



# Fatima

NIGERIAN ACTIVIST AND ORGANIZER  
REPLACING FIREWOOD WITH A CELL PHONE

Fatima never wanted to be where she was. When she would see her older brothers and sisters leave for school, she would cry because she couldn't go with them. But when they started taking her to school, she would cry because she didn't want to stay by herself. Fatima has always had the feeling that things were never just as they should be, that she had to keep looking for something else.

Fatima was born in 1986 in Jos, a city with half a million inhabitants in the centre of Nigeria. Her father, Abubakar, had a management position at a mining corporation; he owned his own house and car, and was able to support the ten children he had with Aisha, a pious and devoted woman who spent what little free time she had knitting and spinning thread to help make ends meet.

When she was a child, Fatima was surrounded by brothers and sisters, and her life was almost easy. She had to walk for an hour to get to and from school, but when she got

home there always was something good to eat, and she would take a nap before helping with the house chores and, every other day, washing her uniform. Fatima and her siblings had to see to their responsibilities before going outside to play.

Fatima belongs to a small tribe, the Egbira. Once a year, her family travels to "its" town; though none of them had been born in Toto, their grandparents were from there. It was a peaceful place where they would get in touch with their heritage. It was there that Fatima learned, for example, to respect her elders: that one must not only bow, but also kneel before them. Fatima did it, but she wondered why. Fatima was always challenging the reasons for everything. She wondered, for example, why she never saw a woman driving a car or, later, why all the people on TV and the radio defending women's rights were men. At home, Fatima had often heard the African saying that goes, "He who wears the shoe knows where it pinches most,"

but for some reason that didn't seem to apply to women.

Fatima was particularly interested in one of those television programs, aired on a local channel, it was called Youth Perspectives and its host was Mr. Kingsley Bangwell. He spoke of health issues, HIV, the environment, youth participation, entrepreneurship. Fatima hoped that one day she would go and see him and so, when Kingsley went to her school and asked people to help out in the community, she thought it was a sign. The next day, Fatima – now 16 – became a volunteer with the Young Stars Foundation.

*It was mind blowing. There were so many resources to read from, so many interesting things to learn. I began to get into youth participation, governance issues, economic empowerment, sustainable development.*

Young Stars Foundation was where Fatima saw a computer for the first time. They taught her what it was for. They also

taught her how to make cosmetics, soap and candles and how to dye clothing, so to be able to train unemployed youth. At first, she didn't have a lot of self-confidence, but gradually she came to trust herself more. She loved feeling that she was doing something that mattered: she was no longer an observer, but a player. Until something unexpected happened that changed her life: her mother had a stroke and was paralyzed. A few months later, a second stroke killed her.

"... I didn't even know that I was causing harm to myself and to the rest of the world, both by cutting down trees and by the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions."

*I always loved being a child. You're so innocent, and everything comes so easy. But when my mother died, a huge feeling of responsibility fell on my shoulders, because automatically I had to start taking care of my siblings: that's when I knew that I was not a child anymore.*

She felt that her world had crumbled and wondered why to go on. It comforted

her to think that her mother had had a good life, and that if her Creator took her, He must have had his reasons. When she felt ready, she wrote an article about her mother, entitled *Never Give Up*. That was the lesson that Fatima had learned from her mother's life, and it was the first time she wrote something with the idea of publishing it; those who read it liked it, and encouraged Fatima to keep on. Fatima thought about writing a novel that would tell the real life stories of girls like her. And so she started working on *The Face of Africa*, which she intends to finish soon, and then *The Amazon of Elkira*. She also changed her mind about becoming a doctor, the profession that she had always wanted to pursue; she would never be able to look at a sick person again without thinking of her mother.

Fatima had finished high school but she didn't go to the university because her family couldn't afford tuition. She kept doing community work, and that's how she came into contact with the people from the British Council. A few months later, she was selected to participate in Global Exchange, a program for young people from Nigeria and England. Thanks to the program, she would spend three months in Birmingham, England.

*It was my first time so far from home, I was homesick. Everything was so different there. For one thing, I was surprised by how neat and punctual everything was, from meetings to buses.*

But she found the food flavourless and, mostly, she was shocked to see young people drinking and smoking in the streets, dressed without any modesty and treating elders as if they were their equals. Fatima began to appreciate her own country more. It may be poor, she thought, but it has values that shouldn't be thrown away. She was very busy; she worked with women at a homeless shelter and on HIV and AIDS prevention campaigns. She learned that even a rich country like England was not a bed of roses for everyone.

Back in Jos, she started working with Spring of Life – an NGO focused on HIV and AIDS issues – trying to support patients not to give up, and to explain to them that, if they take good care of themselves, they can live with their disease for many years. She eventually started working as a volunteer at YARAC – Youth Adolescent Reflection and Action Centre – an NGO that, from the very beginning, allowed her to work on her own project, Young Women of Vision. There, she worked – and still

works – organizing workshops on a variety of issues: the first one was on reproductive health and the prevention of STDs.

*Very few Muslim girls from here would do what I'm doing. Women here are much more passive. It's in our culture; we are supposed to be housewives and that's all. But that's why so much work needs to be done.*

Fatima was 19 and didn't plan to study, because she was already doing what she wanted to do and so it seemed like a waste of time. Then she realized that she needed to: "It's not just about wanting to change lives; it's about knowing how to change them," she realized. "And for that I needed a university education."

Even though she didn't have any money, she applied; when she was accepted, YARAC lent her what she needed. Due to her work in the community, she decided to study psychology. She is now in her third year, and she still works with YARAC, and with Action Aid on anti-hunger and food-rights campaigns. She is working on six or seven other projects as well and she doesn't have time – she has never had time – for a boyfriend. But last year, when she first heard about climate change at a meeting of Global



Exchange vets, she felt that she had to do something.

*It was a revelation. I use firewood to cook, and I didn't even know that I was causing harm to myself and to the rest of the world, both by cutting down trees and by the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. I used to throw cans and bottles anywhere, and they'll outlive us, they'll harm future generations.*

Fatima still cooks with firewood because she has no choice, but soon she will get a special stove, crafted by an environmentalist organization, that consumes less and produces fewer emissions. She also got

interested in the problem of water in her city, which affects her directly. Ten years ago, her house and the whole neighbourhood stopped having tap water, and later her well ran out of water and they had to build another one, that doesn't provide drinking water. She is not the only one; due to a lack of infrastructure, most Africans have always had serious problems getting water; this problem has worsened in recent years with the indiscriminate chopping down of trees and the droughts associated with climate change.

Fatima started to think a lot about the issue, and she learned about a WaterAid program that offered a thousand US dollars

to young people who wanted to use new technologies to carry on a project on water and sanitation. But, at 22, Fatima was too old to apply, so her 17-year-old sister, Amina, joined in and they presented an idea; they would put together a group of young people from different communities to film on their cell phones – in Nigeria, where landlines never worked, almost all urban dwellers have cell phones – the problems caused by the lack or misuse of water and of the sanitation system. They would edit a 15-minute documentary to be shown and discussed at schools, and then put together groups to work on the issue and demand action from the local government. The proposal was accepted and they will soon start working.

### *Why water?*

*Because I have not had running water for ten years, because everyone complains about this, because the lack of water is disastrous on all fronts: families cannot cook healthy food, live healthy lives, or maintain vegetable gardens and animals. And women have to walk and walk to get water. If a girl does not have water she cannot wash her uniform and so she cannot go to school, because people laugh at you if your uniform*

*is dirty. We need water all the time. It's so important and, sometimes, so neglected.*

### *Why do you feel the need to do these things all the time?*

*At first it was out of curiosity: I wanted to know. Now it is more the satisfaction of doing something that is beneficial. And it's exciting to meet so many people, and it builds my CV, of course, says Fatima, laughingly.*

The most important thing, she says, is that you never know whose life will be changed by the small things you do. That is what makes her keep going, and she talks about more and more project; she can't stop thinking up projects and imagining the future.

### *So, how do you see yourself in twenty years?*

*A psychologist, a wife, a very good mother, a writer hopefully, a development worker for sure. I might even be an entrepreneur producing cosmetics... I should be able to do a lot more than I'm doing now. I know that now I'm doing all I can to change lives, and I imagine that in twenty years*

*I'll be doing the same thing but on a larger scale. I hate seeing people suffer from lacks: lack of food, of health care, of education, of water. They should have all these things.*

And she tells the story of a woman from a nearby town who could not take her child to the doctor because the drought had ruined the crops and so she did not have the 20 US cents to pay for a motorcycle taxi. When she managed to get the money together and take him to the doctor, he was dying; the mother came home again carrying his body in her arms.

*This is happening in 2009, in our cities. Why would a child die for not having access to health care and food and clean water? What will we do? What are we doing now?*

## POVERTY

### CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The impact of climate change will be most severe on the lives of poor people. While climate change impacts will vary geographically, poor people will be more vulnerable in impacted places, as poor people have less access to key economic and social capital, such as education, private savings, and mobility, all needed in adaptation to projected impact and change.

The effects on the lives of poor people, and the level of resilience to projected changes, naturally varies to a large extent – there will be as many altered lives as there are people living in poverty in places where climate change impact will occur. In cities, poor people will be more vulnerable to health problems induced by increased heat waves and reduced urban air quality, as well as to transmissible diseases including malaria, dengue and cholera, and rodent borne infections following floods or droughts.<sup>1</sup> In rural areas, small-scale agriculture and fishing is threatened by projected changes in precipitation, dry and wet seasons and temperature. Poor urban workers, typically employed in the informal sector, will be vulnerable to warmer temperatures and heat waves, as they often spend long hours in facilities without adequate ventilation and sanitation. Poor people displaced by climate change impacts, often moving to urban areas, might face difficulties in finding work.

Most developing countries have less capacity to allocate capital and human resources needed to respond proactively to climate change, compared

to developed countries. The most vulnerable countries are located in tropical and sub-tropical areas, meaning that some of the most severe projected impact will target the countries that are least prepared.<sup>2</sup> However, societies and communities with high capacity are also vulnerable.<sup>3</sup>

Among the poor, women are expected to face harder consequences compared to men, because of their comparatively lower socio-economic status and women's high dependency on natural resources for their livelihoods. This applies in particular to single female headed households with few assets.<sup>4</sup> Two-thirds of the poor in world are women, and about 70-80 percent of agricultural workers are women. Further, as women spend less time in public spaces, they don't have the same preparation, as men, needed to cope with sudden disasters, with the effect that in many cases, a disproportionate number of women die or suffer injury.<sup>5</sup> Hence, adaptation and mitigation strategies must include special attention to women and girls, and their empowerment, which is partly dependent on their access to reproductive health.

With the global population being compromised by a large generation under the age of 25, young people will not only need to prepare to tackle tomorrow's impacts, but also be involved today in order to prepare themselves and their communities. Young poor people often have insufficient access to education, food, health, including reproductive health, and stable social networks such as

their immediate family, thus making them more vulnerable. Today's young generation is also more urbanized than ever before, and in many cities, young people comprise a disproportionate number of slum dwellers.<sup>6</sup> With adequate efforts, urban young people have the potential to be strong actors in adaptation and mitigation, as cities provide opportunities both in terms of livelihoods and environmentally sound living. However, this requires that special attention be given to urban young people's needs.

As long as the global community fails in keeping the necessary pace with agreed development plans, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), climate change impacts for developing countries and poor people risk being more severe than they need be, as poverty exacerbates people's and countries' vulnerability to climate change.<sup>7</sup> Further, if we fail to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change, poverty risks increasing in already poor countries, which in the long run will, among other effects, add to a decrease in social services, especially basic health services, including reproductive health, and a loss of progress made in efforts to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health, the second target to be achieved under MDG 5 on maternal health. Currently, there is indeed risk that some of the headway made in the efforts to reach the MDGs will diminish because of climate change.<sup>8</sup>