

THE AFRICAN QUEENS

Meet four of Africa's most extraordinary female leaders — who are risking their lives and freedom to speak out against the continent's corrupt regimes. Interviews: Christine Toomey



WANGARI MUTA MAATHAI
NOBEL PEACE-PRIZE WINNER, 2004

Wangari Muta Maathai, Kenya's assistant environment minister, was the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel prize, for her work encouraging women across Africa to plant trees as a platform for community development.

Over the past three decades, Maathai's Green Belt Movement has provided work for over 80,000 women in Kenya alone by supporting the planting of 30m indigenous trees such as acacia, cedar and baobab. But the 65-year-old biology professor sets her sights even higher. "We have about 30m people in Kenya, so we've planted one tree for each person. But we need an average of 10 trees to absorb the amount of carbon dioxide each of us breathes out in our lifetime. I'd like to appeal to each person in the world to plant 10 trees." Maathai's tree-planting crusade began when she returned to her native Kenya in the mid-1970s after studying abroad; she found the rivers were polluted and trees had been felled in the name of commercial agriculture.

Maathai started by planting a handful of seedlings in her back yard, then doling them out to local women to plant on public land. In return, the women were paid a small amount of money. Over the following years, environmental sponsors helped her to develop hundreds of tree nurseries, and the Green Belt Movement was launched.

This grassroots conservation movement, with women as its foot soldiers, gradually evolved into a platform for community development and civic education, and Maathai became increasingly politically active, especially in the fight against government corruption. In 1989 she supported a lawsuit aimed at thwarting plans by Kenya's corrupt former

DORA NKEM AKUNYILI

DIRECTOR-GENERAL, NIGERIA'S NATIONAL AGENCY FOR FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION CONTROL

Dora Nkem Akunyili has been the subject of three assassination attempts since taking up her post and launching a crusade against the manufacturers of fake pharmaceuticals that have caused countless deaths — including that of her sister.

'Drug counterfeiting is so lucrative, we expected the perpetrators to fight back aggressively,' says Akunyili, a 51-year-old British-educated pharmacist. This is an understatement. Two years ago, gunmen opened fire on a car in which she was travelling. Her home has been raided and gunmen have tried to kidnap her son. Her six children have now left the country, but her husband, whose life has also been threatened, refuses to leave her. Her agency's offices and laboratories have also

been burnt down repeatedly.

Some estimate that 67% of pharmaceutical drugs circulating in Nigeria four years ago were fake; many were made in the country; others were drugs imported past their expiry date and relabelled. Many legitimate companies closed down, and drugs that were known to be made in Nigeria were banned abroad.

Akunyili has purged her 3,000-strong department of its corrupt staff. As a result, the number of counterfeit drugs in circulation has fallen by over 80%, the ban on the sale of drugs abroad has been lifted and legitimate companies are restarting production. The crackdown is part of a much wider anti-corruption drive by Nigeria's president, Olusegun Obasanjo, to prosecute corrupt government officials.



Dora Nkem Akunyili with her bodyguards in her burnt-out offices after one of several arson attacks

THE FACTS

- Women make up 50.5% of the African population
- Women do 70% of the agricultural work
- Female life expectancy at birth is 47 years. In 1980 it was 49 — ie, life expectancy has fallen by two years
- 46.8% of adult (15+) women are illiterate compared with 30.3% of men
- Women make up 42% of the total labour force
- 49% of women complete primary education, compared with 58% of men
- More than 40% of women in Africa do not have access to basic education
- A woman living in sub-Saharan Africa has a 1-in-16 chance of dying in pregnancy, compared with a 1-in-3,700 risk for a woman in North America
- 9% of females aged 15-24 have HIV, compared with 4.4% of males

SOURCES: WORLD BANK AND THE MILLENNIUM PROJECT

BEATRICE MTETWA

HUMAN-RIGHTS LAWYER OF THE YEAR, 2003



Beatrice Mtetwa is one of Zimbabwe's foremost lawyers defending opponents of Robert Mugabe's brutal regime. As a consequence, she has been subjected to a savage beating by police. She was named Human Rights Lawyer of the Year by the campaign group Liberty.

When Mtetwa was growing up in Swaziland, her father had so many wives, Mtetwa lost count of her siblings. "There were definitely more than 100. My father was a traditional man. He had little respect for women," says Mtetwa, 46, who moved in 1989 to Zimbabwe, married and had two children.

Mtetwa recalls seeing her father show respect towards his female lawyer. "This is perhaps why I became a lawyer, to gain his respect." But Mtetwa's work defending Mugabe's opponents and those, including a number of British journalists, arrested for speaking out about the atrocities committed by his regime, has won her international acclaim.

Those Mtetwa has defended include many black farmers evicted from their land by the government, the mayor of Harare, a leading member of the Movement for Democratic Change, and Zimbabwe's renowned independent newspaper, the Daily News. It was in October 2003 that Mtetwa, earmarked as a troublemaker by the government, was beaten by police. Yet the hardest aspect of her work is not physical assault, Mtetwa says, but the frustration of facing judges who she says do not apply the law. "In return for towing the government line [the judges] get a new Mercedes and their families are given every assistance. We

will, I fear, be stuck with them and the lawlessness that exists in this country, for many years to come." Such situations, Mtetwa believes, should be denounced by other African nations: "It is completely unacceptable for one African country to use as the excuse for inaction that they will not interfere in the affairs of a neighbouring sovereign state. I believe Africa must be at the forefront of ensuring that all rogue regimes on the continent are treated in the same way."

Mtetwa acknowledges that poverty and Aids are the most critical, immediate problems facing Africa today, but stresses that in the longer term the empowerment of women should be given higher priority. "We are not doing enough to make women aware that they are a voice that can be heard. But it is vital to make women more independent financially. Most women remain silent because they're afraid if they speak out, the tap that supports them economically will be turned off."

Mtetwa puts her faith in Africa's younger generation. "They are hindered by the existing hierarchies. But there are young leaders who are waiting to come up through the ranks who I truly believe will do things differently."

'We are not doing enough to make women aware that they have a voice'



NICOLE NGAKA

RADIO JOURNALIST, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Nicole Ngaka is one of the few voices of reason heard by Congolese living in isolated rural areas. This vast nation of 56m people has endured catastrophic ethnic conflict for much of its history.

The UN-backed Radio Okapi was set up in 2002 — with the help of the Swiss Hironnelle Foundation, which receives some funding from the British government — as talks got under way to end the conflict that has claimed 3m lives. Broadcasting in five languages, it reaches an estimated 45m Congolese, many of whose only contact with those outside their small communities is via radio.

Ngaka travels the country conducting interviews for her daily show, which covers social issues from education and health to the way that warring rebel forces use rape to terrorise communities. 'There are many who are afraid to speak out, but we encourage people to talk,' says Ngaka, 36, who is married to another radio journalist and has a son. She says education, or the lack of it, and health issues such as malaria, receive the biggest responses from her listeners.

Ngaka sees South Africa as a model. 'It has taken on the role of parent, mediating in regional conflicts and acting as a force for peace.' She believes South Africa should be given a place as a permanent member on the UN Security Council, and believes Africa would be a stronger economic force if it adopted a common currency. 'We need to unite. We have so many strengths, but this is lost amid the conflict.'