these. Today, it feels like fate gave me a pat on the back. I hope to make nothing but a positive impact everywhere I find myself.

I need African women to understand they are bigger than the limitations that patriarchal African systems try to place on them. I need us to realize that in every room we find ourselves, we've earned it and our voices matter.

Growing up, my mom always taught me to never think little of myself, and to dispel self-doubt. These days, I just want to keep passing that message on to every girl child in Africa and beyond. This fellowship provides me an opportunity to make an impact on a great scale, and I will grab that with both hands. For Africa to succeed, we must raise and inspire the next generation to be greater. I dreamt of an opportunity, and I found one. Now, we must go on to provide even better opportunities for the ones coming after us.

## Challenges at work

Some of the challenges I face in my role as a fellow include language barriers and cultural differences, even among African nations. I often wish the African Union had a uniform currency for African nations, as that would help boost trade and commerce among member states.

To nip the language barrier problem in the bud, I'm taking classes in French. I am also trying to learn more about the cultures of other African nations, as this fellowship provides me with that opportunity.

## My fellowship journey

This fellowship has taught me the danger of a single story. Africa isn't a country, but a continent with rich cultural values. Sadly, I have also learnt that Africa is more divided than we think. Now, I see the cracks, and I am even more inspired to be part of the process of mending them.

I have interacted with Ethiopians in Addis Ababa who believe all Nigerians are criminals. Such notions divide us rather than unite us. In my interactions, I have realized that Africans don't know enough about Africa and don't travel enough within the continent.

To help connect the dots, I plan to establish cultural exchange programmes that will bridge the divide. This fellowship offers me a platform to research better and learn more from mentors and colleagues. This will better equip me for future assignments and projects.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is "Gidi gidi bu ugwu eze", which is Igbo for "Unity is strength". I picked it because it talks about the power of collaboration and working together towards a common goal. It reminds me of the importance of teamwork and further entrenches the ubuntu concept in my mind.

NOT EVERYONE WOULD LIKE  
YOU, FOCUS ON THE PEOPLE  
WHO DO!

## A proud moment

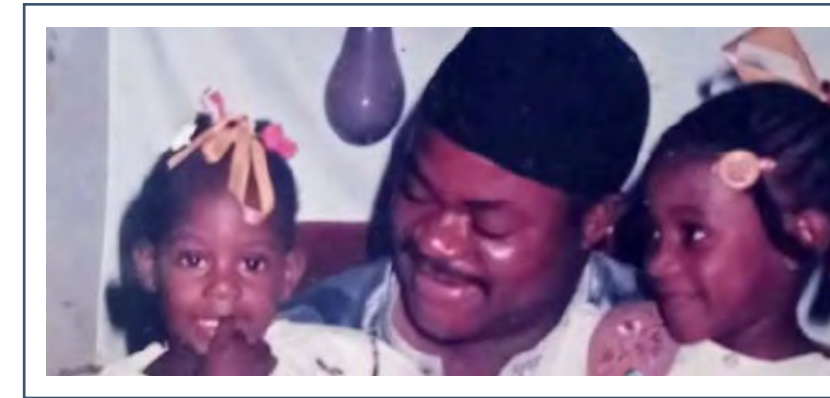
This has to be bagging my Master's of Science degree in Human Rights and Diplomacy in Scotland, far away from home, and at the height of a global pandemic.



## Hopes and dreams

I dream of a life where I will keep making positive contributions while building a better world for myself and my community. I hope that my daughters will take the mantle from me, and become even better women. I want to see them live freely in a world devoid of gender prejudices.

I hope and dream that all African girls will walk into any room with their heads high, and for every girl child to realize that her dreams are valid. I hope for a continent that provides the enabling environment for the girl child to dream and reach their aspirations.



## A letter to myself

Dear (younger) Ntami,

The future is what you make of it now. It isn't as far as you assume it to be. Do you see that dream future? Start working on it NOW.

Lay each brick with faith and never fear failure. Perfection is often a myth, and you only get better as you keep trying.

Mama and Papa want the best for you. Freedom will come, but it's a form of prison as it demands even more from you. Freedom without the right choices leads to calamity.

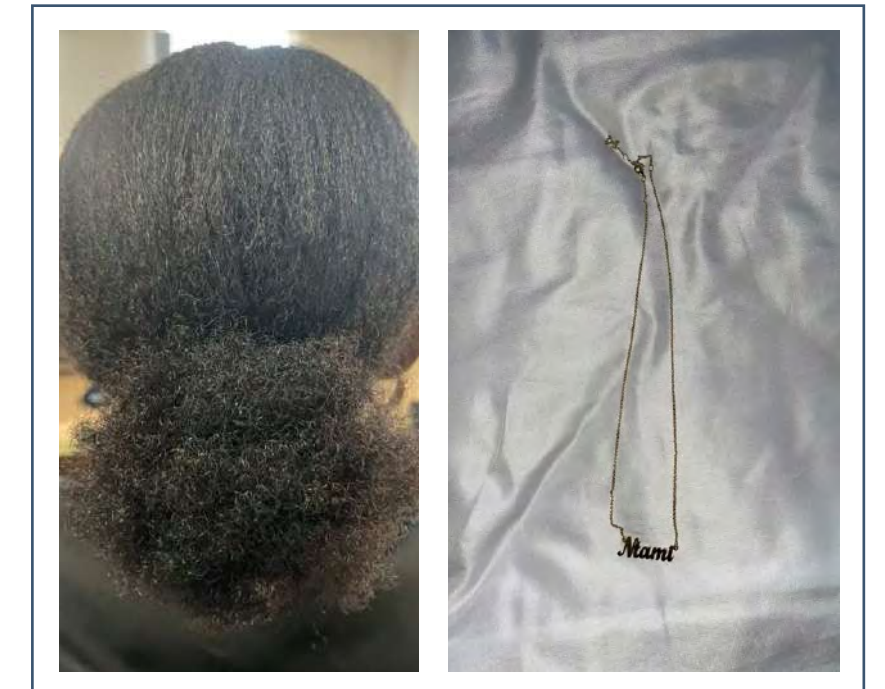
Your intelligence will take you far, but self-discipline will see you through.

## Three favourite things

My 'nappy' hair. It reminds me of the beauty in our diversity. It strengthens me and gives me courage to remain the beautiful, intelligent African woman I am.

2. Green. The colour green keeps me in check and serves as a reminder that growth is a must. It is the dominant colour on my country's flag.

3. My customized pendant. Ntami means 'Gift'. Every time I wear a neck chain with my 'Ntami' pendant, I am reminded of the call to be a blessing to everyone.





*To me, Ubuntu means that I recognize the need for interdependence with others and to collectively work towards creating a better world for all.*

# ORATILE MOLOKO

**FROM:** BOTSWANA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP KENYA

## My experience so far

I arrived in Kenya in April 2022. A few kilometres from the airport, I was greeted by Nairobi National Park. As I went deeper into the city, I was impressed by the greenery of Nairobi. I love the nature-within-the-city aesthetic of Nairobi.

## My story

My father had been unwell for a few months, and my mother had to move to Gaborone to care for him. Sometime in June 2003, during school break, Mom came back to Lerala. Dad was getting better and wanted us to visit him. I couldn't wait to tell him of how well I had done in my mid-term exams. A day or two before our planned trip to Gaborone, one of our uncles came to our home. My six-year-old mind could tell that something was not right: from his slow walk to the hushed tones as he spoke to my grandparents, and the way they summoned my mom to sit under the mophane tree. But what was it — what was wrong? My father had passed on.

The first few years of my father's absence were hard for me and my siblings. There were no stories of trips with dad to share with our friends, and there was no one to

report mom to when being corrected for our naughty behaviours. In all this, I was blind to the way that my society treated women who were unmarried or widowed. As years went on, I realized that respect was reserved for partnered women. Yet my mother continued to stand as a strong, loving, gracious, resourceful and resilient woman. An aspect of my mother's character that I value is the way she gave her full attention to us. Undistracted presence, in which all joys and sadness could be shared, and quality time — which allowed for unspoken concerns to come to the surface, for words to take shape and be shared truthfully with one another.

There is an unending conversation that I have with my mother regarding my self-esteem. Somehow my mind cannot reconcile that a girl who spent her whole life in rural Lerala was able to study in London, study in Exeter, work in Nairobi, and work for UNDP. Are these spaces meant for people like me? Her affirmation is always the same: "o seka wa innyatsa", which loosely translates to "do not think less of yourself".

I carry the qualities that my mother has instilled in me and the words she has spoken over me into every interaction, reminding myself that my lived experiences and perspectives enrich the spaces I am in.

## Challenges at work

This fellowship is my first professional experience apart from the short-term internships I did during my university years. It has been a learning adventure. One of the challenges I have encountered is adjusting to the working culture of UNDP and learning the procedures and protocols, while at the same time trying to deliver great work. Asking questions and seeking guidance are two pillars that have been helpful in this adjustment.

## My fellowship journey

The fellowship journey has been a period of immense personal and professional growth, emerging from self examination and feedback from those around me. I have been able to further examine the type of person I would like to be, as well as the ways in which I would like to serve the world.

This self-discovery journey peaked when I attended the leadership training offered jointly by UNDP, the African Union and the African Leadership University in Kigali, Rwanda. It was during this leadership training that I truly believed that I was a leader in my own right.

Prior to this, I believed that my soft-spoken and reserved personality would cut my leadership aspirations short. I have come to realize that leadership is less about personality and more about transforming one's environment, delivering solutions and inspiring others.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is: "Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe". It is Setswana for "I am because you are". The literal translation to English is "A person is a person because of other people". It reminds me that I am incomplete without a strong community. It is through connection and interaction

with other human beings that I can become the best version of myself and contribute to the collective good. This proverb gives me a tremendous sense of responsibility to ensure that I positively impact others.

"Motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe."

## A proud moment

I am proud to have been a recipient of Botswana's Top Achievers' Scholarship, which enabled me to obtain an international education.



## Hopes and dreams

I hope that I will be a good steward of my time, always seeking to do enjoyable and meaningful things with my time. I hope for boldness and courage to follow my calling.

I hope that my daughters will know that they have permission to live life on their own terms. That they don't need to follow societal prescriptions of what a good daughter should look or behave like.

I hope for a wave of change in Africa, where all girls and women have the agency to curate lives of their own choosing without having to negotiate for their security and safety.



## A letter to myself

Dear 30-year-old Oratile,

Your life has been an adventure.

There is not one single experience that I would erase from your life thus far, because all the good and the not-so-good have shaped the woman that you are today. I am grateful that you have always been in pursuit of a life that has eternal value, that your descendants will enjoy the fruits of your

passion and diligence. What will you do with the remaining 50 or 60 or 70 years of your life to build your legacy?

I hope you will leave behind a legacy of faith. That your great grandchildren will be firm in faith, living with a mindset of endless possibilities, believing in the intrinsic goodness of each human being, and extolling each other to do good.

All love and no pressure,

Oratile, the 2022 version.

## Three favourite things

1. I love spending time with my family as it always gives me joy and reminds me that family is the most important unit in my life.



2. Relaxing in nature is another one of my favourite things to do, as it is good for my mental health and creativity.

3. I love to meditate on the Bible, as it gives me a better understanding of my identity in God.



*If I could simply rephrase Ubuntu – which roughly translates to “I am because you/we are” – to something I often hear in UN spaces, it would be individual attempts made to “leave no one behind”.*

# PEARL ODIGWE

**FROM:** NIGERIA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP CABO VERDE

## My experience so far

I have been in Cabo Verde for seven months now. I love the beach, sun and sand — and this lovely island offers all three in abundance.

## My story

For as long as I can remember, I have had some interesting professional dreams. As a young girl up until now, I have wanted to become a runway model, celebrity (or at least a celebrity’s wife), diplomat, chef and zookeeper (mostly caring for pandas). Of course, I did not become any of those things. Getting older, I realized maybe it did not matter what the profession was, if I enjoyed doing it, made decent money, and still had time to have my kind of fun, that was okay for me. But writing this now, I desperately want the order in reverse.

Life is ever changing, and I cannot believe I used to have certain dreams or even take certain actions. Yet somehow, my decisions led to this current journey I am on, and I could not be more grateful for the opportunities and benefits that come with it. Someone once said to me that even though a decision may not yield the outcome envisioned, knowing it was taken in good faith and with

the best intention at heart should suffice. This is what I always have in mind when deciding or sticking with a decision, and I think that’s why I have very few regrets in life.

I am incredibly blessed to have achieved major milestones that I never thought would be possible at the age of 24. Sometimes I don’t even realize that I currently live these dreams I once had. A dream along with resilience is undefeatable. Truly to win is to never give up. You want to become the future president? It’s possible. You can start by writing to your local government chairman and highlighting gaps in the community and your proposed solution. Who knows where that first step will take you?

I may not have achieved all my childhood dreams, but I did a cat-walk event in high school, met a couple of celebrities (I have decided after careful research that I would dislike being, or having a partner in the movie or music industry). I did not become a zookeeper, because let’s face it — pandas are very cute, but from the videos I watch, their lovely carers seem to be at their wits’ end already. Lastly, I may not be a diplomat now, but who knows what the future holds? I am working with UNDP now and it’s only upwards and onwards from here, right? Time will tell!

## Challenges at work

My biggest challenge is maintaining a work-life balance. This is still a work in progress, but I am grateful for mentors in my life with whom I can share these struggles and gain valuable feedback. This fellowship journey has allowed me to keep track of and monitor my learning journey. I have also realized that it's okay to not have all the answers, and to be introspective and reflective before giving an answer. I am very impatient and sometimes I need a rapid response or solution. I have learnt to exercise more patience even in unfair and difficult situations. I am learning to be more resilient and basking in the journey more than awaiting an "expected" result.

## My fellowship journey

It has been an adventurous ride with its fair share of struggles, which have taught me a bit more about myself and in relating with others. Getting to work on initiatives that empower people with fewer opportunities, or on campaigns that recognize the rights of vulnerable populations, has led to a higher degree of empathy and patience for people on my part.

Discovering a new way of life, culture or new places is always very interesting. Getting to interact with and meet new people in such a bubble allows you to view the world from a different perspective. Professionally, I have learned to enjoy the small but valuable strides I have made — not only to improve on my assigned tasks, but also learning competences.

## My favourite African proverb

"I don't know any other way to live but to wake up every day armed with my convictions, not yielding them to the threat of danger and to the power and force of people who might despise me," Wole Soyinka. I picked this quote because having your guarded convictions gives you a sense of

purpose, allows you to fearlessly stand up for what you feel is right, and leaves no room for compromise on your part, despite the odds.

## A proud moment

Great health, and my amazing family and friends. Whenever I tick items off my bucket list.



## Hopes and dreams

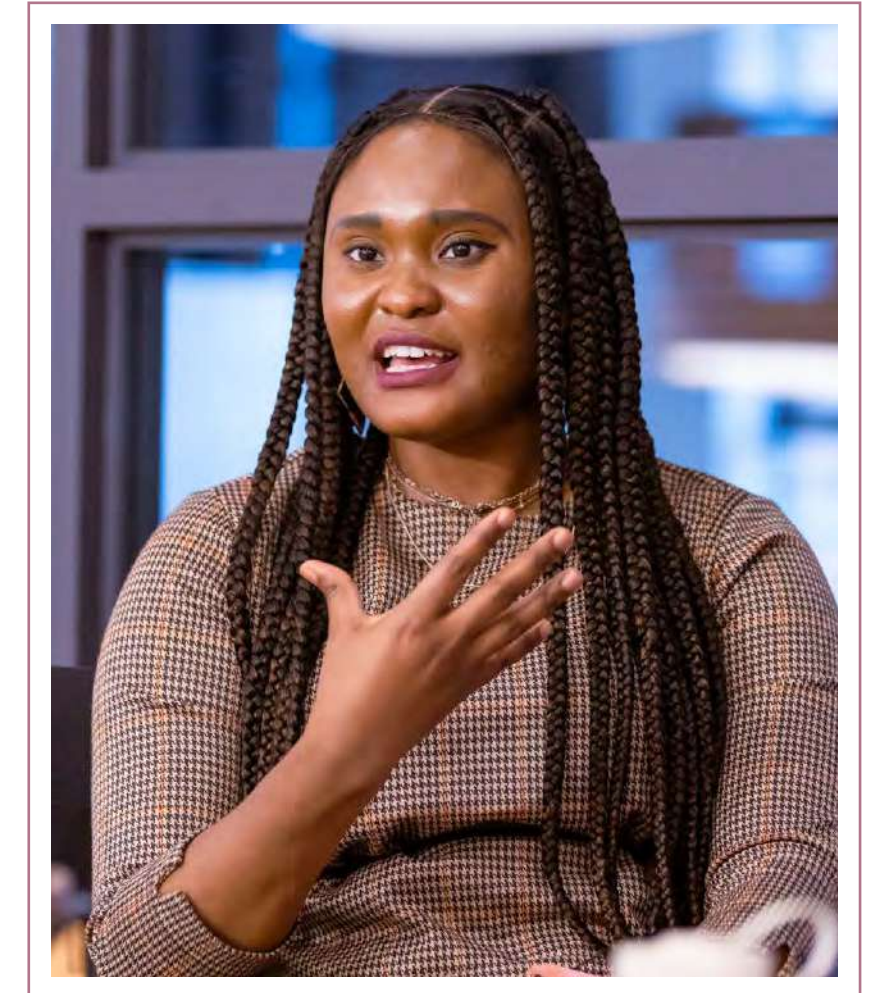
Here is to "strong women" in all senses of the word. May we know them, be them and raise them.

## A letter to myself

Emotions felt at any point in time, whether negative or positive, are to be relished in that moment. A negative emotion will allow you take active steps to make sure you never feel that way again. Positive ones are fleeting too, so enjoy it to the fullest. Cry your eyes out, laugh without a care in the world and remember to love hard... the right people though! Everything, I mean everything, almost always works out in the end.

## Three favourite things

1. My phone or camera. I love making memories and going on adventures, so I need to have a high-resolution camera or my phone to capture these moments.... screenshots too!
2. Letters. I keep hand-written letters given to me by my friends and loved ones, and I enjoy reading them from time to time.
3. Spices. Something I don't have the leisure of doing these days, but enjoy, is buying all kinds of spices and trying them out in my cooking. I have drawers full of assorted spices.





*To me, Ubuntu is metaphysical and can be pictured as an invisible link that connects all human beings. Ubuntu is materialized through manifestations of peace and love.*

# PRISCILLA PLAT

**FROM:** MADAGASCAR | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

## My experience so far

I am based in Kinshasa. The people-pleaser in me would have said “I guess I’m still adjusting”, but I have learned to value and practice authenticity, and I can unapologetically say I haven’t felt comfortable enough at my duty station to call it my home. Yet I’m optimistic.

## My story

I was raised by two strong black women who literally put every ounce and fibre of their being into keeping me safe from the shackles of patriarchy. And they have done it so cleverly, while being trapped and enduring things I still don’t fully know about. These two incredible women are my grandmother and my mother. Both have that “watch me” type-of-energy.

Picture this: Madagascar in the mid-1950s. My grandmother married a soldier despite her father’s disapproval. She then proceeded to get a job despite the law, which forbid military spouses to work and get compensated for it at the time. She decided to have four children, made it a priority to invest in their education, and helped them study abroad.

Fast forward, my mother took notes and decided to take it from there. First, she freed herself from an abusive marriage by getting a divorce, in the 1980s, in a system that, until 1991, only allowed divorces under very limited conditions. Later, she decided to have a child (me!) when she felt like it — and not a minute before — despite the societal pressure. She raised me as a single mother, with the financial resources of a single mother. She deliberately invested every cent she had in my education, despite — or motivated by — the lack of engagement and support from the men in her life.

My mother, and her mother before her, ingrained in me the true meaning of women’s empowerment from early on. But, beyond paving the way for me to fulfil my mission equipped and ready, they also wanted me to be safe. And being sent to the DRC under a two-week notice as a young, independent, (legally) single woman of the diaspora was not the safest process. Yet there I was, expecting another smooth change of scenery.

Who was I kidding? The DRC follows a very hierarchical scheme; the type of hierarchy that also endorses patriarchal values and, by extent, patronizing behaviours. Not only did I find myself entering a field that has traditionally been monopolized by men — that is, governance, peace and security — but I also decided to be a disruptive leader in that sphere by promoting intergenerational co-leadership

in spaces where the median age of authorities approaches 55. Long story short, my wonder women and I have been breaking cycle after cycle. It's a pattern I intend to sustain and fully support in any way I can.

### Challenges at work

In my office, I am one of the youngest team members, so some people think they can patronize me without me noticing. When it happened in meetings or while carrying out group tasks, I used to react somewhat defensively and noticed that it started affecting my mood. I thus decided to do what was best for my mental health and stopped reacting. Today, I simply show humility and results. I call it: leading by example.

### My fellowship journey

In the workplace, the fellowship has brought me a clearer understanding of why the United Nations is one of the most criticized yet most respected institutions in the world. On a personal level, it has helped me to develop effective communication skills and be clear about my intentions. Financially, it has challenged me to address my insecurities and work on a healthier relationship with money. Overall, the fellowship has taught me to manage my expectations, put my privileges to use, unlearn norms and standards, lean deeper into faith, and own my multiculturalism.

### My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is: "To get lost is to learn the way". It represents the one experience — exploring the world and myself — that has never failed to teach the most valuable lessons. Mentally, physically and spiritually, I've been lost so many times. Yet every time I found myself to be on the right path — that is, mine. This proverb is my reminder to honour the distances I have travelled to meet myself.



### A proud moment

Being who I am and doing what I do today might just be the achievement I am the most proud of. Everything I have done was out of faith, love and the unshakable belief that I serve a higher purpose.

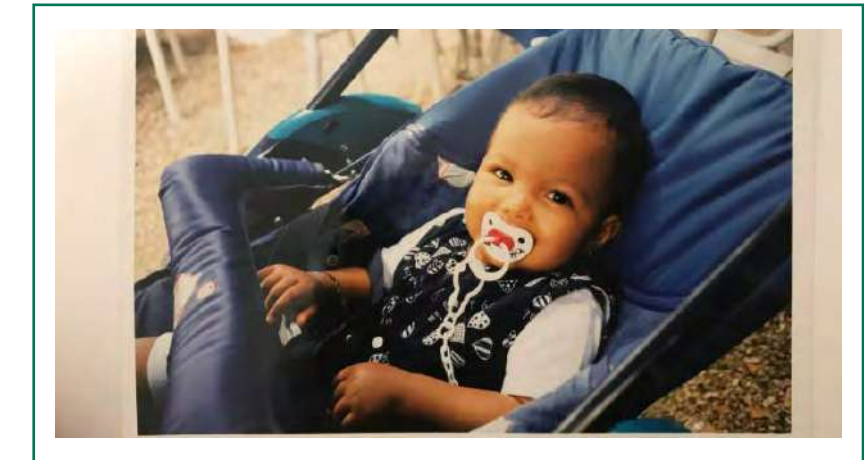
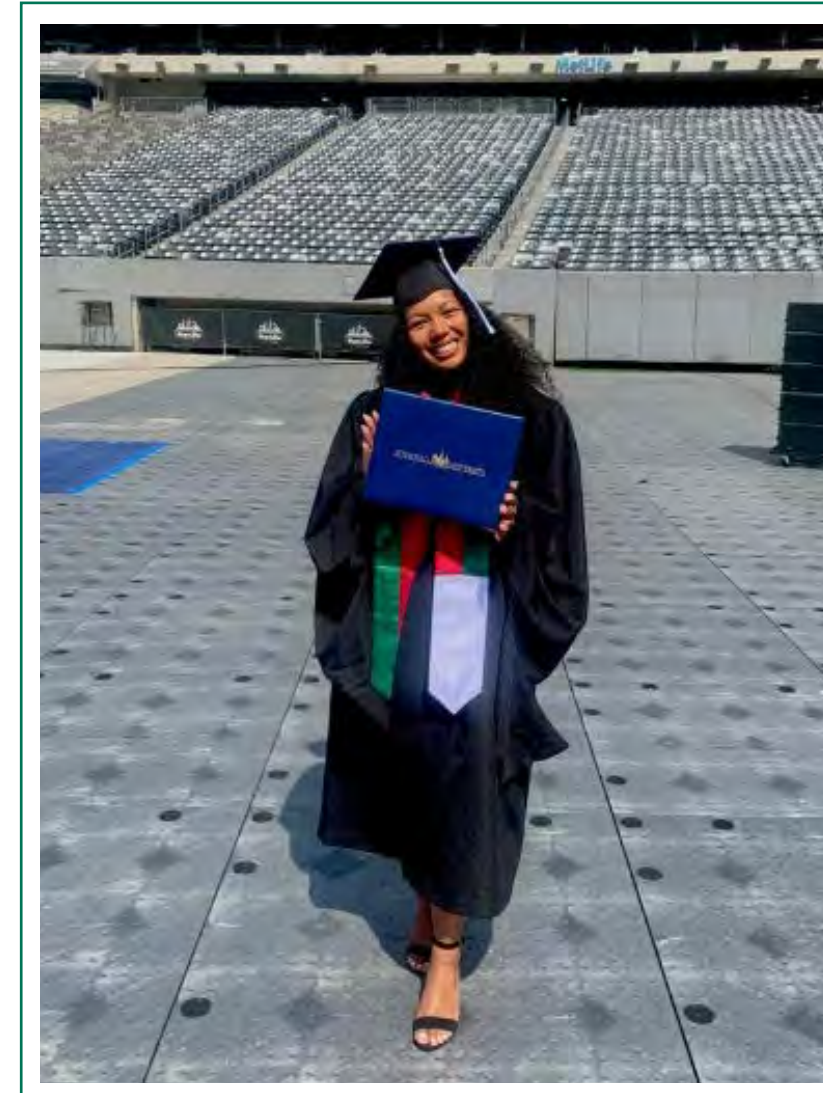
### Hopes and dreams

I want to let others dream for themselves so, my hopes and dreams for my future self are to stay kind, be unapologetic, find my helpers, keep learning, build generational wealth and serve the African continent.



### A letter to myself

Dear younger self,  
I know you can feel it. The decision you are making right now is unlocking a multitude of blessings. I am so proud of you for freeing yourself from abuse, complacency and misery. This is your time — to forgive yourself, to hug yourself, to get back up, to breathe in confidence, and breathe out anxious thoughts. It has been exhausting on so many levels, I know, but trust me, it will all make sense. Keep praying, keep journaling, keep talking to your people, keep believing. Thank you for not giving up on us.



### Three favourite things

1. My necklace, because it is made of three precious gems — garnet, ruby and opal — which are my grandmother's, my mom's and my own birthstones.
2. My journal, because writing in it is therapeutic.
3. My body, because it has taken me this far.





*To me, Ubuntu is the belief of the universal bond that connects us. We really do share the same hopes, dreams, fears and worries. We want the same things, and we can achieve them all together.*

# ROWAN AHMED

**FROM:** EGYPT | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP BURKINA FASO

## My experience so far

I have been stationed in Burkina Faso for six months at the time of writing. I kind of like it now, although it was really hard at the beginning — and still is. It's challenging, but I usually enjoy a good challenge.

## My story

I always dreamed of travelling. Yet, as a girl, I lost more travel opportunities than I could count. My mom used to say, "When you get married, you can travel." The assumption is that you go wherever your husband is going, but I ended up marrying a doctor in the army, not so much travelling there. I figured, that's it... that's my destiny. He's such a great guy, I won't refuse to marry him just because of an ambiguous dream. So we got married in 2013.

I worked as a pharmacist in the Ministry of Health, but professionally, I was not satisfied. I felt like I was never contributing enough; it felt like dying slowly! In these situations, there are two choices: either cry in the corner, complain and feel sorry for yourself — or get up and make a change. I always choose the latter. So, I tried everything! I worked at a community pharmacy, as a science teacher, as a medical representative. Nothing felt right.

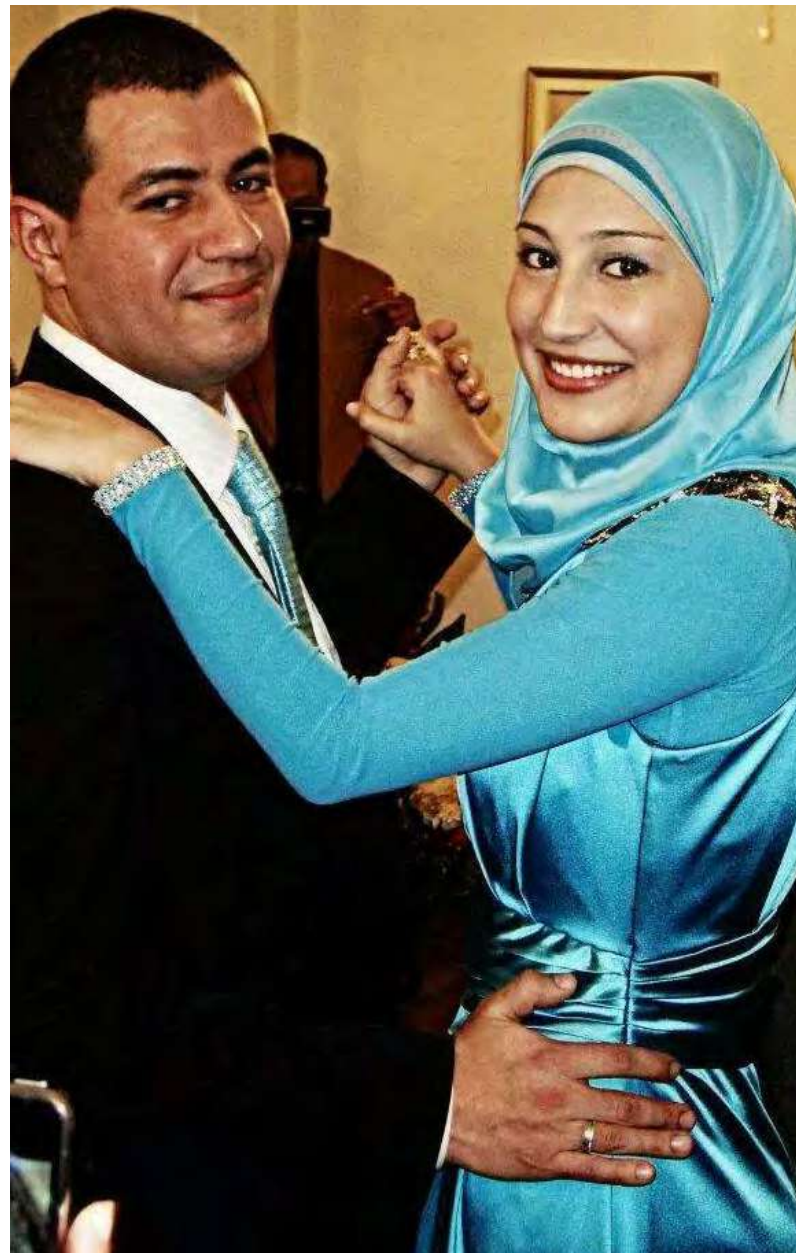
One day my husband saw an ad for a scholarship abroad in the newspaper, and he encouraged me to apply. I told him: "How come? We have a baby now. Why apply for something and get it, then not go?" He said: "Just apply. If you get it, we will see." For four long years I kept applying for scholarships; getting rejections and being criticized for even considering it.

It was not until 2019 that I got the opportunity that I was looking for: the chance to pursue my master's at Lund University in Sweden. At the time, my eldest daughter was five and my youngest was one. I officially embarked on this master's journey with my two little daughters. Oh man, it was quite the journey! I was the student mom, with my stroller, laptop bag and diaper bag!

There were multiple challenges: being a mom, a wife, a Hijabi from a Middle Eastern culture, trying to live the student life, with a lot of ambitions and big dreams. All the odds were against me, but I knew I had the potential to succeed! I knew I could make it!

Then came my fellowship journey. I thought Sweden was hard, but oh boy... this was something else! It felt like I raised my own bar! When I got the call, I was still in Sweden. I had 10 days to pack my three years of life in Sweden, withdraw my kids from school and preschool and arrange

for their re-instatement in Egypt along with all the other paperwork. It took me a week to arrange things in Sweden, then I went to Egypt for a day and a half, and then I took off to Addis for our induction workshop... and the wildest adventure of my life so far. So I did travel when I got married. I'm sure it's not what my mom had in mind, but it happened.



## Challenges at work

I suddenly found myself juggling projects that needed quality assurance, submission deadlines, late assignments, a new course module and preparations for four workshops in two weeks. And of course, I also had to follow up with my kids' homework and activities (even if I am not there). I hate to say this, but it was overwhelming! How do I overcome it? Well, I try to take a breather, do something on the side that is enjoyable, and then to organize my time as best I could and prioritize things. The key is prioritization and compartmentalization.



## My fellowship journey

Everything happens for a reason, and there is a path written for you. Even if you don't see it, even if it looks messy to you, there's a pattern somewhere. The fellowship showed me my true potential.

The key thing I learnt is that you never really know what's good for you. God has better plans. Burkina Faso was the one country that I said to my husband I didn't want to go to. Now I think it's one of the best things that ever happened to me!

It's been totally different to anything I ever knew. The first month was the toughest... Not to mention being thrown into a French context. But I found good people, made lots of friends and found a nice place to stay. The experience that I'm getting here, I would never have gotten anywhere else. I still don't know what I am going to do next, but I feel like literally everything is possible.

## My favourite African proverb

I don't have a specific favourite proverb, but some sayings really guided my choices. I keep reminding myself of things like "If you don't ask, then the answer is no". "I am not the next of them, I am the first of me"; "if you believe it, then you can achieve it"; "rejection is redirection"; and "persistence pays".

## A proud moment

Pursuing my master's degree with my two little daughters while having to navigate a foreign system; studying and succeeding, while giving my girls the best memories and the best experience. I would say my biggest achievement is that, against all odds, I did it!

## Hopes and dreams

For me, I wish I can be an inspiration to my daughters and to other women. For them to believe that you actually can do what you want; you can achieve your goals, that dreams do come true.

I wish for my daughters to be happy, to achieve what they want, to have the whole world accessible to them without

having to struggle, for them to be free to go wherever they want to go and to have it easier than I did.

For all girls in Africa be happy with what you have, while you're pursuing what you want.

## A letter to myself

Hey little Rowanna,

Girl... you travelled like you wanted to. You drove like you wanted to, and you got your car. You've got two beautiful daughters and an amazing husband. Who would've thought!

Embrace the experience, because you're in for a ride. It's going to be very bumpy — so hold on tight! Your path is not straight; it's zigzag, which makes it even more exciting. Don't listen to them. Trust your instincts, they are always right! Always! They will criticize your decisions, then they will admire you when you succeed. Don't let them get to you! You can do it!

Your partner can make you or break you, so choose wisely. And you did girl! You always said you would know when you see him, and you did.

Finally, trust yourself. And above all, trust that God has a plan for you. You were meant to do great things and you're on your way to achieving them, so keep going!

Love,  
You

## Three favourite things

I wouldn't say I have three favourite things, more like four favourite persons! My husband would be on the top of the list, without him none of this would've happened. My mom, who's my biggest supporter now, and my daughters, who are my biggest fans.



*The spirit of Ubuntu signifies the importance of others for individual growth and success: that one cannot do life alone, you are what you are because of the input, influence and help from others.*

# TAMIWE KAYUNI

**FROM:** MALAWI | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP KENYA

## My story

I was born in a culture where investing in girls was seen as a waste, as girls were regarded as tools for childbearing and rearing. In addition to this, being born in a family of all girls, and having five sisters ahead of me, made being a girl more challenging and placed high expectations on me. My sisters before me had proven that a girl can be educated, become something in life, and be as good as they set their hearts to be.

With such a culture, I grew up with a mindset that all odds were against a girl child and if the girl child doesn't fight for her dream, she would either end up getting married or pregnant at a tender age, or not go very far with her education.

I, therefore, grew a backbone at a tender age. A backbone to be strong in an environment where women were not expected to. A backbone to be bold to voice out my opinions in a culture where it was seen as rudeness. A backbone to believe in myself and have an 'I can' mentality in a setting where everything screamed 'you can't'.

As a young girl, I remember how my parents ensured that their voice was the loudest in my life, because theirs was a voice of hope and inspiration; a voice that cheered me to greatness. If not for their voice, and for believing that they

could raise seven girls who can become something in life, I may not have been here today. It is their voice that gave me the courage to dream smart and big, to work hard, to believe in the greatness within me, to not falter when faced with systems that place a girl as a loser, and the courage to fight for my dreams.

That made me work extremely hard and smart. The motivation was to prove that a girl can make it in life, and was therefore worth believing in... But I also wanted to be an inspiration to the many girls I saw in my community whose future was blurred, who had men lined up to marry them the moment they reached puberty, who had dropped out of school at a younger age because their parents felt educating their brother (a boy child) was more beneficial... (and what else could they have done, because the culture said a boy child is equal to wealth!).

## Challenges at work

My biggest challenge, in general, has been the fight for a seat at the table in a space that is already crowded. Additionally, being young and a woman hasn't made it easier, especially with people looking down on you. But one thing I have always done is to believe in myself, believe I am important and that what I have to offer is

extremely important. This mentality has given me boldness and has earned me trust and respect. I ensure that at every table where I find myself sitting, I bring something valuable that cannot be denied.

## My fellowship journey

In a quest to 'be' so that other girls can also become, I endeavoured to grow as a woman leader, and grabbed every opportunity to be trained and groomed as a leader. Applying for the AfYWL Fellowship Programme was therefore a no brainer. I applied for it twice, and on the second attempt I made it. I remember vividly that Thursday afternoon, on 28 February 2022, when an email notification popped up. The heading alone was enough to create an ecstatic feeling: Offer of AfYWL Fellowship, UNDP Kenya, Nairobi (Inclusive Growth). As I write this, it's been exactly six months since I started this fellowship journey. It's been nothing short of exciting. The fellowship journey has been a platform of growth to be an innovative leader who boldly contributes to positive change in her environment.

## A proud moment

Being able to inspire women to greatness and have them achieve their dreams because I believed in them and I supported them.

## Hopes and dreams

Few believed or expected me and my six sisters to go far. This gave me a passion to be a voice to other girls who have no one to believe in them and tell them: "You can amount to something great". My hopes and dreams are to see African girls flourish without any hindrances in whatever they set their minds to do; to see more African girls taking up positions of leadership and decision-making on the global stage; and for African girls to dare to dream big — and being bold to make that dream a reality.



## My favourite African proverb

A proverb from the warm heart of Africa, Malawi, sums up the three key things I will need to achieve my hope of raising African girls to become leaders on the global stage. The proverb is "Bololo sakonda madzi", which in English means: "The 'bololo' insect does not like water". It means that one must be determined to achieve one's end and it denotes three words: determination, perseverance and courage!

Bololo Sakonda  
madzi

## A letter to myself

Dear future me,

At every stage of your life, you will have a story to tell, challenges to overcome, wins to celebrate, discipline to maintain, and faith to uphold. In all these stages, remember that you are always a winner and a victor.

You have achieved great things so far in your career and life in general, and what has helped you is the one you believe in: God. As you continue your aspirations of bringing many girls along with you to the top and helping them realize their purpose, remember His grace is sufficient for you and you will do exceptionally well.

Regards,  
Me

## Three favourite things

There are certain things, animals and places that I found fascinating growing up, because they perfectly described

the fearless me that was birthed at a tender age — and is still within me today.

My favourite animal is a lion. It always reminds me to be a girl who is fearless, strong, courageous and believes in her own potential to 'rule the jungle' (i.e., a leader in development,



the owner of a multi-billion-dollar business, a CEO of a reputable organization, etc.). It also reminds me that these characters that have brought me to where I am.

If asked what my favourite natural geological feature is, it would be the mountain. It represents firmness and reminds me to be firm as a girl who is a leader and aspires to grow on the leadership ladder.

If asked about my favourite colour personality, it would be red. It represents the movers and the shakers of the world that have loads of confidence. It reminds me of my aspiration of being a change-maker, and that it has taken a lot of confidence to navigate systems that put a girl at a disadvantage.





*Ubuntu is the idea that we exist in our fullest, highest form, because of those around us. Therefore we must focus and prioritize really seeing, loving and building those around us.*

# TATENDA ZVOBGO

**FROM:** ZIMBABWE | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP REGIONAL SERVICE CENTRE FOR AFRICA, ETHIOPIA

## My experience so far

I love Addis Ababa. The people are friendly and always ready to help, and the culture is rich. I have met so many diverse people, and I have been very lucky to have four other AfYWL fellows assigned in Addis. It has truly been beautiful to have my own little tribe always pushing me, holding me accountable and loving me through this journey.

## My story

My grandfather usually came home around 6pm every day. He would walk up the stairs to the living room, where we would all be sitting in our little pyjamas watching my grandmother watch Days of Our Lives or Macleod's Daughters. I was about eight at the time, and my sister and my cousin were four. As he arrived at the top of the stairs, we would run up to him. He would put his briefcase and blazer down and take turns to pick us up and swing us in the air. We would giggle and ask for another 'swing'. This would continue until we were laughing hysterically, and he was completely exhausted.

Two years prior, I had lost my mother. My family was struggling to find their feet after the loss. I was living with my grandparents, and my grandfather was going through

the chaos of political life in Zimbabwe. He would soon find out that he had cancer. I look back at this little routine of joy we had created, and it reminds me that beauty can always be found despite or within the pain.

I am the second-born in a family of five. I am the sixteenth lawyer to graduate from my family; a family that prides itself on being educated and using that education for the good of the country. We also find pride in family unity and showing each other love at any given opportunity. My family are a source of motivation for me. To know that my grandparents, grand aunts and uncles achieved great things in their own ways, despite their circumstances, makes me believe that no matter what, I can achieve anything. All it takes is bravery and determination.

I have lived my life surrounded by some of the most amazing women. Women who went out of their way to love, help and build me. African women are truly magical in the way that they love and exist. Despite our stories and difficulties, we never shut down and turn hope and love away. To other African women, take this away:

- You are not your background or current circumstance. You are whomever you want to be. It takes one action, one application, and one moment to change your life! Keep pushing.

- You are a magical gift to this earth and to our continent. Give yourself the permission and space to be, to make mistakes.

- You are a masterpiece and a work in progress simultaneously.

## Challenges at work

One of the main challenges I face is self-doubt. Having the opportunity to walk into rooms with people I admire, with vast knowledge and expertise, can sometimes make me feel as if my voice is not as important or that my opinions are not as significant. I remind myself that every voice deserves to be heard. Our beauty lies in the fact that we are all different, and I offer a unique perspective. I also surround myself with people who value me for who I am. Having my own little tribe of love and kindness has helped me overcome this feeling, and encouraged me to always use my voice.

## My fellowship journey

I have grown immensely, both professionally and personally. Professionally I have worked on regional projects building the capacity of regional economic communities and member states, and creating laws that will empower women and create gender equality. It has been a gift to see the work that goes into ensuring that certain laws are created and implemented throughout Africa.

Personally, I have been challenged like never before. I have learnt to navigate difficult relationships. I have been exposed to different people and learnt that despite geographical differences, we are similar in our experiences and lives. All this has made me more confident and more determined than before. I am inspired by my growth and believe that this is just the beginning. This fellowship has built a strong foundation for what will be a long-standing career for the betterment of my continent and the women on it.

## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is “Mwana washe muranda kumwe”, which in Shona means: “A chief’s son is a subject in another land”. It shows the unpredictability of life. It reminds you to be humble, to always seek learning and to not place too much value on titles or wealth.

Mwana Washe  
Muranda  
Kumwe

## A proud moment

The achievement I am most proud of was winning the public speaking competition at my high school, and going on to win the national public speaking competition in Zimbabwe, with a speech on women’s rights. I remember being really nervous. Despite my fear and doubts, I was successful.



## Hopes and dreams

I hope to have a successful, impactful career that changes lives and brings me the utmost level of joy. I hope to not only be happy, but to bring happiness and blessings to all those around me.

I hope that my future daughter would be able to live a life free from the burdens of societal expectations and rules! That she would be able to be her truest self and that the world would remind her of her beauty, her intelligence and her purpose.

My hope for girls in Africa is that they would use their skills, knowledge and intelligence to take over the narrative and show Africa as she really is. “Until the Lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter,” Chinua Achebe.



## A letter to myself

Dear 17-year-old Tatenda,

You are going to be so happy and so proud of how it all turns out! The dreams you are dreaming and writing up in that little journal have been heard by God, and everything is working out in your favour.

You are so hard working, and you do not give yourself enough credit. You are doing the best you can with what you have, so be gentle with yourself. Your life will be more than what you dreamed and prayed for. You will be surrounded by joy and love. The type of joy and love that will inspire you to dream bigger and do better.

## Three favourite things

1. The first is a silver watch that belonged to my mother. In every picture I have seen of her, she is wearing that watch. The watch reminds me that life is short and that I should always choose happiness for myself and those around me.

2. The second is the Zimbabwean flag that was laid over my grandfather’s coffin and given to my family by then president Robert Mugabe, as part of my grandfather’s funeral at Heroes’ Acre. My grandfather was a great man. The flag reminds me that I should always strive for excellence and use my knowledge, skills and voice to serve my people.

3. The third is a trophy I received at the public speaking competition in secondary school. It reminds me of my power and that hard work and determination can get you a long way.





*Ubuntu means I do not exist in isolation, I am constantly evolving due to my relationship with the people around me, as they are constantly evolving too due to my presence in their lives.*

# VANESSA AKIBATE

**FROM:** GHANA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP ZAMBIA

## My experience so far

Zambia is a warm and welcoming country, with some of the most incredible landscapes and wildlife I have ever seen. I instantly felt at home and have started to make friends out of colleagues, and family out of friends.

## My story

In Grade 11, after being nominated as a potential prefect, my school organized a leadership camp to make final selections. We embarked on a journey to Magaliesburg on the outskirts of Gauteng, South Africa. There we performed a set of gruelling mental, emotional and physical activities. Before this, I had never truly considered myself a leader. After the camp, my school identified three prefects who displayed immense leadership ability. They were called senior prefects, not quite head prefect, but well on their way to that position. I was, to my surprise, one of these few.

I was deeply honoured. It was a big deal for 17-year-old Vanessa, but also confusing. I sometimes think back to this point in my life. It has been some years since, but I recognize this as a turning point – this was when I began to see myself as a leader and decided that in whatever form it took, I wanted to be someone who stands with

anyone who needs their voice heard and presence felt. This led me to join the African Union Student Alliance at my university and becoming its head of public relations. I started multiple blogs to speak about issues that I felt needed amplification. My family, friends, co-workers and many strangers have witnessed me making impassioned pleas for support on all the issues I hold dear to my heart – women’s rights, queer rights, sustainability and ethical production and consumption, African pride. This is also why I switched from profit-driven enterprises to development work.

I have worked in marketing, digital marketing, corporate communications, media and management consulting roles over the past few years. While I deeply enjoyed the projects I was involved in and the people I worked with, my calling for leadership – specifically with leadership with a positive impact, continued to grow. I wanted to work directly with people to build a stronger, resilient Africa and a better world.

Through the AfYWL Fellowship, I have been blessed with opportunities to go into the field and play a part in creating positive impact in communities and in the lives of people. I feel fortunate to be able to prove my teachers right, make my family and friends proud, and to honour the desires of my heart. I only hope I will be granted

continued grace to proceed down this path and expand my impact on the lives of people from all backgrounds and communities.

## Challenges at work

All my experience as a communications practitioner has been in the corporate world. However, communication for development places importance on beneficiaries and impact. This change in approach, coupled with the fact that I approached work from a marketing perspective whereas the common approach within UNDP is journalistic and media focused, meant I had a lot to learn. However, I now feel more confident in my role – as I learn how to communicate for development and adopt a more journalistic approach to my work. Learning while creating an impact is a blessing that I am honoured to enjoy.

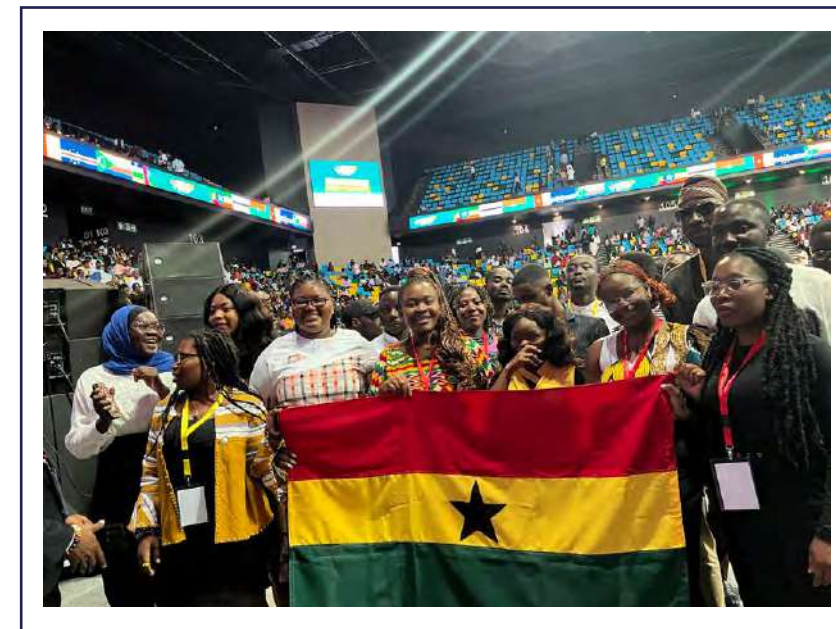


## My fellowship journey

I get to work with and engage with development experts and leaders from a wide range of fields. This has been extremely exciting. From mentoring sessions with Zambia's Resident Representative and my supervisor, to conversations with the other fellows and time spent in the field, I have learnt and grown a lot. I have learnt to be intentional in my

choices and receptive of new ideas. I have also become bolder, and I know I can be bolder still.

Above all, I have learned that leadership is a process and not a result. And if you commit to doing it right, the result is the impact you create. In my time as an AfYWL fellow, I have seen how change is created from multiple facets. I hope to build on this understanding to keep making a positive impact from community to policy level.



## My favourite African proverb

*Bubuŋa kam ba nywani yira* is a Kasena proverb that roughly translates to “Focusing on what you set out to do, does not tire the body”. Essentially, it means there are no limits to what you can achieve if you enact will and determination to your goal.

"Bubuŋa kam ba  
nywani yira"

## A proud moment

Being one of 40 out of 5,254 applicants for this incredible opportunity is an achievement I am deeply proud of. The experiences I have had, the people I have met and the perspectives I have gained, have all broadened my horizons and shaped me into a person I become prouder of each day.



## Hopes and dreams

In my career, I hope I contribute to building the image of Africa, globally and within the continent and its diaspora. This continent is vast and vibrant, full of opportunities and ideas that can change the course of generations to come. I hope I can contribute to catalysing these truths to transform understandings of and within the continent, with a focus on sustainability and women's rights.

About 35 years from now or more, I would like to see myself living on a farm in my hometown – Navrongo, with some goats, cows and maybe sheep to keep me company. I hope I am surrounded by plants, in a home I designed and help build. I dream of spending my days tending to my farm, making art and contributing to development projects in the community – towards a cleaner, sustainable and equitable Navrongo.

## A letter to myself

Dear Vanessa Wematu,

I am so proud of you. You keep impressing us past versions of you by taking on challenges and opening yourself up in ways I never imagined possible. I believe you will change the world in the ways that mean the most to the people you care for. I pray that you continue to learn from and explore the world around you, and to allow yourself the freedom to connect with people and understand what it takes to create positive and constructive spaces for communities around the world. I hope you believe in yourself enough to take criticism as inspiration for growth and to let go of things you can't control. It's been so good being and becoming you. You're a journey I would take again and again. You're as you need to be, and you'll be greater still. Be you soon,  
V

## Three favourite things

1. The Internet: it has the potential to be the great equalizer, giving a platform to people from various backgrounds and with differing perspectives.
2. Notebooks: I love to make lists, doodle and pen down anything that comes to mind or crosses my sight. Since being in Zambia, I have filled four notebooks with ideas, drawing, thoughts and long to-do lists.
3. Time with family and friends: spending physical time with my loved ones leaves me with intense feelings fulfilment. I could sit all day in their presence, not even talking, and leave feeling overjoyed.





*To me, Ubuntu reflects what life is really like and what it should continuously be. No one person has the sufficiency to achieve all they need by themselves; we all need and depend on each other's capabilities.*

# VERONICA OTIENO

**FROM:** KENYA | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK

## My experience so far

I have loved and enjoyed living here thus far. I am always meeting people from different parts of the world. I have also become more aware of the inequalities and challenges that people face across the world. This has heightened a sense of compassion and responsibility. Working at the Bureau for External Relations and Advocacy (BERA), a central bureau, has provided an opportunity to see the organization from a bird's-eye view.

## My story

The most important element of my life is my relationship with God, and this has a great influence on the other aspects of my life. When I was a young girl, I vividly dreamt that I was on a runway on my way to a large plane. Just when I was about to board, I woke up. Oh no! The young Veronica was extremely disappointed. I remember narrating the 'ordeal' to my dad. Many years later my dream has come to pass several times and, thank God, this time round I get to board. I am still in awe of flying and aeroplanes. I never take it for granted.

I value my family, friends and community at large. Our house has always been a form of shelter and support system for our family and friends. My parents are extremely

supportive, especially when it comes to education. They made big sacrifices for us to acquire quality education.

I remember due to peer pressure asking my dad to buy me a car. He always responded that he had already bought me a Mercedes-Benz by paying for my education, and all I needed to do is to access it. Now I see it! I see that by God's grace, my education has opened many opportunities for me. My mother was and still is ever-present. She has always been there to help, encourage, discipline and remind me and my siblings to be focused. I cannot forget to mention my grandfather, who was always on the frontline of my cheering team. I wish he could be here so that I could share with him my accomplishments, and especially working for UNDP. He also fought tough circumstances to go to school, and later became a champion for education in his community, using his own resources to ensure that many were educated.

I consider myself privileged due to the opportunities and experiences that I have received, and my hope is to pay it forward. One way is through contributing to the transformation of Africa's education system.

As African women, I believe that it is important we learn to value ourselves and our diverse contributions that continue to be significant in transforming our continent. Our value

for community is very important in spearheading inclusive and sustainable development. We should work tirelessly to bring and nurture this value, even in our workplaces. While our history is important, it should not tie us down, we should instead learn from it and forge ahead, while embracing our unique feminine qualities.

## Challenges at work

The biggest challenge I have faced so far is self-doubt and comparison; wondering whether I am up to the challenge. I am overcoming this lie with the truth that I have capabilities to deliver impactful results. Preparation and continuous learning have also been essential. The second challenge is finding my space in development, which is very broad. There is an overwhelming amount of information out there. I am learning to overcome this by embracing continuous learning and trusting the process, with the hope that eventually it will all add up. Through mentorship, I have also learnt that development is not linear.

## My fellowship journey

My fellowship journey has provided me with great exposure to a big, diverse and complex world. Working at UNDP and living in New York taught me that the world is much greater than I perceived it to be, and that life also carries with it great possibilities. The diverse nature of our work and environment taught me to listen, question, empathize and have compassion.

My plan is to continuously work in an innovative and impactful way for the development of others. I hope that my work, at all stages of my career, will positively transform many people's lives, set Africa and the world at large on the right trajectory, and create a ripple effect. The fellowship has played a key role in reminding me to embrace leadership. I am forever grateful for the mentorship, training and exposure that the AfYWL programme will contribute to my work for society.



## My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is "Izandla ziyagezana", a Zulu saying meaning "Hands wash each other". This proverb inspires me to think and act beyond self. Although serving others may in many instances be difficult and vulnerable, it is also a great place of intrinsic satisfaction and reward, especially after we see results.

Izandla Ziyagezana

## A proud moment

As I leave my twenties, I am very grateful for the progress, growth and experiences that have shaped and refined me. I focused a lot of my resources on learning and improving different aspects of life, even through challenging times, and I can gladly say that the results have been better than I hoped for.

## Hopes and dreams

My hope is to love and serve humanity with joy, wisdom and humility through transforming the education system, which is a bedrock in every society. For my future daughter,

I hope that she takes the mantle even further. I hope that she uses her talents and skills to create, serve and influence her generation in faith and service as well. For all girls in Africa, I hope that they embrace their uniqueness and use it as a strength to serve others. I hope that they live in a just and fairer world, which they are also participating to create.

## A letter to myself

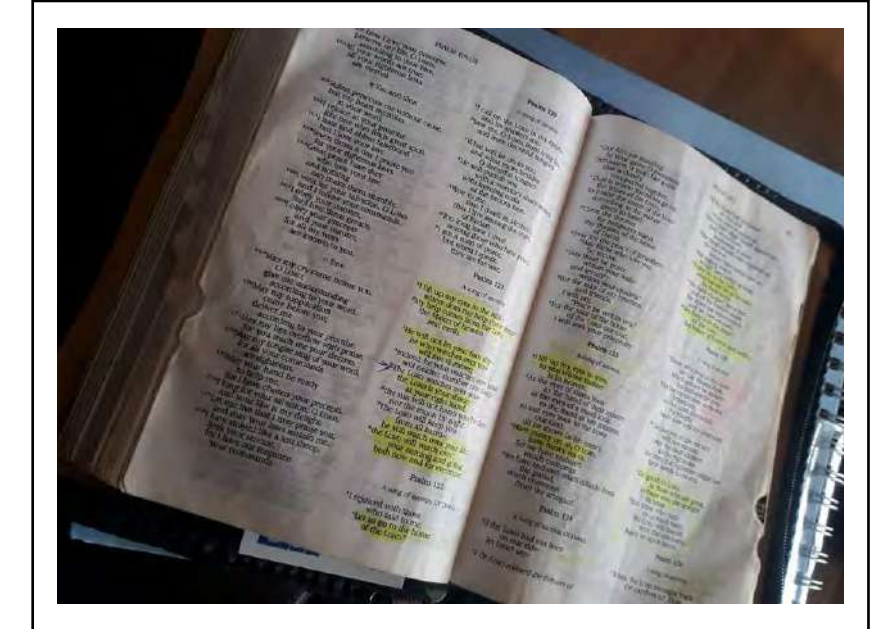
Dear older Veronica,

I look forward to meeting you with excitement and laughter as I have hope that you are going to do well, by God's grace. I hope that you finally embrace the call of leadership and influence that has been in your life since you were a young girl, with humility and strength. I hope that you learn and grow in service to humanity, animals and the environment. I hope that you fulfil your dream of challenging the status quo through creating and supporting development solutions, which will produce positive returns for Africa and the world at large.



## Three favourite things

1. My Bible. This is my greatest source of inspiration and influence. I read and seek to understand it more than any other book.



2. My journals: A great tool to record and reflect on my life's journey. It also acts as a great encouragement, I look back and see how far God has brought me.

3. My phone: I appreciate the fact that I can connect with my family and friends with ease, listen to good music from all over the world and read on any relevant topics.



*To me, Ubuntu means union, compassion and humanity. It means being part of a beautiful ecosystem where balance is only possible when the people around me and I share mutual respect and love.*

# VIVIANE NOBRE

**FROM:** MOZAMBIQUE | **DUTY STATION:** UNDP HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK

## My experience so far

I have been here for six months, and I am really enjoying both the city and the experience I am getting from my assignment. New York is a vibrant city that never leaves you bored, and it's also a melting pot where I can see and find bit of each corner of the world.

## My story

Something I wish more people knew about me is that I am a stubborn dreamer. They say with great power comes great responsibilities; I say with a great family comes great expectations. I come from a big African family and my relatives are good and loving, but very traditional in terms of roles and expectations for younger, and especially female, members of the family. As the middle sister, I was a good conflict manager by nature, and I was always very good at not giving up on my dreams and managing any storm that they would cause.

From a young age, I never conformed to what people expected from me. When I was 11, I skipped from sixth to seventh grade due to my academic performance and while I was warmly welcomed in my new classroom, I also had students coming from other classrooms just to

see the girl who skipped a grade. They would look at me, a short and skinny girl, laugh and tell me that I would not handle it and would fail. At the end of the year, I passed with the highest score in school.

My mother tried hard to convince me to study medicine, because it was her dream. It wasn't mine, so I challenged her and went to university to study what I really liked: psychology. I was lucky to nevertheless get her support. Towards the end of my undergraduate studies, I was accepted in a scholarship programme abroad and while some family members were against me going abroad by myself, I did it anyway.

After graduating, I started working in various roles. I was part of a graduate programme that did not want the graduates working and getting experience in a unit that was aligned to their studies. I challenged the decision and, in the end, convinced the manager that I was fit to work in HR. When I was 24, I left a "secure" job to get my master's degree abroad through a scholarship (an irrational decision in the eyes of some).

As a woman, people in my personal, academic and professional circles always had something to expect and assume of me, and I never gave them what they want. I think it is important for everybody, especially for us

women, to be true to ourselves, follow our hearts and not fear failure or getting up after a fall, as long as we're not harming others. If everybody in the world was doing this, there would be no one left with the time to expect things and put pressure on others.

### Challenges at work

I am very fortunate to work in an inclusive and enabling working environment, which helped me integrate very easily in my team and to do my job in the best way I can. For these reasons, there are honestly really few significant challenges I encounter along the way. If I had to indicate one, I would say that it is related to having a busy schedule and having to deal with a lot of priorities, which can be a lot sometimes. But it turns out I manage it like a pro.

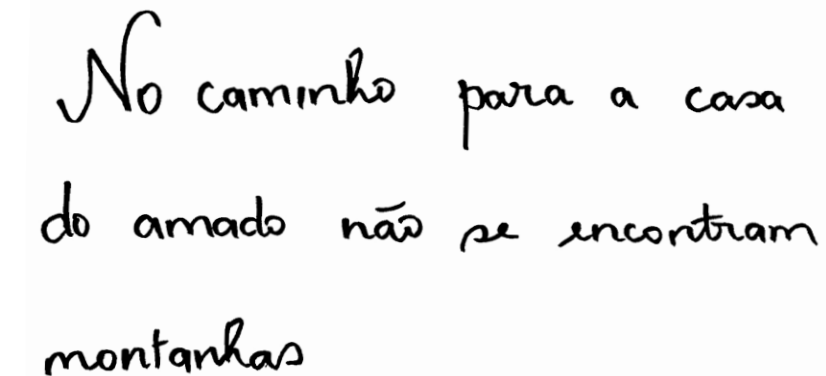
### My fellowship journey

This fellowship journey has taught me that I am a strong person with an elastic heart. It has been a journey of self-discovery and self-improvement that allowed me to explore new interests and discover qualities I didn't know I had before.

The fellowship has changed my way of viewing things and opened my mind to accepting and embracing new challenges and transforming them into opportunities. In the years after the fellowship, I want to focus on my career and affirm myself as an African young women leader. This experience has been wonderful and a stepping stone to my future aspirations. I am very thankful for the work experience I am acquiring, and the immense learning opportunities; from on-the-job learning to online learning resources, and an organized leadership training with the African Leadership Academy.

### My favourite African proverb

The proverb I picked is "No caminho para a casa do amado não se encontra montanhas", which is Portuguese for "There is no mountain in the way to your beloved's home". This proverb is not necessarily about a beloved person, it is also a metaphor for whatever we are passionate about. It reminds me that there is no obstacle that can't be overcome if we fight for what we love and believe.



No caminho para a casa  
do amado não se encontram  
montanhas

### A proud moment

The achievement I am most proud of in my life, to date, is this fellowship. It was very a competitive selection process, and I am very proud to have made it.

### Hopes and dreams

For myself: that I keep learning from my experiences and my mistakes, and that I keep inspiring others with the small things I do right. For my daughter(s) (if I ever have them): that they make the world their oyster, that they have curious minds, that they do not bend, and that they find happiness and pleasure in being world citizens. For all girls in Africa: That they dream big, follow their dreams, have their voices heard, and make both Africa and the world better places.

### A letter to myself

Dear future me,

I hope you are reading this in good health, with a happy mind and warm heart. I hope you did most of the things that you dream of, and that you have finished the book that you plan to start writing. I hope that you worked on your career goals, but also took the time to find balance with your personal life and do the things that make you happy. I am writing from a moment when everything seems uncertain for the near future after the fellowship, but I am still optimistic that I am going to do and achieve a lot of great things in life. Whatever your fate, I want you to know that I am very proud of what you have done so far, and I think you can still do much more. Trust yourself, the rest will come.

With love,

The young, insecure and less smart you

### Three favourite things

1. My autographed flag is a symbol and reminder of my first international experience for an exchange semester in the US. At the end of my exchange, I requested the people who were dear to me to sign and leave a message in my flag.



2. My silver crucifix. It belonged to my late maternal grandmother and was passed to me. I wear it most of the time.



3. My wooden necklace purchased in Rwanda. It resembles the necklace of Vixen, my favourite superhero in the DC universe. Vixen is a brave, young black and African woman from the Zambezi valley (where my ethnic tribe is from), and she is strong and resilient.



Abiba Issa Moussa  
Abigail Ceesay  
Adja Sy  
Atika Najar  
Ayak Wel  
Boitumelo Gabankitse  
Daizy Funjuh  
Daniela Nianduillet  
Datcha Byangoy  
Dominique Ngninpogni

Edda Neniwa  
Eleanor Ewi  
Elena Teixeira  
Elsie Too  
Esther Bansah  
Esther Mpagalile  
Franchesca Beru  
Ghadir Raghni  
Gloria Nyangiye

Gloria Kpinsoton  
Grace Vanderpuye  
Ines Djonzo  
Jemima Erasto  
Makeda Yeshaneh  
Mercy Nyamutswa  
Mona Moustafa  
Mumbe Mwangangi  
Nisrine Mbarki

Ntami Eborty  
Oratile Moloko  
Pearl Odigwe  
Priscilla Plat  
Rowan Ahmed  
Tamiwe Kayuni  
Tatenda Zvobgo  
Vanessa Akibate  
Veronica Otieno  
Viviane Nobre

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