White House #YALICHAT on Entrepreneurship in Africa

On Monday, March 30, YALI Network members will have an exclusive opportunity to speak with senior White House and other U.S. government officials and American entrepreneurs about entrepreneurship in Africa. The conversation will start at 13:00 UTC on Twitter and will feature the announcement of the location for the 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Summit.

Last year, during the historic U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, President Obama announced that the 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Summit will be held for the first time in sub-Saharan Africa.

Will the 2015 summit be in your country? What opportunities are available to entrepreneurs in your country? Join the chat on Twitter with #StartTheSpark to find out! Follow the conversation with @YALINetwork at 12:00 CVT / 13:00 GMT / 14:00 WAT / 15:00 CAT/SAST / 16:00 EAT / 17:00 SCT/MUT.

What is the Global Entrepreneurship Summit?

The Global Entrepreneurship Summit is an annual gathering that gives emerging entrepreneurs a unique opportunity to pitch to new investors, gain expert insights and connect with one another.

Launched by President Obama in 2009, the annual summit has grown to include high-level meetings and networking events, strategic workshops and pitch competitions. It's a chance to celebrate startups and unlock the world's economic potential.

Last year's summit was held in Morocco and this summer it will take place for the first time in sub-Saharan Africa. The summit mixes entrepreneurs, mentors, investors and policymakers. This year, YALI Network members will have a unique opportunity to participate, too.

Why does the United States care about entrepreneurship?

As Secretary Kerry said, "The United States has learned through its own experience that entrepreneurship is an essential driver of prosperity and of freedom." Entrepreneurs create opportunities for themselves and others. They unlock economic growth, create jobs and empower entire nations. Perhaps more importantly, they often find solutions to social problems.

Somewhere in the world right now, there's a startup developing a new source of clean energy, another working toward a smarter electric grid and still another devising an improved way to store all that energy. The United States wants to help them transform these ideas into successful and sustainable ventures, and thus transform the world.

What is the United States doing to support entrepreneurship abroad?

The YALI Network represents just one way the United States supports entrepreneurship abroad.

Through the president's Spark Global Entrepreneurship initiative, the U.S. government has set an ambitious goal to attract more than a billion dollars in new investments to support business and

social entrepreneurs by the end of 2017. Half will be raised for women and young entrepreneurs (those under 35). These initiatives include top programs such as the Global Entrepreneurship Summit, the President's Ambassadors for Global Entrepreneurship (PAGE), the Young African Leaders Initiative, the African Women's Entrepreneurship Program (AWEP), and the entrepreneurship work of USAID's Global Development Lab.

As we expand these efforts, the United States will continue to work with other countries, businesses and nonprofit organizations to find new ways to light the world's entrepreneurial spark.

Why is entrepreneurship important in Africa?

Entrepreneurship helps lift economies and solve problems. YALI Network members prove this every day.

In Kenya, a YALI Network member has created a shoe insert that generates and stores power. Just an 800-meter walk with the Hatua charger sole insert can fully charge a mobile phone or other small, electronic device, saving wearers the burden of unreliable or unaffordable electricity.

In Ghana, a YALI Network member is reducing waste, promoting environmental conservation and empowering women through his Trash4Books initiative. Trash4Books Ghana teaches women to make products such as woven baskets from recycled plastic, then sell them for a profit.

And in Zimbabwe, another YALI Network member has developed a mobile-phone application to help aspiring drivers pass their provisional driver's license test. Called VIDapp, the application saves users the trouble of carrying books and has potential for other educational purposes.

Entrepreneurs are transforming Africa, one startup at a time.

What Role Will You Play?

By: Alvin Allgood

I am proud to have this opportunity to engage with you all and look forward to our #YALICHAT on investing in women and girls.

Alvin Allgood is the chief operating officer of Vital Voices. He has more than 25 years of leadership and management experience.

Everyone has a role to play when it comes to investing in women and girls. I believe that your generation has already made a mark. You're known for your curiosity, creativity and refusal to

accept systems that no longer work. You see problems and you fearlessly work to create solutions. You use technology to relate in ways we couldn't have imagined even 10 years ago. You aren't bound by convention, and you're not satisfied with just accumulating wealth or power. Maybe more than any generation that's come before you, you're motivated to contribute to the larger social good — to do well while doing good.

It's this motivation that convinces the rest of us that you will improve on the world you're inheriting, and solve some of the biggest problems we face.

This month the world turns its attention to one of the greatest challenges of our time: the universal inequality that keeps women and girls from achieving their full potential. Each March on International Women's Day, global organizations, national officials and local leaders recommit to investing in solutions that work. At Vital Voices, this is what we do each and every day.

For more than 18 years, Vital Voices has been investing in women leaders who improve the world. We find women who have a vision for a better world and demonstrate leadership that unites and inspires others. Then we partner with them to help make that vision a reality.

We work with leaders in three key areas: human rights, economic opportunity, and political and public leadership. These women are in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

We make long-term investments in each leader and design programs that offer practical skills and services. We connect them with expert advisers for mentoring and collaboration, and support them in telling their stories and sharing their perspectives.

Together, these interventions increase a leader's capacity and expand her access to opportunity. They enable a leader to accelerate the impact she is having on the ground, realize her vision, and improve not just her community, but the world beyond.

As a member of the YALI Network, you're linked to more than 130,000 of your peers. You're part of a community with the potential to educate, motivate and have a lasting impact — both online and off.

I know firsthand the power of a network like yours. Throughout my career, I've seen what a determined group of leaders can achieve when they work together toward a shared goal. Before joining Vital Voices, I spent more than 20 years in the education sector innovating, improving and expanding educational services to prevent dropouts and create solutions around problems that have put our youth at risk. This was only possible through collaboration.

Through his work with Vital Voices, Allgood is helping to create a global network of women leaders.

What we see every day at Vital Voices is that real leadership leads to collective empowerment. Every woman leader we invest in makes it her mission to reinvest in the rising generation. By sharing access, information and opportunity, the women we partner with are empowering other women and girls. It's this collaboration and cycle of impact that improves communities around the world.

When you consider making a pledge to invest in women and girls, look first to your fellow network members and think about what you can achieve together.

As you work to strengthen and expand your various entrepreneurial ventures, I urge you to leverage the networks and technology you have available to make ambitious pledges to empower the women and girls in your communities.

I look forward to reading your comments and answering any questions you have during the #YALICHAT.

Alvin Allgood is the chief operating officer of Vital Voices. He has more than 25 years of leadership and management experience, particularly in the education sector. Mr. Allgood is a veteran of the U.S. Army and has earned a bachelor's degree in advertising and public relations as well as a master's degree in organizational management.

Highlights from a #YALICHAT with Ambassador Cathy Russell

U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Cathy Russell held a Twitter chat with the YALI Network on Wednesday, March 18th to talk about challenges facing women in Africa and to support the #Africa4Her pledge.

> *Hi everyone! I'm excited to talk with you about investing in women and girls today. #YALICHAT #Africa4Her pic.twitter.com/Lp9sOxtPgw*
>
> *— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015*

Ambassador Russell started with a question for the YALI Network…

> *What are some challenges you see young women facing in your communities? #YALICHAT #Africa4Her*
>
> *— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015*

And received some critical answers:

@AmbCathyRussell Some of the challenges include unemployment, education and early marriages #YALICHAT #Africa4Her

— Dorcas Aba Annan (@NABAFOUNDATION) March 18, 2015

The situation I see it worrying is teenage pregnancy in Ghana, especially the fishing communities. #Yalichat #Africa4Her

— #MGWV Nana Yaw (@nayakjnr) March 18, 2015

We have very few women proficient in IT (I.C.T.) in Ghana. At my workplace, I share much IT skills/protocols with them #Africa4Her #YALICHAT

— Sam Adzaka (@samdzaka) March 18, 2015

@AmbCathyRussell @YALINetwork unless married, a woman is never taken seriously #YALICHAT #Africa4Her

— Afro Ginger (@cathychansa) March 18, 2015

What was ur biggest challenge & how did you overcome it ? & be where you are right now. @AmbCathyRussell #YALICHAT @YALINetwork #Africa4her

— Frehiwot Negash (@FrehiwotNG) March 18, 2015

@FrehiwotNG It can be uncomfortable to be in the spotlight. But I've found it's worth it to be out there to support women & girls. YALICHAT

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

.@AmbCathyRussell in what specific ways can we educate men & children on respecting &

supporting women's rights? @YALINetwork #YALICHAT

— EAWi (@EAWinitiative) March 18, 2015

@EAWinitiative @YALINetwork 1/2 Need to remember that women's rights are human rights and that women are drivers of change. #YALICHAT

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

@EAWinitiative 2/2 We can also recognize the traditional role women already play as leaders in communities and families. #YALICHAT

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

@AmbCathyRussell @YALINetwork #YALICHAT how can a developing nation best address gender stereotypes? Especially in young peoples.

— Jack Kafwanka (@Rjkafwanka) March 16, 2015

@Rjkafwanka @YALINetwork Education/opportunity are key & recognizing the many ways women contribute to stability/econ growth #YALICHAT

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

@YALINetwork @AmbCathyRussell please let us know your advices upon how men can engage to respect women right?

— colomba (@letlubero) March 16, 2015

@letlubero Men and boys are critical allies to advancing rights of women/girls. We cannot do this alone. #YALIchat.

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

@letlubero @YALINetwork Men can stand up against violence, discrimination & support girls education. #YALICHAT

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

@YALINetwork @AmbCathyRussell What is your recommendation on combating #GBV as you are working globally on women issue? #YALICHAT

— Frehiwot Negash (@FrehiwotNG) March 17, 2015

@FrehiwotNG We have to approach it holistically by addressing health, education, legal reform, enforcement, econ empowerment. #YALICHAT

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

@FrehiwotNG We also need to encourage men & boys to take an active role in preventing #GBV. #YALICHAT

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

@YALINetwork @AmbCathyRussell focus is as an African woman in Kenya how accessible are jobs as opposed to starting a business ?

— Brenda Kemunto (@bkemunto) March 18, 2015

@bkemunto Our AWEP-WECREATE centers in Africa will support wmn entrepreneurs, hopefully createa new jobs. http://t.co/1yZTuzgKKf #yalichat

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

Ambassador Russell signed off with a pledge to the YALI Network

Thank you so much for all your great questions and for sharing how women face challenges in your communities. #yalichat

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

I'm proud to take the #Africa4Her pledge to invest in women and girls. #YALICHAT #LetGirlsLearn pic.twitter.com/74AubUsSbz

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

Join me in pledging to invest in women and girls today –> https://t.co/S53vPbONXP #yalichat #Africa4Her

— Cathy Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) March 18, 2015

The YALI Network looks forward to more #YALICHATS with Ambassador Russell!

#YALICHAT @YALINetwork Thank you YALI for an interesting chat with Ambassador Cathy Russell. Looking forward to more brainstorming chats.

— Hadiza Idris (@tweetdijenow) March 18, 2015

@bflowmusic continue with that spirit bro empowering women #yalichat

— Mercy Bandaras (@Mercymimiz) March 18, 2015

Mentors Help Guide Entrepreneur's Businesses

Cynthia

Nigerian entrepreneur Cynthia proved that there is financial and environmental value in cassava peels.

A finalist in the 2014 Global Innovation through Science and Technology competition and a YALI Network member, Cynthia developed a way to convert cassava peels into nutritious goat feed. Farmers had perceived the peels as a useless byproduct and burned them as a cheap way of disposal. But that practice releases harmful pollutants into the atmosphere.

Nigeria is the world's largest producer of cassava, each year growing 40 metric tons and generating 12 million metric tons of peels. When burned, those peels release more than 10 million tons of toxic

carbon monoxide in the air.

Cynthia's solution to the problem begins with a simple platform on which peels are dried. The dried peels are packaged and sold as a healthy goat feed. By selling both food products derived from the cassava tuber and animal feed, farmers can utilize 100 percent of their plants and boost their incomes. "This is something the community embraces with joy and excitement," Cynthia says.

In 2013, Cynthia, 24, founded the social enterprise Kadosh Production Company in Delta state to recycle cassava waste. The venture also helps small-scale farmers get credit so they can purchase drying platforms, and it links cassava growers and processors with goat-farmer customers. With an eye set on expansion to other countries, Cynthia says she hopes her business will grow to be "a major influence in the Nigerian economy and Africa at large."

Cynthia has a bachelor's degree in textile science and polymer technology and a master's in business administration from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria. She says that since she was young, her parents have inspired her to go into business.

Further inspiration came later when Cynthia volunteered to work for a year at a woman-owned bakery "to learn how to run a business of my own." At the bakery she learned about the challenges associated with running a business and how to handle those challenges. The experience "made me confident that I could run my own business," she says.

Cynthia received further business advice from a U.S. mentor — a former United Parcel Service executive. Gary Mastro is one of many experienced businesspeople MicroMentor has matched with young entrepreneurs around the world. MicroMentor is an initiative of the nonprofit humanitarian group Mercy Corps based in Oregon. More than half of the entrepreneurs who request its help are from outside the United States, the group notes.

Cynthia, center, stands with some of the entrepreneurs she has mentored and their supporters.

Cynthia's first venture was a liquid soap company called EverGlow that makes an affordable, hygienic alternative to bar soap. "Gary is a pillar in my business and a man I respect so much," she says.

And now Cynthia is a mentor herself. In 2013 she founded Confident Women to mentor young women and teach them about home management, family relationships and how to make liquid soap so they could start their own small-scale businesses. The businesswoman later changed the name of Confident Women to the CAMY Foundation after collaborating with a partner in Zimbabwe who wanted a similar mentoring model in her country. CAMY Foundation now has more than 450 women members in Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

Cynthia says she communicates regularly with other YALI Network members who tell her about what is happening in other countries and let her "see the great work young leaders like me are doing."

"This encourages me a lot to keep up the work and never give up so we can have a better future."

She adds that she learns a lot from the ongoing YALIChat Twitter conversation.

Cynthia encourages other YALI Network members and potential members to “maximize the opportunities from YALI Network” and to “be a change in their society.”

Learn more about the GIST Tech-I business pitch competition.

#YALICHAT with the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues, Cathy Russell

Cathy Russell serves as the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues. Previously she served at the White House, coordinating the development of the Obama Administration’s strategy to prevent and respond to gender-based violence globally. Join Ambassador Russell (@AmbCathyRussell) for a Twitter #YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 18th at 13:00 UTC. Additional details below.

Ambassador Russell visits girls at a school in Zambia

As young African leaders and followers of the YALI Network, you already know that the United States invests in women and girls because it’s the right thing to do for gender equality and the smart thing to do for our foreign policy.

When policies and programs consider women and girls, they’re more successful. They promote stronger democracies and more durable peace agreements. They increase food security and make for healthier families. They improve public service delivery. And they lead to fewer conflicts and

more rapidly growing economies.

As the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, it's my job to work with my colleagues across the U.S. government and with leaders around the world to advance the status of women and girls worldwide. Every day I talk with government officials, world leaders, and women and girls around the world about how women have contributed to global progress and why we need to break the barriers keeping women and girls from fully participating in society.

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of presenting ten women from ten countries with the Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Award. These women, including Marie Claire Tchecola from Guinea and Beatrice Epaye from the Central African Republic, have shown exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for women's rights and empowerment.

As an emergency room nurse in Guinea, Marie Claire Tchecola has been on the front lines of the fight against Ebola. When she became infected with the Ebola virus, she took precautions to protect other workers and her family from contracting the disease – and when she recovered, she went back to work. Through her leadership in the Ebola Survivors Association of Guinea, Marie Claire continues to spread awareness about the disease and fight the stigma associated with its survivors.

When Seleka rebels stormed the streets of Bangui and overtook the Central African Republic's capital, one of their first stops was the office of Beatrice Epaye, an outspoken activist who raised her voice to condemn the horrors of civil war and to call for peace, human rights, and good governance. Refusing to be intimidated, Beatrice took to the radio and met with local and international organizations, eventually becoming the president of the Preparatory Committee for the National Dialogue.

Ms. Tchecola and Ms. Epaye are proof of how women can and do transform societies with little fanfare through their everyday actions. Yet in every country – from Guinea to Germany to Guatemala – women and girls face challenges and barriers that keep them from fully participating. A family may choose to send a son, but not a daughter, to school because there's only enough money for one child's fees. A woman may be kept from launching a new business because she can't access capital. Or bias and stereotypes about women's roles in society will keep a woman from her rightful seat at the peacekeeping table or in Parliament.

It will take all of us – men and women, boys and girls – to achieve the progress we need to unleash the power of women and girls. But if every one of us takes action, we can break down these barriers and open doors for women and girls of courage.

I urge you all, both my fellow women and our male allies, to take the #Africa4Her pledge and tell us how you will invest in women and girls. Show us how you will raise, educate, protect, support, mentor, and elevate the many women and girls of courage in your life.

Join the YALICHAT on Wednesday, March 18th at:

12:00-13:00 Cape Verde Time (CVT)
13:00-14:00 UTC/GMT
14:00-15:00 West Africa Time (WAT)
15:00-16:00 Central Africa (CAT) and South Africa Standard Time (SAST)

18:00-19:00 Eastern Africa Time (EAT)
19:00-20:00 Seychelles and Mauritius (SCT/MUT)

Eco-Pads Keep Girls in School

Lucy Athieno

Taking advantage of a morning break between classes in Buteba, Uganda, then-13-year-old Lucy Athieno set off to play with friends. Then she heard some boys shouting at her.

She looked down and saw a blotch of red on her otherwise clean uniform. Embarrassed, she quickly sat down. It was the only way to stop the boys from making fun of her. After all the other students had gone, she got up and went home. She did not return to school.

Many girls in low-income communities drop out of school when menstruation begins because they lack information and hygienic material to use.

Days went by before Athieno shared her experience with her late mother's friend. The woman told her to continue using rags and to throw them away after use. She said, "Nobody should see your blood. It is taboo."

A year later, Athieno was adopted by an aunt who bought Athieno her first sanitary pads. The gift of pads made the young woman realize that the "problem" of menstruation was not unique to her. The aunt also persuaded Athieno to return to school.

When she got to secondary school, Athieno — a 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow and YALI Network member — suggested to a teacher that they cut pieces of cloth and give them to other girls. She believed all girls should have the right to good health and education and not be hindered by what is a normal biological process. But the teacher considered the idea peculiar.

Convinced that her idea was realistic and desperately needed, Athieno carried it through to university. In her second year at Makerere University in 2010, she began to volunteer with a women's organization and was convinced her cause was justifiable. "Many girls were using rags or leaves or sitting in the sand during menstruation," she says.

Lucy Athieno makes reusable sanitary Eco-Pads to support retention of girls in school.

As part of her volunteer work, she went to Kenya where she found an organization that was distributing sanitary pads to girls. Returning to Uganda, she purchased bed sheet material and cut it

into pieces and thought, “What if I inserted something between two layers of this material – something that would absorb the blood?”

She experimented with different types of cloth pads until she settled on one that was washable, comfortable and reliable. “These pads are reusable for at least one year, making them not only affordable but environmentally friendly,” she says, adding that the pads help young women return to and stay in school. One year’s supply of pads cost just $3, she notes.

Now 30, Athieno has bought four sewing machines to make pads that have helped hundreds of Ugandan girls. In 2013, she founded Aluta Holdings, which holds rights for the reusable “Eco-Pads.” She wants to expand access to the product to other countries.

So far, Aluta has provided pads to more than 400 girls. Meanwhile, Athieno has mentored 200 girls, encouraging them to stay in school.

“I want to impact the whole of Africa,” she says.

Closing Technology Gaps in Burkina Faso

Francine Legma didn’t take her secondary school math teacher’s advice. Instead she followed her instincts.

Francine Legma wants to close technology gaps in her home country of Burkina Faso.

Legma earned poor grades in math and physics, so her teacher advised her to study literature “because it would be easier for me than scientific studies,” she says. But the 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow and YALI Network member from Ouagadougou knew that studying science would lead to a better future.

With the support of her father, a university chemistry professor, Legma pursued the more challenging field and eventually earned a baccalaureate in science and mathematics. With a scholarship from the government of Burkina Faso, she went on to earn a bachelor’s degree in computer science from the Institiut d’Ingénierie Informatique in Limoges, France, and a master’s degree in international commerce from Icoges in Paris.

“Like my mother, my father never put in our minds that a woman is less intelligent than a man,” Legma notes, adding that both her parents stressed hard work, integrity and motivation in pursuit of any goal. “My parents have been the fuel of my inspiration,” she says.

Now 35, Legma serves as an information technology project manager at Burkina Faso’s national

telecommunications company, Onatel. Through the company, she launched mobile payment, postpaid and customer loyalty systems.

She frequently participates in online discussions about technology "gaps." One is between developed and developing countries in telecommunications infrastructure, telecommunications law and Internet access. Another is between women's and men's use of new technologies.

Legma, center, teaches a group of young women about computer applications.

As a response to the latter concern, Legma started the nonprofit group Femmes et Tic, which aims to educate young girls and women on the opportunities of the Internet and new technologies, and to raise awareness about the dangers and risks of their misuse.

Next on Legma's agenda are plans for a summer "tech camp." The camp will teach girls how to use the Internet, give oral presentations and hone their leadership skills. She has enlisted local schools and universities to help her develop the curriculum and is looking for other partners to help her acquire computers and other equipment.

Legma says she would like to add more technology classes for women and girls but is restricted by the limited number of skilled volunteer instructors. She hopes that other YALI Network members might be interested in becoming volunteer trainers. Potential trainers can find out more on the Femmes et Tic website.

"For me, trained girls and women is a must if I really want to contribute to change in a better way in my country," she says.

#YALIVotes: Join Your Community

"May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears"

« Que vos choix reflètent vos espoirs, non vos peurs. »

- Nelson Mandela

Credit: AP Images

Africa is rising and Africa is voting. In the coming months, many Africans across the continent will be heading to the polls. These elections are important not just for you and your country, but for the

entire continent of Africa and across the globe. Elections are the fundamental means by which citizens connect to their government and the world – but your responsibility and opportunity doesn't stop there. As young leaders, you can show the importance of participating in elections and staying actively engaged in civic life after the polls close, to make your voice heard.

Credit: AP Images

L'Afrique est en pleine croissance et l'Afrique vote. Au cours des prochains mois, beaucoup d'Africains se rendront aux urnes. Ces élections sont importantes non seulement pour vous et votre pays, mais aussi pour tout le continent et le monde. Les élections constituent le lien fondamental entre les citoyens et leur gouvernement, d'une part, et le monde, d'autre part mais votre responsabilité ne s'arrête pas là. Vous, jeunes leaders, vous pouvez vous faire entendre en montrant combien il est important de participer aux élections et en restant activement engagés dans la vie civique, même après la fermeture des bureaux de vote.

Show your community that #YALIVotes to bring about a more prosperous, democratic and peaceful Africa. Tweet or share on Facebook what you believe is important about Africa's upcoming elections by filling in the blank: "#YALIVotes because _____."

Montrez autour de vous que la communauté YALI est prête à voter pour rendre l'Afrique plus prospère, démocratique et pacifique. Tweetez et partagez sur Facebook ce qui vous paraît important dans les prochaines élections en complétant la phrase : « #YALIVOTES parce que_____ ».

Read more about the importance of elections and democracy:

Nigerian YALI Member Stands Up to Violence
To Get Change, Vote
Afrobarometer Tracks Opinion and Democratic Trends
#YALICHAT: Engaging Youth in the Democratic Process
Civil Society: At the Core of Democracy and Human Nature
How to Launch Women into Political Leadership
Candidate Debates Are Centerpiece of Democracy: 1 of 3
Organize a Candidate Debate: 2 of 3
Partner With the Media: 3 of 3

#YALIVotes Tweets

ENGAGE WITH US:

Follow @YALINetwork

#YALIVotes is a campaign of the Bureau of International Information Programs in the U.S. Department of State for the Young African Leaders Initiative Network in Africa.

Nigerian Seeks Justice Against Domestic Abuse

> *"The change we so desire in the world today starts with each one of us. Don't give up."*

— Naomi Osemedua

Naomi Osemedua says it should be easier for women to speak out about gender violence.

"Victims are afraid to come out and talk, as they are afraid of stigmatization," she explains. "They are afraid that when they come out people will say they are useless or that whatever happened to them was their fault.

Naomi Osemedua, center, stands up for justice with fellow anti-abuse advocates in Abuja, Nigeria.

As in many cultures, women in Nigeria are often blamed for their own abuse, with critics suggesting their clothes or appearance provoked the assault or violence. Osemedua, a YALI Network member, founded the Nigerian branch of Making a Difference (M.A.D.) Positive International in Abuja in 2011 to break the silence surrounding sexual abuse and domestic violence. The organization's work extends beyond the capital city to Lagos and Abeokuta and to the rural areas of Kwara, Delta and Rivers states.

Osemedua, 36 and an abuse victim herself, has positive messages for women and youth — that they can become agents for social change.

"We must not talk alone but create action," she says.

The advocate constantly responds to requests for information about abuse and provides inspiration to help stop it. She regularly appears as a guest on local radio programs using passion and humor when talking about abuse, girls' education and other women's issues. She reaches out to women and girls, men and boys through social media as well as public and private partner organizations like WellBeing Foundation Africa, Project Pink Blue and GenVoices.

Although Osemedua estimates that so far those efforts have reached more than 10,000 women, it's not enough.

"It has been overwhelming because when you think you have started, you discover that you have not even scratched the surface," she explains.

Through M.A.D., in 2014 Osemedua helped organize Nigeria's "1 Billion Rising for Justice" event to demand justice for women who have been sexually assaulted. Organizers of the event, which happened on February 14 in cities around the world, proclaimed, "I refuse to stand by as more than 1 billion women experience violence. … I am rising for justice."

In Abuja people danced to the words of the "1 Billion Rising for Justice" anthem, which includes these words: "I can see a world where we all live, safe and free from all oppression. No more rape or incest or abuse. Women are not a possession."

Osemedua is confident that change is on the horizon and that gender-based violence will end. "It may take time, but it will be worth the wait as people are searching for sincere and genuine change-makers," she says.

Naomi Osemedua, right, is interviewed by a member of the local media in Abuja, Nigeria.

Osemedua contributes to her community in other ways. The YALI Network member is active in the government's YouWin! Program, serving as a volunteer mentor for entrepreneurs ages 18 to 45. She also works with with a leadership academy for girls ages 10 to 14 that focuses on leadership development. She says her work with the academy has been fulfilling.

"The work is important because these young girls will be the leaders of tomorrow, and there is no telling how far the impact will go. We believe that one girl can change the world."

"Other YALI network members can help girls in their communities by mentoring them. Even if it is just one girl at a time. … with one girl, over time much can be achieved," she adds. "We hope that through our work with these girls that each one of them will indeed have a sense of true leadership and settle for nothing less than the best that they can be."

One of five siblings, the new mother credits her father with being her "greatest supporter and inspiration. She says her father "continually lavished love and affection on all of us … [and] made sure we had the best education."

Osemedua says she has been "greatly inspired" by the YALI Network. "Just reading about all the great stuff others are doing makes me want to do more for my community and the world."

A video of Nigeria's 2014 1 Billion Rising for Justice dance event is available on YouTube. The song's lyrics are available on the 1 Billion Rising for Justice website.

First Lady, Peace Corps Join to ‘Let Girls Learn’

> *“When girls have a chance to learn, they raise healthier families, earn higher salaries, they contribute more to their nation’s economy.”*

— First lady Michelle Obama

> *“Every girl matters, and when she is given the opportunity to get an education, everyone in her life benefits.”*

— Peace Corps Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet

Ugandan students read at school. USAID aims to improve equitable access to education.

U.S. first lady Michelle Obama and the Peace Corps have joined to help girls around the world “get the education they deserve.”

Globally, 62 million girls are not in school. Millions more are fighting to stay there. They often face harassment, discrimination, threats and violence just to get an education. And even when girls reach school, they may not have adequate materials to help them learn to read, write and do basic math.

“That just doesn’t limit their prospects, leaving them more vulnerable to poverty, violence and disease, it limits the prospects of their families and their countries,” Obama said in announcing the White House–Peace Corps “Let Girls Learn” collaboration March 3.

According to the White House, girls’ attendance in secondary school is linked to later marriage, later childbearing, lower maternal and infant mortality rates, lower birthrates and lower rates of HIV/AIDS. The World Bank reports that every year of secondary school education increases a girl’s future earning power by 18 percent.

“When girls have a chance to learn, they raise healthier families, earn higher salaries, they contribute more to their nation’s economy,” the first lady said.

Let Girls Learn will empower local leaders to put lasting solutions in place. Peace Corps volunteers who live and work at the grass-roots level will serve as catalysts of community-led change.

In the collaboration’s first year, Let Girls Learn will target 11 countries, six of them in Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mozambique, Togo and Uganda.

In Togo, 69 percent of adolescent girls do not complete primary school because of lack of funds for

tuition, school supplies and uniforms. In Burkina Faso, 28 percent of girls give birth before the age of 18, interrupting school attendance. In Ghana, more than half of adolescent girls believe that domestic violence is justifiable, a belief that can be countered with education. In Mozambique, just 37 percent of adolescent girls have comprehensive knowledge of HIV prevention, putting them at risk.

From helping to start a school library to organizing a technology camp for girls, this collaboration will bring increased focus and resources to the issue of girls' education.

The new collaboration extends the existing Let Girls Learn initiative launched by the U.S. Agency for International Development in 2014. USAID focuses on ensuring that girls and boys can safely enroll and learn in schools and that all children leave school with the skills they will need to thrive. USAID works to improve teaching techniques and learning materials; support regular assessments of reading skills; maximize classroom instruction time spent on basic skills, especially reading; support instruction in native languages; and promote parent and community involvement in education.

As USAID Chief Strategy Officer Carla Koppell says, "Because an educated girl is a force for change, she is the leader and peacemaker of tomorrow."

A video of Michelle Obama speaking about Let Girls Learn is available on YouTube.