

Central African Feminists' Forum

ON BEIJING+30

Our Declaration of Hope

I am Esperanza

Yo soy Esperencia

Je suis Espoir

I am Hope

My name is Esperanza. I was born in Malabo, and my parents were migrants from Rwanda and DRC; they were survivors of the genocide and conflict. I heard I was born in 1995. Fortunately, the same year, women gathered in Beijing to discuss and fight for my rights. It's 30 years now and I am still seen as a foreigner in the country where I was born. I cannot claim my birthright because my parents were immigrants from DRC and Rwanda.

Growing up, I had to walk several miles to fetch water and firewood and helped my mother cook in the kitchen while my brother went to school and played football with his peers in his leisure time.

My father had always nursed the fear of me not getting pregnant at home, so he finally found a suitor for me, a 75-year-old successful cattle owner. Inasmuch as I wasn't happy being the only person doing most of the house chores, I still enjoy playing with my friends while going to the stream to fetch water. I loved and enjoyed the stories told by my mother and watching my brother do his math homework. I don't feel ready to get married at the moment. I just started seeing my period, and it feels awful as nobody talks about it. I still find it hard to go to the market or the stream on days when I am bleeding, as I had no sanitary towels to pad myself from the menstrual flow and preserve my dignity.



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Men kept making hissings when I walk across the streets. One day, my neighbour's son was bold enough to tell me he likes my curves, hips, thighs and buttocks. He says my breasts are as firm as a well-developed avocado. I do not feel safe any time I walk past their house to the forest for firewood.

One day my dad shamelessly told my mum and I that my husband's family will be coming to take me the next day. He says this is the most dignifying thing he can do as a father: to ensure that I am safe and to ensure I do not bring shame to the family. I was betrothed to a 75-year-old man from a remote village in the Central African Republic.

EGALITE

I had to move over with my husband to the Central African Republic. I went through so much hardship in my husband's home. I was deprived of every opportunity to do business. Some days were so violent. It got worse when I had menstrual cramps. I gave birth to six children at the age of 20 and was denied access to modern family planning methods by my husband. Some years after, war erupted in the Central Africa Republic; women in my village were raped, beaten and killed by some non-state armed forces. I decided to run away with my children to Cameroon. Running for our safety, from oppression, from torture with my six children, all we had was hope for a better life. We moved in the bush for several months, eating wild fruits until we arrived in Cameroon.

We finally arrived at Cameroon, our intended destination. Life was hard. I had to get involved in small trading to take care of my children. I was involved in selling firewood and farming to take care of my family. I used to sell across the Cameroon-Gabon borders, buying from Cameroon and selling in Gabon. Shortly after, COVID-19 happened, and the borders were closed. I learned that my husband was killed during the war. My children and I mourned for months, but my grieving period could not last because I had to continue hustling to feed my children. My children went to government primary schools for free. This reduced the burden on me to cater for their school fees. I resorted to online marketing. I started using the media to sell and also share my story to empower other women. The media took an interest in my story, and I was invited to participate in several entrepreneurship and women empowerment sessions to motivate the population, especially inspiring other young women like me to not give up and stay empowered.



At the age of thirty, I took an interest in politics and decided to contest for elections. I was well known because of my story; I was well-loved by the public, and so many other women related to my story and saw me as a beacon of hope. It was difficult for me to register my candidature for the elections. The fees were huge, and the barriers were enormous: from cultural to socioeconomic to religious and linguistic. I was even laughed at and mocked by some male political figures and fans who told me that my place as a woman was not in the public sphere but in private. These were exacerbated by the multiple barriers faced to securing signatures from first-class chiefs (who were all males) to grant me their approval to run for an elective position. After three attempts, I was able to raise the money amidst the multiple barriers that prevented my participation just because I am a woman. Today, I am a public figure.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Through my political initiatives, I was able to push for laws advocating for affirmative action and positive discrimination for women in both public and private spaces. I advocated for policies centred around equal participation of women in decision-making spaces in all sectors, the need for gender education at all levels, the need to ensure that its gender policy includes mechanisms for the collection of valid, reliable, and gender-disaggregated data in the area of women's protection, Strengthen accountability mechanisms for human rights violations, Increase funding for women-focused interventions across all sectors, Address root causes of the conflict through inclusive dialogue; Strengthen legal and policy frameworks, Enhance women's meaningful participation and a 50:50 representation in decision-making processes at all levels, including national delegations attending international and regional meetings. Improve access to justice and support services for all women and girls, including survivors of Gender-Based Violence. Adoption of a gender action plan on climate change and gender-responsive budgeting to climate finance. To create, and it does not exist and disassociate where it exists from marginalizing the Ministry of Gender with youths, children and the family. Ensure the protection of women against Cyberbullying and cyber gender-based violence. Allocate adequate resources and ensure that state budgeting is gender-responsive.

I am Esperanza,

Yo soy Esperanza

Je suis Espoire,

I am the hope of Women and girls in the Central African Region

