WE SAT DOWN with Dr. Lola Dare on International Women’s Day 2018 to discuss the progress that women have made over the past thirty years or more. Text of the interview is below.

FROM 1985, WHEN BEIJING CONFERENCE HELD IN CHINA ON WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND OTHER INTERVENTIONS, WOULD YOU SAY WOMEN HAVE FARED BETTER?: The progress since Beijing has been patchy across African countries, implementing sectors and issues. While some countries have reported significant progress in women’s inclusion and participation in politics, many still lag behind. Women should push for much more progress.

More women are completing primary education, but very few go up the education ladder to complete secondary and tertiary education. In the work place, women comprise only 15% of the membership of multi-national boards. In spite of having more women in the work force, they still remain largely in administrative positions, with a wide pay gap even when they occupy senior or executive positions in corporations.

According to the most recent report on gender parity published by the World Economic Forum, it would take over 2 centuries (217 years) to bridge the gender parity gap if we continue at the current pace. This is unacceptable and much more needs to be done.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACING THE WOMENFOLK?: I do not identify challenges but opportunities. Within every mountain lies an opportunity to learn, adapt, improve and positively impact on your space, work and indeed on humanity. This shift in mindset is very important for progress and action. The average man sings his minutest victory as ‘awesome’. Women on the other hand are known to play down their greatest exploits as simple and ordinary. This ‘modesty’ has not helped to profile women as the success they are at home, work, play and society. Increased exposure to education, along with democracy, expanded availability of technology to enable voices and improved access to financing all provide more opportunities for the African woman to harness.
The coverage by these empowering inputs remain inadequate amongst women and this is where more needs to be done. We need bolder progress to ensure that women access what global, regional and country policies provide to them towards representation, participation, inclusion and access to both social and economic assets. The #timeisnow!

HOW WOULD THESE CHALLENGES BE TACKLED?: One of the key ways is for women themselves to come together in purposeful action with unity. No one commits to you until you commit to yourself. Women need to be courageous and seek to acquire the education, skills and competence they need to successfully compete in all sectors. Women need to seek implementation of the many good policies that are in place. We need to take advantage of support to small and medium scale enterprises. This is an area that is largely dominated by women-led enterprises. We need to move women’s loans from micro-credit to enabling enterprise loans that can truly move women away from poverty to sustainable livelihood.

The policies for gender equality are in place and have been signed as a part of the Sustainable Development Goals. Women must work across borders to demand their implementation and #pressforprogress. Women need to support each other, celebrate each other and more importantly nurture young females.

WOULD YOU SAY OUR CULTURE AND TRADITIONS ARE ANTI-WOMEN EMPOWERMENT?: Our culture in its original form is based on a high level of regard for women. In our traditional tenets, a man of stature and integrity is measured by the value he places on the women in his life (mother, wife, daughter etc.) to provide for, empower and protect them. This in no way makes women the ‘weaker sex’ but the respected and revered one! I am not aware of any culture or tradition, where domestic abuse or disrespect for women is celebrated except among charlatans and scoundrels in society. This is neither our culture nor African heritage.

Our history is full of women who have distinguished themselves well beyond the kitchen and other duties. The social impact investment area of our work targeting women, young females and girls is named to celebrate Queen Kambasa of the Bonny Kingdom, in the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria. Queen Kambassa is well renowned for her positions on gender equality. There are many others including Queen Amina of Zaria, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Magaret Ekpo, Hadjiya Gawa Sambo, Alhaja Humuani Amoke Alaga MBE, all of whom are notable rights activists as well as Prof. Jadesola Akande, Prof. Bolanle Awe and Prof. Grace Alele-Williams to mention a few amongst many others.

Traditional rites of passage including various forms of genital mutilation affect both men and women and can be harmful to both. However it is taking some time for women’s roles to fully evolve from their long standing role of home keeping and child rearing. We need concerted actions to take forward the very modest achievements in this area and should also #pressforprogress here.

We need to move women’s loans from micro-credit to sizable enterprise loans that can truly move women from poverty to sustainable livelihood.
SOME WOMEN HAVE EXCELLED IN BUSINESS AND OTHER HUMAN ENDEAVOURS WITH THE EXCEPTION OF POLITICS IN NIGERIA, WHAT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS?: Politics in Nigeria is not for the faint-hearted even, amongst men! It is a very tough terrain requiring long hours and a lot of money. Women have neither this time nor resources to wantonly engage in the current billion naira patronage motivated political system that we have. I stand in deepest admiration for those women of valour in Nigerian politics who have in spite of all odds stood up to be counted in this murky terrain. Kudos!

Quite frankly, we should frown that our politics is driven by this volume of money, such that it leaves merit and value behind. The experience is the same for both male and female. Money matters so much that only a minuscule value for merit, commitment and vision drives politics and can be found in its landscape. Sadly, it would appear that money wags merit and as you can see, we all lose. This must change for progress to occur.

WOULD YOU SAY WOMEN ARE ENDANGERED SPECIES?: Endangered ke? This could never be the case. In whatever way you construct it – mother, wife, daughter, aunt, niece, friend, cousin, colleague…! There is no humanity and no life without a woman!

WHAT IS YOUR ADVICE TO WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THIS DIGITAL AGE?: ‘Be prepared!’ I was taught this as a member of the Girl Scouts in Ireti Primary School, Ikoyi and later as a member of the Girl Guides of the Holy Child College, Obalende, Lagos. A very important life enabling lesson. Only those who are prepared can identify and make the best of opportunities that present themselves in our lives each day.

‘To thy self be true’. I learned this from the Reverend Sisters in Holy Child College. Being true to self is key to believing that you can and that by His grace you will.

Finally, all women must remain primed. ‘Action not words’. This is the motto of Holy Child College, a great school that has turned out women of distinction and integrity.

Dr. Lola-Dare, is a community physician, epidemiologist, social development consultant and an irrepressible global health advocate of over 30 years. Dr. Dare’s unwavering commitment to health policy, systems strengthening and accountability to expand the access of African communities, women, children and young persons to health care, empowering inputs and productive assets is well established.

-Lola is an innovative thought leader whose voice is respected as authentically African in global, regional and national level dialogues towards African-led and owned priority setting, financing and accountability in global health and development.

CHESTRAD has grown under her leadership into a reputable global non-state African-led social enterprise and development agency, hosting country, continental and global initiatives

Dr. Dare graduated with an M.B.;B.S. from the College of Medicine University of Ibadan (1985) and a Master of Science in Epidemiology from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (1991). She was awarded certificates in Population and Development as a David E. Bell Fellow (1994) and in International Health as a Takemi Fellow (2000) from the Harvard School of Public Health. Dr. Dare holds a Certificate in Advance Management from INSEAD, an international business school in France (2006).

Dr. Dare has been awarded Fellow of the UK Faculty of Public Health by distinction.
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