



**I Belong To Me**



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**#IBelongToMe**  
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Saleema was born one warm afternoon in the village. Saleema was a healthy and quiet baby who grew up to be a joyous and caring little girl. She took the time to smell the blooming flowers and gaze at the running clouds in the sky everywhere she went. Everyone she met would be greeted with her beautiful smile and shining eyes. Saleema was the most beloved little girl in the village.



One evening, as she was playing with her friends outside her house, she heard her parents arguing. As she went closer to the door, she heard her mother's voice:

“She is still too young, please let's wait a few more years.”

“She is not a child anymore,” her father replied. “She will soon be 11 years old and the dowry this family is offering is good money that we need.”

“She is still a little girl!” exclaimed her mother.

“Not anymore! It is time you take her to see the old lady this coming summer so she can become a woman, and after that we will marry her off. I will make sure that she is in a good family.”

Saleema slowly walked into the house to hug her mother who was still weeping.

“Father, I don't want to get married.” she said. She was ashamed of feeling this way. She knew that the girls who hadn't been coming back to school were now married. She did not want special treatment, but could not help feeling that this was not right.

Her father was a tall, strong man. She knew he loved her and wanted what was best for her. As he sat down next to her, and gently wiped the tears off his wife's cheeks, Saleema felt hopeful that he had changed his mind. She smiled at him, but he did not smile back; he was staring at the door.

"Saleema, this is who we are. I am not getting you married to punish you". His voice was soft now. "I am getting you married to protect your honor and our family name. You will understand when you have children. The bond between parents and their children is what keeps our traditions alive."

"So we should keep our traditions alive even if they kill us?" she asked.

Her father stared at her angrily, and Saleema knew she shouldn't have said what she said. She was scared and wanted to explain: "One of my friends died after her aunt took her to visit the old lady and follow tradition."

Suddenly, he stood up and shouted, "You will go to the old lady, and you will get married, because this is who we are- This is non-negotiable! I am your father, and you will do as I tell you!" then he stormed out of the house.

In the coming days, Saleema did not smell the flowers; the sky seemed grey and the clouds heavy. At school she kept quiet, knowing that those would be her last months there. She did her best to hold back her tears every day... She couldn't let the others know that she did not want to follow tradition. She loved her community, her village, every flower and tree that grew on their land. She loved nothing more than her mother's bread in the morning and her singing in the evening. When her mother sang, she could feel the wind carrying the voices from the past, reaching from beyond the ground and the seasons, echoing prayers of strength and courage passed on through generations.

Class ended without her noticing that the day had gone by. As she was slowly leaving the classroom her teacher called her name.

“Saleema, can I please talk to you?”

She knew he had noticed she hadn't been paying attention in class and was ready to receive the lecture she deserved. Her teacher was strict but fair. He had gone to study in the city, but unlike many others, he had come back to the village. People said that it was because he was too weak for the city. Saleema doubted that was true.



As the last students left the classroom, the teacher motioned for Saleema to sit down, and she obeyed silently.

“Saleema, I have noticed that you have not been yourself lately. Is everything ok?”

She looked at him surprised. She wanted to tell him the truth, but she feared he would think something was wrong with her, so she kept silent, her eyes focused on her feet.

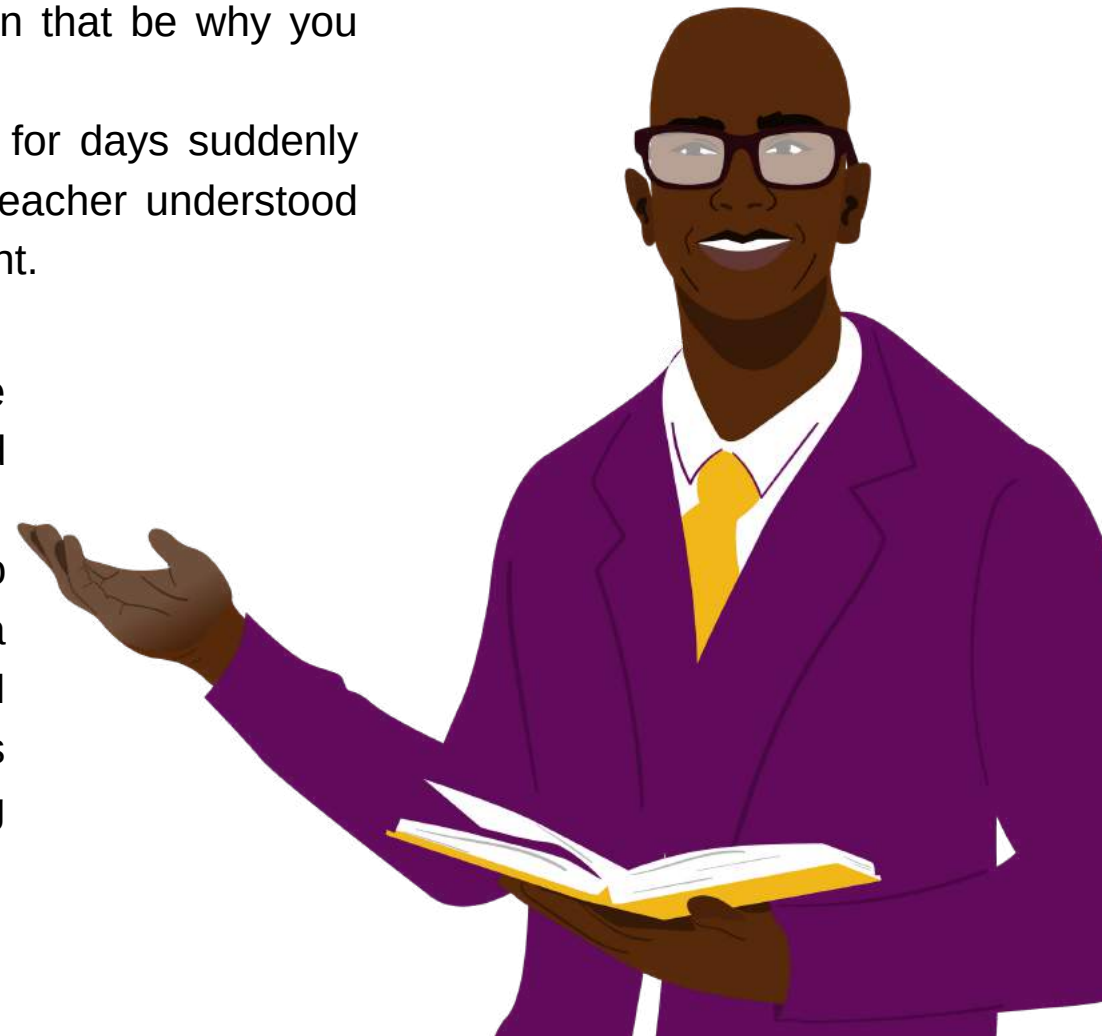
“You are still a child, but at your age, our people are starting to see you as ready to become a woman. Can that be why you seem preoccupied?”

The tears Saleema had been holding back for days suddenly started flowing down her cheeks, and her teacher understood then that he was about to lose another student.

“This is not fair,” he whispered

Saleema did not expect an adult to feel the same way she did. She decided she could trust him.

“Father says it is time I go visit the old lady to become a woman so that I may become a suitable wife. I cannot explain why, but I know this is not right. Everyone says that this is who we are, so something must be wrong with me.”



“ I see...” he paused to heavily exhale. “Saleema, have you heard of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights?”

Saleema shook her head. She had no idea what that was.

“There is more to who we are than what you have been told. African history and identity cannot be reduced to marrying a child. This is why I came back from the city to share what I had learned with our community. We are the richest continent on Earth. Before colonization, Africa was composed of wealthy kingdoms defended by strong warriors. You know Saleema, some of our greatest warriors and leaders were women. You need to learn about our history so that you can participate in preserving our collective memory and defend the rights of other girls. It all started after independence, you see. African presidents and leaders came together in Ethiopia to establish the Organization of African Unity which is now known as the African Union...”

Her teacher’s voice started fading away as Saleema dove into her thoughts. After all, what does it matter who we are, who we were... She did not have control over any of it. As she was walking back home that afternoon, her teacher’s words were however stuck in her mind. “There is more to who we are than what you have been told...”

She felt a light breeze of air on the back of her neck.

“Is the air following me?” she thought to herself, before dismissing that silly thought.

That night when Saleema went to sleep, her mother came to lie next to her for a few minutes. She had noticed her daughter's heart was heavy. She held her in her arms and started singing in a soft voice while gently tapping the rhythm on her back. Saleema closed her eyes as the wind grew stronger in her mother's song and the rhythm played by her fingertips' light touch soothed her into sleep.



“Saleema. Ya Saleema. Wake up, my daughter. You have arrived.”

Saleema opened her eyes to find an old lady sitting by her side. She jumped from her bed, about to ask the old lady why she was in her family's house, when she realized that she was not home anymore. She felt sand under her feet and the sun warming her skin. From afar she could see giant triangles coming out of the ground. She rubbed her eyes with her small hands and opened them again in amazement.

“Where are we?” she asked.

The old lady smiled. Her face was wrinkled and her eyes were kind. Saleema felt oddly safe.



“We are in Cairo, my daughter, the capital of Egypt. What you see there are the pyramids. They were built by kings and queens called Pharaohs, a long time ago, and are part of Africa’s most ancient History”.

Saleema was mesmerized.

“Why am I here?”

“You are here because you were about to give up. The ancestors sent you here for guidance, to help you understand who we are.”

“Are you an ancestor?”

The old lady laughed. “No, my child. I am old, but not that old.”

Saleema sat on the warm sand grains.

“Who are you then, Auntie?”

“My name is Hala. I am the first stop on your trip tonight. I am here to tell you about the International Conference on Population and Development, which was held here in 1994 .

The world gathered here in North Africa to agree that girls' and women's rights are central to the development of societies and countries. The world has promised to defend our health and rights in order for us to access education, productive work and participate in political, social, and economic life. Here in Cairo, on our beloved Continent, the land we all call our Mother, our rights as women and girls to decide how we live in our own bodies were declared sacred. Since then, our right to choose when we want to have children and how many children we want has become a condition for a better future for everyone.”

“We get to decide when we want children?”

“Yes, my daughter. No one is allowed to tell us how to live in our bodies. It is called bodily autonomy. It means that you belong to you.”

“I belong to me” Saleema whispered.

“Now you need to go, my child. The night is short, and you still have many places to visit. Go see Fatima, she will tell you about bodily integrity.”

“How do I go?”

“Close your eyes. I will send you to her.”



Before she could even say goodbye, Saleema felt her feet in the water.

“Welcome to the Smiling Coast, Saleema!”

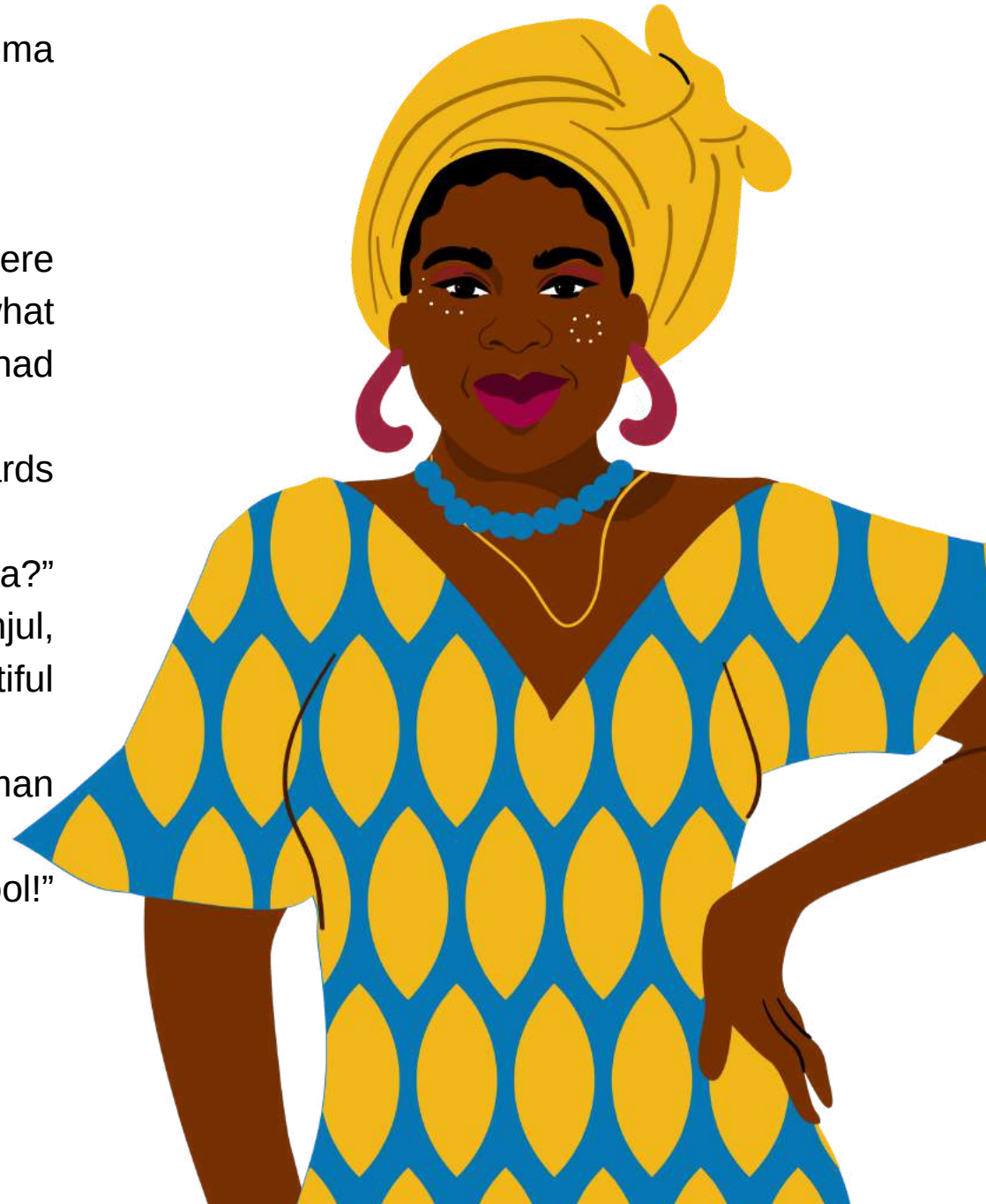
Saleema was now on the beach, her legs were being caressed by the waves coming from what seemed to be an infinity of water. She had never seen such a beautiful place.

Fatima held her hand and guided her towards the shade of a palm tree. They sat down.

“Do you know where we are, Saleema?” Saleema shook her head. “We are in Banjul, capital of The Gambia”. Fatima was a beautiful woman with a face full of light.

“Here, in 1981, the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights was adopted.

“My teacher told me about it at school!” Saleema proudly said.



“As he should have!” Fatima responded. “It is our most important policy as Africans. Do you know what a policy is?” Fatima did not wait for Saleema’s answer: “A policy is a set of rules countries agree on. 54 out of the 55 African countries signed The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights. One of the rules says that ‘every human being shall be entitled to respect for his life and the integrity of his person’.”

“Bodily integrity” Saleema whispered, remembering Hala's words.

“Yes!” Fatima shouted. “You are smart! It means your body should never be harmed and your life is sacred.”

Saleema kept quiet for a short moment, assessing whether she should confide in Fatima before she spoke: “My father says it is time I go see the old lady in the village to fully become a woman, but one of my friends died after her aunt took her there.”

Fatima's face became serious. “In many countries, people believe that in order to become a woman, a girl should be cut, but that is actually prohibited. It is called female genital mutilation, and it is forbidden by the rules.

People need to know that policies have been written to ensure that our culture respects our nature. You must go to Mozambique now; Malangatana will be there to guide you.”

Saleema hugged Fatima goodbye and closed her eyes.



When she opened them, she jumped out of fear. She was standing in a street that was suspended in mid-air, above water. How was that even possible?

“It’s okay, Saleema. It is safe.” Malangatana was a tall man who held his head up high with pride. “Welcome to Maputo, capital of Mozambique. You are standing on the Catembe Bridge; the longest suspended bridge on the continent. From the Mediterranean Sea to Chapman's peak, no one has ever seen construction like it.”



Saleema took a few hesitant steps to make sure the bridge was solid enough. Once reassured, she looked up at Malangatana who seemed to be waiting for her full attention to speak.

“We do not have much time, Saleema. You still have other places to visit, so pay attention. What did you learn from Fatima?”

“She told me about the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights and about bodily integrity.”

“Good.”

“She said female genital mutilation is forbidden and sent me here.”

“Yes, indeed, female genital mutilation is forbidden on our continent. It is written in the Maputo Protocol.”

“Is it a policy?” Saleema asked.

“Yes. Women and girls face specific types of discrimination and violence, so in 2003, African countries voted to adopt the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, better known as the Maputo Protocol. In its Article number 5...” Malangatana paused, “Do you know what an article is?”

“No, Uncle.”

“In policy documents, rules are called articles. Each policy has a set of regulations presented under each article. Do you understand?”

Saleema nodded.

“In Article 5 of the Maputo Protocol, all African countries must prohibit this practice and do everything they can to eliminate it because it is harmful and can lead to death. The next article of this policy says that the minimum age of marriage shall be 18 years old. This means that what we call Child Marriage is also prohibited. Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage are both Harmful Practices.”

“Because they are contrary to the principles of bodily integrity and autonomy,” Saleema said.

“Exactly.”

“But my parents say I will be married soon. Are you sure that the Maputo Protocol is correct, Uncle? My father says that he has to get me to marry because that is how we protect our history and identity.”

“Our history and identity are what we make them, my sweet child. For a long time we were colonized until men and women stood up and said we deserved better. They sacrificed their lives for our independence and for all of us to be free. We follow their path, stand on their shoulders and build on their blessed promise for a prosperous future for all. You are our future, Saleema.”

Saleema suddenly felt overwhelmed by the responsibility to do something. Her gaze was now directed to the ground. She saw her feet - her small feet on such a big bridge. She felt powerless.

“Uncle, why are you and Hala and Fatima telling me all of this?”

“Because you must know before you can do.”

“But do what? I am just a child; I do not count,” Saleema said as she was losing patience.

Malangatana smiled at her for the first time since they met moments earlier.

“It is time for your next trip, sweet child.”

“No please Uncle. I am sorry - I shouldn't have spoken back. Please tell me more about the Maputo Protocol.”

“I have told you enough. It is now time for you to learn about the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.”

“The child?” Saleema repeated in disbelief.

“Close your eyes, Saleema.”

She complied.

When Saleema opened her eyes, she found herself in a city. She was surrounded by buildings and shops; cars were rushing and people were walking in a hurry.

“Saleema!”

As she looked around for the person calling her name, she saw a young man seated under a tree by the road waving at her. She walked to the tree and sat next to him.

“Welcome Saleema! Welcome to Maseru, the capital of Lesotho! How are you?”

“I am well, thank you; and yourself?”

“I am doing great, thank you for asking. I see your parents have raised you well. My name is Mustu. I will be telling you all about the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.”



Saleema was so excited! Finally, a policy specifically made for her age.

“How was your visit to Maputo?”

“Uncle Malangatana told me that I am the future and that I must know before I can do. But I don't think that there is anything a little girl can do. I told him that, but I regret it now. I shouldn't have spoken my mind.”

“You did a wonderful thing!” responded Mustu.

Saleema was startled by his enthusiastic reaction.

“By saying what you think, you have given life to Article 7 of your Charter! It says that every child shall be assured the right to express his or her opinion freely in all matters. It seems Uncle Malangatana was wrong. You did that before you knew you could do it!” Mustu said as he burst into laughter.

Saleema wasn't sure why this was funny, but she smiled, relieved to find out that she hadn't offended Uncle Malangatana.

“However, you were also wrong; there are many things a little girl can do!”

“What else can I do?” she asked, eager to learn more.

“You have many rights, you know?” She could hear in Mustu's voice that he was just as excited as she was about the rights of the African child. “You have the right to education, and the right to rest and play.”

“The right to play?” Saleema asked. She was the one laughing this time and Mustu laughed with her.

“Yes! Article 12 of your Charter says that you can rest, play, and participate in cultural and artistic activities. You also have the right to be healthy, which you can accomplish through medical assistance, adequate nutrition, and safe drinking water. You have the right to protection as well, in case of conflict or discrimination such as Harmful Practices.”

“Uncle Malangatana and Fatima told me that Child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation are forbidden because they are both Harmful Practices.”

“That is very true. It is written in Article 21 of the Charter that Harmful Practices are prohibited. In 1990, African countries came together to put on paper the rights of the African child for everyone to know. They have also listed responsibilities such as respecting your parents, serving your community, and strengthening African cultural values and historical principles. Those rights were passed on to you so that you can build on them. Those words echo the vows whispered before your birth, and by knowing your rights you will know your worth.”

Saleema’s trip started to make sense. From Cairo to Banjul, and from Maputo to Maseru, she was learning the promise of the ancestors and the inherited dream she needed to fulfill.

“Am I here because the Charter was signed in Lesotho like the other policy documents were in the places I have visited?”

“No, you are here because in the Charter, the African countries have provided for the creation of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child - men and women who are the guardians of your rights and your wellbeing. This committee is here in Maseru.”

“So where was the charter signed?”

“It was adopted in Addis Ababa by the Organization for African Unity. That will be your next stop. I hope you have enjoyed learning about the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.”

“Yes, very much! Thank you Mustu.

Saleema closed her eyes, ready to discover the next adventure.



This time, she was inside a building. Sunlight was shining through the big glass walls revealing the many portraits and paintings hanging in the hallways. The ceiling was higher than anything she had ever seen. She sensed a solemn power emanating from this place.

“Hello Saleema.”

Standing in front of her was a young, thin woman with beautiful hair.

“My name is Yewbzaf. I am very happy to meet you.”

“It is very nice to meet you too, Ms. Yewbzaf. Are we at the Organization for African Unity?”

“That is what it used to be called; now it is the African Union.”



Yewbzaf motioned for Saleema to follow her as she started walking. She followed the fast and measured rhythm that the woman's high heels played on the shiny floor. The sound was flying in the air and bouncing off the high ceilings. As they were walking down the long hallways, Yewbzaf noticed Saleema was contemplating the portraits on the walls.

"Do you know who these men are?" she asked

"No."

"They are the African Presidents - the Heads of States and Governments who vote together here every year on all matters related to the African Union. This building we are in is the African Union Commission. Once the Presidents take a decision, we work to make it a reality."

As they reached the entrance, Saleema stopped. She was staring at a portrait that caught her attention.

"Ms. Yewbzaf, who is this lady?"

"This is Her Excellency Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the first female Chairperson of the African Union Commission."

"You hang the picture of the lady in charge of the chairs with the portraits of the Presidents?" Saleema asked puzzled

"In charge of the chairs? N'dee!" Yewbzaf laughed. Chairperson means President, my dear."

"A woman used to be President of this place?"

“Of course. Our current Chairperson is a man, and the Deputy Chairperson is a woman. We make sure that women and men work together as equals. For instance, each floor in this building is dedicated to a Department, and each department has a chief, we call them Commissioners. There are 6 departments, which means...?”

“6 Commissioners!”

“Exactly! 3 Commissioners are women and 3 are men.”

“Is there a Commissioner for Harmful Practices?”

“Harmful Practices are under the Department of Health, Humanitarian Affairs, and Social Development, which is headed by Commissioner Amira Elfadil.”

“And what does she do about Harmful Practices?”

“In 2019 the Presidents of the African Countries voted on an important document to eliminate Harmful Practices, and in that document they have asked the Commission to create an Accountability Framework.”

“I don’t know what that means”

“It means that the African Union Commission...”

“In Addis Ababa!”

“Yes, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights...”

“In Banjul!”

“Yes, and the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child...”

“In Maseru!”

“Yes. They will all work together, hand in hand, with the 55 African Countries of the African Union to eliminate Harmful Practices.”

“All those people, from all across the Continent, are doing this? It sounds very serious then.”

“Of course, my dear child. This is very serious. Girls’ and Women’s health is important to the development of societies.”

“That was decided in Cairo during the International Conference on Population and Development!”

“I am very proud of you, Saleema. You have paid attention and learned so much during your trip. I am sure that one day you will become President and you will have your portrait on our walls!”

Saleema burst into laughter. “Girls don’t become Presidents!”

Yewbzaf froze. She turned to Saleema and looked deeply into her eyes while she was bending one knee to be at her height. “Listen to me carefully,” she said in a soft voice. “Girls can grow up to be anything and everything they choose to be.”

It is your right but also your responsibility to participate in building the Continent because women take care of the child and the parent. We walk ahead and we leave no one behind, for we know no other way to carry but by holding our heads up high. Here, in Ethiopia, our President is a woman, and you will also be that one day. It is written in the Africa We Want that the Continent will be led by women and young people.”

“The Africa We Want?”

“Yes, it is the foundation of our work here. It is the slogan for Agenda 2063 which is a text that has seven aspirations for us to build.”

“Ms. Yewbzaf, it is true I have learned many things during my trip, but how can I build? I do not know how to make policies.”

“You have your voice, my dear, and it is powerful. So many people in many different countries have come together through the years for you to have power in your voice. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a Continent to defend girls’ rights. Now you must go to Niger; they are all waiting there to hear from you.”

“Why Niger? Is it a new lesson?”

“No, you must go to Niger for the African Girls Summit. Now wake up.”

Saleema opened her eyes. She was lying in her bed, and the light of day was coming through the thin curtains hanging in front of the window. She ran to her parents and jumped on them.

“Father! Father! I must go to Niger!! Wake up!”

He opened one eye but kept quiet.

“Saleema, it is very early,” her mother said in a sleepy voice.

“But I have to go to Niamey! The ancestors told me last night! It started in Cairo, and then in Addis Ababa; Ms Yewbzaf said that they are waiting for me!”

“What is this nonsense now?! Saleema, you were dreaming! Go get ready for school!”

“But Father, I really need...”

“No! Niamey is far away and we are not going there because of a dream. Now go get ready for school.”

Saleema knew that it had been more than a dream, and that she needed to find help to convince her parents. Uncle Mustu’s words came back to her “They have also listed responsibilities such as respecting your parents, serving your community and strengthening African cultural values”. She could not let the ancestors down.

Saleema ran to school that morning. She wanted to make sure she would tell her teacher about her dream before class started.

“You know, Saleema, your father is probably right; it was just a dream.”

“Teacher, you have to believe me. I know it was more than that. On Catembe Bridge, Uncle Malangatana told me that the Maputo Protocol calls for the elimination of Harmful Practices, and so does the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. And Ms. Yewbzaf at the African Union Commission told me that I need to go to Niger to participate in building the Africa We Want.”

Her teacher looked at her in amazement. How could she know all this? Where could she have found all this information in just one night? Was it possible that she was telling the truth...? “The Africa We Want...?” he repeated in disbelief.

“Yes, Teacher; the 7 aspirations of Agenda 2063.”

“You are telling the truth, aren’t you? It was more than a dream.”

“Yes! The ancestors need us to build on their sacred promise for a prosperous future for all.”

“We have to convince your father then. But how?”

“I don’t know,” she said, disappointed. “I was hoping you would know.”

“I have an old car, and I can take you to Niamey; but your father will still not believe us”

“It takes a village,” Saleema whispered.

“What?”

“It takes a village! That’s what Ms. Yewbzaf told me! Let’s call the village council! They can convince my Father.”

“Great idea! But you will have to convince them first, and that will not be easy.”

“Now that I know, I can do. Teacher, don’t worry; I can do it.”

“We will call for a meeting this evening after school! Now go sit at your place for class.”

In the evening, the elders gathered in the village tent. Saleema’s mother had made tea and ginger water; it was her way of showing her support. Her father was not happy with his daughter and the teacher calling for this meeting. He knew everyone would now make fun of his family for taking a little girl's dream too seriously.

Saleema was nervous, but she knew she was doing the right thing.



The elders of the village were the three most important people she knew. Tindigahwya was the traditional leader. His body was old, except for his eyes that still sparked like those of a young boy. Issa was the religious leader, he was short but seemed tall each time he spoke. The third elder was Mariama; she was the grandmother of the village, and everyone respected her.



Saleema was the only child present at the gathering that evening. Those meetings were usually reserved for the adults, but this night was about her. One by one all the adults of the village entered the tent with the customary greetings. As everyone sat down, the crowded tent went into silence, until one man in the back complained, "Why are we losing time for a dream? We have better things to do!"

The voices of everyone started rising in the small space in agreement.

Tindigahwya raised his hand, and the voices stopped. "We are here to listen. I am not convinced, but I want to hear what the teacher has to say."

All eyes were now on the teacher. Saleema could see he was not sure where to start, but he kept his chin up and his back straight. She tried to copy his posture.

"I have called for this meeting this evening," he started, "because as tradition requires, we make our decisions together as a community. Saleema came to me this morning with an unusual request about a dream she had. She needs to go to Niamey because the ancestors asked her to."

People started laughing and complaining again. Saleema could see her father frowning and felt guilty for embarrassing him in front of everyone they knew. She couldn't hold her chin up or her back straight anymore.

“My daughter does not lie,” her father said as Saleema looked at him surprised. “We have taught her to always tell the truth. We now need to know if this was just a little girl’s dream or if there is more to it. I leave it to the elders to decide and guide us.” He held her little hand in his, and by that simple gesture, she felt stronger than ever.

“Very well. We will listen to your daughter’s dream.” Issa said, and the crowd went silent again. “Saleema you can speak now.”

Saleema was paralyzed. She started doubting herself, and the words were disappearing from her tongue. Maybe this was not a good idea. Maybe they were right, and this was nothing but a dream. She started mumbling, “In Banjul and then in Maseru... policies were adopted, and they said that girls have the right to health... the old lady in the desert said the world came to Africa...” Her voice was slowly vanishing.

“This is not serious,” Issa interjected. “Teacher, how could you call the council for this nonsense?”

Saleema felt small, like on Catembe Bridge, like in front of the infinity of water in Banjul, like in front of the Pyramids in Egypt. She remembered Hala’s words “You are here because you were about to give up. The ancestors sent you here for guidance for you to know who we are.” She was about to give up again, but she knew she couldn’t.

She mustered all the courage her little body could contain and stood up. Her back was straight, her voice was clear, she was speaking from the past and the present to change the future.

“I belong to me.”

The tent went silent again, as the wind rose outside.

“That is the promise of the ancestors. That I belong to me. From the Mediterranean Sea to Chapman’s Peak. From the Kingdom of Habesha to the shores of The Gambia, I have been promised by those who have given their lives for our independence, and for all of us to be free, that I belong to me.”

“Tell us more, my daughter.” It was the first words Mariama had said since the meeting started, and no one dared to speak. They were all waiting for Saleema’s story.

Saleema told them about the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, the Organization of African Unity that is now the African Union, she told them about the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Maputo Protocol and the African Girls Summit and everyone listened.

When she finished her story, Issa asked the teacher if what Saleema had said was true.

“Teacher, is the information contained in the dream accurate?”

“Every word is true.”

“Have you taught her this?” Tindigahwya asked.

“No, this is too advanced for her class. I do not know where she could have found all this information in just one night.”

“This meeting has become much more interesting than expected,” Tindigahwya said, smiling.

“This information is surprising, yes, however is it enough? Why would the ancestors talk to a little girl instead of us?” Issa interjected.

The voices rose again. Everyone had an opinion to express and most of them thought that a girl’s dream was not worth going on such a trip. They were all debating and exchanging their opinions, except for Mariama, who was quietly sipping her tea, slowly bringing the cup to her lips, and then wrapping her hands around it to warm her fingers. Saleema felt her dream was slipping away.

“And what if the girl is right?” Mariama asked. “What if the ancestors reached out to a little girl because adults don’t believe in dreams anymore? We wake up, we get on with our busy day, and we forget where the night has taken us. Only a little girl would fight this much and gather a village for a dream. The ancestors know that. There is power in a girl’s dream. I believe that Saleema should go to Niamey to deliver the message that the ancestors have reached out to our village through one of our daughters.”

Whispers of excitement started rising in the tent. Saleema could feel the energy changing, as all of her village started believing in her dream.

“Mariama’s words are wise, and while I do not know if it is the truth, I also believe Saleema should go to Niamey because I am curious to know how this story ends,” Tindigahwya said

“Every man who has come with a sacred message has been told he was crazy at first, but because they held onto that message and found support around them, they changed the world. I cannot say that I believe every word I have heard here tonight, but there is only one way to know the truth. For this reason, I also think Saleema should go to Niamey, and that her father and her teacher should accompany her,” Issa added.

Saleema was astonished; she jumped in her father’s arms to hug him and he smiled at her with pride.

“We have a long trip ahead of us. We should go tomorrow morning at sunrise, and with the blessings of the elders, we will succeed.”

The next day, the little girl hugged her mother before she left.

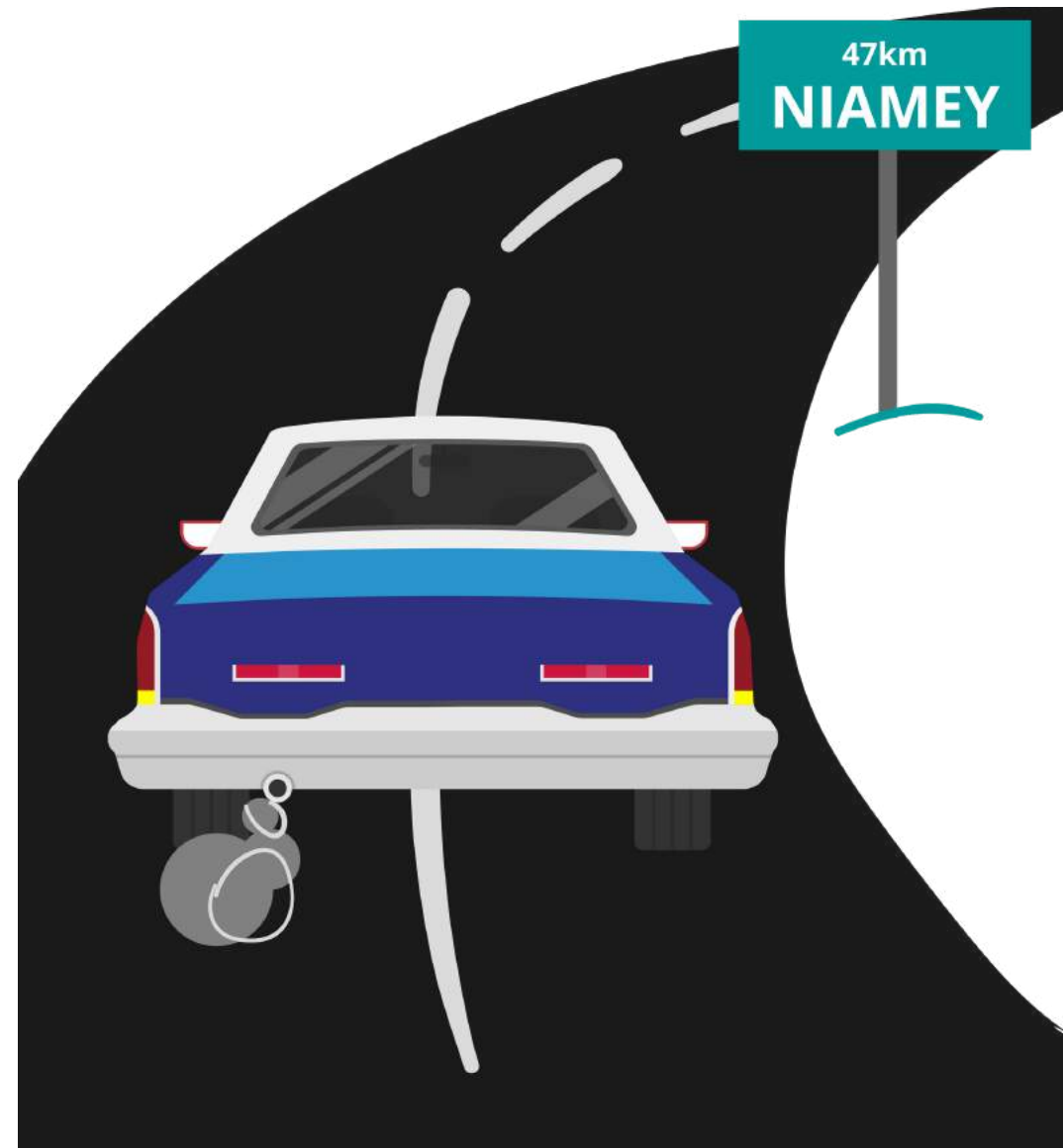
“I am proud of you, my daughter.”

The sun rays were still shy when Saleema, her father and the teacher jumped into the old car to start their new adventure. They drove for hours.

“Father, what will I tell them? When we get to Niamey? I don’t know what to say.”

“You will tell them that you are powerful. I know you will find the words, just like you did with the elders.”

Saleema was not sure she was powerful, but her father’s trust in her gave her confidence. She fell asleep smiling.



“Saleema! Wake up! We are in Niamey!”

Saleema opened her eyes to see the red ground and the green trees of Niger from the car window.

“Look!” her dad shouted pointing at a billboard. “ Look Saleema, it says...”

“The African Girls Summit,” she whispered.

“You were right!” She had never heard her father this excited, and she could see that now he fully believed her.

They followed the billboards, which led them to a huge building. People were waiting outside.

Just as they were stepping out of the car, three men came to greet them. “Saleema! Welcome to Niamey! Everyone has been waiting for you.”

“For me? You knew I was coming?”

“Of course, you are the most important person here today. Presidents, Ministers and Commissioners are here to listen to you.”

“To me?”

“Follow us. We will take you inside.”

Saleema followed them, accompanied by her father and her teacher who could still not believe their ears.



They entered the building. Hundreds of people were seated in the immense space, in front of a stage. Her father and her teacher were directed to two empty seats, and Saleema was taken to the stage and given a microphone. In front of her, elegant people were watching her; a room full of colors and patterns from all across Africa. She suddenly knew exactly what to say.



“I belong to me.

“As I stand on the land we all call our Mother, it is to defend the Human Rights of your daughters. Today let us praise the heavens and honor the ground as in Niamey the world descends. Today we write our History. The chapter is Culture, Human Rights and Accountability.

“I belong to me.

“I am the African Girl and this is my summit. Our common goal is to eliminate every Harmful Practice; simply for us to fully exist, to stand on your shoulders, build on your promise, and follow your feet on the path paved by the grandparents. We are the African Girls. Our voices echo the vows whispered before our birth. Know our worth. We are your army for peace and prosperity, and we will make the Africa We Want a reality.

“I belong to me.

“We are your future, as your present will be our carved collective memory. The one that will have shifted our value from dowry to global ambition because you believe the words that say that if you educate a girl you educate a Nation. Now believe also in our aspiration: we empower a girl to empower a Continent, across generations, for women take care of the child and the parent. Tradition is important. We walk ahead without ever leaving anyone behind, for we know no other way to carry than by holding our heads up high.

“I belong to me.

“Tomorrow we will be the doctors, the teachers, the mothers, the leaders. But today, I still do not belong to me. My bodily autonomy and integrity are words I can see in our policies, and yet as I stretch my fingers and push my arms to the sky, these rights remain out of reach. Because for me to belong to me, we need a culture that respects our nature. We need our Human Rights to be set in stone, in flesh and bone. We need to implement accountability because I deserve to say truly, that finally, I belong to me, as it is written in Agenda 2063.

“I belong to me.

“Teach us those words as our sacred prayer and watch how me and my sisters can empower a generation across the Continent, rising as one blessed Nation because you will have eliminated Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation.

“I will scream it from the top of the mountains to the bottom of the oceans. I will say it to the bird, the river and the tree. I will write it on walls and in books to read. For I have a heritage to build and passed on dreams to fulfill. My dreams are not just mine but my body should be.

“Today, as I stand on the land we all call our Mother, you hold our collective future in your hand. And if you tell me that I belong to me, I will carry your words as a necklace and an armor. Your words and your names will shine through me, for even though I will finally belong to me, I am forever your Legacy.”



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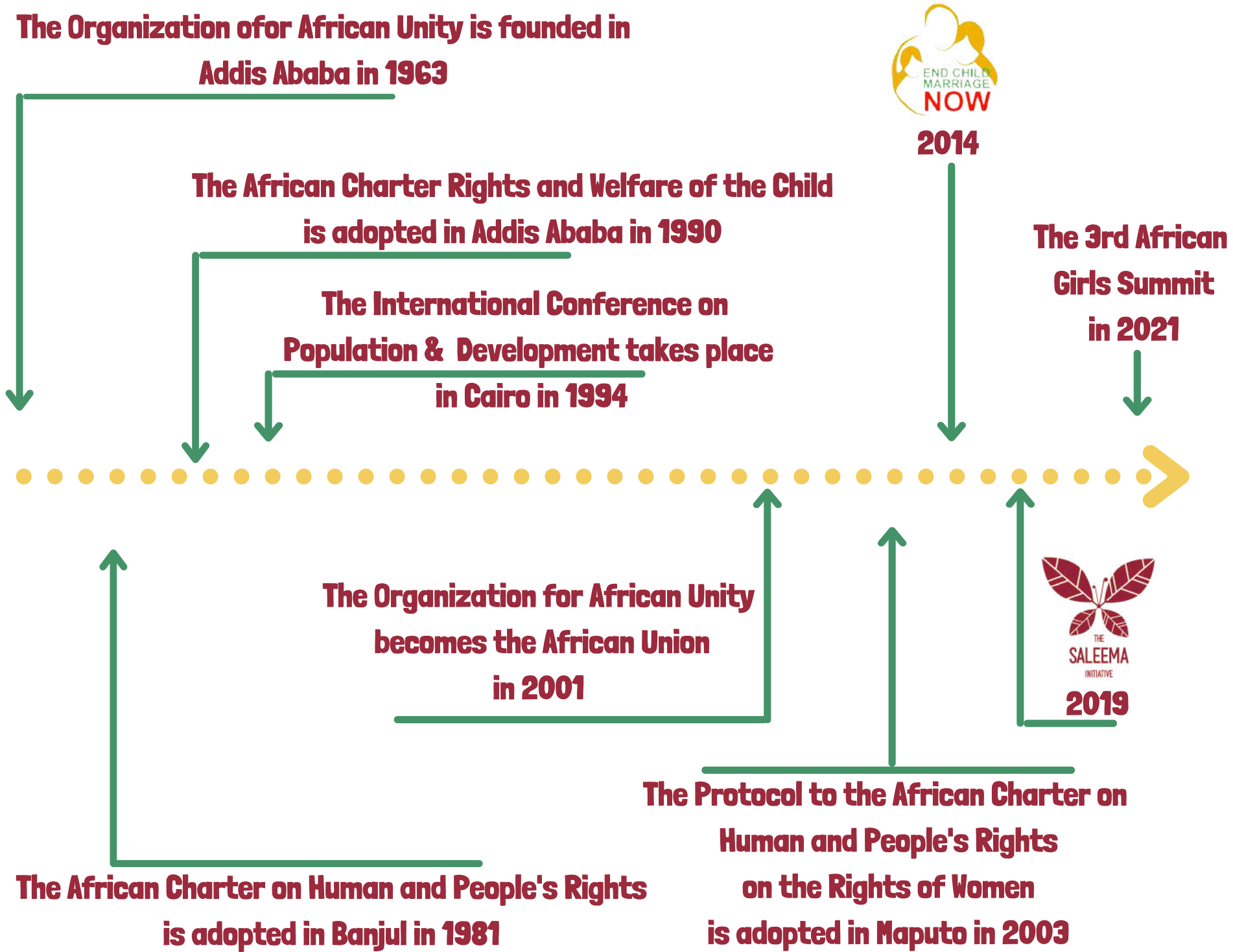
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**The Organization of African Unity is founded in Addis Ababa in 1963**

**The African Charter Rights and Welfare of the Child is adopted in Addis Ababa in 1990**

**The International Conference on Population & Development takes place in Cairo in 1994**



**2014**

**The 3rd African Girls Summit in 2021**

**The Organization for African Unity becomes the African Union in 2001**

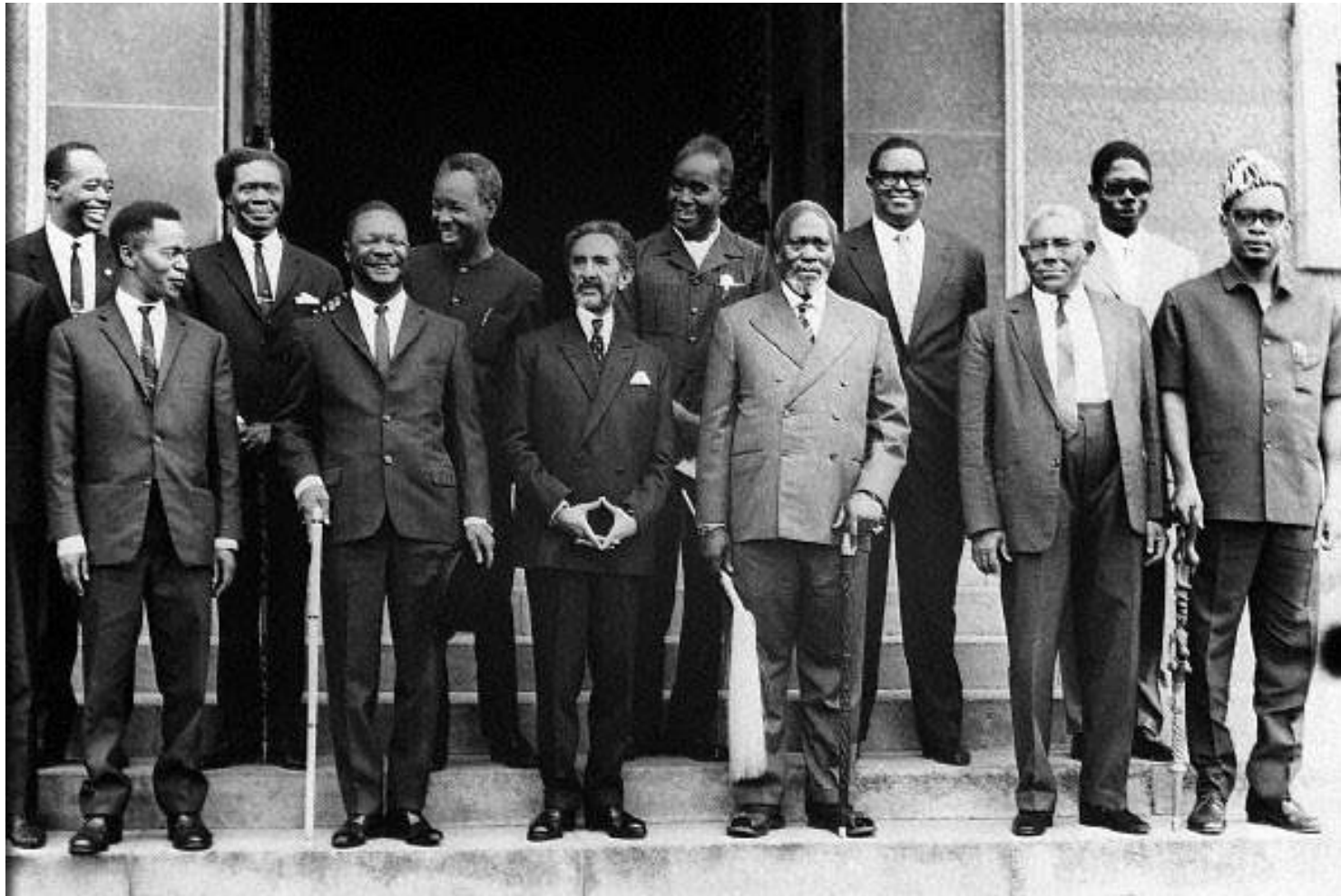


**2019**

**The African Charter on Human and People's Rights is adopted in Banjul in 1981**

**The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women is adopted in Maputo in 2003**

**“That is the promise of the ancestors. That I belong to me. From the Mediterranean Sea to Chapman’s Peak. From the Kingdom of Habesha to the shores of The Gambia, I have been promised by those who have given their lives for our independence, and for all of us to be free, that I belong to me.”**



Some of Founding fathers of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), Addis Ababa, 1963





H.E. Moussa Faki  
Chairperson of the African Union Commission



H.E. Dr. Monique Nsanzabaganwa  
Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission



H.E. Amira Elfadil  
Commissioner for Health Humanitarian Affairs  
and Social Development



Ms Mariama Cissé  
Director, Social Development, Culture and Sport



Dr Margaret Agama-Anyetei  
Acting Director, Health and Humanitarian Affairs



Dr Jane Marie Ong'olo  
Head of Division, Social Welfare, Vulnerable Groups,  
Drug Control and Crime Prevention

## **African Union Champions for the Elimination of Harmful Practices**



H.E. President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré  
President of Burkina Faso

AU Champion for the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation



H.E. President Hakainde Hichilema  
President of Zambia

AU Champion for Champion on Ending Child Marriage

# **“Saleema! Wake up! We are in Niamey!”**



H.E. Mohamed Bazoum  
President of the Republic of Niger



H.E. Allahoury Aminata Zourkaleini  
Minister of the Promotion of Women and the Protection of the Child  
Republic of Niger



**"Girls can grow up to be anything and everything they choose to be"**



H.E. Amira Elfadil  
Commissioner for Health  
Humanitarian Affairs  
and Social Development

H.E.Sahle-Work Zewde  
President of Ethiopia

**"We walk ahead without ever leaving anyone behind, for we know no other way to carry than by holding our heads up high"**



HE Prof. Sarah Anyang Agbor, Commissioner of Human Resources, Science and Technology

HE Amira Elfadil, Commissioner of Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development

HE Amb. Josefa Sacko, Commissioner for Agriculture, Rural Development, Blue Economy and Sustainable Environment

HE Dr Amani Abou-Zeid, Commissioner of Infrastructure and Energy



Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma  
1st Female Chairperson of the  
African Union Commission



Bineta Diop - Special Envoy on  
Women Peace and Security



Hon. Marie-Christine Bocoum  
Former Special Rapporteur on Child  
marriage and Other Harmful  
Practices



Ms Victoria Maloka  
Acting Director of the Women,  
Gender and Development  
Directorate



Dr. Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda  
African Union Goodwill Ambassador on Ending  
Child Marriage



Ms Chido Cleopatra Mpemba  
African Union Youth Envoy



Ms Aya Chebbi  
1st African Union Youth Envoy



**"We empower a girl to empower a Continent, across generations, for women take care of the child and the parent"**



HE Amina Mohamed  
Deputy Secretary General  
United Nations



HE Hanna Tetteh  
SRSG to the AU and Head of the  
United Nations Office to the African  
Union



Dr. Natalia Kanem is the Executive  
Director of the United Nations  
Population Fund



Najat Maalla M'jid  
SRSG  
on Violence against Children



Nafissatou Diop  
Chief of the Gender and Human  
Rights Branch  
UNFPA



Mireille Tushiminina  
Global Coordinator  
UNFPA UNICEF Joint Programme  
Elimination of FGM



Nankali Maksud  
Senior Advisor on Harmful Practices  
UNICEF

# Adoption of the African Union Accountability Framework on Harmful Practices





# Ouagadougou International Conference on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation



H.E. Roch Marc Christian Kaboré  
President of Burkina Faso



H.E. Sika Kaboré  
First Lady of Burkina Faso



H.E. Hélène Marie Laurence Ilboudo-Marchal  
Minister of Women, National Solidarity, Family and  
Humanitarian Affairs  
Burkina Faso



# Regional Conference on Eliminating Child Marriage & Female Genital Mutilation – Cairo



H.E. Soyata Maiga  
Former Commissioner of the ACHPR



Hon. Dr. Azza El Ashmawy  
Former Member of the ACERWC



Ms Mariama Cissé  
Director, Social Development, Culture and Sport

# ICPD+25 – Nairobi



HE Uhuru Kenyatta  
President of Kenya





# The Saleema Youth Victorious Ambassadors



Kawsar Muuse  
SYVA for East Africa



Abimbola Aladejare Salako  
SYVA for West Africa



Saada Djadid Mahamat  
SYVA for Central Africa



Dickel Dia  
SYVA for North Africa



Palesa Mashao  
SYVA for Southern Africa



Basma Kamel  
SYVA for the Diaspora





HE Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, former UNWomen Executive Director & former Deputy President of South Africa

**"Today, as I stand on the land we all call our Mother, you hold our collective future in your hand"**

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**You have power in your voice, and we believe in you**



**#IBelongToMe**



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