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Voices of African Womxn

Perspective Paper II

Collateral Benefits

Perspective Paper II: Voices of African Womxn

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Collateral Benefits is a platform that through a series of Perspective Papers aims to lift up the voices of African and Afro-descendant people from all walks of life, so that African and Afro-descendant intellect, wisdom and experiences can contribute to and shape the global conversations on the critical issues of our time.

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Foreword

Returning to our pre-pandemic world is not what we should aspire to; we cannot and must not. COVID-19 provides a unique shared experience – all of humanity, forced to face a common challenge that emphasises our deep interconnections – what do we want to be different going forward?

Our perspective papers are an opportunity to reflect on this question, and in particular, to include African perspectives in the global conversation about what COVID-19 means and can mean for the future. In this moment of challenge and disruption, there is potential for radical transformation. It is this sense of possibility that is at the core of Collateral Benefits.

Perspective Paper II is not an exhaustive account, but it is an invitation to a broader, more inclusive conversation that centres the voices of African and Afro-descendant womxn and their experiences, aspirations and actions during this tumultuous year

The 40 womxn who contributed to this paper share thoughtful accounts, not just of the unique way this pandemic is impacting womxn, but also the ways forward they see, in moving towards the Africa we want.

Their voices of transformation span seven major themes:

- Justice and gender-based violence
- Race, racism and belonging
- Culture, narratives and representation
- Innovation, technology and science
- Business and entrepreneurship
- Power and inequality
- Rest, resilience and mental health

That these were the themes to emerge is not surprising given the events that have shaped 2020. We hope that this sparks inspiration and action for you.

The pandemic pressure cooker brought to the surface so many issues and inequalities that we have faced for too long. It has called into question many of our assumptions about how the world has to be, allowing us to find opportunity spaces that were not possible before.

We are deeply grateful to the womxn who have shared their vision and voices with us. Onwards to the possibilities that the future holds for African womxn everywhere!

Sarah J Owusu
Lead Editor, Perspective Paper II

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Justice and gender-based violence

To bloom without fear we need justice for all womxn

#genderbasedviolence #justice

[a version of this perspective was first published by [New African](#)]

Josina Z. Machel (*Mozambique, South Africa*) is a well-known Women Human Rights Defender. Following a horrific domestic violence attack that left her blind in one eye, she founded the Kuhluka Movement, a non-profit initiative that empowers women survivors of gender-based violence, to which she dedicates her life.

I trace my left eye across the horizon of humanity, watching the trend unfold. For African womxn resisting violence, we are swiftly becoming dust that falls through the cracks of the systems meant to protect us. As the rocks of society, a collective call for an end to gender-based violence is our only mandate.

Mountains are formed when the pain of eruption transforms into purpose. We are existing in unprecedented times, leaning on the edge of the cliff called humanity, faith fading in the justice and health systems which have failed not only myself, but every Mozambican womxn and every African womxn. Perpetrators and all those complicit, operate with impunity in every home and on every street corner without eyes and ears in our favour.

If we successfully carry out the campaign to achieve Justice 4 All Womxn, we will shift the narrative by confronting our judicial systems that so often side with the aggressors. **We have power in numbers with our brothers and sisters across the continent and we will not rest until every judicial system is transformed to take a victim and survivor centred approach.**

The gender-based violence (GBV) pandemic in Africa is man-made and rampant, tainting every thread in the fabric of our societies. It is only fitting that my cry out echoes as Kuhluka, calling on a rebirth to ensure the safety and survival of every African Womxn. It is time to begin again and open up to an Africa where our daughters are born to bloom.

Dismantling patriarchy through focused action and solidarity

#genderbasedviolence #justice #patriarchy

Audrey Mugeni M (*Kenya*) is a feminist and Program Lead for the Young Changemakers Program at Akili Dada, a program working with adolescent girls in Secondary Schools.

According to [Human Rights Watch](#), violence against women and girls in Kenya is a daily reality: 45% of women and girls aged between 15-49 years have been victim to physical violence, and 14% have experienced sexual violence. Most cases go unreported and women hardly receive medical care, let alone justice.

Gender-based violence is a complex issue that is structural, cultural, and systemic. Cultural challenges range from female genital mutilation, child marriage and beading practices (a cultural practice among the Samburu community, which sanctions a non-marital sexual relationship between Samburu men in the 'warrior' age group and young Samburu girls, usually between the ages of 9-15 years). In addition, women rarely have access to the same educational opportunities and therefore have fewer pathways to employment. The Kenyan Government has put in place policies that protect women and girls, but in practice little is done. Beyond attempts at preventative measures, when women are subject to violence, the policies in place to protect them are rarely implemented. Women are viewed as the instigators of violence, and the day-to-day abuses are many, from catcalling to body shaming.

Within private spaces, the restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic force women to be confined in their homes with their abusers with little escape or solace from social supports outside of the home. The outcome has been a spike in the cases of violence against women. And women who fall victim to violence are then faced with a medical, police and justice system that is male-dominated, and by extension unable to offer the necessary support.

Going forward the Kenyan Government should ensure women gain access to services such as counselling and safe houses. And we must see a justice system that prosecutes perpetrators. There must be consequences for violent actions that are embedded in our socio-cultural ways of being, and we need all hands on deck to dismantle patriarchy. Only with collective action and people raising their voices against violence, can we change the narratives that dictate and control the bodies and lives of women and girls.

When will we get to rest?

#genderbasedviolence #justice #resilience

Sara Kapay (Congo, South Africa) is an African woman passionate about Civil Society Organisations and their contributions to society. She is Administrative Assistant at University of Witwatersrand and is founder of [LikersOfThings.co.za](#), an events and social lifestyle platform.

Womxn: a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a story. These five letters invoke a million journeys of joy, success, upliftment and community. But also journeys of pain. Across the world, womxn face similar issues of inequality,

discrimination, lack of access and opportunities and gender-based violence.

Living in South Africa I can speak of a country that is known for its diversity, beautiful scenery and rich culture, as well as being a living nightmare for womxn from all walks of life. Every year the country celebrates South African Women's Month (and day) in August to honour those who pioneered and opened up opportunities for womxn in the country. We remember the brave womxn activists, freedom fighters and advocates both past and current. But the month is also a very painful reminder of how the womxn in the country are mutilated, hypersexualised and abused physically, emotionally and mentally, in our workplaces, on the streets and in our homes. South Africa has a reputation for high rates of gender-based violence and femicide, and this was amplified by the pandemic. During the first five days of the lockdown in South Africa, calls to the police force gender-based violence hotline tripled compared to before lockdown and [murders surged](#).

On top of this constant violence and abuse, there is a global narrative about womxn (especially African womxn) as strong, resilient, *imbokodo* (a Zulu word meaning "a rock"). Whilst there is truth in these labels, they take away from our suffering and negate our humanity. **We cannot continue carrying the weight and responsibility of society's (read: men's) inability to protect us, care for us and allow us - and our bodies - to be free. We are tired.** When will we get to rest? When will it end? When will we not be held accountable for the violence perpetrated against us, apparently spurred on by our appearances, our actions or even the simple act of saying no? When will we get to just be?

And despite the everyday challenges womxn experience, we persevere, we overcome. We want peace. We want our "NO" to be a complete sentence. We want to stop telling this devastating story.

The aftermath of Cyclone Idai

#humanitarian #survivors #genderbasedviolence

Lurdes David (Mozambique) is a Community Based Counsellor supporting victims of Cyclone Idai. This perspective was documented by **Natasha Diane Buchholz**, Business and Operations Manager at iDE in Mozambique.

Lurdes David is community counsellor, working in the lasting aftermath of Idai, the tropical cyclone that devastated many communities along the Beira Corridor, Mozambique in 2019. Lurdes is widely respected in the community and is the wife of a pastor; community members trust and confide in her for advice.

During her visits to a survivor's family she met a single mother and her pregnant, 15-year-old daughter. When their home was destroyed by Cyclone Idai, their husband / father abandoned the family to live with another woman. Lurdes narrates, "The girl did not want to open up about her life in the beginning, let alone reveal who was responsible for her pregnancy, but on

the third day she explained that it was a border controller who has his own family. She had been forced to sleep with him in exchange for food. When her mother reported this to the local leader, he told her to take care of her child and leave this man alone as he was married. I have since written a complaint to the police and will accompany the mother and child to the police. Due to the influence of the border officer, I suspected that the process would be tainted, so we went with representatives of Save the Children. Our intervention resulted in 6 months in prison and financial support for the child and the girl on a monthly basis upon finishing his sentence.”

The community was pleased with this sentence leading others to come for psychosocial support. Lurdes explains that she is currently working on a similar case: also a 15-year-old girl, this time abused by a divorced 65-year old man, who swore to marry her. Upon hearing about the case of the border officer, he rushed to elope with the girl, fearing he too would be accused of sexually abusing the minor. The girl's parents are currently making efforts to bring her back home so that Lurdes can support the case and take it to court. In her words, “we have many issues of child sexual abuse especially in the post-disaster context when people are most vulnerable. It is unfortunate but this often goes unnoticed. **Every time I am able to help a survivor, I know that it's only a drop in the bucket that hopefully someday will be full.”**

We are worthy of more than broken promises

#genderbasedviolence #accesstohealthcare #advocacy

Dr Eleanor Nwadinobi (Nigeria) is a medical doctor and women's health activist. She is the International President of the Medical Women International Association and Founding Co-chair of Every Woman Treaty.

COVID-19 is a war we did not choose to fight with many other battles intertwined, such as the battle for our lives and livelihoods, and against the twin pandemic – that of violence against women and girls. Pre-COVID, physical and sexual violence was already affecting 35% of women worldwide ([UN Women](#)). With COVID-19, these numbers have risen exponentially. As members of the workforce are obliged to work from home in close quarters with domestic abusers, women have become more imprisoned than ever before. They face intimate partner violence from which they would normally have a buffer of protection from going to workplaces outside the home and access to community services. They are the unpaid caregivers. They are the left-behind widows vulnerable to abuse. They are the survivors seeking support for mental health issues that face reduced access to experts. They are the exposed, facing female genital mutilation due to restricted movement of human rights defenders.

The challenges are many, but at the root of every crisis is opportunity for creativity and for building trust with the community – to band together in sisterhood and let our

resilience shine through our collective efforts. The Medical Women's Association of Nigeria is responding to these circumstances by leading an innovative, grassroots campaign focused on women's rights to health information – the WORTHl campaign. We are giving women who are the bearers and carers in every home, access to life-saving health information in an easy to understand format. We use simple, pictorial formats as well as local languages to ensure that women are able to use this information to make the best health decisions for themselves and their families.

But the battle is bigger than this, and beyond WORTHl we are insisting that governments must incorporate women's voices in their emergency response and in global health governance in general. At a global level we want to see them commit to a treaty to end violence against women and girls, and we will no longer accept broken promises.

Race, racism and belonging

The Awakening of Young Social Justice Leaders

#youth #socialjustice #racism #diaspora

[a version of this perspective was first published by [New African](#)]

Silvia Mangué (Canada, Equatorial Guinea), is the founder and CEO of Kulea Love, a social enterprise focused on non-medical care services, and Kulea Culture Society, a consultancy specialised on equity, inclusion and diversity. She is also the president of the British Columbia Black History Awareness Society.

According to [a poll by TD Canada Trust](#), a Canadian commercial bank, conducted in April and May of this year, young Canadians and those who are black, Indigenous or people of colour have been the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in their pockets. 64 percent of Black Canadians expect to face unemployment and a reduction of their income in the last quarter of 2020, compared with 53 per cent of the general population.

This survey shows that the fight against systemic racism in Canada is far from over. More needs to be done, in particular, given the [current call](#) to put an end to the ongoing episodes of police brutality against Black Canadians. But as the Black Canadian population is only about 3.5 per cent of the total population, a small number compared with 14 percent for African Americans in the United States, these episodes keep being treated as a one-off events rather than a systemic problem ([Statistics Canada 2019](#)).

The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States resulted in the mobilisation and solidarity of Canadian youth from across different cultural and ethno-racial backgrounds. **This support was unexpected and unprecedented, because young people not only risked their health, but committed as individuals and as part of a collective, to action.** The British Columbia Black History Awareness Society, of which I am President, received an influx of financial donations, volunteers for events and projects, and in-kind offers of support (such as pro bono use of venues) from young Canadians. The local government has also chosen to work with us in the development of a curriculum to enhance the local curriculum on Black history.

Beyond Canada, especially in the context of the UN International Decade for People of African Descent, it has been heartening to witness the support of the African Union to this movement, and hopefully they will do more to support social movements across Africa against police brutality, armed conflicts, gender based violence, and the mismanagement of natural resources.

Time to get comfortable with the uncomfortable

#racism #coaching #humandevelopment #businessculture

[a version of this perspective was first published by [New African](#)]

Dvora Stein (South Africa) is Founder of The Hive, working as a People and Culture Strategist and certified coach. She is a faculty member, Developmentor® and Assessor at Integral+ Africa's Coaching Centre with a background in Industrial Psychology. She finds purpose in supporting individuals, teams and organisations to navigate change, tap into their hidden power and potential, activate culture and transform obstacles.

In the context of the global pandemic, we are all learning to get comfortable with the uncertainty and ambiguity of the current moment. But there is another shift that needs to happen: let's talk about race relations within our businesses. We are petrified of having the real conversations; of the messiness that will emerge when we have spent so much time sanitising the surface of the issue and ticking boxes for compliance. We are unskilled in this area, and don't know how to hold the tension or navigate the flood of human experience, vulnerability and emotion.

Just as we have had to face the pandemic, we need to begin this powerful, uncomfortable and above-all necessary journey, for the sake of our collective humanity. Racism is a business issue, and South African businesses are avoiding the tough topic – to their detriment. The fact is that in a business context, not addressing racism has an impact on corporate culture, and in turn on the business' ability to perform and grow. Why? Because organisational culture affects the bottom line and [research](#) has revealed that companies with strong cultures see a four times increase in revenue growth. We also [know](#) that **satisfied employees outperform their peers by 20%, and this is attributed to 12% more productivity. We literally can't afford to avoid addressing race and racism within our institutions.**

Organisations need to learn to listen, and to work on their individual and collective bias and systemic blind spots in order to begin to create strong cultures. Businesses that achieve this can then begin to truly celebrate diversity and leverage the unique and rich perspectives and experiences that their people bring. In recent months we've had no choice but to live with the uncomfortable. We can use this practice to face the discomfort: look racism in the eye and address it head on.

Where do we belong?

#racism #diaspora #belonging

Titilayo Adedokun-Helm (Nigeria, United States) is a crossover singer currently based in South Africa and has sung in numerous opera roles worldwide and recorded and collaborated on several jazz albums and theatre works. She is married with three daughters.

Finding a sense of belonging has been a journey – and as a mother, it is important that my daughters have role models that demonstrate that they too belong. A new chapter of my journey began when visiting South Africa for the first time with my husband in 2008. I was looking forward to finally seeing the country and to coming "back" to Africa. But from our arrival at the airport to our hotel stays on the Garden Route, I kept wondering if we were really in Africa. With the "n***** go home!" segregation posters in American history still resurfacing in my nightmares, I had naively thought that being in Africa would be less foreign, more warm embrace. As uncomfortable as it had been to be harassed in America or Europe, I discovered that South Africa was no different. On the southernmost tip of the so-called "Black Continent", black people were cleaning, washing, gardening, waiting tables, and resigned to being spoken to in dismissive and disrespectful tones by white people.

"So," I asked myself, "where do black people go to feel a sense belonging, if not in Africa?"

Five years later, we moved to Cape Town with our three daughters. I thought that by promising myself to always be of service and to refrain from being part of the problem, I could carve out my own identity and create my own sense of belonging. I convinced myself that even with the racial injustices and inequalities, it would be a better environment to raise our children, giving them a chance to see everyday positive role models who looked like them. I had truly believed that, with a brand new and fair constitution, South Africa would be a force to reckon with in the near future. **Now, I have begun to accept the difficult realisation that I will most likely leave South Africa for the very same reasons I came.** But, my time living in South Africa has also taught me this important lesson: that the best role model and anchor for belonging that my children can have...is me.

The personal is the political and social

#justice #diaspora #racism

Zakiya Carr Johnson (United States, South Africa) is an entrepreneur, co-founding Director of Black Women Disrupt and for the past 20 years, subject matter expert on social inclusion in International Development and Policy. She is a daughter, mother, sister and partner who loves to cook and dance. 2019 Atlantic Fellow for Racial Equity.

Every day I reckon with the world as it is now, vacillating between unbearable fear of the pandemic and the thought of the peril that might lie ahead, raising a Black son and daughter. Here in the United States, the terror of a virus we could not see and that held us within our homes, illuminated the ugly truth about the pre-existing systemic racism which impacted Black communities and communities of colour in the worst ways. I do not sleep like I used to. I worry about what the future holds for my children outside of this safe-haven we have created. I question why the cooking, the children's home schooling and more of the cleaning than ever before, seem to fall on me. I

wonder if it is because I am a woman, and I feel embarrassed to have taken on a traditional role in the household as mother and perpetual caregiver. Or should I be proud? No doubt, they will all grow strong because of the care I can provide. I am in conflict with this reality and with myself - I feel a former self shrinking as I juggle the multiple roles all cooped up in this space.

I lead the Black Women Disrupt initiative designed to connect and inspire Black women entrepreneurs and innovators around the world – we call them Sister Disruptors. My own conflict made me ask the question: if I feel this way, what might my sisters be experiencing? With this in mind we created the 'Summer Series Live in 2020' and emerging from this series, was the clear insight that **to address global challenges, the world must lift the shroud of silence on the circumstances facing Africans, people of African-descent and Black women in particular**. In fact, the ever-present factors of racism, colourism, gender and ability discrimination create cycles of inter-generational poverty with no way out. Our experiences show us that we need to embrace more Black women-led initiatives and support their determination to help the next generation of young women and men see themselves in power and positive light.

On courageous African identities

#justice #identity #belonging

Ziyanda Mngadi (*South Africa*) is a communications professional working in the International NGO space for many years, currently heading to South Korea to teach English, broaden her international work experience and learn about a new culture and environment.

I often feel confused by the invisible fight of black women in South Africa. I am an African child, born to an African mother and father, adopted by African parents. I was born in Swaziland and have lived in several beautiful African countries like Mozambique and Zimbabwe. In South Africa, I experience not just a daily struggle to defend my gender, but also my race, my educational background, my accent, and being in an inter-racial relationship, the choice of whom I partner with. **This struggle of identity saddens me, and leaves me wondering how this can still be the case and for how long.**

My personal scars are many. My career has been impacted by “pull her down” syndrome, my culture questioned by my African brothers and sisters because I speak Portuguese, but am Zulu. I have been told I sound white (*umlungu*) because I went to a private "Model C" school. Is my identity not enough? It is a daily struggle being a woman, but I am proud of the many progressive movements and individual young black women fighting for human rights, gender equality and to raise awareness of the struggles of African women.

POISON: How Racism Lives in the Psyche

#racism #sexuality

Nereya Otieno (*Kenya, South Africa, United States*) is a writer, thinker and creative strategist. She focuses on intercultural spaces and the ways in which music, food and the arts are forms of storytelling.

This is NSFW [ed.: not suitable for work]. I haven't masturbated in over a month. I know exactly why.

On May 31, almost one week after George Floyd was murdered in broad daylight by US authorities, I tried to start my Sunday off as I usually do: a little morning masturbation with intermittent, very casual yoga poses. But I couldn't. For the fifth day in a row, I couldn't.

I'd seen other bodies repeatedly cast aside, run over, screamed at, tear gassed, charged at, shot at, beat up, crying, sobbing and bleeding...all because of the existence of my black body. The disgust crept over me as I lay there, warm in the rays of an ignored mid-morning, perfect-for-self-satisfaction sun. Well, actually, the disgust didn't really creep. It panged deep in my belly and splintered through me to the edge of my limbs. The way safety glass breaks in the centre of a room and shatters immediately to every nook and cranny it can find. Nuzzling shards deep in corners even the kitchen itself had forgotten existed. This past Sunday it was the same.

I can only see what they see. A shameful body. A peculiar, exotic, mammalian body. One that is to be used and not touched. Beaten and worked and impregnated but not celebrated or stimulated or given pleasure.

Discrimination thrives, at its core, as one of the purest and most painful forms of unrequited love. The majority not loving you and, in turn, the difficulties in loving yourself.

This is how racism lives. This is how the teeth sink in. It's not that I cannot masturbate out of sadness or exhaustion at the state of the world. It's that I know that my body is the cause for that exhaustion, and that cause should not be rewarded — no matter how innocent, how incredibly deserving it is of joy and crying out to be loved in a way that only I can love my body.

So, I'll wait. Until another problem comes along to distract and I can heal enough to unwrap the gift of my body and find solace in myself. Loving of myself. When the world is not yelling and crying and frustrated — debating the humanity of my mere presence.

Culture, narratives and representation

Marginalized Bodies

#belonging #bodypositivity #eatingdisorders #mentalhealth

[a version of this perspective was first published by [New African](#)]

Táyra Augusto (*Mozambique, South Africa*) is a singer, plus-size model and a Chemical Engineer.

Growing up I always felt that I didn't belong. I was chubby, tallish and was raised by a mother who was a beauty icon in Mozambican society. I didn't feel represented through commercials on TV that brainwashed me into believing that the core of beauty was "skinniness" and that's the only way people will accept you. If you succeed at being skinny then boys will like you and girls will envy you. It wasn't long before eating disorders started knocking on my door, reminding me every day that if I eat that extra snack I would have to starve myself the next day to compensate. I always wished I didn't let my overthinking, anxiety, depression get the best of me, but it did. It still does, but with time I have learnt how to deal with these daily challenges and have mechanisms to avoid reverting back to my old ways.

Because of these experiences, body positivity and representation mean everything to me. Part of overcoming my personal challenges, was carving out space in the very industry that didn't seem to include me. As a plus-size model, I represent girls like me, that are not the norm of tall, flat stomach and thigh gap.

Small changes are being seen from stores having plus size mannequins to more representation in movies, but we need complete inclusivity and that goes beyond size. **There are many marginalising bodies that are underrepresented in the mainstream media. And when you add race and gender, there is something truly necessary about seeing a black, African woman model that looks like me.**

In the context of COVID-19, an [October 2020 study](#) is showing that the anxiety and stress of the situation could be causing body image issues. We need to give voice to these issues, and challenge what is considered "the norm", creating healthy debates about our relationship with our bodies, rejecting the conditioning we've experienced. I educate folks to avoid commenting on the appearance of others unless asked, and speak up about loving every inch of yourself and embracing what you see in the mirror.

Let's share our own stories

#storytelling #childrensstories #representation #belonging

[a version of this perspective was first published by [New African](#)]

Eliana Silva (Angola, Mozambique) is a communications and public relations specialist. She is Account Director at CREATE, and this year she published her first book.

Living in a moment of daily challenges, one thing we can take on is using the opportunity to rewrite our stories. We already know about the many challenges across African countries, but there is so much more and there is power in telling our own story. As we face a pandemic that doesn't allow for real connection, we need stories to show us the diverse faces and experiences of African women. We must show their bravery and lift up the strength of women. **As everything "goes digital" we must use these spaces to change the stories that are represented - I want to see a multitude of women standing out and showing their competence, expertise and ability to drive the development of their communities and countries.**

I have spent this time creating a story that I am proud of. 'Bina, a Descobridora do Índico' (Plural Editores África) - or in English, Bina, the Discoverer of the Indian Ocean - is a children's book that tells the story of Bina, a young girl with albinism who travels the world on her bicycle. It is a story of empathy, courage, respect and self-love - values that are only more important in the current pandemic. Across sub-Saharan Africa, in some groups albinism affects [one in 1,000 people](#) and in Mozambique specifically, more than [30,000 people](#) are living with albinism - creating the character, Bina, was an opportunity to represent a group of people often stigmatised in society.

With no physical book launch, the release was an online gathering in conversation with another African storyteller, Eliana Nzualo. This moment of connection was important to me, more so in this moment of potential disconnection. And it feels even more relevant to lift up stories that connect with young African girls, and that represent and show acceptance of the diversity of who we are. This moment is challenging, but it remains urgent that we find our voice and share the stories of brave African girls and women.

Telling our full stories

#narratives #representation #singlestory

Oni Aningo (Nigeria) is Founder and Executive Director of Global Group Media, a fast-growing pan-African media agency committed to telling your stories. She is founder of the Rising Series, which showcases the best of Africa.

2020 brought the world to a grounding halt, leaving humanity powerless, revealing our fundamental flaws. The Black Lives Matter movement exposed age-old differentiation and harms done based on race, especially in the United States. And in thinking about Black Lives Matter, I also reflect on what it means to say Black Women's Lives Matter, African Lives Matter, and therefore, African Women's Lives Matter.

As African women, we often fall prey to 'the danger of a single story', a term that we know from Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Adichie's 2009 Ted Talk of the same name. Adichie warns us of the oversimplification we are prone to that 'sees no possibility of Africans being...human equals'. Today, we have access to many mediums to tell our stories and express ourselves in our varied, authentic ways. This is the time to fully write and rewrite, tell and retell our stories. With this mantra, I have created Rising Woman Series Africa, which focuses on stories of our impact as everyday African women, but now in our third edition and with over 250 interviews done... I feel we have succumbed to the single stories of ourselves. Our startup stories are mired in mysteries. Our stories of doubts, successes, failures, and compromises seem fantastical. Our silent leadership, legitimate and unfounded paranoia of competition, fears and insecurities, limit our African woman and her stories. **How are we supposed to inspire and advise others when our own stories are half-truths and single stories of ourselves? If we don't tell our stories, then we will remain exactly where we are - incomplete and misunderstood.**

Now is the time to tell the full story – first to ourselves, then to each other as African women, and then to the world. I urge you to express and share fully and transparently, at every opportunity you get, for the generations of African women to come. These stories matter, our perspectives matter, representation matters and the full lives of African women, matter.

African pop culture shapes the world around us

#culture #narratives #pop #storytelling

Andrea Kirsten-Coleman (South Africa, United States) is Global Communications Manager at the Vision Impact Institute, a global non-profit dedicated to making good vision a global priority. She has expertise working for organisations that fight for social justice, health equity, and is passionate about telling the stories of those empowering women and girls in Africa.

Can a Netflix show told by African women, launched during a pandemic, be a catalyst for evolving the Africa narrative? I believe it can. Queen Sono, Netflix's first original African series was launched in early 2020 and quickly shot into the most watched lists by people globally. Set in South Africa, the cast of women smash stereotypes and reshape the African story. The series centres on a secret agent, played by Pearl Thusi, and manages to do something that few just-for-entertainment shows do.

Firstly, it portrays women as the strongest characters. Women of all ages, ethnicities, unique personalities, and backgrounds take on the lead roles and they intentionally break apart stereotypes of what an African woman should be or do. In an article for [OkayAfrica](#), Thusi says, "I want other women to see themselves in this. Women are the heroes of this show... [and w]e are still heroes of this continent." Secondly, it showcases Africa as a continent of diverse countries and cultures. By highlighting diverse locations like Zanzibar, Harare, Congo and South Africa, and by featuring a pan-African soundtrack

and diverse wardrobe, the show dispels the notion that Africa is a single story.

It is pop culture. But pop culture has the power to shape. A clear example: in the University of Southern California's 2019 [Africa in the Media](#) report, we see that 'Black Panther's fictional African homeland, Wakanda...placed fourth behind Egypt, South Africa and Kenya in our rankings of most mentioned countries', just one month after it's release. Moky Makura, Executive Director of Africa No Filter, [reflects](#) on this emphasising, "The fact that Africa's fourth most talked about country doesn't exist tells us ... [that] pop culture is a powerful tool for narrative work".

Shows like Queen Sono give me hope. In a world that will not return to the way of life we once knew, it's refreshing to consider that African women can and will have an impact on shaping life as it really should be.

The women heroes of this pandemic

#storytelling #childrensstories #rolemodels

Rehmah Kasule (*Uganda, United States*) is a serial entrepreneur, an international award winner, and consultant on gender mainstreaming, youth development and the future of work. Born a village girl, she refused to become a village woman in rural Uganda. She is the Founder of CEDA International and the Plus Africa LINKUBATOR at Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative.

History is influenced by those that write it and too often, it's written by white men who don't recognise women as leaders, change agents and as catalysts for development. A famous quote from bell hooks goes, "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." That's precisely why women's efforts are underplayed across the world.

COVID-19 has tested global systems, leadership, and exacerbated gender inequality. This moment will show us how well we adapt and learn from the pandemic. **Will we continue to let gender inequalities persist or will we use it to amplify efforts and use the opportunities it creates?** Unfortunately, early reports suggest the former. Although women are having a profound impact in the world's response to this crisis, with 75% of frontline health workers being women, they have received little recognition. And the stories of their contribution seem soon to be forgotten. We must document stories of women that have created positive impact, and use their voices and narratives to inspire, educate, and empower others, especially children. Such stories will teach practical skills about service, courage, compassion, efficacy, active citizenship, and provide authentic role models they can relate to in their communities.

My children's storybook published this year, 'Sheroes of COVID-19' (Kasule, R. & Shah, P., Pangea Publishing) documents the extraordinary work, leadership and achievements of 23 women around the world during the crisis. These

women have risen at the community level, in media, peacekeeping, running businesses, caring for the elderly, protecting other women from domestic violence, and keeping children learning. These women are our heroes, and represent the power of unity of action that gives women a unified voice. Every day, we are reminded of how women are agents of change. And working together, they are a force of nature whose power must be lifted up. And working together, they are stronger.

African knowledge production and history in the making

#oralhistories #narratives #academia #identity

Adaugo Pamela Nwakanma (Nigeria, United States) is a researcher and educator. She is a PhD candidate in the Department of Government with a secondary field in the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard University.

The question of what we know and how we know is at the heart of social science inquiry and our collective understanding of the world. As a Nigerian-American social scientist researching the intersection of African women's economic empowerment and political behaviour, my hyphenated identity and experiences influence my lens of analysis.

Due to the pandemic, I had to do my doctoral dissertation research from my mother's house in the Midwestern part of the United States instead of conducting fieldwork in Nigeria. And with this I re-learned the essence of purposeful creativity – making the most of what we have, to generate what we desire. I realised that the epistemological grounding that I needed for my research is embodied in my mother. Though my travel plans have been disrupted, quality moments with my Nigerian household in America have reified some of the theoretical insights of my research.

This link between knowledge and experience came up as my mother narrated a moment from her childhood while frying *akara* (Nigerian bean cake), which reminded her of primary school in the 1970s/80s when the cost of food was constantly rising. She described the expression “*ota n’isi*” (austerity) that was pervasive at the time, used by the local intelligentsia who used antiquated forms of the Igbo language that were both comical and captured the zeitgeist of the period. This experience from her childhood linked with my own studies on the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s that shrunk social services, increased living costs, and raised unemployment levels in several African countries. **The opportunity to connect familial oral histories to my studies is a blessing that I do not take for granted. African and Afro-descendent women across time and space continue to have a profound impact on my education about the world.** As the pandemic evolves, I am reminded by my mother, and all the women who came before her, that history is being created every moment. Being purposeful in my attentiveness

to these diverse ways of knowing creates greater room for creativity and captures our reality more richly.

Innovation, science and technology

Science is wealth

#sciencemadeinAfrica #healthiswealth #scienceiswealth

[a version of this perspective was first published by New African]

Faith Osier (Kenya, Uganda) is an immunologist working to make malaria history through effective vaccination. She is President of the International Union of Immunological Societies, #Togetherband Ambassador for United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good health and well-being. Faith is a 2018 TED Fellow and was nominated among the 2020 Top 100 Influential African Women.

We are all born with a desire to live, prosper, and go further than the previous generation. My parents ensured that I did not face the indignities they have endured. They gave me the best education, protected me from disease and in so doing, empowered me to realise my highest dreams. I am forever grateful. But many across Africa do not enjoy this privilege. We see killer infections (malaria, HIV, tuberculosis) and debilitating diseases stifle opportunities of a healthy life. On top of that, for 420 million people living below the poverty line, breaking out of the cycle is a herculean task, in particular when national institutions cannot sustain these efforts for a critical mass of our population.

I see science as a key to turn what many consider to be our greatest weakness, into our greatest strength. We have waited on others to define for us in contemporary terms what our illnesses were, and what we ought to do about them. Images of disease-ridden Africans make good features in the international media. But there is another story emerging that deserves visibility too. Scientific endeavours are blooming all over Africa and centres of scientific excellence are turning their attention to capacity building. Take for example, the success of the Mali International Centre for Excellence in Research in detecting, treating and managing Ebola patients, that enabled the country to be declared Ebola free in 2015. There is the work of research centres such as the Kenya Medical Research Institute and the National Medical Research Institute of Tanzania, who are increasing Africa's output of scientific research and training future generations of African scientists.

Personally, I am the first African and second woman President of the International Union of Immunological Societies. I work to train 1,000 African PhD students in immunology over the next 10 years through the Federation of African Immunological Societies Legacy Project, and to increase Africa's capacity and representation in global health. I believe we can be the solutions our continent is yearning for, and for that we need to believe in science made in Africa, and the health, wealth and prosperity this brings to the continent.

Africa's time to shine: from understudy to lead actor

#decolonisingdevelopment #Africa-led #homegrown solutions

Ercília Mata Ubisse (*Mozambique, South Africa*) is an International Development Practitioner. She is Executive Director at ELIM Serviços Lda, one of the only wholly Mozambican and woman-owned development research firms in the country.

I am a Development Practitioner, seeking to flip the script. Mozambique, like many African countries, has been donor-dependent for most of its post-colonial existence. But as the Portuguese exited stage left, we welcomed in a new brand of colonialism dressed up as humanitarian aid. Being named 'beneficiaries' meant our perspectives were collected but never acknowledged as programmes were unilaterally designed, managed and measured in our name to meet the primary objectives of those who fund them.

As one of the country's only Mozambican woman-owned development research outfits, we have watched with frustration the ring fencing of senior development jobs reserved for (mostly male) "international experts" whose competitive advantage was a Western education and sometimes semi-fluency in Portuguese. This is common across the board: whether hiring for a project position or contracting a partner, local candidates are considered assistants to the action – preferably with no speaking parts. And just as our voices are silenced at project design, our names rarely appear in the credits and we seldom share in the accolades from our work.

Enter COVID-19: taking centre stage, it is becoming the unlikely hero of Global South economies as previously muted local actors are finally given the space to shine. Travel restrictions have forced greater reliance on research development businesses like ours to deliver development interventions, making our contributions undeniable and granting us the independence to implement based on our local realities. **The scene is set for Africa's qualified and experienced experts to take centre-stage.** We can and will craft development strategies that will deliver real impact to our communities, shaped by our social norms and definitions of quality. Africa, it is time to step into the limelight.

Digital solutions to reduce gender gaps

#equality #technology #gender

Rosemary Okello-Orlale (*Kenya*) is a media and gender expert who is interested in creating African narratives through data-driven storytelling. She is the Director of Africa Media Hub at Strathmore University Business School.

This year marks 25 years since the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted, a platform outlining the key areas for urgent action to address gender inequality. Now in 2020, the need for gender equality across all industries and sectors has been made clear with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This calls for collective action and shared responsibility. We need to ask ourselves: how can innovation and digital solutions provide the answer to reduce gender gaps?

Everyone agrees that recent technological advances, unlocked by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, have created numerous opportunities for improving the quality of life for women across the developing world. In Kenya, the story of digital innovation cannot be told without mentioning the likes of MPesa, Ushahidi, and innovation hubs like the i-Hub and Nairobi Garage. The success of these and many other home-grown innovations have given Kenya the “Silicon Savannah” reputation of being a hotspot for innovators. It has also triggered an increase in digital participation, which means the country now ranks as the second leading innovation hub in sub-Saharan Africa according to the World Intellectual Property Organisation’s [2019 Global Innovation Index](#).

Despite these opportunities, the exponential growth in technological changes and innovations across all industries, there still exists a large technology gap between men and women

according to the Women and the Web Alliance (a public-private partnership between a number of NGOs, companies and donors) that is focused on improving digital literacy for women in rural Kenya and beyond, and bridging the ‘internet gender gap’. They [report](#) that ‘only 40 million women in sub-Saharan Africa have access to and use of the Internet, compared to 70 million men’. Leveraging technological transformation, with the right mix of investments in young women and men, Kenya could potentially ride on a wave of high economic growth in the next decades as its working-age population peaks. Digital solutions cannot only fuel this development, but can also be activated in service of gender equality, with digital solutions that address the gender gap.

Women at the centre of sustainable energy sources

#womeninenergy #genderequality #womeninAfricapower

Ojwang Atieno Concepta (*Kenya, Rwanda*) is a woman in the energy sector, working to ensure sustainability. She is a mother and fights for the rights of the girl child.

Sustainable energy is crucial in order to achieve the sustainable development goals of many African countries: poverty reduction, improved education and environment sustainability. Indeed, it is vital for modern living globally.

Across the continent, African women are suffering because of male chauvinism and there is a stereotype that women are not tech savvy and hence cannot be involved in sophisticated technologies. Men have taken this opportunity to dominate the energy sector, but there is an opportunity when it comes to renewable energy. A [2019 report](#) by the International Renewable Energy Agency shows that renewable energy employs 32% women, compared to 22% in the energy sector overall. But the gap is still significant.

Women must be part of the equation and can be the voice in the energy sector, especially if given necessary access and support. We must feel that we belong in jobs across energy supply chains. To get there women face many challenges, such as lack of other women role models and mentors. As the sector transforms towards sustainability in order to remain relevant, women must be part of these reforms.

This transformation must turn around the under- or unpaid, and usually unrecognised economic contribution of women. **As the main users of energy and decision-makers when it comes to the type of energy consumed in households across African countries, women must be involved, and their insights will be critical in solving issues of fuel scarcity, sustainability, health and safety.**

The link between household energy consumption and health outcomes is well established, and must be considered in the COVID-19 context; traditional energy solutions adversely affect the health of families in their homes and put them at risk, especially of respiratory problems. This is little talked about, and the most exposed demographic is women. Empowering a woman is empowering the society at large. We need health-conscious, sustainable solutions to address these issues, and we need women to be at the core of these developments, including involving them in ways that improve their livelihoods.

A time for unity and connection

#equality #entrepreneurship #racism #AfCFTA #unity

Jesusa Ona (*Equatorial Guinea, Switzerland*) is an entrepreneur and the founder of Gender, Diversity and Equality Consulting Agency (GDECA www.gdeca.org), a consulting agency located in Geneva, specialised in the management of equal opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has surfaced the hidden dysfunctions of democracies in Western societies and shown the social injustices that many thought unique to developing countries: inequalities that result in people becoming stuck in vicious cycles of poverty; the increase in gender-based violence; institutional and structural racism and unwarranted police harassment, violence and killings. Afro-descendants and Africans in the Diaspora are exhausted of living with racial discrimination. We fear for our children, and wonder if we are condemning them to a life as second-class citizens, always aware of the mental and physical damage they can suffer as a result of the discrimination based on the colour of their skin.

I see COVID-19 as a huge opportunity for Africa, and for people of African descent who are now exploring relocation or return to Africa where they can be part of a community, make a living and contribute to meaningful social transformation. **Surely, this multi-pandemic moment should uncover a collective concern for the future of the next generation and make us more connected than ever. Stronger,**

empowered, more unified.

As a new pan-African approach emerges through the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), members of Investir Au Pays (a business and large network of entrepreneurs of African descent founded by Philippe Simo) have taken the opportunity to contribute concretely to the Africa we want. Our goal is to create values-driven enterprises in different fields (agriculture, architecture, health, education, art, culture, communication) in order to create jobs and in turn, opportunities and change.

We work with local communities, organisations and experts across sub-Saharan countries, placing value and respect on local knowledge and advice. We seek their guidance to ensure that our expertise is relevant to local demands. We learn from them and with them, and work towards creating a place of return, a place to visit and be transformed – for the right reasons.

The future will not find us unaware

#afrofuturism #imagination #futurenarratives #scifi

Susana Edjang (*Equatorial Guinea, Spain*) has over 15 years of experience in international development. She is co-founding member of Afroinnova, an African diaspora innovation platform, is a member of the Council of the UK's Royal African Society, and co-founder of Collateral Benefits.

In this time of lockdowns, working and studying from home, trying to separate real experts from fake news, carving out daily time in the company of Afrofuturist musicians and African and Afro-descendant science fiction writers can be an act of hope. We can find ourselves immersed in futures more overwhelming than this present COVID-19 reality, where for instance, dreams of equality across racial, ethnic, gender and other lines have been compounded by artificial intelligence. This could perhaps make us think and become more engaged in future thinking, planning and work towards anticipating forthcoming problems. It could equip us to learn about and devise potential solutions, the processes that enable them and the technologies and science that, one day, could make them real.

In moments like this pandemic, we are confronted with the bleakness of our realities. The torture and death of people, in Africa and its Diaspora, as a result of police brutality and other institutional barriers, preventable diseases and hunger, or the radicalisation of the global COVID-19 response. However,

through science fiction we can find ourselves alive, hopeful and represented in futures where African and Afro-descendant people play critical roles, have a stake, are part of the solution, and can focus on these roles because all intersectional barriers are being dealt with or have been lowered or broken up, and therefore we are no longer obliged to choose among

all the isms that define us. We can just exist and focus on challenges beyond demonstrating our humanity and worthiness.

Suspension of disbelief through science fiction can nurture a genuine curiosity for and commitment to philosophy, the sciences, technology, history or storytelling; for subjects and forms that help explore human questions such as reality, life, free will and consciousness. Imagine an Africa in 2050 where all heads of state and government are 65-year old women with a nursing background. Imagine exploring the limitations, the opportunities, the whys and the hows of such a world, one hour a day at a time, or more.

Business and entrepreneurship

A StartUp Act for South Africa

#entrepreneurship #SMEs

[a version of this perspective was first published by [New African](#)]

Matsi Modise (South Africa) is Vice-Chairperson of SiMODiSA Start-Up and Founding CEO of Furaha Afrika Holdings, a pan-African company with subsidiaries across several sectors. She is a World Economic Forum Global Shaper and has won numerous awards for her disruptive work and achievements.

South Africa is the biggest incubator of ideas – people come to South Africa to access its infrastructure, cheap labour and hub location. It is the perfect place to access other African markets, but often with a business registered off-shore. South Africa needs a plan for itself, that leverages our strengths and fortifies our fragile economy. We need to get specific if we want to see South African solutions to global problems. Currently we have an archaic framework (the Small Business Act of 1996), lack of action and implementation, restrictive Intellectual Property policies and embedded corruption. With COVID-19, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are in distress and it shows us that we haven't been investing enough in ensuring a robust economy. We need space for the free flow of ideas and collaboration, not a politically-led structure that is entangled with bureaucracy and restrictive regulations. An ecosystem approach must be future-proof, built bottom up and centred on the needs of SMEs; where stakeholders across sectors have a shared and vested interest, and understand how they can benefit and contribute.

As it stands, SMEs face barriers of access to market and an “old regime” that doesn't want to share. We don't want hand-outs! **We don't need charity, grants and donations facilitated by government. We are delivering value, so SMEs should be seen as investments that will bring return.** We need support in commercialising what we have to offer, policies that allow us to be competitive globally, procurement opportunities and training to equip SMEs to supply consistently. We start with our strengths: one example is South African fintechs – many SMEs in this space have done exceptionally well, complement our strong financial services sector and have potential to go international.

At SiMODiSA we support organisations with Indigenous solutions and provide access to resources and networks to make it possible for them to participate in building our economy. We are also coming together with other players to craft a StartUp Act for South Africa – a process already a success in Tunisia and Senegal, benefiting those countries with job creation, innovation and collaboration. A StartUp Act would provide the vision, direction and structure needed to make the most of our talent, create jobs, and overall, move towards clear outcomes in an intentional manner.

Closing the funding gap for women entrepreneurs

#entrepreneurship #investinwomen #SMEs

Maria del Mar Bonkanka Tabares (*Equatorial Guinea, Spain*) is an economist, consultant and Alternate Executive Director at the African Development Bank. Born in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, raised in Spain. Seven years ago she returned to Equatorial Guinea to work as Economic and Communication Advisor and most recently, was appointed Secretary of State at the Ministry of Finance, Economy and Planning

While the human and economic crisis resulting from COVID-19 affects almost everyone in one way or another, data shows that the livelihoods and work opportunities of women are disproportionately impacted. Across Africa, women led-businesses are more vulnerable to the economic disruptions caused by the pandemic than businesses owned by men. The vast majority of these women-run businesses are micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and according to a [recent survey](#) conducted in 30 African countries by ImpactHER (a Nigerian based-non profit trying to bridge the funding gap for women-led MSMEs), women-run businesses are permanently at risk of business shutdown as a result of the pandemic.

Women are disproportionately represented in the hardest hit sectors in African economies: health, education, agriculture, hospitality and care. On top of that, African women hold more than 70% of jobs in the informal economy and other vulnerable employment situations, such as domestic work, and seasonal and subsistence farming. This means that these women are outside of labour protection measures and social security systems.

This gendered impact of COVID-19 means that it is crucial to put women at the centre of African economies' recovery plans, particularly in the communities, countries and regions hardest hit by the pandemic. Across the world, investing in women is considered the biggest added value to economic growth. In Africa this is the case too. Investing in African women is investing in their already demonstrated entrepreneurial capabilities, which they in turn are more likely to invest in the wellbeing of and opportunities for their families and communities.

In this regard, the clearest lesson emerging from the pandemic is: everything that we do during and after the pandemic should ensure more inclusive and sustainable development, and that will require a gendered approach and economic recovery plans that fully mainstream gender equality policies. Initiatives are already being put in place across countries and businesses in Africa, but we need and can do more and better. We must consistently invest in women and women-led businesses.

Women entrepreneurs can connect African markets

#entrepreneurship #panAfricancollaboration #trade

Sara Fakir (Mozambique) is a mid-aged African woman, daughter and granddaughter of strong women, mother of none. She is curious about life on Earth and its surroundings. Creative, dreamer and visionary. She is co-founder of *ideiaLab*, an entrepreneurship support organisation, and believes entrepreneurship can be an avenue for Africa to reach deserved inclusive development.

In my work supporting entrepreneurs, startups and small and medium sized businesses through *ideiaLab* (which I co-founded in 2010), my experience is that the entrepreneurs of the continent remain with their backs turned to the potential of our internal, continental market. As *ideiaLab* began its expansion into Angola, I have been thinking about intra-Africa trade and entering other African markets as an opportunity that many entrepreneurs miss.

Our approach is to look for the best partners abroad. Working with a local partner makes us more relevant and more competitive. Without local partners we would lose out because of the lack of cross-continent trade agreements. Whilst there are some incentives, such as regional free trade in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), many are not yet effective. As it currently stands, from Mozambique, it is cheaper for me to travel to Dubai than Tanzania; it takes me more time to import chocolate from São Tomé and Príncipe than from Switzerland (despite the likelihood that it is probably the same cocoa). COVID-19 has only emphasised the need for African markets to become less dependent on global supply chains and economies, and the importance of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Over the past years I have had the opportunity to meet extraordinary women from across the continent; usually peers and entrepreneurs like me, connecting at international conferences, in regional or continental business networks, through word-of-mouth recommendation, and in our work supporting female entrepreneurs. They show me that **African women can play a leading role in creating a stronger, more inclusive and cohesive pan-African market.** Our resilience, empathy and carving out our own way of doing business can strengthen ties, build bridges and embrace intra-continental opportunities. I challenge my fellow African womenpreneurs to dare and explore the African market, get connected with peers and pursue the opportunities that emerge.

Bridges to trade between Europe and Africa

#trade #entrepreneurship

Marina Diboma (Cameroon, Holland) is the Deputy Managing Director of the Netherlands-African Business Council where her focus is establishing and strengthening both South-South and North-South cooperation through trade, investment and development. Her passion is building bridges between people and organisations.

Being in the Netherlands during the lockdowns has brought me back to the important questions: what is urgent, essential, priority? In my work it is clearer than ever that we need to rethink business, particularly between Europe and Africa. The obvious realisation is that business as usual is no longer going to work – and in my role I have reflected deeply on what the future holds for business, and how to combine the knowledge of both continents and contexts.

The pandemic has shown that we need to invest in both global and local opportunities. For European companies exporting to African countries, the breakdown of global supply chains emphasises the need for them to localise more effectively by investing in manufacturing on the continent, building local teams and enabling small and medium sized businesses to contribute to their value chains. This type of collaboration will also ensure that products are distributed more widely in-country, providing livelihoods for families and communities.

For African countries, we need to work intentionally to amplify trade in the other direction and get African businesses into European markets. This starts with positioning African businesses in a new light. **Despite common narratives, there are processed, high quality products, primarily made for local markets, but with potential to take up shelf space in Europe; these must be commercialised and scaled.**

This is our role as African entrepreneurs, with the right support from our governments, and we must do it before the rest of the world does it for us. For this to happen local industrial infrastructure needs to be built and entrepreneurship needs to be strengthened. We need incentives for solid African entrepreneurial ventures that want to establish themselves in Europe; currently it is easier for a European entrepreneur to set up in Africa than the other way around. This set of priorities has the potential to serve both African and European countries, if we choose to see them as opportunities to collaborate and make the most of the assets on both sides.

A new generation of entrepreneurs

#entrepreneurship #SMEs

Adelina Nhanala (Mozambique) is an Action Catalyst at *ideaLab*, an entrepreneurship support organisation working to strengthen SMEs and build an entrepreneurial country. She is a mother of two and is passionate about transforming people's lives. She likes to see people being dream chasers and developing their potential.

As in much of Africa, in Mozambique there is a big informal sector of micro and small businesses, primarily run by women. They aren't entrepreneurs by choice, but to put food on the table. My mother has run a small shop from our back garden with what she learnt from life, but businesses like this cannot grow because they are not structured for sustainability.

More and more, we are seeing brilliant examples of young women that are building businesses to last. There is the entrepreneur, Cidália, who started with one box of prawns to sell, and now crosses the border to eSwatini to sell large volumes of seafood stock, has a supermarket and a truck to transport goods across the country. These standout examples are inspiring others to broaden their vision; the entrepreneurial spirit is growing from generation to generation.

I am inspired to see women who say, "I can create opportunities, contribute to society and create jobs." They begin their entrepreneurial ventures alongside their day jobs and think about them as businesses, taking advantage of market opportunities. COVID-19 has been a challenge for entrepreneurs who often operate with a lot less than a month of cash flow. But it is also encouraging them to reinvent and adapt their businesses; those who have kept up have seen their businesses grow exponentially by going digital or starting delivery services. Some are filling the supply chain gaps that have arisen as a result of borders closing.

Our market isn't big, but it still has a lot of potential. **I would like to see more entrepreneurs create innovations that serve the bottom of the pyramid. The perception is that an entrepreneur has to do something fancy, but the truth is there is still a big market with basic needs.** Entrepreneurs need to understand these needs and then find ways to meet them with a differentiated product or services. They need to spend time with and in their communities to understand how they can add value.

Business women as the linchpin of society

#entrepreneurship #informalworkforce

Arinola Sururah Bello (Nigeria) works with children and women, especially the most vulnerable in our African Society. She is Administrative Secretary at Abdulkabir Aliu Foundation Scholarship, and works with students in tertiary institutions.

Opportunities abound for the thriving population of women in trade, but the challenges are also many: the COVID-19 pandemic means many have lost their jobs or sources of income. Within households, the main breadwinners (usually men) are in many cases supported by wives with informal incomes. Where these breadwinners have lost their jobs, the burden is transferred to women, now fending for the entire family. A lot of the women have had to venture into small businesses, and if they weren't already working in this way, they have now been forced to move into subsistence agriculture or the sale of staple food commodities.

A few have been able to build up small scale food processing for products such as smoked fish, snails, spices, pap, and other edible items. But they are still at a disadvantage, being denied access to finance and other resources to strengthen their businesses. These challenges existed before the pandemic, but the urgency to sustain small businesses (and in turn families) is now

amplified. Women are struggling to keep businesses alive, juggling other responsibilities and pressures alongside. The challenge is amplified when women lose their spouses and end up as single, widowed mothers who have to take care of their children or other family members.

As well as addressing the issues of access, financing and business sustainability we also need to shift the narrative and give women the central role in the entrepreneurship narrative that they deserve. **I want to see the voice of these women raised up in order to rally the empathy and support they need to triumph both in their role as the primary caregiver raising future generations, and as business owners.** We know the challenge of dismantling the beliefs and patrilineal history that gives absolute powers to men. This pandemic can be a catalyst for changing this, and I see the potential for transformation in the next few years as more women are recognised for their contributions during this unprecedented moment in our countries.

Power and inequality

Women's access to power is still elusive

#leadership #equality #power

Dr Elizabeth Mary Okelo (Kenya) opens doors for access to credit and financial inclusion for women as Founder of Kenya Women Finance Trust (KWFT); she is a Certified Mediator and Founder of Makini Schools.

The powerlessness of women in Africa is because we still do not have a critical mass of women in positions of power. Across our 54 countries there is only one woman President, Her Excellency Sahle-Work Zewde of Ethiopia. We, women of Africa, need to intentionally create a pipeline of young women leaders and have structures available for them to access power.

I was born in Busia County, Kenya, at the border with Uganda. I was the girl from Nambale, who became the first bank manager in Kenya with Barclays Bank Ltd. I have served as Senior Advisor to the President of the African Development Bank, and established Women World Banking affiliates in several African countries. But my story is not a common one.

Women are still not financially independent and financial inclusion of women has not reached the masses of women. Despite the prevalence of mobile money across Africa, there are still far too few African women who have the financial muscle or that are financially-able. We must do more. **Boardrooms are still dominated by men and in spaces where decisions are made women are marginalized. I believe this is because we have not learned and are not applying the power plays that can promote women to positions of power and authority.**

With the shake-up of COVID-19, and many examples of women-led businesses and countries having greater success, now is the time for women-inspired strategy to take hold, and for us to make pathways to the power necessary to secure our place at the table.

Prosperity and hope for our people?

#oilandgas #conflict #cabodelgado

Talumba Katawala (Mozambique) is National Content and Site Administration Manager at TechnipFMC and Co-Founder of Mozambican Women of Energy (MWE). She is a committed mother, daughter, sister and patriotic citizen.

I was born in Nampula, Mozambique, raised in the highlands of Niassa with a brief interval in Chuanga, at the lake. I started primary school in Paquitequete, Pemba. My mother, in the pursuit of sustenance for her children, moved

around villages and unmarked locations: Metuge, Chiure, Namialo, Mocimboa, Ibo. These places are now better known, with attention from the discoveries of one of the largest natural gas reserves in the world, as well as coverage of the conflict that now engulfs the Northern Province of Cabo Delgado. But back then we slept on floor mats, used candles at night, or batteries for our flashlight when days were good. We had an outhouse in the pitch dark, and I remember once finding my mother, neck deep in the latrine, hanging on to one of the bamboo pillars holding up the structure, a desperate look in her eyes. That day, I managed to pull her out and still do everything in my power to help her.

Since, Mozambique has seen fluctuating, but significant GDP growth and an influx of foreign companies setting up operations. Yet, two weeks ago, my mother called to tell me about a woman who had lost everything in Mocimboa da Praia (a port town right in the heart of the conflict). The woman had come, empty handed, to her door asking for a job. She hadn't seen her loved ones since the night she and many others ran into the dark of the bush to hide. She spent three days in a ditch waiting for the burning of the village to subside. She walked endlessly at night, fearing being attacked by wild animals and other dangers, some of them in uniforms.

I am proud of knowing that I have a hand in the exploration projects under development in Cabo Delgado, as these discoveries have the potential to bring a bright future for Mozambique and its citizens. **One of the liquid natural gas projects was even named 'prosperity', and I hope to see them add value for my mother, sisters, my tribe, my nation.**

We need to care more

#patriarchy #femininewisdom #care

Korkor Cudjoe (*Ghana, Scotland, South Africa*) is an entrepreneurship and leadership specialist and coach. Together with her proudly feminist partner she has four children – a daughter and 3 sons – aged 31, 24, 16 and 14. She works with the Graça Machel Trust as a Technical Advisor for the Women's Economic and Social Advancement Programme.

When COVID hit, it arrested our busy-ness, into a collective pause. Many of us felt bored and restricted. Others like me were happy to be still, of service and to nurture. I felt privileged to have an income and some savings and felt the desperation of those less privileged. I assisted family members and random people in need of help. We are truly interdependent and interconnected, and we need to take care for each other. Whilst our family has always prioritised support for the extended family, the pandemic was a chance to grow in generosity.

In my work in women's justice organisations, I felt the need for our organisation to change gear and go beyond the intellectual advocacy debates and become more hands on.

The pandemic has challenged relationships and it plays out worst for African women. Difficulties in relationships were amplified, many marriages did not survive the intensity of the lock down and there were heart-breaking surges of gender-based violence. As nurturing women – sisters, mothers, aunties – we must not underestimate our power to help men unshackle themselves from the “old bread winner” man to the new and rare “care giver”. We must embrace the complementarity of our distinct differences for more harmonious relationships. **We must anchor the feminine wisdom of slowing down that emerges from the pandemic and be more compassionate.** Perhaps we can embrace care as the new currency to reset our patriarchal society? This is of our domain as women; this is where we are in our power and can rebuild, starting with our homes.

We, African women, have so much to show the world. We are not bored. We are busy with our responsibility to care for one another, our sense of community and connection – this is ubuntu – that remembrance that I am, because you are.

Becoming a mother during a pandemic

#pregnancy #sexualreproductivehealth #policeviolence

Jeronime Obwar (*Kenya, Norway*) is founder of a community-based organisation working within the informal settlements of Kisumu, Kenya, focused on empowering young people with information on sexual-reproductive health and advocating for socio-economic policy change.

It felt like the lights dimmed. I have known nothing like COVID-19, so when I saw the news of its discovery I did not think about the fact that it would slowly make its way to Kenya, or how directly it would impact me. But as I watched the news unfold, I was bringing to life a new being that was speedily growing inside me, amidst the darkening situation. This baby insisted on coming out exactly during the curfew hours instated by the Government. I am from the slums of Kisumu and here, in the unusual context of COVID-19, our freedom of movement was being heavily infringed upon and the police were using force to disperse people and to enforce the curfew. It was in this situation, at exactly 7:30 at night and just after the start of curfew hours, that I felt contractions and my water broke. I had to be rushed to the hospital on a motorbike that sped through groups of people confronting the police. Stones were being thrown, answered with teargas flying through the air. **As I inhaled, I was unsure if I would make it – this was a journey between my God and I. Labour pain, loss of breath, suffocation, fatigue and sweat, all interspersed with abuse from the police.** We were stopped by police officers that began questioning us: “Who are you? Where are you going? Why are you disobeying the curfew?”

Eventually, we were let go and when we got to the hospital, by the grace of God, I found the strength in me to push. Now home, with the baby...nothing much has changed. Teargas still fills Kisumu. The questions that I am left with

are as blinding and choking as the teargas itself: What if I had lost my life, or the baby? How many women have lost their lives because of the COVID-19 rules and the way they are being enforced? We mustn't lose sight of these real challenges in a pandemic that seems to be adding fuel to an already raging fire of sexual and gender based violence against women.

Women carry the weight of conflict in Cabo Delgado

#internallydisplacedpeople #conflict #cabodelgado

Olga Paulina Franciso Muthambe (Mozambique) is an activist and leader of *Hikone Mozambique*, an association working for the empowerment and protection of the human rights of women.

Since October 2017, when the armed attacks began in the Province of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique, it is estimated that at least 1,100 people have been killed and that around [560,000 people have been displaced](#), forced to take refuge in safer places. Women have been the main victims, suffering monstrous acts of sexual and gender-based violence. Between the conflict and COVID-19, women are carrying the greatest burden of ensuring the protection and survival of children, the elderly and people with disabilities – from fleeing the places of conflict, to arriving at full-to-the-brim reception centres for the displaced. These have been the responsibilities and harms that affect African women everywhere, even in times of peace. However, in Cabo Delgado we are witnessing a daily deterioration in the conditions for displaced people. There is a continuous influx in the city of Pemba (the Provincial capital), of people trying to escape the war, and the impacts are being felt across the districts and across borders, with refugees moving into neighbouring countries.

Within my organisation we have spoken to many women displaced by this conflict, and the stories they tell are horrifying. We have been facilitating trauma relief sessions, providing some form of solidarity and comfort. **We have elaborated a public appeal to the Government, civil society and the international community calling for a stronger intervention, and the provision of better protection and assistance for women**, with reference to the Kampala Convention on the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa. Most people in this region are primarily concerned with surviving poverty, war and displacement – COVID-19 is a background concern – but the compounding effects of the situation disproportionately impacts and worsens the lives of the women and children of Mozambique.

The counterfeit feminist: the enemy within

#feminism #womensrights #equality

Makokha Selina Kwamini (Kenya) is a communication specialist with an interest in advocacy and peace building, and is a volunteer at Community Voices of Peace and Plurality.

Does it irk you that, as women we make 10 strides forward, then 15 backwards? We've improved legislation, such as the Gender Bill for better gender balance in Kenyan institutions. There are more organisations advocating for us today. Despite progress, somehow, we still backslide. The examples are many: the new Somali Penetration Act that normalises violence against girls and women, acid attacks on women in India, an increase in femicide cases worldwide. And I dare not start with Josina Machel's case - campaigner for women's rights, the daughter of two former presidents, with a powerful mother, who still faced domestic abuse. It is hard to comprehend.

This is the known enemy - the patriarchal system. Today I shift focus to a subtle, dangerous enemy one within. The "Trojan Horse" sabotaging our efforts, leaving us exposed to the external dangers and possibly a reason as to why our voices are not taken seriously.

I call this internal enemy, the counterfeit feminist and it shows up in two ways: 1. The Opportunists: devoid of women's issues at heart, these see increased foreign aid and opening government appointments as an opportunity to milk. They have gathered that a rant about women's challenges earns them a golden ticket. They use our plight as a stepping stone, but soon forget. I echo Martha Karua, former Kenyan presidential aspirant, who asked current women legislatures if they were "flower-girls", or true advocates of worthy causes. 2. The Toxic Feminists: just as there is toxic masculinity, there is toxic feminism. These are doing more harm than service. They have weaponised gender: asking for leniency for the women who intentionally infect men with HIV, but call for action against the man who does the same.

We can't flash the gender card only when suitable. Men and women are not at war. If anything, we have the same enemy: the patriarchal system. Yes, it has hurt women and girls more, but it has not spared the boy. We can do better. Will we let the wheat and chaff grow together? Or will we do some weeding in our own backyard?

Rest, resilience and mental health

Transforming pandemic pressure in to resilience

#resilience #coaching #trauma

Manyi Ebot (Cameroon, Canada) is the author of the best selling book, 'The Caged Giant', and a certified Trauma Recovery Coach with postgraduate education in Psychosocial Rehabilitation. She is also the host of Possibility Realm podcast and coordinator of British Columbia Psychosocial Rehabilitation Advanced Practice.

The impact of COVID-19 is evident in high mortality rates, but the psychosocial impacts cannot be overlooked, for it is a devastating counterpart. As the number of cases continues to fluctuate there is also a rise in traumatic stress and complex trauma. And trauma in turn, is linked not just to mental and emotional health problems such as anxiety, but also to physical health issues like heart and liver disease. So, does the rise in COVID-19 cases influence the rise of trauma, or is it the other way round? The answer is unclear, and we may never understand the links fully. But what I know for sure is that women of African descent are solution-driven and this will be our power in the face of the mental, emotional and physical impacts of this pandemic.

The way we choose to think and respond to challenges makes a difference in unprecedented times like these. Personally I have faced diverse traumas: childhood sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, immigration trauma and personal life challenges. And in response, **I have found that using my internal locus of control has enabled me to reframe my experience and influence outcomes. Of course, many things are out of our control, but identifying the opportunities we do have to make things happen can be the first building blocks to constructing our resilience.**

As women, I consider our abilities such as flexibility in thought and action to be central; during this time we can bend and grow, rather than stay rigid and crack under the pressure. There are many new decisions, that we face: to send children to school or not, the quantities of food to buy, ensuring adequate sanitation, all whilst juggling the daily career and business decisions which are also under pandemic strain. The opportunity I see is for us to approach change as a challenge rather than a threat. And most importantly, let's continue to get involved in meaningful projects and interactions, virtually or while maintaining physical distance. Let's find a way to connect and interact despite the restrictions, in order to build our resilience.

In defence of sensitivity

#coaching #emotionalintelligence #sensitivity #selfcare

Zayaan Buffkins (South Africa) is a Professional Integral Coach and facilitator with a focus on making Integral Coaching more accessible and inclusive, opening up spaces for growth and transformation by facilitating authentic conversations. She collaborates with practitioners whose work transforms the individual and collective.

If you have in any way been tuned in to yourself and those around you, you may have experienced the pandemic as an emotional rollercoaster. But this “tuning in” or sensitivity to what we are experiencing is often neglected. We are told that we must appear strong and hide our emotions. The messages received at the beginning of the pandemic continued to push the world’s obsession with being busy and productive. As a coach, this felt at odds with the feeling that we needed to stop and reflect, to notice what we were feeling. Not an easy task in the face of another common narrative: that sensitivity is weakness, and further, that womxn are overly sensitive and therefore, weak. But to be sensitive, which is innately human, is a great gift. Emotions can provide useful information about our experience. I have found that Integral Coaching provides the space to sit with and explore this moment, and to move beyond the over-thinking and over-doing.

As I sit with my own experience, and listen to what my clients share, I have seen existing societal challenges being amplified by the pandemic.

Existing high rates of femicide, gender-based violence and inequality were made worse by the lack of movement and access during lockdown. But these moments are also a reminder of the power of womxn coming to the forefront to solve these issues. Womxn are helping the most desperate and destitute; womxn have used COVID as a time to pause and look at how the world doesn’t serve them; to further decolonise, redefine and reimagine and no longer just accept things as they have always been. And we do this by tapping into our full range of internal resources, experiences and emotions.

As the restrictions are easing, let us tap into our sensitivity and ask: How can we access our ability to sense, trust and feel what matters most to each of us? How can we resist the pull towards productivity, and the pressure and expectation that we womxn rescue, solve and carry everyone? How do we use the gift of sensitivity and care, but balance it with care for ourselves?

The power of sabbatical

#rest #wellness

Misan Rewane (Nigeria) is an African problem-solver and change maker. She is CEO and co-founder of West Africa Vocational Education (WAVE) that uses a vocational training model and seeks to empower millions of West African people.

As an African woman, the word “rest” doesn’t feature in the operating manual that the world hands us. I have watched, as I’m sure many women have, my mother juggle career, marriage and motherhood, in-laws, extended family and church obligations. I never really saw her sleep or take power naps in the middle of the day. Even our summer vacations required her to work as a full-time mum. **To me, being an Africa woman looked hard and thankless.** In 2010, just a few years into my first job, I stumbled upon the concept of sabbatical and decided to take one for six months to volunteer in francophone West Africa. While it was “time off”, I worked and immersed myself in a new culture and re-emerged ready for a full career switch.

However, as I returned to work and career building, over the next 10 years, I longed for and fantasised about another opportunity for a real “Shabbat” - a true rest or break from work. I began planning to take one in 2020 and planned that this time it would be different. My focus would be on the four Rs - rest, reflect, refresh and reset. When 2020 came, my sabbatical began and despite the unexpected pandemic, I have committed to this mantra. How’s it going? I have taken numerous weekday afternoon naps, watched the sun set, taken long walks, and been fully present in 100% of conversations. I have journalled daily, played guitar for tens of hours, and just hung out with myself, having a dance party of one on most mornings. I have responded to people, had deep conversations and engaged in activities that have heart and meaning for me. I am now ready to reset.

I appreciate the luxury of having been able to plan time out from pursuing a career, but the value to me and my work has been priceless. They say, to whom much is given, much is expected, and so I intend to integrate these 4Rs into my regular rhythm of living rather than a once in a decade affair.

Overcoming the stigma of mental illness

#mentalhealthawareness #investinmentalhealth #suicideprevention

[a version of this perspective was first published by New African]

Susana Edjang (*Equatorial Guinea, Spain*) has over 15 years of experience in international development. She is co-founding member of Afroinnova, an African diaspora innovation platform, is a member of the Council of the UK’s Royal African Society, and co-founder of Collateral Benefits.

COVID-19 has disrupted health services across African countries, especially mental-health services. African mental-health practitioners report increased demand for mental-health services and psychosocial counselling.

This has come both from people with pre-existing mental-health conditions and those impacted by spikes in [stressors associated with COVID-19](#) such as isolation, depression, anxiety about the risks associated with loss of income and loved ones, and the misuse of alcohol and drugs.

This situation has prompted many promising responses that help overcome the stigma and discrimination associated with mental-health conditions for people who live with them and people working in this field.

A steady, albeit insufficient, visibility of mental-health issues has been sustained throughout the pandemic:

- The Africa CDC issued a [guidance for mental-health and psychosocial support](#);
- According to the WHO, [at least 27 African countries have integrated mental-health in their national responses](#), with the [brave support of community or village health workers](#);
- Civil society and the private sector have expanded existing innovations or created new ones to ensure increased access to mental-health services and information through telemedicine, social media campaigns and other technological solutions.

Examples include [iDocta Africa](#) in Cameroon, [Wazi](#) in Kenya, the [MEGA project](#) in the Southern Africa Development Community, and [Shezlong](#) in Egypt. Although these opportunities are limited to people with digital literacy and access to the internet and smartphones, they are a great addition to government efforts to make mental-health services fully accessible to those hardest to reach, especially in the rural areas.

Next we must use these innovations to counteract the inequalities that maintain the '[treatment gap](#)' – the proportion of people living with mental illness who don't get treatment – at over 70% across Africa, including those in refugee camps, that lead to more than [35,000 Africans](#) committing suicide each year. **Greater awareness and investment in mental-health is long overdue and we know from previous experiences with the [Ebola epidemic or HIV/AIDS crises](#), that the mental-health impacts will outlast the pandemic.** It is critical for the prevention and the care of those at risk of and living with mental-health conditions, including frontline health workers. Mental-health and psychological support must be better integrated and prioritised into COVID-19 national responses and beyond.

Resilient no more!

#resilience #trauma #transformation

[a version of this perspective was first published by [New African](#)]

Yabome Gilpin-Jackson (*Sierra Leone, Canada*) is a dreamer, doer and storyteller, committed to imaging and leading the futures we want through award-winning human and organisation development scholarship and practice. Co-founder of *We Will Lead Africa*, writing and curating African identity, leadership and belonging stories always.

Resilience...the ability to "bounce back". Whenever a relatively positive narrative is spun about the continent of Africa and her peoples, it is often one

about resilience. After all, if African countries and African people continue to endure suffering and pain and yet continue to exist, then surely, it can be concluded that if nothing else, we are resilient. To me, this narrative lands as trite and dehumanising; the patronising and patriarchal tone places “Africa”, that Dark Continent, as a passive recipient of a doomed destiny. In this narrative, suffering is inevitable and unstoppable for or by African peoples, especially African womxn, who are expected to carry the brunt of the load, literally and figuratively, of daily burdens and ongoing violence of all kinds.

Whilst there is truth and evidence for the common aphorism “what doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger”, and that transformation is a possible outcome of trauma, my own research on [posttraumatic growth](#) has also raised the perspective that a continued resiliency narrative is inhumane.

It is inhumane to continue to be bystanders to suffering for the sake of observing the collateral benefit of resilience, because an environment that perpetuates suffering will not only erode resilience, but amplify mental health and traumatic injuries, in turn closing off possibilities for innovation and transformation.

The crises of COVID-19 and social inequality have revealed the environmental and social structures that breed suffering for black peoples globally. But it has also opened up opportunities for African womxn who have been positioning to take space in all arenas; they are building on what our ancestors did quietly while fulfilling traditional gender-assigned roles, to boldly lead Africa’s progress as we saw in documenting their stories for [We Will Lead Africa, Volume II: Women](#).

As we respond to COVID-19 and shape Africa’s future, its time to not only look for the resilient solutions (“bounce back”), but to take actions that allow us to “bounce forward”. Resilient no more! We are here to take and make space for Africa’s continued transformation, especially for African girls and womxn on the continent and in the diaspora.

Community and belonging is our advantage

#belonging #mentalhealth #community

[a version of this perspective was first published by [New African](#)]

Sarah J Owusu (*Ghana, Denmark, based in South Africa*) is co-founder of two story-telling platforms, *Collateral Benefits* and *We Will Lead Africa*, that focus on documenting and sharing African perspectives and stories of everyday African leadership in order to shift global narratives. She is an award-winning organisation development practitioner and coach, and applies her expertise to the innovation space through the boutique consultancy, *InkDot* (www.theinkdot.com).

African countries may be faring better in terms of infection and death rates associated with COVID-19, but as the WHO Regional Director for Africa has

[stated](#), 'this new virus can stir up stress levels and trigger mental health conditions or exacerbate existing ones'. Whilst many African countries have considered mental health in their COVID-19 response plans, many of these plans are only partially funded, or not funded at all.

Getting ahead of this pandemic means acknowledging that health goes beyond the physical; it is intuitive to assume that our health is determined by lifestyle choices such as diet, smoking and drinking. Alongside this, **we need to include belonging as a fundamental human need**. A [2010 meta-analytic review](#) confirms that the 'quality and quantity of individuals' social relationships has been linked not only to mental health but also to both morbidity and mortality'. A sense of belonging has a direct impact on our overall life satisfaction and on our mental health. So what is a sense of belonging? According to a [Science Direct study](#), it is a person's experience of involvement in a system or environment – a feeling that one is an integral part of it. Just as we might think of financial resources as a cushion that allows us to absorb financial shocks, a sense of belonging, membership to social groups and access to social support are a critical psychological resource, necessary for wellbeing.

Unsurprisingly, the experience of belonging (or not belonging) runs along the existing rifts in social fabric – for example, unemployment and isolation has a significant negative impact on belonging, two areas where COVID-19 has hit us especially hard. This understanding of what impacts our wellbeing also shows us that strengthening our sense of belonging is not just an individual endeavour; it requires relationships, community and social cohesion. Our mental and physical health – indeed, our survival – is not just in our own hands, but also in the collective and shared sense that we exist in a world that will catch us if we fall. And within African cultures, the centrality of community may give us a significant advantage, if prioritised.

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