

WANGARI MAATHAI: 'DOING THE DO-ABLE'

Interview conducted by Mark Canavera¹

In 2004, Dr. Wangari Maathai became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. She is internationally recognized for her tireless advocacy over several decades for environmental conservation, human rights, and democracy. Dr. Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya in 1940 and in 1971 became the first East African woman to earn a PhD. As the founder of the Green Belt Movement, Dr Maathai has encouraged citizens, especially women, to plant over 30 million trees in their communities. Dr Maathai has received countless honors, including France's highest honor, the Legion d'Honneur, and being named one of the world's 100 most influential people by Time Magazine in 2005. She was elected Member of Parliament in Kenya in December 2002 and was subsequently appointed Assistant Minister for the Environment.



Africa Policy Journal: How has your life changed since you won the Nobel Peace Prize? You were already doing so much. You were in the Kenyan Parliament, you were working with the Green Belt Movement, and now you're an international icon. How has your life changed?

Photo by Wawero Mathai

Wangari Maathai: My life has changed tremendously but for the better, I would say, because the Norwegian Nobel Committee made this historic decision to recognize the

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environment. This decision linked the need to better manage the environment with the need for good governance and respect for human rights. And it linked those things to peace. As a result, there's a whole constituency of individuals, organizations, and policymakers who felt that this was an opportunity to reemphasize the need to protect our environment and to promote good governance. It was a recognition of many organizations and individuals – people who had been promoting human rights for years; people who had been promoting environmental management for years; people who had been advocating for recognition for minorities; people who had been working for women's issues for many years. In other words, there was a very wide constituency that felt recognized as a result. I have been invited by such a large number of people who want to share the message, who want me to see their work, who just want to hear the linkages that the committee made, so I have been traveling extensively. It has been very difficult to keep up with the schedule. I'm still far away from satisfying the demand.

APJ: You mentioned that you are working in good governance. In your career, you've shifted from protest and advocacy to politics. What has it been like to be a member of the parliament in Kenya?

WM: Being a member of parliament for me has been very satisfactory because for many years I was criticizing policymakers from outside. I was trying to tell them what they ought to do and the laws they ought to pass. Now as a member of parliament, I can sit in the chamber and literally participate in making laws and introduce laws that I think are good for the issues that I have cared about. So it has been very good to be on the inside and also to see some of the constraints that governments face when they are in charge and to see how sometimes governments are relaxed about issues they should not be relaxed about. It's been a fantastic experience, and I'm enjoying it.

APJ: What have been some of the negative pieces of being in the government?

WM: Some of the negative aspects of being in the government, especially in a government which took power from a very dictatorial system, come from having inherited a system that needed thorough change. One of the frustrations is that change – that thorough change –

does not come fast enough, and you face a situation where a large number of people in the government are used to the old way of doing things and resist changes that you are trying to introduce. The other challenging experience I have had as a person who had for many years been fighting to improve governance is that when we finally formed a government, it was not a government formed by reformists alone or even led by reformists. We mixed people who were reformists with people who had been in the old system who had joined us towards the end of our campaign. It has been very difficult sometimes to work with the people that you were fighting before and to appreciate the fact that sometimes they are actually in a more powerful position than you are and are therefore not going to allow some of the changes that you would like to happen as quickly as you would like. You have to sit back and literally beg them to accept your proposals. Sometimes it's very frustrating because these are the very people you wanted to get rid of, and now they are the very people sitting in the forefront and are not moving things as fast as you would like. Obviously one of the most frustrating experiences that we have had is that when we were campaigning, one of our cardinal promises was that we would be zero-tolerant toward corruption, so it was very frustrating to then find ourselves, as a government, being accused of corruption in a very serious way, even to the point where senior ministers had to be fired to allow investigation because these accusations were so powerful. That was very surprising and frustrating to those of us who were committed to change and did not believe that any one of us would even be suspected of being corrupt.

APJ: We've heard a lot about the corruption scandals in the current administration, which came to power on an anti-corruption platform as you mentioned. Do you think women have a special role to play in the fight against corruption?

WM: Well, the question of what women would do if they were in power is a question that is constantly being asked, perhaps because women continue to make inroads into government, so there is this curiosity as to whether women would provide better governance than men. My response to this has always been that it is very difficult to judge women today because women have not yet been given adequate positions and adequate space or adequate numbers to demonstrate that they can make a difference. Often women who find themselves in influential positions in government are a token number of women. For example in Kenya,

in a cabinet of about 35 ministers, we have two women ministers. Now what can two women do in a cabinet that is dominated by men mostly thinking in the old ways, not really being men who are committed to reform and change? What can those two women do? Also, we must realize that when such a cabinet is formed in that kind of an environment, the people who are put in the cabinet are put there either because they support the government or they support the ruling party or they have a very strong constituency which the ruling party depends on for survival, for winning votes; therefore, people are not always put there because they are the most competent. Sometimes they are put there because they represent the best opportunities for those who are in power. Therefore, to expect the women – or even those men – to make the difference sometimes is asking for too much because performance, meritocracy, and vision are not always the values that direct the formation of the cabinet. I think that for the women we still have to wait for the opportunities for a larger number of women to be in the government so that we can see whether women can make a difference. That will happen when the constituents are willing to give more women an opportunity to go to parliament. We still have a comparatively small number of women who have been directly elected to go to Parliament. Even in Kenya, and even with the very popular wave of the NARC political party in the year 2002, I think there were about six women who were elected to Parliament. The rest had to be nominated in order for us to have the equivalent of about 18 in Parliament. That shows you that even the society has yet to give women a chance. I think it is very difficult to judge the performance of women on the basis of the few women who are currently serving in our parliament. That applies not only to Africa but to many parts of the world, even where the president is a woman.

APJ: There is a surge of influential women rising throughout the continent of Africa – your own achievements, the election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia to the presidency, and several other women elected to very high positions throughout the continent. What do you think are the driving forces behind this surge?

WM: I think that it is a reflection of the many years of struggle by women. You remember that the first United Nations Conference on Women was in 1975 in Mexico, and this was the very first time that women from all over the world met and set for themselves several goals, one of which was to try to make inroads into decision-making bodies, especially government.

So we are actually seeing the result of over 30 years, and of course it goes much farther back since the times when women started struggling over 100 years ago by organizing in England, in Europe, in America. Myself, I joined the women's movement through the National Council of Women of Kenya, and I know that the first organization was actually established here in America in 1888. I remember in 1988 we celebrated the 100-year anniversary since the National Council of Women of America was established. And so we are talking about the cumulative, positive effect of this sustained campaign by women to raise awareness of the need for them to be given opportunities beyond the traditional roles into the professions. We see women everywhere. We see them as doctors, we see them as lawyers, we see them as teachers and of course because being in the government is such an important symbolic position for women, when we see them being ministers, being senators, being presidents, it is extremely encouraging. It is important to recognize that we are now benefiting from many years of struggle by women.

APJ: Can you ever imagine a woman being the president of Kenya?

WM: Definitely. As you will remember in 1997, we had a woman, Charity Ngilu, who actually did very well for herself although she eventually came, I think it was fifth, in a field of men. It was actually a very good performance for her. People were surprised that in the end, the voter did not give her the vote even though they were very enthusiastic when she was campaigning. I do believe that, like in many other parts of the world, the prejudice that people have had – that voters have had – is slowly breaking down. When will it completely break down in Kenya, that I don't know. Whether it is in the next few elections, one can never tell. It's usually that a dynamic woman – a woman that people trust, a woman that men are willing to support, a woman that the popular political party is willing to support – will come forward. It's not a question now of whether a woman can become president; it is a question of when, and that is very encouraging.

APJ: To return to your own experience, how do you, with all of your responsibilities, maintain a relationship with your constituents?

WM: It is not easy, but I have had a very understanding constituency that accepted the fact that one of their own was honored. I know that they appreciate the fact that I cannot be there all the time. I'm proud to say that even though I'm not there every day, my constituency is performing very well because I have organized myself in such a way that activities are being done whether I'm there or not. I usually explain to them, a leader is not somebody who is in front of you all the time. A leader is supposed to facilitate development activities. Occasionally he or she must go around and listen to what the constituency says, but I have created a system of governance very much like the way I do the Green Belt Movement, a system which allows me to be in touch with the constituency even as I'm doing my role as a Nobel Peace laureate.

APJ: Do you have a special relationship with your female constituents?

WM: Not specifically, except maybe to say that a lot of the female members of my constituency also participate in the Green Belt Movement. From that perspective, we have that relationship where they see me not only as a person who is representing them in parliament but also somebody who has been working with them for many years in the area of environment conservation on their farms.

APJ: You take every opportunity available possible to remind people to do simple things like plant a tree. With all that you've accomplished, how do you maintain focus on the small things people can do to make a difference?

WM: Through my own personal experience, I've come to appreciate that it is not the big things that are done by corporations or by governments that will make the difference in the way we manage our resources and the way we protect our planet. Rather it is the cumulative effect of what individual citizens do that makes a difference. I could have used my whole life planting trees, but I could not have planted 30 million trees alone. It is the cumulative work that individual citizens do, every woman planting her trees one at a time. When thousands of them were doing it, we were able to change the landscape and improve the quality of life in that particular area. So I know the power of small actions that are repeated by millions of citizens throughout the world that can make a difference. If there are now

close to eight billion of us, as I understand, if every one of us would plant a tree, can you imagine how much of a carbon sink we would create right there?

APJ: What do you think is the most effective way to inspire individuals to do that?

WM: It is indeed to give them hope that they can do something because many of us get overwhelmed by the many problems we read about. In a country like here in America, you have television, you have radio, you have newspapers, and people are constantly being bombarded by problems, not only the ones in their own country but the ones in other parts of the world. Sometimes you can feel overwhelmed and feel like, “What can I do as an individual?” Therefore it’s very important for individuals to be encouraged to do the do-able in their own environment. For me, I can plant a tree. In another country, I’ve been to Japan, and they have created these bags with this word, “mottainai.” This word “mottainai” encapsulates the idea, “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.” That also encourages people not to waste resources and to be respectful of resources and to use and receive them with gratitude. I went to Japan, and I talked about this whole concept of “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle,” and for the Japanese, when I discovered their use of this word “mottainai” and started using it, they really responded. They have come up with all kinds of ways to promote the use of “mottainai,” the use of resources more responsibly, more accountably, to remember that there are other future generations as well. In Japan, if you go to visit a guest, you tie the gift with this clothe, which they call furoshiki, and then when you give the gift, sometimes you come back home with your clothe and you use it again. Or you can leave it with the host, and the host will reuse it. The whole concept of reuse and reduce, they picked it up and are producing merchandise which is really fantastic. This clothe is made from recycled plastic, and when I saw it I thought, “So much can be accomplished using technology.” Even the highly developed countries like America, like Japan, like Europe, which have a lot of resources and which can access resources all over the world, they can help to save because they have the technology and the skill to reduce, reuse, and recycle some of these resources. Then there will not be such a scramble for resources all over the world, a scramble which we know eventually leads to conflict.