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Strengthening Young Women's Civic Participation and Leadership in Uganda**

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My name is Rehmah Kasule, I am a youth and gender development specialist from Uganda and currently a fellow at Harvard University with the Advanced Leadership Initiative.

Growing up in a community with strong patriarchal cultural and religious gender dis-empowering practices, I was always told to “shut up”, yes, not keep quiet. And I refused to. My mother was always embarrassed with a child like me who never followed the social norms. Just like me, millions of girls and women around the world don't have a voice, their opinions are not heard, they are not engaged in decision-making and don't participate in community activities.

We know that history is influenced by those that are writing it and too often women were not seen as change agents, as engaged leaders and as catalysts for development in their communities. Never the less, feminist scholarship has continually uncovered women who are playing pivotal roles in various fields and professions, those who may not have been given credit but who have shaped the world.

In the 21st century, we have moved beyond the imaginability of women leaders to the endowment, empowerment and to engagement of those women on a global scale. As Bell Hocks says “sometimes people try to destroy you, precisely because they recognise your power, not because they don't see it, but because they see it and they don't want it to exist.

Our partnership with UNDEF enabled us to empower and accelerate young women's leadership by engaging them to actively take charge of their lives and lead change in their communities. We multiplied faces and amplified voices of young women in civic, electoral and democratic processes in Uganda. Strengthening young women's leadership and civic participation project in Uganda directly worked with 1,500 young university women and mentored 50 women members of Parliament. We raised awareness about voting as a human right, built leadership capacities of young women to confidently run for public offices, built strong supportive networks for peer learning and mentorship; and we created platforms for self-expression. Young women have a voice to speak out, speak up, to question and hold their leaders accountable.

A great philosopher said that “You can ignore 100 sheep crossing the road, but not two lions seated by the road side.” Young women have become those two lions. Young women now have a voice to speak out, speak up, to question and hold their leaders accountable.

To share some statistics, 78% of the population in Uganda is below 30 years. Out of those, 65% of are voting age, moreover only 20% were interested in voting. Our work contributed to the 55% rise in young voters in 2016 general elections.

Personally, I strongly believe in the power of collective action and community of practice. We therefore must *empower women to use their power to empower other women*. In our work, we emphasize that as a woman goes up, she must lift 2 other women with her. This is one of the ways we shall drive social change, economic development and political participation.

Eleanor Roosevelt said that: The future belongs to those that believe in the power of their dreams. We know that when women lead, change happens; women's voices will be heard, from the valleys to mountain tops. Our voices will rise higher and higher to transcend borders and change trajectories, one woman at a time.

I know the time is now to re-write the narrative about gender roles, participation, representation and engagement that will close the gender gaps. My question to you all is, if not now, then when? And this will take ordinary women like you and I to do it. So join me in multiplying faces and amplifying voices of young women around the world. I always say a woman alone has power; collectively we have impact.

I know I can't do this alone. Like the African proverbs:

"The night sky is never lit by one bright star, it is lit by the billions of stars that come together. If you walk alone, you go fast. When you take others, you go far."

Let's hold hands as we boldly walk into the future. Thank you very much.