



## Mandela Washington Fellowship Summit

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Leadership for the Future: Resilience and Inclusion

### Mariatu Kabba Ignite Talk Transcript

#### Speakers

- Mariatu Kabba, 2021 Mandela Washington Fellow, Sierra Leone

#### Session Transcript

Imagine, upon the death of your husband, being kicked out together with your four girls from a family house by your late husband's relatives who claimed you could not be physically capable as men to own and sustain a house or any other property possessed by their late son and brother. Imagine you have no platform to voice out your complaints because this has traditionally been accepted by your society, and your case is not unique. This was exactly the situation of my mother some 21 years ago. As the only girl with tertiary education within the four girls of my mom, my passion to empower girls derived from this sad personal experience. I came from a very common, Mandinga Islamic background within Koinadugu District [unintelligible] in West Africa, where formal education and vocational skills trainings are no-go areas for girls because early marriage is considered to be the highest form of achievement for them.

Like many other women and girls within, before my mom could turn 30, she had had a third child, and before I could turn six as the fourth, she became a widow, and we were more prone to the existent social prejudices. As the youngest among the girls, I was taken from my mom by an extended family member who promised to give me a better life, but ended up to be false. Growing up as a child was extremely difficult. I was only guaranteed a roof, not even a space to lay my head. But as God could have it, the government had passed a policy on free primary school education, so I benefited from that. At secondary school level, I struggled to fund my school fees, I struggled for medical health facilities, and more. I became a woman before being a girl. I am grateful to God and a few community people who aided me through my tertiary education. My story was not unique and is still not different from that of the thousands of girls across the streets of Africa. Maybe the only difference could be that they are at a higher risk of not fulfilling their dreams due to the expensive formal and informal educational system, and the lack of community parenting which I benefited from.

Today, I'm already a mentor replicating myself to many. I tell the inspiring stories of great women and girls, or push boundaries and make mark in traditional male-dominated areas. I, as well, give voice to the voiceless and deprived women, like my mom, who underwent a lot of challenges from a marital background that prevented her from identifying her true potential. Through my non-profit called Strong Women Strong in Sierra Leone, we've been able to touch the lives of over 1,000 girls through



our mentorship programs, our career development sessions, and more. Women can't be physically capable as opposed to men, but they can have vision, wisdom, passion, integrity, tolerance, patience. What more does it take to lead?

Today, when I look around our community, I still see many of my mom. I see a lot of young women with high potential of telling the same story due to their socioeconomic demography. As leaders, we need to see beyond the idea of standing up for women and girls as in advocating for them, but rather, stand up with them, as in bringing them on board to champion their own issue. And empowerment is not when the structure to uphold it are lacking. How do we change societal norms and beliefs that led the likes of my widow mom, myself, and my three elder sisters to be thrown out of her family house?

I challenge each one of us to go back into our communities, seek out means to collaborate, and work towards changing the narratives, because that's what "Leadership for the Future: Resilience and Inclusion" means. Can we go back and see how we can create more safer spaces for women and girls to develop their literacy, numeracy, business, and life skills? This is why one of the things I'd love to embark on upon the end of this Fellowship is an idea similar to the pad project, where the issue of menstrual hygiene was handled differently. I remember skipping out classes due to poor menstrual hygiene and the fear of being stigmatized. I would love to see the development of sanitary pad factories across different regions in my country, where girls will freely learn skills on how to make their own sanitary pads, as well as use those skills to raise income for themselves. By embarking on this project, I will be fixing my best by ensuring the dignity of every girl in Sierra Leone is restored. I urge each one of us to start by becoming a mentor to a girl or two in our communities, because that's what "Leadership for the Future: Resilience and Inclusion" means.