It takes personal effort and the whole village to grow a leader

My Life, My Career: Sharing Life Experiences

Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda
TNGO Fellow for 2012, Moynihan Institute
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs; Syracuse University
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Early Years: Seeding My Dream

I am pleased to have this opportunity to share with you my career experiences, and how my life in the last 40 plus years, has shaped who I am. I appreciate so much being here as the TNGO Initiative Fellow for 2012, at the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, here at Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. This is such an opportunity for leaders of transnational NGOs to increase our effectiveness and to nurture our skills and competencies through moments of reflection in an academic institution. My talk to you this afternoon focuses on the theme “it takes personal effort and a whole village to grow a leader”. You are all part of that village in my two week experience here at Syracuse University.

Born in Magaya Village, Murewa District in Zimbabwe, I am the last born child in a family of eleven. I was the last of my mother but the first one to be born in a health center and the first to go to university. My parents were subsistent farmers, passionate about access to education for their children, doing all they could with their hands, the land, and their networks to make that happen. I was an avid reader at school, at home, on weekends, everywhere. I would carry a book going to the river for laundry; a book as I balanced my jerry can of water from the well, a book as I walked the two kilometers to our garden. I would read the book, any book that I could find in this rural school that just had limited options and possibilities. I would read about geography, I was fascinated about history and about people. I read about women in the bible, and read African literature, liberation history, and our culture.

I loved literature, and always wanted to one day write. One story that I really want to write about is “where does the bus come from?”. I had a quest of knowledge- knowing this world and what makes it tick. I wanted to really know where this bus comes from, the “shiri-yekutanga bus service” that passed through my village each morning and each evening. From childhood, I had the quest for knowledge; and made the personal effort with my village, my parents, my siblings, and all who were around me in support of that dream to remain in school, and to go to university. My father died when I was in 5th grade. It was in 1978 during the liberation war of independence from British colonial rule. My mother held the mantle and continued the journey, for almost 28 years she lived as a widow, she continue to invest in our education. She passed away in 2006, on 19th of January. In her memory I established Rozaria Memorial Trust.
I first lived in a big city when I joined the University of Zimbabwe to study law. For my secondary (junior high) school, I had been living with my brother and his family in a small mining town called Zvishavane in Zimbabwe. I then went to Gokomere High School, a catholic boarding school for my high school education, ‘A’ level according to the British educational system. I majored in languages, history and literature. It was such an exciting migration to move from my village experience to a small mining town. My horizons were expanding and my opportunities were increasing.

At university, studying law, I became interested in both family law related issues- dealing with custody and guardian of children and marriage laws- divorce and inheritance. I was also deeply interested in constitutional law and human rights issues. I would gravitate around these issues, with the full understanding and knowledge that what affected women and children in our communities can as well be protected by the constitution and the subsidiary legislation. This was the first time I was able to formulate clarity of my career path, my quest for social justice and protection of human rights, and the practical actions for citizens-especially women and children- to benefit from the protection of the law.

I then went to Sweden, Uppsala University for a post graduate certificate in Conflict Resolution and Mediation. Again, this took not only personal effort to look around my school university notice board, submit an application, get the recommendation letter, apply for a passport and visa etc. It also took the whole village to do so: my professors at the law faculty, the Swedish educational fellowship programme, my friends and colleagues, and the support from my husband Charles who I had just married.

University was an important space for forming my career path, options and possibilities. I had the opportunity to participate in an internship programs at the private firm Stumbles and Rowe. I learned from that experience that I was not cut out for private practice that focuses on commercial, family, or public law. It was good to be exposed to this opportunity, I did learn a lot within the months of attachment, but I also came to know myself and interests a little bit more. My advice, is take the opportunities that are afforded while at university to get to know yourself and it will help you craft and define your career path. Again, I am grateful that there was another whole village, private sector willing and interested in offering such opportunity to us as students. Real-time workplace experience is always importance in the processes of decision making and career formation.

My university experiences also offered me opportunities to be connected with other social and research events outside my daily academic schedule. I had an opportunity to do some research assistance work that simply exposed me to working with others on a concrete project, time bound and with clear results. I was active in the church related activities and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. These spaces gave me an opportunity to interact with other students, and the community at large beyond the university. It helped me to acquire not only other forms of knowledge, but skills in inter-personal and group relationships, and a sharper awareness on the issues that I was deeply interested in. It centered me more in terms of my career, questioned my assumptions and lifted my aspirations. During this fellowship with the TNGO Initiative at The Maxwell School, I am reflecting and researching on inter-
generational leadership. These engagements at University affirmed me as a leader, though receiving clear mentorship, advice and support.

A bureaucrat, activist, a diplomat and an advocate for human rights and social justice

Post university, I always describe my work experience through the continuum of working in a bureaucracy, as a civil society activist with NGO in my country Zimbabwe, the ten years of experience in the UN, and now my present role as General Secretary of the single largest and oldest women’s organization in the world, the World YWCA!

The cumulative experience of working on governance as an assistant law officer, in the prosecution department of the ministry of justice and constitutional affairs, was short but very informative. I learnt more about how government works, how decisions are made, and how we can work for social justice issues within the space of bureaucratic institutions. The experience as a lawyer, and founding Coordinator of the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association in Zimbabwe was also quite important. This is the first time I learnt how to do organizational administration, strategic planning, coordination, and programme delivery. It was at a small scale but for a young woman, with just a few years of experience, this was a big step in my career. I needed and, fortunately, I had strong mentors, and advisors, who were willing to hold my hand. I was open to learning, acknowledging my mistakes, and accepting that I have to grow not only my knowledge of the issues but also of how the world works, which includes more than the knowledge and content on issues.

The years in the United Nations where I served with both UNICEF and UNIFEM were very rewarding professionally, contextually exposing, and challenging as well. While I had made a personal decision that I would like to expand my horizons and explore the world beyond my own country in Zimbabwe, I could not personally determine, how or when such an opportunity would present itself. It was a combination of contacts, luck, opportunity, and self-knowledge. I was invited to UNICEF to join a team which was undertaking a study on the rights-based situational analysis of women in children in Zimbabwe in 1998. I did not know that this singular assignment would offer me an opportunity to then be appointed a National Child Rights Advisor for UNICEF, and subsequently get an international post and move to Liberia. I thought I would be in the UN for a few years, but I ended up staying for 10 years. In my last role, I was the Regional programme Director for United Nations Funds for Women (UNIFEM), which is now part of UN Women. Again, a wonderful opportunity, I had to be a leader on issues I deeply care for related to social justice with much more focus on women’s rights, peace, and security.

Again, stepping into this role was not simply a result of personal effort, but an outcome of many people coaching, guiding, supporting, enabling, and encouraging me. An important part of my village at this stage was my husband Charles and my two children, Munashe and Farirai. Whatever decision that I had to make about my career, it was not just about me, and stepping up the career ladder, it was also about the people I deeply care for and love. It was also about the social support of my extended family, my siblings, my mother, and mother-in law. While I had to now live outside the country, they were part of ensuring that I remain connected to my roots and that life is larger than just my job and my immediate family. They also provided me with encouragement that enabled me to dig into my personal life to make
my social justice and human rights work more meaningful. I could always refer to our growing up in poverty, family experience with health related issues—whether HIV or mental health, the strong connections of family support and continued focus on education, and any other higher goals in our lives.

*My Present Passion, My Leadership of the World YWCA*

Today, I am the 13th General Secretary of the World Young Women’s Christian Association (World YWCA), a global movement with 158 years of history, reaching 25 million women and girls worldwide. We are present in 125 countries and in 22,000 communities. I had an opportunity the other day to visit the YWCA of Tonawanda and I am looking forward to greeting the YWCA of Syracuse this week! An amazing movement, the YWCA’s mission is to develop the leadership of women and girls for collective action towards peace, justice, human dignity, freedom, health and care for the environment.

Many people have asked how and why, in terms of career, did I to join an international NGO from a position in the United Nations. Again, this was a confluence of many factors, which some of you will confront in your own lives. It relates not just to the job and income side of things, but your own personal values and what you care for; opportunities and dream for the future. Therefore the personal effort again emerges, I got connected with the need to still search for “where the bus comes from”, and the deep urge to give back to my community.

My mother passed away in 2006, as I looked at her that last moment on the 20th of January, I knew that I had to do something special for her to just say thank you. One immediate decision was to dedicate my professional personal time to an organization that touches women’s lives in communities practically every day. I was in a way still “looking for my mother”. I was also searching for the world, wanting to know where the bus comes from! I had spent 10 years with the UN, mostly focusing in the Africa region. I was looking for another experience, another challenge, and another possibility. The World YWCA fortunately was looking for a Chief Executive Office, a General Secretary to be based at its World Office in Geneva. It came at the right time also for my family, because our son was now moving to college and our daughter to high school. Therefore this was a win-win-win for me; with regards to my career, giving back to my mother, and getting a little bit more knowledge about where the bus comes from as well as for my children’s future.

The work is fulfilling because we develop and nurture the leadership of women and girls in the world. But we are also provide services and are connected with daily lived realities of our communities, while at the same time we are able to influence public policy, social norms, and values.

For me to be an effective leader, and get the best out of this space, I know that I need to practice and model shared leadership in my daily work Life. This is with my co-workers, staff colleagues, my volunteer Board, the members of our movement; as well as remaining connected with and supported by our friends.

I continue to seek knowledge, experience, and mentors. I believe in knowing the self, living by principles, and making the personal political. We are who we are in our professional lives, not just because of our
knowledge and experiences, but also because of our history, our context, life circumstance, and just knowing when to grab an opportunity when it knocks on your door.

Thank you for creating this space for me to join this career conversation at Maxwell.

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