



A Citizen of the World

Leila Ndabirabe

Burundi

Leila Ndabirabe began to notice that the climate was changing even as she was growing up. Few may have heard of the small African country of Burundi. But the country, located at the intersection of Africa's Great Lakes region, the plains of East Africa and the Great Rift Valley, has a special place in the continent. Burundi is known as the "heart of Africa."

It was here that Leila spent the first 10 years of her life. She lived with her family in Bujumbura, the largest city and a key port for goods like coffee and ore. She remembers the central market and the church her family attended. Everybody in her neighborhood knew one another well and there was a strong sense of community. Neighbors spoke with neighbors and supported one another.

However, the drier weather was making it harder to grow crops and people were being forced migrate to the cities. "The dry season it getting so dry, it doesn't rain enough, so people don't have enough food to eat," she says. "The soil is bad, and the pollution is bad. Everybody is moving into the city because they don't have enough food to survive."

The increasing lack of food undermined her country's peaceful coexistence, where was an unsettling feeling of instability that would soon spread across the small country. That instability – spurred by a whirlwind of politics, prejudice and poverty – eventually erupted in the 1990s, when Leila was just a child. The heart of Africa nearly stopped beating, ripped apart by a brutal civil war.

The Civil War didn't happen overnight and it didn't spread to Bujumbura immediately. "You would hear gunshots and you knew you weren't always safe, but we kind of got used to it," she says. "We slept with our clothes on in case we had to run in the middle of the night. We just made fun of it. The war was always something in the back of our minds."

By the time she was 10 years old, in 2000, her parents decided it was no longer safe to live in Burundi. So they moved to Belgium as refugees. Moving to a new country, and a new continent, at such a young age wasn't easy for Leila. Even though her new classmates were friendly – she remembers them smiling at her and trying to connect with her—it still took her a while to make friends. And though she had long dreamt of Europe as a sort of promised land, she learned that the reality of it was not that simple.

"When I arrived in Belgium, I had spoken Kirundi my whole life, and learned French only at school, but not enough to feel comfortable in a conversation. Plus, I was the only black girl in my classroom," she says. "It's a lonely moment when you realize, oh, wow, you thought it would be a dream, but when you get there, you have to overcome a lot of things and learn a new culture, learn a new language," she says. "The temperature is different, the social environment is different, everything is different."

Being a curious child turned out to be her greatest asset that kept her positive through this major life change. Keeping an open mind and asking questions helped her to get to know this new, unfamiliar environment. "Instead of seeing things as a difficulty, you just try to see it's a good opportunity to learn something different," she says. "Don't be afraid and don't stay in your corner. Be open and just make the best of each situation."

Soon Leila began to become more confident and with confidence came success. She eventually learned several more languages – including French, English, Dutch, and Swahili— and she was accepted to law school to pursue her passion for social justice.

All the while, Leila was blossoming into a lovely young woman. At nearly six feet tall, with high structured cheekbones and dark eyes, she began to catch the attention of modeling agencies, in Belgium and Europe. People told her she looked like Naomi Campbell, the British model and entrepreneur.

At first Leila brushed aside the requests to model. Her mother was suspicious for her to start a modeling career. Back home in Burundi, there were strong gender norms and social mores that prevented girls like her from pursuing modeling. It just wasn't a "thing" for girls like her, she was told. Where her mother saw a dead end, Leila saw an opportunity. Not just to lead a successful career, but to inspire other girls like her around the world. Eventually, with a little help from her sister, she was able to convince her mom to let her give it a try.

Then her fashion career caught fire. She appeared in shoots for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* among other magazines. This started her on a new journey, to NYC where she lives now. "That's another dream that came true for me," she says. "But once again I had to start all over by adapting, and learning about the fashion industry, with its set of values. That led to building my career; having a voice; and becoming the woman I am today: a blend of three cultures—African, European, and American."

Now, as Burundi's first top model, she's walked the runway wearing the dresses of some of the most well-known fashion designers: Oscar de la Renta, Marc Jacobs, Gucci, Hermes and others. From Fashion Week in Paris, to Milan and New York City, her career takes her around the globe, where she's become, in her own words, a "citizen of the world."

Her mom has now become her number one fan. "She's so proud because she realized that it's just a job – no different from any other job," Leila says. "It's just a different path."

Over the years Leila's life path has inspired young black girls in Belgium, Burundi and across the African continent – showing them there is a place for them in the modeling world. With a growing influence and platform, she looked for ways to be a force for good, helping girls who are struggling to find their way in conflict-affected countries like hers.

Growing up Leila had seen Marguerite "Maggy" Barankitse on TV sharing about her work with Maison Shalom. "In her speeches, she talks about humanity, about forgiveness, about hope," says Leila. She was touched by how she helps orphans gain access to a better future through loving support and education. Founded in 1993, Maggy adopted 30 orphans in Burundi during the civil war, and has gone on to help thousands more. She won peace prizes and would tour European countries and reach out to the Burundi diaspora to raise awareness and ask for support. "What she has done is just amazing!" says Leila.

Inspired by Maggy's work, Leila began to use her model platform as a force for good. She knew that her life could easily have gone this way. Had one of the bombs or gunshots she'd heard going off as a child, she or her family could very well have been in the line of fire. Five years ago there was another crisis and 300,000 people left the country. Maggie had to flee the country to the neighboring country of Rwanda, where she opened another house for Burundi's refugees.

In 2018 Leila wrote to Maggy asking how she might help. Since then, she has leveraged the power of the media to bring attention to Maison Shalom. She's given interviews bringing light to the crisis in Burundi, and visited a refugee camp in Rwanda where she met with some of the young people displaced by the war. "If I can be that channel to just open up people and even the young generation, I want them to just do something because it's not something that only international community can do. It's like everybody as an individual should do something."

Then for Christmas in 2019 Leila visited Maison Shalom's house in Rwanda's capital city of Kigali. "I imagined it would be sad, like an orphanage," she says. Leila was pleasantly surprised to see all children dressed up in their uniforms – performing; singing, dancing, and smiling. "They really made me cry – it reminded me of when I was little. It was just really beautiful."

Maggy gives the children all these opportunities in life -- to go to school, to learn how to cook, and to get a job. Some choose art and others choose career paths. Most importantly she gives them dignity. "She wants them to feel like this is just a moment in their life, that it doesn't define the rest of their life," says Leila. She wants to build a strong generation of young people who can then become the leaders their country so desperately needs. "If you give a hand in life, that's really what matters."

As climate change increases the instability in countries across East Africa, Leila feels a sense of urgency about increasing support for Maison Shalom. Conflicts over scarce resources are multiplying as climate change barrels its way across the agriculture countries of the region. The global outbreak of the Coronavirus has made her even more keen to join the fight against climate change. When the environment is threatened, people aren't able to get the necessary nutrients and with their weaker immune systems, they are more likely to catch the virus. "While this disease is now affecting everyone, some don't have access to how to eat healthy," she says.

Leila's new mission is not just to educate people about physical health, but about mental health and getting over trauma too.

"Your first condition in life, it doesn't define when you're going to become. So really, I hope that people will see that through hard work, good health habits, and through curiosity and hope and love, they can overcome."

*When you have conviction, nobody can stop you. . .
I don't want to hate. I want to believe in human beings.*

Marguerite Barankitse

Call to Action: Follow Leila: <https://www.instagram.com/leila.nda/?hl=en>
Support the Maison Shalom and help refugee children in Burundi and Rwanda live their dreams of a brighter future.
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