

'Women are born peacemakers'

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"One thing: we cannot give up!" This is what Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan winner of the 2004 Nobel peace prize, says about her fight for the environment and for human rights. Decisiveness and stamina also characterise Etweda Cooper, the driving force behind the Liberian peace movement. It played an important role in the resignation of dictator Charles Taylor and the end of the civil war.

They are just two examples of strong African women whose voices are being heard both on the national and the international stage. Role models for a younger generation of African women, both visited the Netherlands last month.

Inspiration from the USA

Her mother and her teachers were the first sources of inspiration to Wangari Maathai, who founded the Green Belt Movement, an organisation which has been fighting for women's rights and against deforestation since 1977. They showed her the importance of education. The realisation that you can change society came during her studies in the US in the 1960s, the era of major equal rights demonstrations led by Martin Luther King and others.


"I think it really did shape my understanding that if you want something you have to work for it and you have to force change to happen. Things don't change just on their own, don't happen on their own. Quite often there is somebody, some people, who force change. Those images I saw in the US helped me when I went back to my country and I tried to change things that I thought ought to be changed" .

Etweda Cooper, who has been active in the Liberian peace movement since the 1990s looks to her youth for the roots of her activism.

"I came from a family where both my parents were quite outspoken. My parents would have political discussions at home. And even we would be discussing world issues. So for me it was like natural. And I remember even in 1990, I had a discussion with my father, at that time my father was in his 80's; he was saying to me "it is your generation that has something to do about this".

Not taken seriously

The attitude of men towards women in particular formed a major obstacle to both Ms Maathai and Ms Cooper, but even today, as a biology graduate who won a Nobel prize, Wangari Maathai is often not taken seriously because she is a woman.

 Wangari Maathai, Kenyan winner 2004 Nobel Peace Prize


Wangari Maathai (Photo © greenbeltmovement.org)

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"But I can tell you: it is still happening to me. It hasn't ended. I want to say that because I want people to understand that the struggle doesn't end. It is almost like you really never get there until your life is over. It is a constant struggle because you are constantly pushing the horizon."



Etweda Cooper
(Photo: Netherlands Defence Academy)

Etweda Cooper emphasises that we should pay more attention to the contribution women make to society. According to Ms Cooper, one of these contributions is that women are born peacemakers.

"We are naturally making peace the whole day. We are serving as judges and lawyers for one person or the other, we are negotiating with our spouses, and so on. And we talk a lot. As we talk we discuss the problems and we begin to solve them. And I think there isn't any wrong in talking!"

Both Wangari Maatahi and Etweda Cooper have shown its possible for an African woman to achieve a position of influence. They serve as important role models to ambitious young African women, but even for the new generation

there are plenty of obstacles to be cleared.

* RNW translation (gsh)

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