

# CHANGE MAKERS: WOMEN

## FROM WORDSMITHS TO WATER CAMPAIGNERS MEET THE WOMEN WHO'VE MADE BIG CHANGES FOR THE BETTER

WORDS HANNAH POOL

**I**n every society, women and girls have less access to resources, opportunities and political power than men. Women perform 66 per cent of the world's work and produce 50 per cent of the food yet earn 10 per cent of the income and own one per cent of the property.

With International Woman's Day (March 8) now firmly established on the calendar, there's a swell of voices across the globe to make the whole of March International Women's Month, but what about the other 11 months of the year? Throughout Africa extraordinary women are challenging stereotypes, campaigning for gender equality and making very real changes.

ARISE celebrates some of Africa's leading women activists and campaigners who have dedicated their time to improving the lives of others. Whether it's lobbying for clean water or risking their lives on Tahrir Square, these women embody the South African phrase 'You strike a woman, you strike a rock'. They are modern day suffragettes, ignore them at your peril.

### THE EDUCATOR NOËLLA COURSARIS 30, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Coursaris may have made her name as a model, appearing in Vanity Fair, GQ and Essence, but listen to her speak passionately about her native Congo and the challenges faced by women and girls in the region and you'll soon realise she's more than just another photogenic philanthropist. A relentless campaigner, she's established the Georges Malaika Foundation (named after Coursaris' father) with the slogan 'Empowering African girls through education'. As well as building a school, the foundation was recently chosen as one of FIFA's 20 Football For Hope centres.

"We need more women in leadership and for that you need education. From the beginning we talked with the community about their needs, and they all said they wanted a girls' school. We selected one girl per family within a 5km circle, aged five or six years old. We don't want the children to walk half an hour or an hour to come to the school. We give them breakfast and lunch for free because it's a very poor village so they don't eat, and we want to make sure they can perform well at school and not fall asleep after one or two hours. If you see pictures of the girls before and now, it's really shocking the way some of them have changed - they've put on weight, they are happier, they are very healthy.

"We have 104 girls and in September we will open three more classrooms and have 156 girls. We also have adult classes during the week. We teach the parents to read and write and we have a few people who come and teach different subjects, such as hygiene and other related subjects. We have the building so we want it to best serve the community. We also have an association of parents; they help to clean every day and serve the food. It's important that we work together to create a better Africa.

"There are a lot of positive things going on in the Congo but it's not shown enough in the press. Congo is huge. What's happening in the east is completely different from the south eastern part where the school is. Where we are it's very safe but in the east there are a lot of issues; rape is being used as a weapon but as the area is poor the world doesn't care."

□ [www.gmfafrika.org](http://www.gmfafrika.org)

PHOTOS: ZOE BARLING, MIKE SCHREIBER, VICTOR DUMINI, LIGHTCIRCLE STUDIOS, MORNE VAN ZYL, DAVID DEGENER, PETER BUYONDO



### THE CLEAN-WATER CAMPAIGNER SARAN KABA JONES 30, LIBERIA

When Kaba Jones returned to Monrovia after nearly 20 years overseas she was shocked by the realities of life in a post-conflict society. On learning that three out of four Liberians still have no access to safe drinking water, she set up Face Africa, an NGO that implements sustainable water projects across the country. Face Africa's goal is to ensure that everyone in Liberia has access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. Kaba Jones travels to Liberia every three to four weeks from the US to oversee six Face Africa projects. When she's not on the ground, she's fundraising (US\$300,000 so far), capacity-building and lobbying.

"I always knew that I wanted to follow in my father's footsteps and do something that would help people and specifically Liberia. I was one of the fortunate ones who had the opportunity to leave before the war, I didn't experience any of the hardships of those who stayed, so I always had it in the back of my mind that I would go back one day and give others the opportunity I had.

"Everywhere you look in Liberia there is a need, whether it is education or health or infrastructure. Everything had been destroyed. But one of the things that stood out for me the most was the water and sanitation issue, because it's something that affects every aspect of people's lives - health, education, environment, poverty.

"In most African countries women and girls are responsible for housework and for cooking. So we find that girls are typically the ones fetching water and that means less time spent

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in school. And of course with women this means less time to focus on economic activities, like going to the market and farming, so there is a direct connection between the water crisis and women.

"But beyond that I also strongly believe in the power of women as nurturers. Women have a unique ability to care and share and make the world a better place. So investing in women certainly will contribute to economic development, improving communities and also improving life.

"To improve 60 per cent of the Liberian population's water and sanitation it's going to cost about US\$100-150million. When the entire budget for the whole country is US\$500million, water and health care is not necessarily a priority for the government. They tend to rely on aid agencies and NGOs to tackle those areas. So that's where we come in and fundraising is critical, which I do in the US.

"I want to grow Face Africa and be a part of this movement to make clean water a reality across the continent because I believe water poverty is solvable in our lifetime." ☞

□ [www.faceafrica.org](http://www.faceafrica.org)



**THE POET**  
**LEBO MASHILE**  
33, SOUTH AFRICA

Award-winning poet, actor, TV presenter and ambassador for the Say No To Child Pornography project, Mashile is a literary and campaigning powerhouse. When not writing or performing her work, she's taking the South African establishment to task on Twitter, or talking to children about the dangers of cyber pornography.

"My poetry is very much focused on politics, gender, sexuality, movement, travel and how all those shape identity. If you believe in equality, and if you love and respect women, then

automatically you're a feminist. We happen to exist in a world that does neither of the two, so that means that when I move into the world a lot of the things that I find are things that challenge me, that provoke me, that make me uncomfortable, that disturb me, that hurt me.

"Over the past ten years I've spent a lot of time trying to shake off the angry-feminist label but now I've embraced it. Injustice is injustice and I don't want to live in a world where injustice doesn't move me, whether it's racial equality or class equality or gender equality, they're all linked.

"Poetry is an original art form. People have always expressed themselves through words, through sounds. This is what human beings do, and in this corner of the world, old traditions have been used to record history, to record genealogy, to record events, identity. This is part of who we are.

"The way in which people are taught literature is problematic, books are seen as the domain of the elite. So, as a writer I understand how powerful the written word is, as a lover of literature I understand that the written word immortalises everything, it lives on longer than any other art form."

**THE FEMINIST ACTIVIST**  
**JESSICA HORN**  
35, GHANA

Women's rights advocate, activist and writer Jessica Horn is a founding member of the African Feminists Forum (AFF), a pan-African, bi-annual feminist conference. Having started in Accra, Ghana in 2006, then initiating a series of regional and national conferences across the continent including Senegal, Nigeria, Uganda, the AFF brings African feminists and activists together. Horn is also co-editor of Voice, Power And Soul: Portraits Of African Feminists, and of the Our Africa strand of the Open Democracy blog.

"It's important for people to understand that feminism did not begin in the writings of American or European women in the 1970s. The struggle for women and young girls to have full space in society, to have full expression and autonomy is a struggle that African women have been fighting for generations.

"My mother is Ugandan, she is my feminist mentor. For others it's their grandmothers, or women in the market. They may not use the word feminist, but they are part of a very

beautiful history of African women rising up. I was born a feminist, I have always had a feminist consciousness, I was always aware of dynamics between boys and girls, men and women, this came very much from my mum's education, and discussions at home about women's rights and women's place in society.

"As a women's rights activist, I'm not at the forefront of campaigns, I'm more behind the scenes, working on infrastructure. For 60 per cent of the year I work all over Africa, the other 40 per cent is in Europe, America or elsewhere.

"I have no problem with the word feminism. To some the word feminism may have negative connotations but that's only because it challenges power. People don't think it's cute to challenge power, so they don't want to hear it. My role is not necessarily to be nice, my role is to ask why is it that so many women have been abused? Why is it that so many women feel that they have no choice when it comes to what happens to their body, when it comes to work or the labour market?"

□ [www.africanfeministforum.com](http://www.africanfeministforum.com)



**THE TECHNOPHILE**  
**ORY OKOLLOH**  
KENYA/SOUTH AFRICA

Policy and Government Relations Manager for Google in Africa, Okolloh is also an activist, lawyer and blogger, and is co-founder of open source website Ushahidi [see Jon Gosier interview, page 124].

"During the onset of post-election violence in Kenya in 2007 mainstream media reporting of the events was poor. I invited people to send their stories to my blog and was overwhelmed by the volume of material coming in. It became apparent that there was a need for a more efficient way to collate reports from citizens, and that tracking the reports by location would give people a better sense of where violence was occurring. I believe that having access to technology can open new worlds and allow one to transcend the limitations of their existence. □ [www.usahidi.com](http://www.usahidi.com)



**DISABILITY RIGHTS CAMPAIGNER**  
**AÏSSATOU CISE**  
SENEGAL

Senegalese writer and disability activist Aïssatou Cise works with young women to help them write and find their voice and she is also active in the people's power/pro-democracy protests in Senegal. Cise runs workshops in Senegal for marginalised girls to help them write their own stories. "My activism started when I was very young, beginning of course with my own rights," says Cise (in Voice, Power And Soul: Portraits Of African Feminists). Cise, who won an award from Lebanese publishers Namaan for her novella Linguère Fatim, also campaigns against forced early marriage, polygamy and female genital mutilation.



**THE FRONTLINE BLOGGER**  
**SALMA SAID**  
EGYPT

Cairo-based blogger and activist Salma Said recently posted an alarming video on YouTube, in which she is filmed speaking from a hospital bed having been shot during the latest unrest.

"We were protesting to denounce police negligence and to signal that we believe they deliberately plotted this crime against innocent football fans," says Said in the video, shot by film collective Mosireen. "I was shot with pellets in my face, arm and chest and in my stomach, pelvis and legs, both right and left."

Announcing her return to action, Salma tweeted: "What I've been through is nothing in comparison to the many heroes lying in many hospitals. Let's visit them!" □ [www.twitter.com/#!/salmasaid](https://twitter.com/#!/salmasaid)



**THE SEXUAL RIGHTS PROVOCATEUR**  
**DOROTHY AKEN'OVA**  
NIGERIA

Dorothy runs the International Center For Reproductive Health And Sexual Rights (INCRESE), an advocacy and campaigning NGO that works to improving the sexual and reproductive rights of all within Nigeria.

Dorothy has been very vocal around LGBT rights, and speaks up for vulnerable groups, including adolescents, women, people with disabilities and sexual minorities. She also believes in good, safe sex for all, and challenges the government over issues it would rather ignore, from gay rights to deaths as a result of unsafe abortions. □ [www.increase-increase.org](http://www.increase-increase.org)