

## Empowering women leaders: A letter to my sisters and daughters

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Professor Stella Anyangwe, born in Cameroon, is a distinguished physician and epidemiologist with a career spanning several decades. She earned her medical degree (MD) in 1977 in Cameroon, followed by a Master of Public Health (MPH) in 1986 and a PhD in 1990 from Tulane University in the USA. Fluent in both English and French, and conversant in multiple African languages, Professor Anyangwe has made significant contributions to public health across the African continent. She practiced as a nephrologist and taught public health and community medicine in Cameroon until 1993. In 1996, she joined the World Health Organisation (WHO), serving as the WHO Country Representative in countries including the Seychelles, Mali, Zambia, and South Africa between 1998 and 2011. Her final role before retiring in 2013 was as the Programme Area Coordinator for Disaster Preparedness and Response at the WHO Africa Regional Office in Brazzaville, Congo. Post-retirement, she was appointed Honorary Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Pretoria's School of Health Systems and Public Health, where she leads the Disaster Risk Management program.

### Introduction

My dear sisters and daughters,

As I sit down to write this letter, my heart is filled with a deep sense of responsibility, love, and hope for each of you. I write not just as a woman who has lived and learned but as a sister, a mother, a mentor, and a friend. My journey has been filled with triumphs and trials, moments of joy and deep reflection, and lessons that I now feel compelled to share.

Throughout my life, I have worked in public health, education, and leadership, serving in various roles where I have witnessed the resilience of women across different cultures, backgrounds, and generations. I have seen women rise against all odds, and I have also seen many struggle under the weight of societal expectations, self-doubt, and external limitations. This letter is for every woman who has ever doubted her

worth, her strength, or her ability to change her own destiny.

If there is one thing I want you to take away from my words, it is this: You are powerful beyond measure. You have within you the capacity to shape your future, to uplift others, and to leave a legacy that will be remembered for generations. But this power comes with responsibility—the responsibility to educate yourself, to stand firm in your beliefs, to support your fellow women, and to never settle for less than you deserve.

Let me take you on a journey—one that will help you navigate the path ahead with wisdom, courage, and an unshakable sense of self.

### Define yourself and your own path

One of the greatest battles we will ever face as women is the battle to define ourselves on our own terms.

Society, culture, family, and even our own insecurities often try to dictate who we should be, how we should behave, and what we should aspire to. From the moment we are born, we are given roles—daughter, sister, wife, mother, caretaker—without being asked if these roles align with our true essence.

I have seen many brilliant women shrink themselves to fit into moulds that were never meant for them. I have watched women silence their voices in boardrooms, in relationships, and in society because they were taught that speaking up is unbecoming. I, too, have faced moments where I questioned whether I was too much—too ambitious, too outspoken, too independent. But I learned that the world does not reward silence; it rewards those who dare to define themselves.

This is a lesson I learned from my mother, Mrs Elizabeth Nkuku Nwigwe, nee Ekwe, alias “Sweet Mother” in her community in Buea, and in all of English-speaking Cameroon. She was a woman of remarkable strength who refused to let societal expectations limit her potential. Growing up, I watched her challenge traditions that dictated what a woman could or could not do. She refused to be boxed in, teaching me that our identities are ours to define.

So, I say to you, do not let the world define you—define yourself. Stand firm in your beliefs, in your dreams, and in your identity. Be unapologetically you, because the world needs your unique light. If you allow others to dictate your path, you will spend your life living for their approval instead of fulfilling your own purpose.

## Education is your greatest weapon

If there is one lesson I hold close to my heart, it is that education is the key to freedom. I do not speak of education only in the formal sense—though academic achievement is important—but in the broader sense of lifelong learning.

My mother understood the power of knowledge, even when the world tried to deny it to her. I remember watching her stay up late into the night, poring over books by the dim light of a kerosene lamp. She was determined to learn, despite the obstacles in her way. She often said, “Knowledge is a treasure that no one can take away from you.” That belief shaped my life.

It is because of her that I pursued my own education with relentless determination. She showed me that learning is not just about personal advancement—it is about empowerment, independence, and the ability to uplift others.

Knowledge is the one thing no one can take from you. It gives you the confidence to speak, the ability to make informed decisions, and the power to change the course of your life.

## Resilience in the face of adversity

Life will not always be easy. You will face obstacles, heartbreak, failure, and moments of doubt. But remember this: resilience is not about avoiding failure; it is about rising every time you fall.

My mother exemplified resilience in every sense of the word. I recall a time when our family faced significant financial hardship. Instead of succumbing to despair, she took matters into her own hands. She started a small business, selling handmade goods in the local market. Day after day, she worked tirelessly, never allowing her circumstances to break her spirit.

She taught me that resilience is not just about enduring hardship—it is about finding solutions, adapting, and pushing forward no matter the odds. I carry her lessons with me to this day, and I want you to carry them as well.

You will face rejection, you will encounter setbacks, but these do not define you. What defines you is how you respond.

## We rise by lifting each other

One of the greatest joys in life is seeing another woman succeed. Yet, too often, we are conditioned to see each other as competitors rather than allies. This must change.

My mother understood the power of sisterhood long before I did. She was a pillar of support for the women in our community, organizing gatherings where women would come together to share stories, offer support, and empower one another. These circles became a source of strength for many, fostering unity and collective resilience.

Her example taught me that lifting others uplifts us all. The progress of one woman is the progress of all women. We must break the cycle of competition and create a culture of sisterhood where we uplift each other instead of tearing each other down.

## How to support other women



## 1. Celebrate Other Women's Successes Wholeheartedly

Too often, we feel threatened by another woman's success, as if her achievements diminish our own potential. This mindset must change. When another woman succeeds, it does not mean we have failed—it means possibilities are expanding for all of us.

When a woman in your workplace gets promoted, congratulate her with sincerity. When a female entrepreneur launches her business, support her by spreading the word or making a purchase. When a friend reaches a milestone, whether personal or professional, celebrate her joy instead of feeling envious.

A simple, genuine, "I am proud of you," can mean the world to someone who has worked hard to achieve their goals. Let us learn to clap for each other without hesitation.

## 2. Offer Guidance and Mentorship

Many women navigate their careers and personal lives without guidance, feeling lost or unsupported. If you have walked a path that others are just beginning, take the time to mentor, advise, and uplift them.

Mentorship does not always have to be formal—it can be as simple as offering advice to a young colleague, sharing resources with a friend looking to grow in her field, or guiding a younger woman through difficult decisions.

Think back to the women who helped shape your journey. Pay that kindness forward.

## 3. Advocate for Women in Professional Spaces

The workplace can be a challenging space for women, filled with biases and barriers. One of the most powerful ways we can support each other is by advocating for one another in professional settings.

- If you are in a position of influence, create opportunities for women to rise.
- If you hear another woman being dismissed in a meeting, amplify her voice.
- If a female colleague is not being credited for her work, speak up.

- If you are in hiring or promotion discussions, advocate for gender equity.

Lifting another woman up professionally does not take away from your own success; it strengthens the foundation for all of us.

## 4. Be a Safe Space for Vulnerability

Women face immense pressures to appear strong at all times. Many struggle in silence, afraid to express their fears, challenges, or pain. One of the greatest gifts we can offer each other is a space where vulnerability is welcomed without judgment.

Be the friend who listens without interrupting. Be the sister who offers support without gossip. Be the colleague who notices when another woman is struggling and asks, "How can I help?"

Sometimes, support is as simple as letting another woman know that she is not alone.

## 5. Support Women-Owned Businesses and Initiatives

Economic empowerment is one of the most impactful ways to uplift women. Whenever possible, support women-owned businesses, buy from female entrepreneurs, and invest in initiatives that empower women financially.

It is easy to admire successful women from a distance, but real support means choosing their businesses over big corporations when possible, attending their events, and recommending them to others.

A single purchase, a positive review, or a referral can make a significant difference in a woman's financial success.

## 6. Challenge Harmful Stereotypes and Biases

Women have long been subjected to harmful stereotypes—too emotional, too ambitious, too assertive, too passive. These biases hold us back.

If you hear someone diminish a woman's achievements by attributing them to luck rather than hard work, correct them.



If you see a woman being judged more harshly than a man for the same behaviour, challenge that thinking.

If you find yourself unconsciously reinforcing gender biases, take a step back and reassess.

Creating change requires all of us to actively dismantle the narratives that limit women.

#### 7. Teach the Next Generation of Women to Support Each Other

Our daughters, nieces, and young girls in our communities are watching us. They will learn from our actions, our words, and the way we treat one another.

Let us show them that women are not enemies, that sisterhood is powerful, and that collaboration is more valuable than competition.

Teach young girls to uplift their peers, to celebrate diversity among women, and to understand that they are stronger together.

#### 8. Be Kind—Always

Sometimes, the smallest acts of kindness leave the biggest impact. A kind word, a supportive gesture, a moment of encouragement can change someone's day—or even their life.

If you see a woman struggling, offer help. If you hear someone belittling another woman, defend her. If you admire someone's work, tell her.

Kindness costs nothing but has the power to transform lives.

### Final Words: Be Fearless, Dream Boldly and Leave a Legacy

My sisters and daughters, my greatest wish for you is that you live boldly. Do not shrink yourself. Do not settle for less. The world is waiting for you to take your place and make your mark.

Be fearless. Dream beyond what you think is possible. And when you have reached heights you once thought

unattainable, turn around and lift others with you. That is how we change the world.

I think often of my mother and the legacy she left behind. Her courage, wisdom, and unwavering love shaped me into the woman I am today. Her strength was not just in what she endured but in the impact she had on those around her. She showed me that true power lies in knowledge, resilience, and the ability to uplift others.

Now, I pass these lessons on to you. Carry them with you. Live them. And, one day, pass them on to the next generation.

With all my love and faith in you,

Professor Stella Anyangwe

