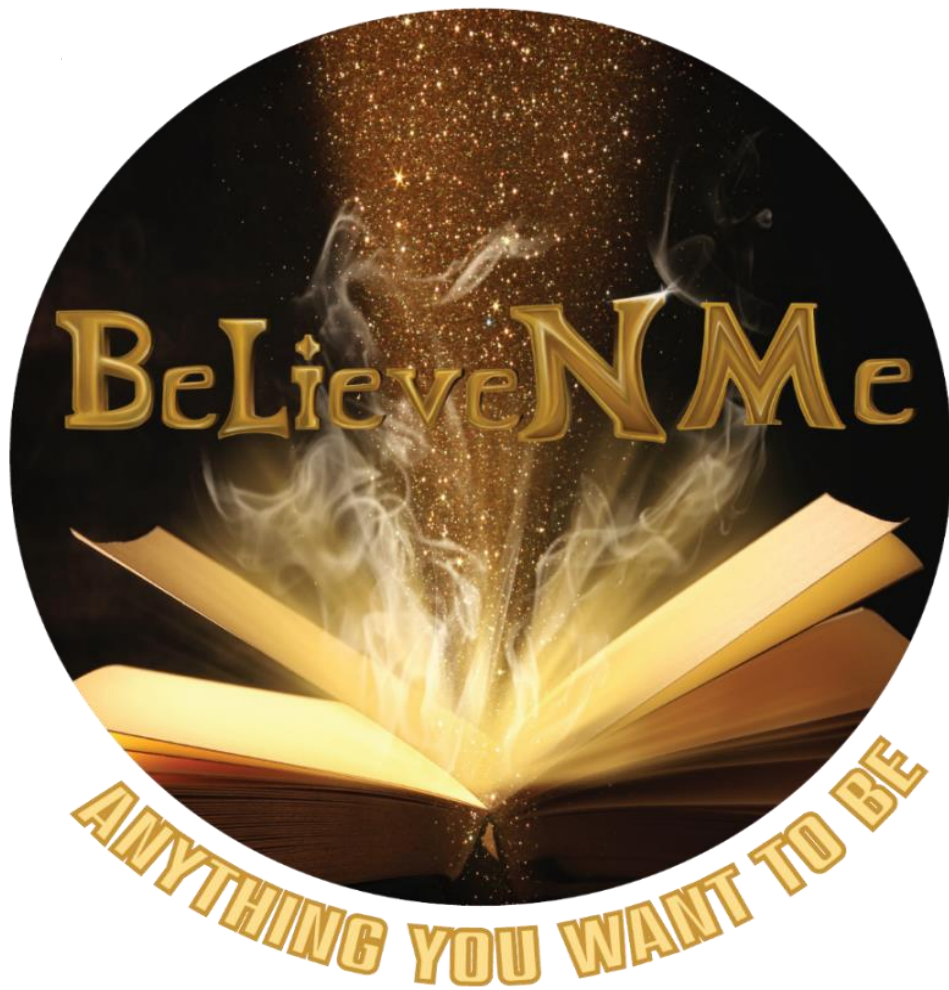


Natasha Agarwal



**TALES OF
AFRICAN WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS**

**Written by
Natasha Agarwal**

© 2024 Natasha Agarwal All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the Author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests, write to the Author at the address below.

info@believenbooks.org

DEDICATION

***To my mom,
who supports me in every moment of my life.***

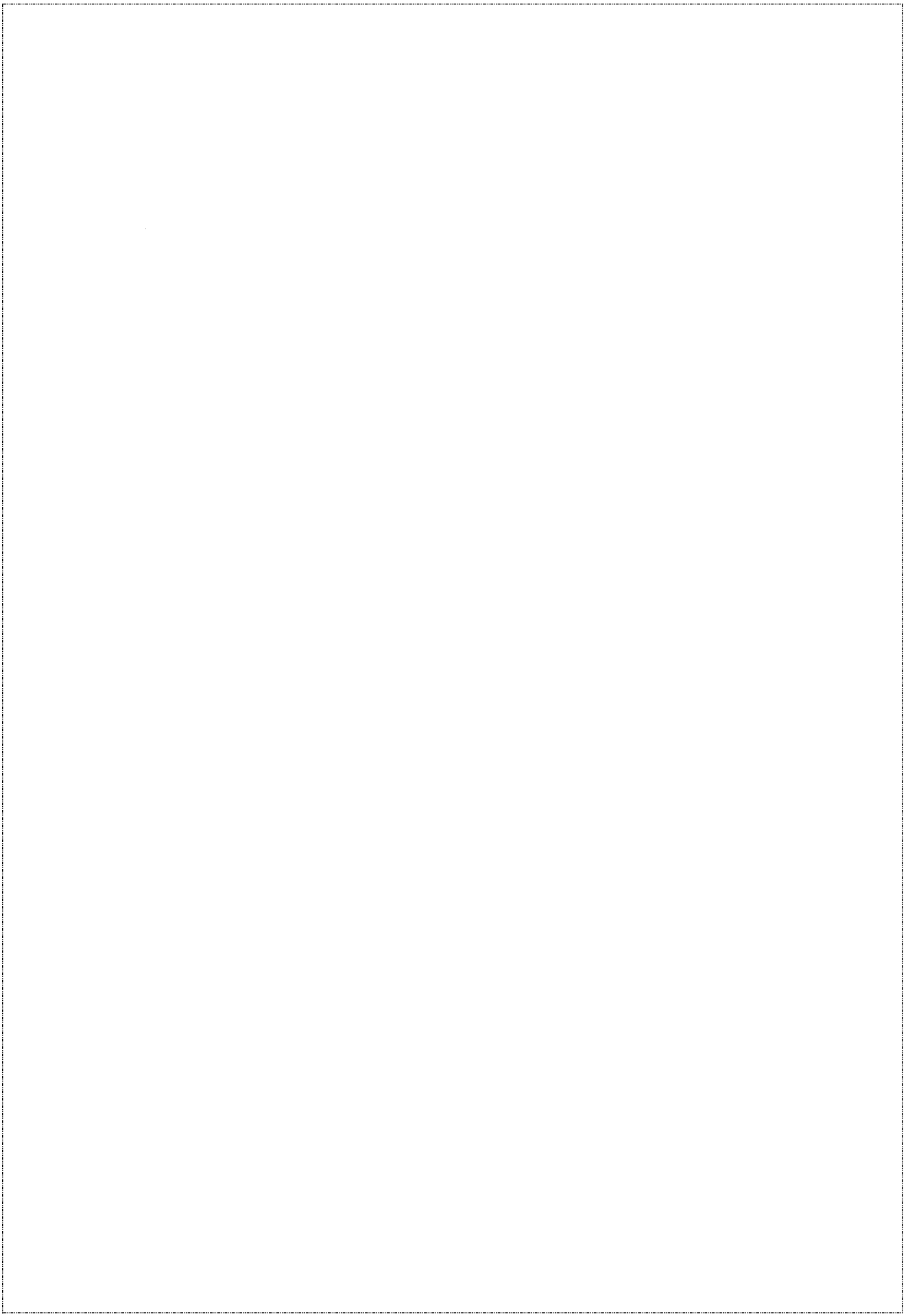


TABLE OF CONTENTS

ASISAT OSHOALA	1
ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO	5
CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE	9
DAMILOLA OLOKESUSI.....	13
ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF.....	17
FATMA SAMOURA.....	21
FATOUMATA BA	25
FOLORUNSO ALAKIJA	29
HELENA NDUME	33
JESSIE NDABA	37
LEYMAH GBOWEE	41
MARIA MUTOLA	45
MEAZA ASHENAFI	49
MIRIAM MAKEBA	53
NAMINA FORNA.....	57
NANA AMA BROWNE KLUTSE	61
NGOZI OKONJO-IWEALA	65
TARNEEM SAEED	69
THÉRÈSE SITA-BELLA	72
WANGARĪ MAATHAI	77
YAA ASANTEWAA	81
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	84



Asisat Oshoala

Going for the Goal

PROFESSIONAL SOCCER PLAYER

IKORODU, NIGERIA

BORN IN 1994

Asisat Oshoala was born into a tight-knit Muslim family alongside her seven siblings. She attended the Air Force Primary School of Victoria Island Lagos and Aunty Ayo International School for her early education. In her teenage years, Asisat took a liking to soccer, playing for hours a day in the streets of Nigeria. Her parents assumed it was a phase, believing that sports were not an acceptable career path for women. Despite this, Asisat's passion for soccer grew stronger.

When her father banned her from playing soccer, Asisat began to secretly play outside, turning to her grandmother for encouragement and support when family tensions arose. In 2014, Asisat's parents accepted their daughter's dreams and gave her permission to pursue

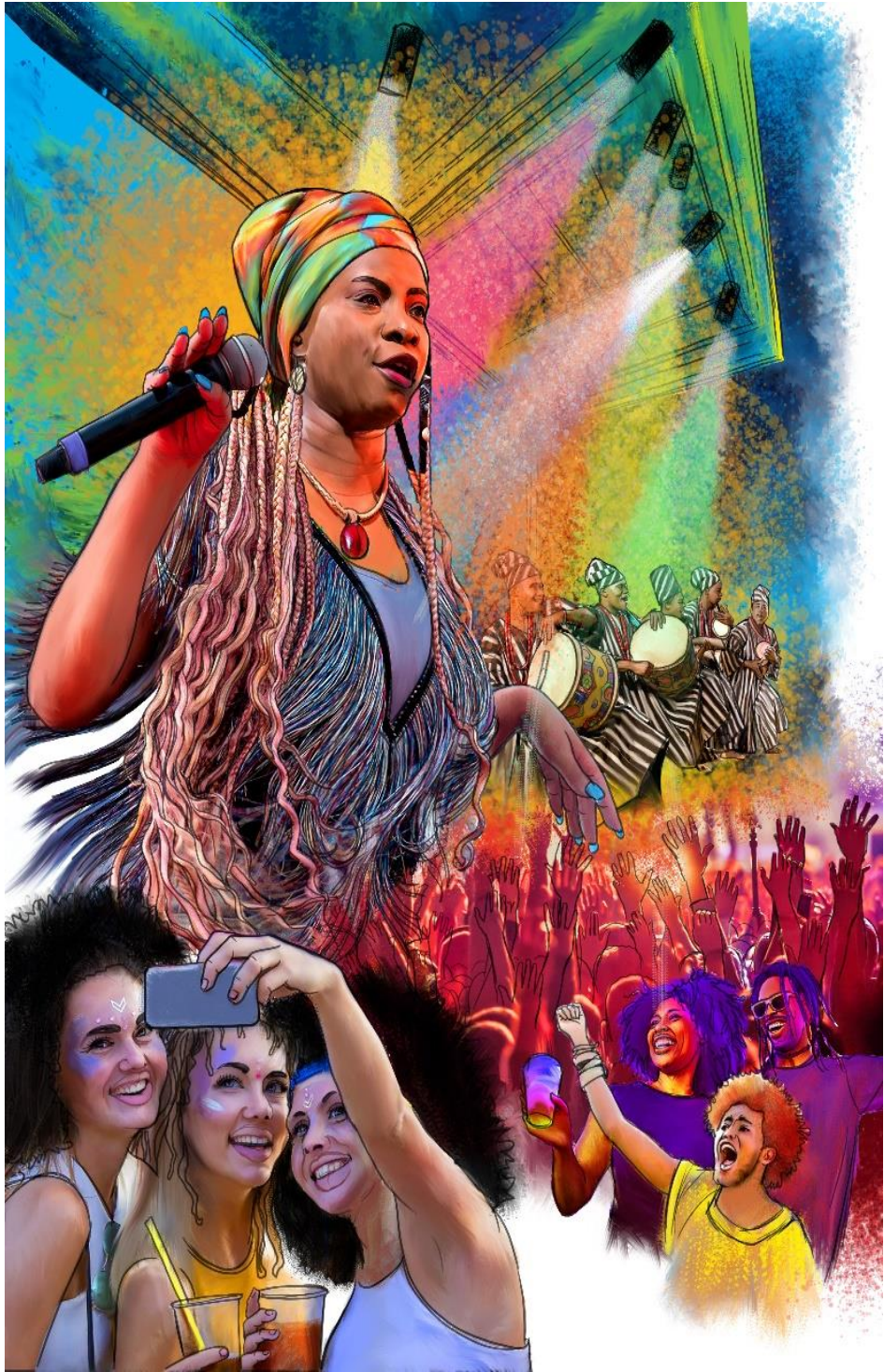
soccer. Her professional career began with Nigerian clubs including FC Robo Queens and Rivers Angels FC, where her ball control and speed made her a standout player.

In 2015, Asisat left Africa to join Liverpool FC, becoming the first African woman to compete in the English Women's Super League. Despite a knee injury that sidelined her for two months, she scored three impressive goals in nine games. Her talent soon caught the eye of Arsenal FC, where she transferred in 2016. She helped lead the team to victory at the 2016 FA Women's Cup final, solidifying her status as a powerful forward. In 2017, Asisat went to China, where she played for Dalian Quanjian, winning a European Golden Boot and two league championships.

The defining moment came when Asisat joined FC Barcelona Femení in 2019. She became instrumental in numerous victories, including the UEFA Women's Champions League, multiple Primera División titles, and the Copa de la Reina de Fútbol. Her goal in the 2019 UEFA Women's Champions League final was historic as she became the first African to score in such a high-profile

match. In 2021, she became the first African woman to win this league.

Asisat has been honored as a Member of the Order of the Niger by the President of Nigeria and earned multiple African Women's Footballer of the Year awards. She earned the nickname "Àgba Baller," meaning "Legendary Footballer". She has also launched the Asisat Oshoala Foundation, which focuses on empowering girl soccer players in Africa and hosts the annual Football4girls tournament in Lagos. Her belief of dreaming big, challenging stereotypes, and remembering where she came from has enabled her to become one of the most successful, celebrated African footballers of all time.



Angélique Kidjo

Harmonizing Humanity

SINGER

COTONOU, BENIN

BORN IN 1960

Angélique Kidjo was born into a family of musicians and surrounded by traditional Beninese and Yoruba music growing up. She started to perform with her mother's theater group at age six, giving her early exposure to the arts in Africa.

In her teenage years, Angélique sang with her school band and even recorded her own album called "Pretty" and began touring. However, Benin faced conflict during this time, so Angélique fled to Paris to safely continue her career as a musician. In Paris, Angélique worked many jobs to pay for her tuition at Le Cim, a prestigious jazz school. While she studied there, Angélique became the lead singer of the Euro-African jazz and rock band Pili Pili, and she created three albums called "Jakko," "Be In Two Minds," and "Hotel Babo." By the late 1980s, she had

become one of the most well-known singers in Paris and recorded her solo album called “Parakou.”

Angélique was soon discovered by Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, who signed her in 1991. She recorded four albums with him and two more with Columbia Records in New York. These albums gained international fame and admiration.

Angélique is known for her entertaining music and magnetic stage presence, and she has won five Grammy awards to date. She is a global phenomenon, labeled as one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time Magazine* in 2021. Her voice is a symphony of traditional African rhythms combined with genres such as pop, funk, and jazz. Angélique is also an advocate for change and has released songs such as “Agolo” and “Afirika,” where she explores the themes of identity, colonialism, and resilience of African cultures. Her lyrics are written with a sense of purpose and have been translated into five different languages, reaching listeners from across the globe.

Beyond the stage, Angélique is a humanitarian and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador. She uses her platform to fight for the rights of African children, prioritizing

education, health, and gender equality. Her work in raising awareness about topics such as child trafficking and female empowerment has earned her global recognition. She sees beyond borders, recognizing that the solutions to many of the world's most pressing problems lie in collaborative, cross-cultural endeavors. Today, Angélique Kidjo represents the boundless power of artistic expression to ignite conversations, foster empathy, and drive progress in the ongoing pursuit of a better world.



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Weaving Worlds with Words

AUTHOR

ENUGU, NIGERIA

BORN IN 1977

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born and raised in the deeply religious university town of Nsukka in the Enugu State. Her childhood was largely impacted by the Nigerian Civil War, where she lost both of her grandfathers early on. In 1997, at age nineteen, she moved to the US to pursue higher education at Eastern Connecticut State University. She later received master's degrees from Johns Hopkins University and Yale University and completed multiple fellowships. In addition, she has been awarded sixteen honorary doctorate degrees from various academic institutions across the United States.

Her literary journey began with the publication of her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, in 2003. Her sophomore novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, was released in 2006. The

two novels are centered around the Nigerian Civil War, exploring the horrors of battle and the resilience of those who endured it. Chimamanda's profound gift for storytelling became evident soon after the release of these novels. Her words became a powerful force, painting vivid and unforgettable portraits of African life, identity, and the struggles that define it. Her talent not only earned her recognition but also an array of prestigious awards.

In 2013, Chimamanda's *Americana* was published, further cementing her reputation for writing about complex themes. This novel, an examination of race, immigration, and the African population, resonated deeply with readers from diverse backgrounds. Through the perspectives of her characters, Chimamanda dives into the hardships of finding one's identity in a connected world and fostering important dialogue about the realities faced by thousands. The themes shed light on the identities and experiences of groups that have often been disempowered in the past.

Her influence extended into the genre of nonfiction, including her essay "We Should All Be Feminists," which became a global motto for gender equality. Her TED Talk,

"The Danger of a Single Story," received 35 million views and is in the top 15 most-watched TED Talks of all time. Within this speech, Chimamanda voices the need for a world where the perspectives and experiences of all people are recognized and respected. This will prevent the advancement of harmful stereotypes or suppression of certain groups that can occur from a lack of knowledge.

Chimamanda's fearless advocacy for women's rights and social justice transcends Nigeria, inspiring people around the world. Her remarkable literary contributions have garnered numerous accolades, including the esteemed National Book Critics Circle Award. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is crafting a legacy that invites readers into a richer, more nuanced understanding of the world and the diversity of the human experience.



shuttlers



UK-AFRICA INVESTMENT
SUMMIT 2020

IGREAT by PARTNERSHIP



Damilola Olokesusi

Breaking Borders

TRANSPORTATION ENTREPRENEUR

LAGOS, NIGERIA

BORN IN 1990

Damilola Olokesusi's educational journey was rooted in her homeland of Nigeria. She studied at All Saints' College Ibadan and later explored the world of chemical engineering at the esteemed University of Lagos. Early in her career, Damilola worked as an assistant teacher at the Corona School Victoria Island. Her dedication to education was powerful, leaving an unforgettable mark on young minds.

Damilola soon moved into the area of engineering and joined Marine Professionals Limited as a trainee engineer in 2014. This marked a shift in her professional path, and she sharpened her skills in a hands-on work environment. But an unexpected and unsettling event changed her trajectory—Damilola's sister was robbed while using public transportation in Lagos. This inspired Damilola to

shift her focus towards creating safer transportation methods throughout Africa. She became the co-founder and driving force behind Shuttlers, a female-owned technology start-up reshaping the way professionals and organizations travel in busy Nigerian cities. Shuttlers was established in 2016 and allows individuals and groups to rent vehicles and request rides at an affordable price. By offering a safe, comfortable, efficient mode of transportation, Damilola has enabled Africans to travel around a crowded metropolis with ease. So far, Shuttlers has provided over 3.5 million trips and transported more than 10,000 individuals.

Damilola's most recent initiative, Shemoves Shuttlers, was launched in partnership with Ford in 2020. Shemoves Shuttlers is a women-only shuttle service that connects female professionals with successful business executives during their commutes. This provides them with networking opportunities in an efficient manner.

Damilola's commitment to finding solutions goes beyond Shuttlers. Since 2017, she has been a member of the Youth Advisory Board for Plan International Nigeria, an organization advancing children's rights and equality for girls. In 2019, Damilola joined the World Economic

Forum. She took on the role of business mentor at Impact Hub in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, where she continued to promote entrepreneurship in the face of global challenges.

Damilola has always been deeply connected to her homeland. Her work at Shuttlers has increased accessibility and convenience for Nigerian commuters while opening doors for professional women in Africa. Her journey is an example of the power of combining education, innovation, and a strong commitment to community.



Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Liberia's Iron Lady

PRESIDENT OF LIBERIA

MONROVIA, LIBERIA

BORN IN 1938

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is known as the "Iron Lady". Although her parents grew up impoverished, they always believed in the power of education and passed that belief on to their daughter. Ellen attended a well-regarded preparatory school called The College of West Africa from 1948 to 1955. There, she learned about the world and dreamed of making a difference for others. At age seventeen, Ellen married James Sirleaf, and they had four sons together. Determined to provide the best for her children, she worked long hours as a bookkeeper in an auto repair shop.

In 1961, Ellen and her family moved to the US so that her husband could further his education. However, Ellen decided to pursue her own studies at the Wisconsin School of Business. Although her journey included a

divorce from her abusive husband, Ellen pushed past this adversity and took on the sole responsibility of raising her sons. Her perseverance and commitment to learning carried her to the University of Colorado Boulder and then to Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Ellen's education in economics allowed her to return to Liberia, where she eventually became the finance minister in 1979. But when a dangerous coup threatened her country, Ellen had to escape to ensure her own safety.

During her time away, Ellen worked in the US and Kenya with large organizations such as the World Bank, Citibank, and HSBC. She never stopped believing in her homeland or working toward a better future. Although it was risky, Ellen returned to Liberia in 1985. She was not afraid to criticize powerful leaders or attempt a coup against the regime. This landed Ellen in jail multiple times. Despite tremendous pressure from government officials, she fought tirelessly for justice.

The defining moment for Ellen came in 2005. She ran to become Liberia's president and won the election! Becoming the first woman in Africa to be democratically elected as a head of state, she served as president for 12

years. Ellen focused on important issues such as economic stability, medical care, education, violence reduction, unification, and helping impoverished people.

In 2007, Ellen was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her unwavering dedication to protecting Liberia from corruption. In 2011, she received the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in protecting women and bringing them into the peace-building process. The Iron Lady showed that no challenge is too big, even unifying a divided country when others did not support her.



Fatma Samoura

Leading the Global Game

SPORTS ADVOCATE & ACTIVIST

DAKAR, SENEGAL

BORN IN 1962

Fatma Samoura is the only daughter of seven children born to a Senegalese military man and a schoolteacher. She attended the University of Lyon in France and received a master's degree in English and Spanish. She is fluent in English, Spanish, Italian, French, and her native language, Wolof. Continuing her education at a nonprofit organization called International English & Cultural Studies, she focused on international relations.

Fatma's career began at the United Nations World Food Programme, where she spent over two decades honing her conflict resolution and leadership skills in seven different countries. These years were critical for Fatma to learn about navigating complex global challenges, including negotiating with warlords and

heads of state. These skills proved to be very valuable as she embarked on a new chapter in sports administration.

In 2016, FIFA, the International Federation of Association Football, appointed Fatma as its Secretary General. Her diplomatic experience and conflict resolution background allowed her to steer FIFA through difficult issues. She spearheaded various reforms within the organization but focused on promoting the core ideas of transparency, governance, and inclusivity within the sports industry. Under Fatma's oversight, FIFA was revamped, and she became the highest profile woman working in the world of soccer. She was recently recognized for these efforts when she received the World Football Summit Lifetime Achievement Award.

But Fatma's influence extends far beyond FIFA. She is a passionate advocate for women's empowerment and education through athletics. Recognizing the potential of soccer as an opportunity for positive change, she has worked tirelessly to create pathways for female participation and leadership within the sport. Through these initiatives, she expresses her belief that soccer can be powerful in breaking down barriers and driving personal progress for women.

Fatma's remarkable blend of diplomatic finesse and her deep-seated love of the sport have been an impactful combination. Her journey from the corridors of international diplomacy to sports administration is an inspiration for young girls aspiring to lead in male-dominated fields. Fatma Samoura has redefined what is possible in the pursuit of excellence and positive change, and she continues to show girls the value of challenging societal standards.



Fatoumata Ba

Leveling the Playing Field

INVESTOR & TECH ENTREPRENEUR

DAKAR, SENEGAL

BORN IN 1986

Fatoumata's story begins in the vibrant city of Dakar. She was a very inquisitive child and often asked her family challenging questions about Africa and its lack of development. Fortunately, her family was middle class and could afford to buy electronics for their home. With access to these gadgets, Fatoumata hacked her dad's computer at age nine, created her first email at age eleven, and built her first website at age sixteen. Her early fascination with technology and entrepreneurship was nurtured, and Fatoumata's greatest source of inspiration was her mother.

Fatoumata went on to pursue a master's degree in marketing and strategy in Toulouse, France. She eventually earned a degree in public policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. She

became fluent in five languages through her foreign studies programs. In 2007, she joined Index Multimedia as a business developer in France. Fatoumata also worked for France Telecom and Atos Consulting for several years before returning to Africa.

In 2013, Fatoumata founded Jumia, an e-commerce platform, and became chief executive officer (CEO). During her tenure, Fatoumata grew Jumia into the largest African e-commerce platform, selling items from beauty products to household appliances. Her leadership led to the creation of thousands of jobs and opportunities in Africa. Jumia was eventually valued at over 1 billion dollars, making it the first African tech unicorn to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

In 2018, Fatoumata founded and became the Executive Chair of Janngo Capital. Janngo is a tech fund with a focus on gender equality. Because many African entrepreneurs do not have the funds needed to start their own businesses, Janngo supports African start-ups by investing in them. One of Fatoumata's main goals through this program is giving women the means to become successful leaders and entrepreneurs.

Fatoumata is a crusader for women's entrepreneurship and empowerment. She believes in using technology to address important issues including health and education. She has been recognized as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum and received the prestigious Aenne Burda Award for Creative Leadership. But Fatoumata Ba's story is not just about individual success; it is about the transformative power of technology in Africa. Her journey illustrates the value of investing in entrepreneurship and innovation to change many lives for the better.



Folorunso Alakija

Fueling Fashion

ENTREPRENEUR & BUSINESSWOMAN

IKORODU, NIGERIA

BORN IN 1951

Folorunso Alakija was born into a very large conservative family in Ikorodu, Nigeria. At age seven, she traveled to the United Kingdom to receive primary education at The Dinorben School for Girls in Wales. She later returned to Nigeria and studied at a Muslim High School called Sabo Sagamu. After graduating, her father decided she would return to England to pursue higher education in secretarial studies.

In 1974, Folorunso took on the role of secretary at Sijuade Enterprises of Nigeria. She eventually held various positions at the International Merchant Bank Limited of Nigeria. In 1984, Folorunso decided to embark on her own journey by completing a one-year fashion-designing course at the American College in London and

the Central School of Fashion. Here, her artistic talents and creativity blossomed, inspiring her to follow her heart and start a fashion label called Supreme Stitches.

Supreme Stitches was later renamed The Rose of Sharon House of Fashion in 1996. They offer collections of modern African clothing to people across the continent. Attracting customers such as former Nigerian first lady Maryam Babangida, the company quickly rose in popularity. Folorunso soon became the president of the Fashion Designers Association of Nigeria, increasing her impact on the African fashion industry. She used this position to promote and celebrate Nigerian culture.

Folorunso next set her sights on expanding her family's oil business, Famfa Oil Limited (FOL). She fought for and secured higher subsidies for oil companies and grew the business through long-term petroleum extraction. Her extraordinary success in both the fashion and oil industry shows her versatility in managing diverse challenges, leading her to become a billionaire. Aside from these achievements, Folorunso's Rose of Sharon Foundation works to equip widows and orphans with resources and skills to enhance their lives. Her foundation also grants scholarships to 9,000 STEM-

oriented students yearly, supports tuberculosis and malaria treatments, and creates schools in Africa. Finally, Folorunso has generated new opportunities for women by creating entrepreneurship and career education programs, enabling them to realize their true potential in the face of adversity. Folorunso Alakija's legacy is one of inspiration, showing that success is most meaningful when used to help others.



Helena Ndume

Visionary Healer

OPHTHALMOLOGIST

TSUMEB, NAMIBIA

BORN IN 1960

Helena Ndume's story began in the mining town of Tsumeb. Her childhood was spent in an apartheid country amidst Namibia's ongoing struggle for independence. Apartheid was a system of legalized racial segregation discriminating against Black individuals which persisted for 40 years. At age fifteen, she fled to Gambia, where she completed her secondary education. Her mother worked as a fashion designer, inspiring Helena to follow in her footsteps. Helena also dreamt of pursuing medicine as a career path but felt that it was unrealistic given her circumstances. It was only when an elder encouraged her to become a physician that she thought of this as a possibility.

Helena traveled to Germany to study medicine at Leipzig University while working part-time in fashion. She

then pursued a medical internship in Namibia in 1989, eventually specializing in ophthalmology—the branch of medicine dedicated to the study and treatment of eye disorders and diseases. She distinguished herself through a focus on transformative surgeries, with an emphasis on cataracts. For over twenty years, she has worked as a volunteer ophthalmologist for Surgical Eye Expeditions International (SEE). SEE is a nonprofit organization that restores sight to individuals living with preventable blindness. Helena began to start and participate in week-long eye camps in Namibia, where people suffering from eye issues received free treatment from ophthalmologists. As the need for medical attention grew, these camps soon began taking place in other regions of Africa and various continents. Over the past twenty-five years, Helena has been able to restore sight to 35,000 people.

Helena has also worked with the Namibia Red Cross Society, where she served as Vice Chairperson from 2001 to 2007. She has provided disaster relief and healthcare to hundreds of Namibians. She currently serves as the Director of Ophthalmology at Windhoek Central Hospital,

the largest hospital in Namibia. Helena is one of only six ophthalmologists in the entire country!

Since the creation of SEE, Helena has been honored for her accomplishments. In 2015, she received the UN's inaugural Nelson Mandela Prize. She has also become an advocate for encouraging young women to pursue careers in medicine. Through her advocacy, she contributes to a broader conversation about equality, challenging societal norms, and inspiring positive change. Helena Ndume's legacy shows the extraordinary impact that one single person, driven by compassion and dedication, can have on the world. Because of her, thousands of individuals can look more clearly at the future and reach their full potential.



Jessie Ndaba

Launching Into the Future

AEROSPACE ENGINEER

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

Jessie Ndaba was brought up by her grandmother in the vibrant city of Cape Town. Her grandmother valued education and surrounded Jessie with puzzles and books early on. At age fourteen, Jessie's world changed with a textbook that her grandmother gave to her. A photo of a rocket engine captured her attention and launched her interest in space. She decided she wanted to become a space engineer despite her lack of knowledge surrounding the field. A few years later, Jessie earned a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering with honors from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. She also attended the International Space University's Space Studies Program, which set her career trajectory.

At SCS Space, Jesse learned about satellite technology and sustainable space solutions. She honed her skills in business development and program

management. In 2017, Jessie co-founded Astrofica Technologies; the name is a combination of the words astronomy and Africa. Astrofica is a Black-owned satellite technology company focused on developing space systems and satellite components, a profitable area of the African space industry.

In addition to her role at Astrofica, Jessie's seventeen-year long association with SunSpace Information Systems highlights her enduring commitment to the field. One of the top achievements of Jessie's career is her involvement in the SumbandilaSat program, South Africa's first government satellite project under the Department of Science and Technology. This project showcased her technical prowess and her ability to contribute to national space endeavors.

Jessie is also deeply invested in the socio-economic and human capital development of the continent. She firmly believes in the important role of commercial space companies in implementing the African Space Policy. Speaking at forums such as the 2023 Malawi Space Conference, she has emerged as a voice of authority and an advocate for collaboration among African nations in space technology.

Jessie Ndaba's views reflect a deep understanding of space's potential to transform African lives and economies. Her journey is not just about her achievements in aerospace engineering but also about driving innovation and contributing to the global space industry. Her work, particularly with Astrofica, symbolizes a new era of African ingenuity, where the sky is not the limit but just the beginning.



Leymah Gbowee

Promising Peace

SOCIAL WORKER & PEACE ACTIVIST

MONROVIA, LIBERIA

BORN IN 1972

Leymah Gbowee was born into a rural community in the heart of the first independent republic in Africa. At age seventeen, her childhood was transformed due to the First Liberian Civil War that erupted in her homeland. She began to train as a social worker, counseling former child soldiers and gaining insight into the true devastation of the war.

Due to the turmoil in Liberia, Leymah left and fled to Ghana with her partner and children. However, the situation remained dire and the family experienced homelessness. Leymah and her children returned to Liberia to rebuild their lives. She began volunteering at the Lutheran Church as a trauma counselor for the

victims of the war. She inspired other Christian women to fight for peace in their country.

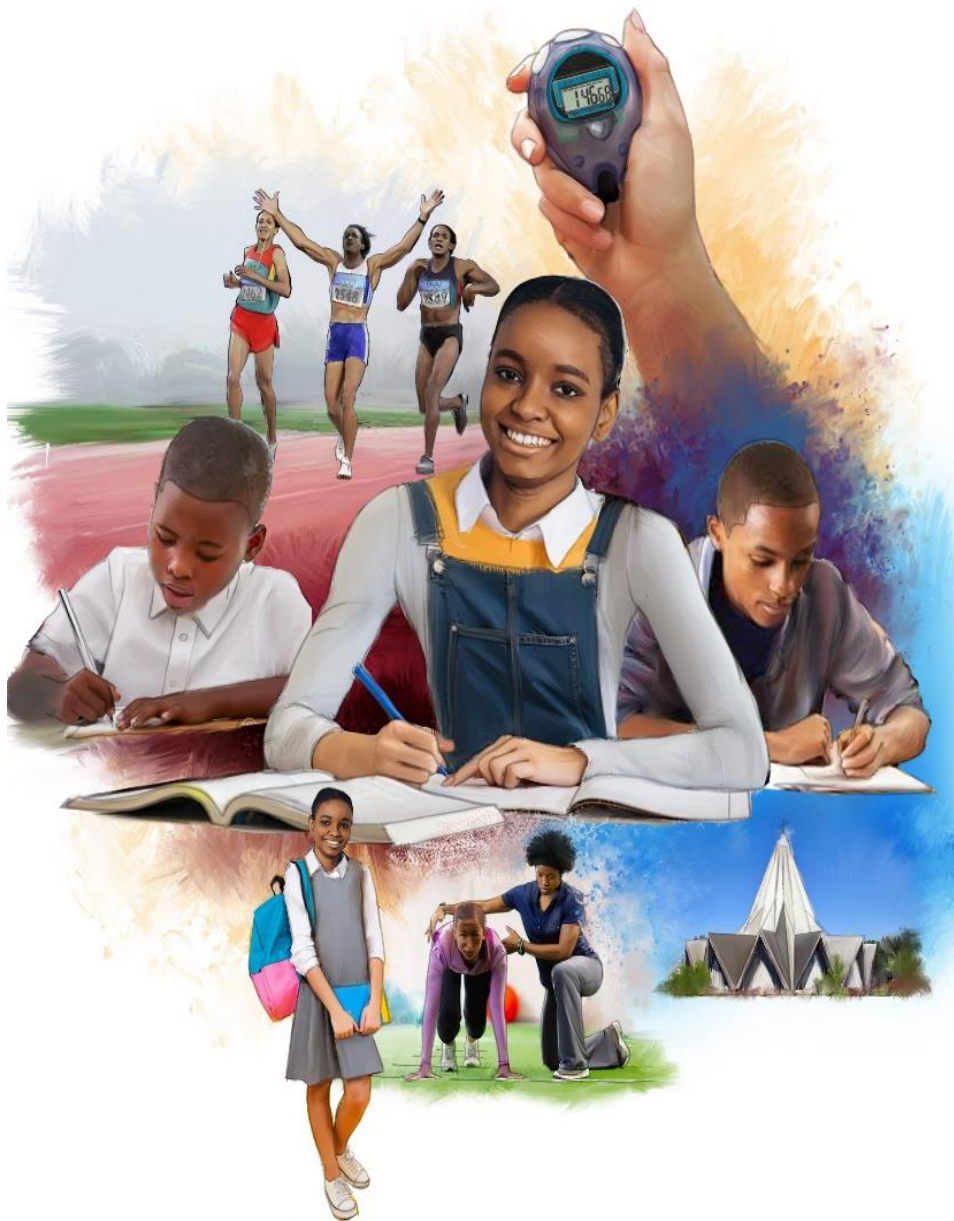
In the early 2000s, amidst the smoke and devastation of the Second Liberian Civil War, Leymah undertook a historic endeavor. She co-founded the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement. This was more than an alliance; it was a sisterhood of women from diverse backgrounds and faiths merged by a singular purpose: to end the violence that was tearing their nation apart.

The women's actions were purposeful, marked by sit-ins, demonstrations, and a relentless insistence on justice. These women, draped in white, stood as silent watchers of hope, with their message reaching the halls of power. Leymah's work was transformative, leading to the enactment of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2003.

Leymah was presented with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her extraordinary efforts as a national peacemaker. She then went on to launch the Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa (GPFA) in Monrovia, Liberia in 2012. The foundation focuses on women, girls, and youth, and provides educational and leadership opportunities for them. Through the organization, women struggling

with circular poverty still receive academic opportunities where they can develop the skills and knowledge needed to live empowered lives.

Leymah Gbowee continues to inspire countless individuals to challenge their current situation and create their own paths toward transformation. She is an advocate for women's empowerment and education, showing that any one person can make a difference. Her story is a powerful reminder that even in the darkest of times, the human spirit remains unbreakable.



Maria Mutola

Running Towards Greatness

OLYMPIC TRACK STAR

MAPUTO, MOZAMBIQUE

BORN IN 1972

Maria Mutola was born in an impoverished shanty town in Mozambique. Her passion for athletics began at a young age with soccer. Maria's first coach was a former national long jump record holder who had competed in the 1980 Summer Olympics. The intensive training felt overwhelming to Maria at first and she decided that running was not for her. However, Maria decided to give the sport another chance. It do not take her long to discover her true calling—the tiring yet exhilarating 800-meter race.

In 1991, Maria won a scholarship to study and train in the US. She was hosted by Springfield High School in Oregon because they had one Portuguese-speaking staff member. This was critical since Maria spoke no English. Maria gained tremendous guidance from the renowned

athletics coach, Margo Jennings, who continued to coach her even after she relocated to Johannesburg.

Maria Mutola graced the global stage at five Olympic games. The peak of her career came at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, where she secured the gold medal in the women's 800-meter race, becoming Mozambique's first-ever Olympic champion! Her victory was not just a personal triumph, it was a great source of pride for her nation. When she returned home to Mozambique, a road was named after her in Maputo and huge crowds came to cheer for her.

Maria was a force to be reckoned with, maintaining her status as one of the world's top middle-distance runners for decades. However, the Olympics were just one chapter in Maria's noteworthy career. In 2008, after the Beijing Olympics, she officially retired from competitive running. She transitioned into a new role that showcased her passion for nurturing talent and promoting athletics. Maria became a coach and a sports administrator, using her personal experience to inspire a new generation of athletes. She has become a glimmer of hope for young athletes, especially girls, proving that dreams can become a reality. Her footsteps on the track

**serve as a roadmap for those who dare to dream big and
run toward greatness.**



Meaza Ashenafi

Champion of Justice

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST & CHIEF JUSTICE

ASOSA, ETHIOPIA

BORN IN 1964

Meaza Ashenafi attended school in the town of Asosa, where her father was the mayor. Though Meaza's mother was illiterate, she ensured that all eight of her children received a solid education, and she had a significant impact on Meaza's desire to study law. After completing secondary school, Meaza attended law school at the Addis Ababa University and received her law degree in 1994. In 2005, she won a UNESCO scholarship to attend the University of Connecticut for post-graduate studies in international relations.

Meaza appreciated education from early on in her life and emerged as an individual devoted to justice, human rights, and female empowerment. After completing her studies, Meaza eventually served as a judge for the Federal Supreme Court of Ethiopia for about three

years. In 1993, she received an appointment from the Human Rights Committee of the Ethiopian Constitution Drafting Commission as a legal adviser. In 1995, Meaza co-founded the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), a haven for countless women facing gender-based violence, discrimination, and systemic injustice. Through EWLA, she led a movement that provided legal aid and fostered a community of support and empowerment for Ethiopian women.

In 2003, Meaza passionately defended Aberash Bekele, a young girl who had endured unspeakable horrors after being abducted. Meaza's character and legal expertise shone through, and justice was served. This landmark case echoed throughout Ethiopian society, inspiring new laws that would protect the rights and dignity of women. Meaza became a Hunger Project Award laureate due to her outstanding work.

In 2018, Meaza rose to a position of greater influence, becoming the first female president of the Ethiopian Federal Supreme Court. Her appointment was a representation of her absolute dedication to justice. In this prestigious role, she championed the rule of law, approved various reforms, and fought for the

accessibility of justice for all. Her life's work has been an unyielding pursuit of equality and fairness in her homeland.

Beyond her extensive career, Meaza is an idol for young girls interested in pursuing a career in the field of law. She actively supports initiatives that improve legal education. This advocacy has been recognized on a global scale, and she was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2005. Meaza Ashenafi's indomitable spirit and tireless advocacy have left a significant impact on Ethiopia's legal framework. She is a champion of justice, women's rights, and the dignity of all.



Miriam Makeba

The Voice of Freedom

SINGER & ACTIVIST

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

BORN IN 1932 & DIED IN 2008

Miriam Makeba is known to the world as "Mama Africa". Despite experiencing a very challenging childhood where she was forced to leave school to find a job after her father's death, it was clear that Miriam possessed a gift that would resonate far beyond the borders of her homeland. As a teenager, her voice found its place in the harmonies of various choirs. It was a sign of things to come, a hint at the musical revolution she would soon lead.

Miriam gave birth to a daughter at the age of seventeen before ending her brief but difficult marriage. She was also diagnosed with and beat breast cancer during this time, but these early struggles did not stop her from starting a career. Miriam went on to join The Manhattan Brothers, a very popular South African vocal

ensemble. Her melodies blended the traditions of her homeland with jazz notes and folk traditions. This combination sent a wave of hope through her native lands and resonated with people all over the world.

Miriam's songs were more than entertaining- they were anthems of resistance in the height of South Africa's apartheid. Through her music, Miriam channeled the outrage and determination of an oppressed population. With every lyric and note, she rallied against the divide. Among her collection of impactful songs, "Pata Pata" resonated with people the most, reminding us that the human spirit cannot be crushed, even in challenging times.

Beyond her music career, Miriam was a proud Civil Rights activist and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador. She shone a light on the injustices faced by her people, unafraid to speak out against the South African government while living in the US. After decades in exile, Makeba returned to South Africa and continued fighting for humanitarian causes through new music, films, and advocacy. Her voice, which rang across the globe, now reverberated in the land of her birth, a reminder that change was inevitable.

On the 9th of November in 2008, shortly after a performance in Italy, Miriam Makeba passed away due to a heart attack. Even after so many years, her values live on, and her work has been praised by other anti-apartheid activists like Nelson Mandela. Today, The Makeba Centre for Girls works in Miriam's honor, aiding women and children who have been abused or abandoned by providing them with support services, opportunities, and a chance to rebuild their lives. "Mama Africa" has clearly made her mark on the African continent.



Namina Forna

Conjuring Worlds, Challenging Norms

AUTHOR

FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE

BORN IN 1987

Namina Forna was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, a place known for mining and agriculture. She grew up listening to stories about powerful women and goddesses told by her father and grandmother. However, economic turmoil and an approaching civil war forced Namina to flee her homeland at the young age of nine. She relocated to Atlanta, Georgia, with her mother and became an avid reader. Books helped her escape the atrocities of the Civil War. A few years later, Namina studied at Spelman College. She then pursued a master's degree at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. These educational experiences would lead Namina to begin her professional career as a novelist.

In 2021, Namina released her first young adult fantasy series called *The Gilded Ones*. This captivating work of fiction received fast, worldwide acclaim for its exploration of social themes such as gender, power, and identity. It told stories of the African female heroines that Namina had heard about growing up, something that Western literature had previously lacked. Her drive to challenge social barriers combined with her masterful storytelling is what allows readers to connect with her writing. In fact, her debut novel is set to be adapted into a film.

Namina breathes life into characters whose voices have often been silenced, allowing them to flourish on the pages of her books. In a literary world that is always changing, her contributions are a path toward more inclusive storytelling. Her status as a *New York Times* bestselling author highlights her ability to bridge cultures, challenge conventions, and inspire change. She is a cheerleader of other young writers and believes they should utilize their storytelling skills to celebrate and showcase their own heritage. Since her debut novel, Namina has expanded *The Gilded Ones* into a trilogy and continues to publish new work. With each word she

writes, Namina Forna cements her place as a transformative figure in modern literature, inviting readers to embark on journeys that transcend the boundaries of time, place, and imagination.



Nana Ama Browne Klutse

Mapping The World

CLIMATOLOGIST & PROFESSOR

NYANFEKU EKROFUL, GHANA

BORN IN 1981

Nana Ama began her academic journey at Anomabo Methodist Primary School, where she took a liking to science early on. She continued her education at Mfantsiman Girls' Senior High School. Her intellectual pursuits led her to the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, where she dove into the complex details of physics. But Nana Ama's pursuit of knowledge did not end there. She then attended the University of Cape Town in South Africa and the International Center for Theoretical Physics in Italy for her doctoral studies in climatology. This marked the emergence of her dedicated exploration of climate dynamics in West Africa.

Nana Ama began focusing her efforts on deciphering the science behind the African monsoon. Her research brought attention to climate science and its

development, with an emphasis on West Africa. Using models to visualize the interactions of matter and energy in different regions, her work allows us to understand climate change and its growing effects more clearly. Her inquisitive spirit has led her to become an expert in the field of climate science.

Nana Ama is currently a member of the UNESCO Scientific Board of the International Basic Sciences Program. From 2016 to 2018, she was a senior researcher at the Ghana Space Science and Technology Institute, an organization under the Ghana Atomic Energy Commission. There, she managed the Remote Sensing and Climate Center.

Nana Ama's contributions extend beyond academia. As a full-time professor for the Department of Physics at the University of Ghana, she passes on her knowledge to aspiring scientists, nurturing the next generation of environmentalists. She has been recognized as a fellow of the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences. Her role as a lead author in the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and recently Vice-Chair of Working Group I of the

IPCC demonstrate the value she brings to Africa and the entire world.

In the vast arena of climate research, Nana Ama Browne Klutse stands as a luminary, lighting up the path toward a more sustainable future for West Africa and the world. She is an advocate for women in STEM, encouraging girls in Ghana to consider careers in science and working to improve the availability and accessibility of science education. Her dedication to understanding climate dynamics highlights the profound impact one individual can have on the future of our planet.



Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala

Transformative Trade

ECONOMIST & DIPLOMAT

OGWASHI-UKWU, NIGERIA

BORN IN 1954

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was born into the Obahai royal family in the peaceful town of Ogwashi-Ukwu, Nigeria. She attended primary school at Queen's School and the International School of Ibadan. In 1973, she traveled to the US to pursue higher education at Harvard University, where she received a degree in economics. She also earned a master's degree in city planning in 1978 and a PhD in regional economics and development from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She then completed a fellowship at The American Association of University Women.

Ngozi soon began working at the World Bank, where she started as a development economist. She worked her way up to managing director of operations. In this role, she managed an \$81 billion portfolio that spanned

multiple continents. During her time at the World Bank, she led various initiatives to increase food accessibility in developing countries during an economic crisis.

Ngozi began her first term as Nigeria's Finance Minister in 2003. Her focus on openness and anti-corruption measures earned her praise and brought long-term stability to the country's economy. During her tenure, she implemented a range of critical reforms that stabilized the Nigerian economy. Her policies promoted financial discipline, reduced inflation, and encouraged foreign investment. She also advocated for debt relief, which significantly alleviated Nigeria's debt crisis and freed up resources for much-needed development projects. She would occupy this office again from 2011 to 2015 for a second term.

In 2021, Ngozi made history as the first African and the first woman to lead the World Trade Organization (WTO) as Director-General and soon received the Atlantic Council Distinguished Leadership Award for her three decades of public service. She took on leadership at the WTO at a challenging point when the world was grappling with monetary issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Her advocacy for change within the organization has helped ensure fair and inclusive trade for all nations.

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's extensive experience at institutions like the World Bank shows her dedication to global economic stability and development. She continues to hold positions in charitable groups that provide disaster relief to the African continent. Her passion for her country has allowed her to influence policies and strategies with far-reaching impacts around the globe.



Tarneem Saeed

Empowerment through E-Commerce

FINTECH ENTREPRENEUR

SUDAN

Tarneem Saeed's education unfolded on foreign shores, far from Sudan. At age fourteen, she embarked on a journey to Canada in pursuit of higher education. She then joined the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she focused on studying law and governance. Her curriculum was focused on global perspectives and legal discussions. With her degree in hand, Tarneem stepped into the challenging business world. She joined Allen & Overy, a top multinational legal firm practicing in over 60 countries. At this firm, she developed skills as a corporate lawyer and established herself in international law.

In 2014, Tarneem took a sabbatical from work to visit Sudan. As she became reacquainted with her home country, she realized how different Sudan was from

London. Sudan was disconnected from the digital economy - communication between buyers and sellers was lacking. After some research, Tarneem recognized the need for a brokerage platform where people could check the price of goods and services and connect with sellers. As a result, Tarneem launched Alsoug in 2016, which facilitated a digital exchange of information.

Tarneem expanded the platform by introducing advertising, and the business evolved to incorporate online sales and new tools. One of these new tools is an online payment solution called Cash. Prior to this, Sudan did not have a digital payment platform to make and receive online payments. Tarneem's creative approach aimed to bridge the digital divide and has established Alsoug as the primary e-commerce solution in Sudan.

Tarneem Saeed is recognized as a leading businesswoman in Sudan. She is working to expand Alsoug to neighboring countries. By doing so, she hopes to promote secure, convenient transactions for more people across the continent and revolutionize e-commerce in Africa. Her entrepreneurial journey embodies her ongoing commitment to improving her

homeland's economy and finding innovative solutions for Africans.



Thérèse Sita-Bella

Through A New Lens

FILMMAKER & JOURNALIST

CAMEROON

BORN IN 1933 & DIED IN 2006

Thérèse Sita-Bella was a Beti tribe member who was raised and educated by Catholic missionaries. She attended college in Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital.

Her educational pursuits led her to Paris in the 1950s, where she discovered her passion for journalism and film. Embarking on her professional journey in 1955, Thérèse began working as a journalist. Co-founding the French journal *La Vie Africaine*, she worked towards the magazine's mission of highlighting Black-African culture. She was the sole African woman on a team of twenty writers.

During this time, African cinema became popular all over the world, with film reels emerging as the central technology of the time. However, power was often held

by white Western filmmakers who painted Africans as a "different" type of people. Though women were making strides in film, their contributions to the filmmaking industry remained unknown. In 1963, Thérèse transitioned to filmmaking and directed the documentary *Tam-tam à Paris*, the first film produced by an African woman. It showed the journey of Cameroon's National Ensemble group performing in Paris. This film made its mark! In 1969, the film graced the screen during the inaugural Week of African Cinema, later known as FESPACO, in Burkina Faso. After the release of her film, Thérèse returned home to Cameroon. She joined the Ministry of Information and worked her way up to the position of Deputy Chief of Information. Sadly, colon cancer took Thérèse's life on February 27, 2006.

Thérèse Sita-Bella navigated a male-dominated film industry with grace and determination. In early filmmaking, it was clear that cinema was not a woman's business, and there were very few female camerawomen at that time. There were a few West Indians, a woman from Senegal, and Thérèse Sita-Bella. While Thérèse did not always receive the recognition she deserved during her lifetime, it is important to remember her legacy.

Today, her success is celebrated by the Sita-Bella film hall at the Cameroon Cultural Centre. She is known as a pioneer, a guardian of untold stories, a woman ahead of her time. Her journey is a symbol of perseverance as she thrived in a place where her light shone brightly, even against the odds.



Wangari Maathai

Seeds of Tomorrow

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST

NYERI, KENYA

BORN IN 1940 & DIED IN 2011

Wangari Maathai spent her childhood in the rural villages of Kenya. She loved the outdoors and grew her own crops at an early age. Even though it was uncommon, Wangari's family believed in education and sent her to St. Cecilia Intermediary at age eight. Wangari showed promise early on as a bright and dedicated student. She was selected for the Kennedy Airlift Scholarship in 1960, which enabled her to attend college in the US. She received a bachelor's degree in biology from Mount St. Scholastica and a master's degree from the University of Pittsburg.

In 1971, Wangari returned to Nairobi, becoming the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree. She then decided to tackle the issue of widespread deforestation and soil erosion, which

plagued her homeland. Wangari recognized that sustainable development was not a luxury but necessary for the growth and survival of communities, ecosystems, and the biosphere. The pinnacle of her efforts was the Green Belt Movement. This initiative highlighted the power of communities in planting trees—a simple act that would benefit the entirety of the African continent. As saplings took root, landscapes transformed, barren plots flourished, and ecosystems revived.

However, Wangari's vision extended beyond just ecological restoration. She provided women with the tools to uplift themselves and their communities through education and employment opportunities. Her activism evolved into a force against political oppression and corruption. She was even targeted for assassination by the government after trying to free political prisoners. Eventually, Wangari was recognized for her heroic efforts, and she went on to become the first Black African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. She passed away from ovarian cancer in The Nairobi Hospital in 2011.

The Green Belt Movement, with its flourishing forests and empowered communities, still stands as a living

tribute to her visionary leadership. Wangari Maathai's story reminds us that the preservation of nature is not an isolated endeavor, but a collective responsibility intertwined with the well-being of humanity. Through her pioneering spirit, she guided us towards a more peaceful coexistence between people and the planet.



Yaa Asantewaa

The Warrior Queen

FREEDOM FIGHTER

BESEASE, GHANA

BORN IN 1840 & DIED IN 1921

Yaa Asantewaa was born into Ghanese Ashanti royalty around 1840. A skilled farmer, she spent her childhood working to cultivate crops in the town of Boankra. In 1880, Yaa was appointed to become Queen Mother of Ejisu by her brother Nana Akwasi Afrane Okese, the ruler of a nearby community called Edwesu.

The defining moment of Yaa's legacy was not her ascent to the throne, but her bravery in a time of conflict. In 1900, British forces had set their sights on the sacred Golden Stool, a symbol of Ashanti unity and pride. In the face of this threat, Yaa fearlessly rose to the occasion, performing her duty as gatekeeper of this prized possession. She stepped onto the battlefield and led The War of the Golden Stool.

Yaa embodied extraordinary courage by becoming the leader of the Ejisu-Besease army, a force composed of both men and women. The sound of her name became a rallying cry, resonating in the souls of soldiers who stood alongside her. Yaa made it clear that if Ashanti men were unwilling to defend The Golden Stool, women would take on the challenge. Her bravery was marked by unwavering determination, setting an inspiring standard for her people that challenged traditional gender roles.

Six months later, the Ashanti people surrendered to the overwhelming British military. Unfortunately, Yaa was captured during the last stretch of the war and sent to Seychelles, as were 15 of her advisors. She died in exile in Seychelles on October 17, 1921. Her legacy extended beyond the battlefield as her name was carved into the fabric of Ashanti and Ghanaian history forever. Although Yaa was not alive to witness it, her vision for Ashanti independence from colonial rule came to fruition on March 6, 1957.

Since Yaa's death, The Yaa Asantewaa Girls' Senior High School has been founded in her honor, motivating thousands of young women in Ghana to win their own battles and strive for educational greatness. Today, the

legacy of Yaa Asantewaa resounds through modern movements for justice, female empowerment, independence, and the safeguarding of culture. Yaa's bold opposition against British forces and personal refusal to back down from battle have classified her as a Ghanese patriot and heroine. Her story embodies the idea that the pursuit of freedom and dignity knows no bounds.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

At 13 years old, Natasha Agarwal's enjoyment of reading led her to found BelieveNBooks. She started with the simple idea of getting gently used reading materials to underserved children. Many book drives and several years later, she distributed her 100,000th book in March

2024 and celebrated the opening of a 9th chapter of BelieveNBooks.

At the request of one of her non-profit partners, Natasha started a program called PAGETURNER in 2022. The PAGETURNER program includes the distribution of a backpack filled with 10 books to preschool students learning English. It comes with instructions to access YouTube videos where children can listen to these same books being read aloud by Natasha and her peers. For many of the recipients of PAGETURNER, these books are the very first that they receive and mark the start of their home library collections.

In 2023, Natasha started learning about the literacy gap in Africa and the need for young girls to have female role models. This led her to write her first book, *Tales of African Women Trailblazers*.

Natasha is now a high school senior. She is involved in mock trial, theater, basketball, and is a member of the National Honor Society. She enjoys reading, hanging out with friends, and traveling. Natasha has been recognized for her service and leadership with the Girl Scout Gold Award, The Duke of Edinburgh Award, and as an outstanding philanthropic youth in her community.

TRUE STORIES OF INCREDIBLE LEADERSHIP!



In *Tales of African Women Trailblazers*, Natasha Agarwal wishes to show teenage girls across the African continent the breadth of possibilities available to them. The book highlights African-born women who have overcome different forms of adversity and stayed true to their goals to foster positive transformation in various industries. All of the women included have exemplified the qualities of bravery, courage, dedication, and leadership, the essence of what it means to be a trailblazer. Featured are some of the biggest names in African history, including Miriam Makeba, Yaa Asantewaa, Ellen Sirleaf, Meaza Ashenafi, and others. This is Natasha Agarwal's first book, dedicated to inspiring the next generation of African leaders to dream big, show resilience, and do the unthinkable.



ISBN: 9798333204943



9 798333 204943

90000