

A portrait of Danielle Sassou Nguesso, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing an orange long-sleeved top and a white skirt with thin orange stripes. She is sitting in a chair, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a window and curtains.

DANIELLE SASSOU NGUESSO

THE STRIDES OF AN AFRICAN
LIONESSE

Building business is a tough task, building it in Africa is even tougher. According to statistics by moneyweb.com, 70% to 80% of Small businesses in Africa fail within the first five years. Simply put, only 2 to 3 out of 10 small businesses survive after the first five years in Africa. Entrepreneurs in Africa face some of the harshest business conditions in the world - yet, some of them have risen above the hurdle and built successful businesses from nothing. Dr. Danielle Sassou Nguesso falls in the mold of Africans who have refused to be cowed by prevailing realities and have gone on to build successful enterprise across board and is now committed to investing in people towards building a just and equitable society. Through the Sounga foundation, she has continued to invest in African women - teaching entrepreneurship

and empowering them to go forth and conquer the society.

In this exclusive interview with African Leadership magazine, she talks about her passion for entrepreneurship, people development, gender and the Sounga Foundation, Excerpts:

Jack Ma recently said, "If you want your business to succeed, hire a woman." He also attributes the success of Ali Baba to the number of women he has hired; Do you subscribe to this point of view

gender equality a reality. It is essential for women to be recognized as a full member of their society. It is important for our girls to receive the same training like our boys; so that they can pursue the same jobs opportunities as their male peers of the same grade level; so that wives would be respected by their husbands and the widows would not be longer robbed from their property after their husbands pass away. But the patriarchy has deep roots tied to religion, customs and in some cases the law. All that makes the process towards the end of patriarchy challenging,

business, I could not remain insensitive or blind to some of the social injustices experienced by the most vulnerable people such as children and women I met every day on the street. So I created the association Le Petit Samaritain for Children in 2008 and the Sounga Foundation for Gender Equality in 2015. The latter is currently leading, in addition of lobbying actions with public decision-makers, 3 major projects that are the Sounga Nga female incubator; the annual Sounga Focus Group to have permanent data on the situation of Congolese women; the



and how has it influenced your business growth?

I totally agree with Jack Ma's opinion. I believe that women can make a big contribution to the success of a business. That success is based on the fact that women care about others while men only care about themselves. Jack Ma is not the first to state that. African Development Bank and World Bank publication on the same topic argues that women spend most of their income on family's health and education. It is acknowledged that their priority is the well-being of those around them. I try to apply this principle yet with respect for gender parity. The goal is not to have a reverse discrimination against men but to give as many opportunities to women as men.

Recently, there has been a noticeable call to dismantle the age-long patriarchy in Africa. Do you see this as a possibility?

Ending patriarchy is necessary to make

slow or even impossible. But, we would not be able to make changes in habits which exist for centuries in a day. It will certainly take time to abolish patriarchy.

Your success has been an inspiration to many. Can you share more with us on Sounga Foundation and your entrepreneurial journey?

It is an honor to inspire people. My goal was not necessarily to do it. I tried and I try every day to chart my path and to achieve what I'm doing. I became an entrepreneur almost by chance. I have been granted an optician degree that allowed me to work for a large glasses french brand. With that experience, I started my entrepreneurial journey in Gabon where I was at that time the first woman optician. The first store of my brand was settled down and has quickly developed in a market where I had little or less competition. This is how I was able to multiply the shops in Gabon and in several African cities. While developing my

Sounga Gender Label which is a ranking of companies that integrate the most women and, lobbying actions with public decision-makers.

You are well-heelled in mentorship; why are you keen on replicating yourself through your mentees?

Above all, what I am trying to do is to help to empower women so that they are sufficiently autonomous to dare to be equal with men.

In your business strategy, it is a norm to face challenges and criticism. Tell us more about them and how you overcame these challenges as a woman.

The challenges and critics that I face are numerous and on a daily basis. The most violent ones are those where I am treated as an unworthy mother because I regularly travel for professional purposes. One will never address the same remarks to men. I was really shocked. In order to

face it, I rely on the education received from my parents for whom a woman can do the same thing as a man. I am trying to convey the same values to my children, especially my daughters. For my parents and therefore for me, the performance has no gender. If you are brilliant, one would never point out that it's because you are a woman. Just be the best.

What are some of your major milestones under the Sounga Foundation?

The milestones of the Sounga Foundation are the Sounga Nga Women's Incubator, which has already hosted two groups or classes in almost two years of the

take advantage of the fact that the 52% women in our country are an asset. We cannot neglect such a human resource when we know that its contribution is a key one for the country's development.

Are there certain experiences that have helped to stimulate your growth in this project of empowering women?

Yes, there are many examples. I can think for instance of Rosa Parks as the most emblematic. Rosa Parks was an American civil rights activist who illustrated herself by refusing to submit herself to unfairness. Women's lives are a pathway of so much injustice that we all must be Rosa Parks to

The solution for job creation in Africa is to set up appropriate public education and training policies. These policies should be based on school and work experience and learn so that no one leaves the school system without concrete and useful know-how tools. In addition, these decisions must be accompanied by catch-up measures to train girls or women who had to leave the classical school system too early.

How can we get more women involved in policymaking in the continent?

It is necessary to have more women in the



foundation existence. The classes have received entrepreneurship's training and a small found credit to develop their projects. This incubator is a concrete and immediate tool for empowering women. The next major step would eventually be to become a public utility foundation or to belong to various networks of international civil society.

In 2016, you published a book, "Gender and Development in the Republic of Congo." The publication discussed gender parity and marginalization. What inspired your advocacy for gender equality?

The desire to defend gender parity came from the acknowledgment of the various inequalities that prevail between women and men in the Congo and elsewhere. These inequalities are not set in stone. That's why we must stop them in order to

overcome, or at least, to spur change that will ensure that the next generations of women live in a more egalitarian society.

What advice would you give to women who see you as a role model?

My main advice would be: dare. You must dare to become what you are. They must dare to become the ambition they dream of. They must dare to possess what their desire. To dare is to oppose to the status quo, it is to move to change the daily life in order to prepare a less difficult path for future generations.

With the continent's population tipped to double by the year 2050; there is an urgent need for governments and entrepreneurs to create more jobs. What is your view should be the priority for leaders across the continent towards job creation?

decision-making functions in our countries for the reasons mentioned above. On the other hand, the point for this goal to be pragmatic is to truly put in place binding laws to establish and enforce quotas during elections.

What is your top 5 business advice for budding entrepreneurs?

First, you need a realistic and buoyant project. Secondly, you must achieve it despite the challenges that surely will be there. Third, always learn. Fourth, you have to belong to a network of women entrepreneurs. Through the network, you can benefit from others' experiences or pieces of advice. Finally, we must choose to invest in a sector of activity in which we are competent. It's very risky to rely on employees who have skills that we do not have.



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