Mumbi Namwawa is living up to her name. Translated as “one who molds, shapes or creates”, Mumbi has forged a grassroots youth movement for change and democratic freedom in her home country of Zambia. This Mighty Lioness has become the voice of many young people who are feeling disheartened and disillusioned by what they see as the failure of their government to tackle issues of perceived corruption, maladministration and mismanagement of public funds.

Mumbi is fiercely protective of Zambia’s democracy that was hard fought from colonial rule, and it is one of the main reasons why she turned to political activism when she saw what she believed was the crashing of her beloved country’s democracy. “We need leaders who can guarantee us transparency and accountability and we deserve leaders who are a force for good.”

“This movement came about because we need to bring sanity back. In a democracy, every decision made and action taken must be for the benefit of all a country’s citizens, not just a privileged few.” Mumbi believes that all citizens, especially the youth, need to have ownership of policies and laws that directly impact them and their futures. She is very vocal about the inclusion of all young people, not just the connected elite, into spaces where ordinary citizens can engage and debate with elected officials. “Power belongs in the hands of a country’s citizens.”

**YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THE CUSTODIANS OF THEIR FUTURES**

Her citizen’s first approach propelled Mumbi to send out a rallying call to young people across the capital city of Lusaka to participate in the June 22 Youth Protest. “Young people are the custodians of our future. At over 60% of the population, we are a powerful constituency and we will not be silenced. Our Constitution gives us the right to ask hard questions of our leadership and to hold them to account, especially when we believe that they are not acting in our best interests.” The widely supported June 22 Protest was for youth and by youth, and with no outside funding or agenda interference, it became a literal groundswell of youth activism for change, even garnering support from the international activism community. “We even went as far as to ask those participating in the protest to wear plain black t-shirts and clothing without any branding or wording.” This was indeed a powerful statement to those wanting to capitalise off the youth movement that Zambia’s young people were not for sale.

As part of the protest, the movement drafted a Youth Charter, outlining what they see as the critical issues where government is failing its citizens. These include the responsibility of the Zambian government to provide a conducive environment that offers: employment with decent job opportunities, sustainable livelihoods and dignity; an end to rampant corruption, with severe consequences for those found to be flouting the rules; the respect of all Human Rights, which includes the freedom of expression, assembly and freedom to receive and disseminate ideas; leadership that is accountable and transparent; respect for the sanctity of the Zambian Constitution, to ensure that all actions reflect the desires of the Zambian people; education that offers improved learning environments for both boys and girls and those who live in the rural areas; access to health, good housing, clean water and good sanitation; ensuring that women and girls are included into all aspects of national life and that
women and girls are protected from any and all forms of gender-based violence; and creating a fair and equitable tax system, where wealthy citizens and corporations carry the tax burden to ensure equitable benefit and advancement of the whole nation. “Every citizen deserves to live a life of dignity, where their hard work alone determines their success. As young people we are committed to ensuring that the demands made in the Youth Charter are met in our lifetime and that those who are just starting their life’s journey can benefit from our actions.”

EQUAL HEALTH EQUAL ACCESS

When she is not knee deep in tackling the unequal status quo, Mumbi works as a sexual reproductive health rights (SRHR) facilitator and trainer. “Health is everything that a human being is. As soon as health is compromised, then person’s life is compromised.” SRHR has been found to be at the core of ensuring that young people can walk happy, healthy lives towards a future, where they are able to meaningfully engage and participate in the socio economic and political development of their country. “I love my work in healthcare. It’s hugely satisfying to really connect with young people and adolescents on the issues they are facing and what solutions can be brought to the table.” A highlight was when the Zambian Ministry of Health took on board the comprehensive sexual education (CSE) research, which Mumbi and her colleagues had undertaken in local communities, into the ministry’s guidelines on SRHR and CSE for young people. “Human beings are social beings and this includes aspects of sexuality. This is especially important for people who are trying to identify their own sexuality and gender and how they relate to society.” Mumbi believes that as society evolves and grows, it is incumbent upon communities, governments and all spheres of belief structures to learn to accept and allow all people to live freely.

CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE

So what does the future look like for this 21 year old lioness? Mumbi has her sights set on acquiring a Bachelors Degree in Political and International Relations. “After 55 years of freedom, young people still don’t have freedom of speech or inclusive access to development or leadership structures. Our country has not fully benefited from being part of the global community. Young people are kept in a holding pattern and told to wait. But the June 22 Protest has shattered that narrative and we want to use our power to ensure that we bring about change from the inside and help build a society that works for all.” Mumbi is hopeful about Zambia’s future, believing that with young people driving engagement and open dialogue it will create a tide of opportunity and change.

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