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Suba's dream of empowering women

By Mwala Kalaluka on Tuesday 04 May 2010, 08:10:00 CAT (547 Reads)



Mbumwae

FOR many Africans, the United States (US) is the land of opportunities but in this article, a Zambian who has lived in that country for over two decades talks about the demeaning stereotypes that are targeted against African women living and working in the US.

Mbumwae Suba-Smith is the president and founder of Subayo Foundation; a community-based organisation that focuses on the issues of women and children and has been living in New York for the last 25 years, hoping to get the best for her disabled daughter. The Subayo Foundation seeks to empower the women from Ghana and Zambia, through business education and training, literacy programmes and AIDS and prenatal health education. The work of the Foundation, whose vision is to elevate women's standards of living in the Accra, Volta and Ashanti Regions in Ghana as well as in Lusaka and the western region of Zambia, is designed to complement the work of community organisations, government, ministries and development agencies that aim to improve the standards of living in the communities as a whole. But who is Mbumwae Suba-Smith?

According to Mbumwae, she was born in Zambia in 1953 and the events of her childhood gave her a conviction to help the African woman benefit from a system of support and education. Mbumwae says she lost her father at a young age and that she and her older sister worked together to raise their five young siblings.

Mbumwae began her career as a personal secretary after attending technical college. She later worked for the University of Zambia and Philips Electronics but in 1985 she moved to the United States in a bid to look into a new direction.

Whilst in the US, Mbumwae began working with young children by studying Early Childhood Education at the Borough of Manhattan Community College and she continued her education with a degree in psychology. Mbumwae says she turned her education and love for children into a livelihood and she has been doing business in New York City since 1987.

Mbumwae is also an artist with numerous talents and she performs with bands as a dancer and designs contemporary African clothing.

A mother of two and grandmother of two, her business ventures linked the cultures of the US and Africa through fashion and design but unfortunately the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York led to the decline of her company's major partner and Mbumwae halted her business as a result.

Mbumwae was in Zambia recently and in a question for answer interaction with the Sunday Lifestyle, she talks about the change of perceptions on the African people by those in the US following the election of the first US black President Barack Obama and the suffering that affects some Zambians living in the Diaspora, despite most of them trying to portray themselves as being better than the folks back home.

Question: When did you leave Zambia for the US and at what point did you start Subayo Foundation and in brief what was the inspiration behind the organisation?

Mbumwae: I left Zambia in 1985 and hoped to come back in four or five years but I have stayed for 25 years. Even though I have always felt home sick, I had to choose between coming back home where I would be accepted full in my society or staying here where I was not accepted fully by this society and make a life for my disabled daughter with multiple physical and developmental challenges.

Let me explain this part. Here in the US there is so much this country can offer to people who are disabled as compared to what is available in Zambia. For instance, my daughter was bused to school everyday for free, had free breakfast and lunch and even after school programmes something I could not even dream of in Zambia.

Q: Who is Mbumwae Suba-Smith and what has drawn her into issues of women and child empowerment?

Mbumwae: I am a Zambian born American woman. The president and founder of Subayo Foundation for Women and Children in Africa, a community advocate for women and children in New York City, business woman, fashion designer and consultant for contemporary African wear, dancer, mother and grandmother.

Q: While in the US have you come across any stereotypes that women there tend to put on the African woman in terms of her submissiveness to her man? In short what do the women in the US think of an African woman?

Mbumwae: Yes, the stereotyping is very much here and to some extent even among the African women themselves. Sometimes when as an African woman, a Zambian for that matter I voiced my opinions and beliefs as well as experiences as a woman my own fellow women have come out to contradict what I say. It is really hard to be in my position.

Let me first talk about my family in general. In my family women and men are treated equally the only difference is that when it comes to lifting heavy things the girls are not allowed to but boys will lift. Even going hunting some of the girls in my family have gone hunting with their dads.

Here is what I have lived as an African woman when dealing with stereotyping. The women believe that if you are African, you come from all over Africa, from all the 50 countries in Africa and that you should speak the same language and understand each other. Africa is perceived as one country in the eyes of many women in this country. It is also perceived as primitive and not yet civilised like the stories shown in Tarzan. African women are perceived as naive and stupid to some extent and not able to think like our counterparts here.

There are a few who now know and believe that African women are able to talk for themselves, think for themselves and even make decisions that

can impact a nation not just their households or families. The Obama era has really become a blessing for us, African women. People now are beginning to think that may be "This Africa" is something to reckon with and not just dismiss us as some primitive small country that is so insignificant.

At the same time as African women we are inhibited by immigration issues that we are not able to go out and educate this society about Africa. We tend to do odd jobs with little pay and no benefits so we are consumed with working and making ends meet so that we can send a few dollars home to show off that "we are living in America and we are making it. We also try to portray the image that we are better than folks back home".

This is a mistake and I can tell you the truth. Some of those people who are sending money home cannot even afford to live a normal and productive healthy lives because they tend to borrow money and send home while they are suffering. Life here is very difficult and expensive. Nobody can afford to live comfortably even if you were getting a good salary.

I will give you a good example of suffering. One of my uncles was working for one of the United Nations agencies and he was getting a very good salary and all the benefits. With all that he was not living a comfortable life because he could not afford to hire a house servant or a garden boy. He used to shovel snow and also clean his backyard, make sure the grass is mowed and do all these things that his servants did here in Zambia. Finally he came home and he is very happy here.

He is now there very comfortable with his life style that is healthy but his own colleagues and some of his friends are still here in America, suffering and thinking that my Uncle who left is not smart and that he rather is suffering. These people are the ones who make stereotyping worse because they live in denial and they are not in touch with Zambian reality.

With all this here I am coming out and talking about the Zambia woman in a Zambian society not being submissive, who can believe me?

From the above examples, you can see why I as an individual find these conceptions of submissiveness as not being so true per se. Even here in the US there are some households who treat boys and girls differently. They make girls do different things than boys in the same household. There is a belief that all African women have been circumcised regardless of where one comes from.

Q: You were in Zambia recently, could you please give us the impression you had about the role being played by the woman back home in terms of uplifting their livelihood and involvement in women empowerment issues? Are you satisfied with the level of involvement?

Mbumwae: The women back home have moved generations ahead of the women in the US in terms of gaining power as women in the Zambian society. I was privileged to witness the International Women's Day in Zambia. The men came out to support us as partners and not to intimidate us or challenge us as women. Here in the US when there is a forum for women there are so many other groups, which come out to challenge women as women and bring in so many political aspects that do not necessarily support women.

I want every Zambia woman to know that as women we are very lucky to be Zambians and that Zambia has done a lot to accommodate us as partners in all aspects of life at a personal and national level. Even in Politics we have equality. Women have run for offices even as Presidents to be which is not the same here in this country. Women equality in high office in politics in this country is something new but it has been a norm for Zambia for women to be included in high offices in politics.

One of my friends is a very outspoken individual, Namakau Kaingu, for Women in Mining. I'm sure you have heard what kind of awareness she has brought to this sector of business. Zambia has given her the forum to talk about issues affecting women in mining and what it means to us as an opportune venue for women working side by side with men.

I am very happy with the way women are so much part of that society and the impact they have on the economy of the country. Women are able to participate in all aspects of life and as such life is enjoyed to the fullest by most who can make it.

The Zambian woman is a hard worker with a vision even when they have limited education. We tend to have a vision that is so wise at almost every level. We have wisdom that no one can dispute. We do not need to be highly educated to know how to survive or educate our children or put food on the table.

At this stage I wish to congratulate and commend a Zambian man per se. In order for women to enjoy all these benefits, the men must be very comfortable as individuals to facilitate this change in a modern Zambian woman.

If the Zambian man was insecure as an individual, he would try to intimidate his woman and all the other women he comes across either at work places, in politics and elsewhere. I really do admire Zambian men in the sense that they are very smart to understand women. Women are very complex but the Zambian man has been able to understand her. He knows that if the Zambian woman is happy, he stands to benefit because he himself will be treated so well with respect from the women who he comes across.

I am not saying that all Zambian men treat women fairly or that all Zambian women appreciate this treatment in the same way. There are exceptions to every rule. I am talking about men and women in general as opposed to the men and women in this country.

The issue of discrimination has injured men in this country so deeply that in some cases the men are not able to appreciate the women and as such the women are unable to respect the men who are not able to provide, as men should. There are psychological effects that discrimination has had on some men in this country that made the men to have very low self esteem and second-guess themselves or their decision or even interactions with society at large.

A Zambian man has not gone through half these psychological games experienced by some men in this country so he is still able to have his self-esteem because he has never been a minority. It happens sometimes that men in this country oppress women and try to intimidate them to show that they have power somehow. Mental games are very common in some communities much more than in Zambia. Again - to every rule there is an exception.

Q: How is your organisation going to help in the above aspect?

Mbumwae: My organisation is helping by facilitating education, helping the orphans, having workshops for nutrition, self-help schemes. So, the women have some kind of income, literacy, HIV/AIDS Awareness, elevating self-esteem and continue to lobby for equal opportunities for women.

I also like to raise awareness that children are our best resources on earth and that they too have a voice and should be heard and not just seen. Children have feelings, needs and should be respected as we bring them up too if they are to grow into healthy sensitive adults and to be future

parents of the nation. We also try hard to make everyone understand that educated children are the key to our future success as a nation.

Q:Do you have any plans of coming back to Zambia and be directly involved in the issues of women?

Mbumwae: Yes, I will be back home in two years to come and join everyone in the struggle to shape our nation, the best we can. I will be involved in empowering women and children intensively.

Q:Since your departure for the States what cultural changes have you noted in the Zambian society and how has this been influenced by the Western culture?

Mbumwae: This question is very tricky. As you may know there is globalisation. There is a very thin line to walk when one talks about western influence. For instance how can we not dress like the westerners if the whole world dresses the same and we compete for the same opportunities and resources? The world has become one so when it comes to art, music, food, technology- we have no choice but to mix our culture to some extent with that of the westerners. One of the things we cannot help is the language. We need to use English to communicate and in communicating we go into other areas of life like music, food, dance, etc and English comes in. I think the changes that seem western are not necessarily western but just that the world has become so small as one. We are the world and we are part of this one world.

In all this there is still that Zambia culture, which is still there that one sees. I like the way Zambians have incorporated the Western culture into the Zambian culture. I am happy with that and no words can really express well how the Zambian has carefully chosen the Western culture to fit into his Zambian culture. It is beautifully done and it is amazing. We are still Zambians but we have also been influenced by the Western culture but our own culture has survived that somehow to take the better of the two and make it a Zambian way.

Mwala: Thank you very much for your time.

Mbumwae: Thank you and you are welcome.

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