

Interview with Model & Philanthropist Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

'We started only with three classrooms. I never imagined it would grow to this'

BY [DANIELLA SAUNDERS](#)

Daniella Saunders meets model, philanthropist and founder of non-profit organisation [Malaika](#), **Noëlla Coursaris Musunka...**



In the past few years we have seen a rapid emergence of the #MeToo movement, the rise of 16-year-old environmental activist [Greta Thunberg](#) – *TIME*'s Person of the Year 2019 – whilst Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez became the youngest ever woman to join the US Congress. Give a girl the right to education, and the possibilities are endless.

No one believes this more than [Noëlla Coursaris Musunka](#). An established model – having worked with the likes of Agent Provocateur, MaxFactor and Crème de La Mer – and philanthropist, Noëlla has made educating girls in the Congo her mission for the past 13 years. The human rights activist founded Malaika – meaning 'angel' in Swahili – in 2007, a non-profit organisation based in the DRC village of Kalebuka which offers Congolese girls the rightful, but sadly repressed, opportunity to education and healthcare.



There are many ways to describe Noëlla: mother, model, philanthropist, ambassador (for the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria), activist. Though she chose not to name Malaika after herself – ‘we had to feel related, not because of Noëlla, not because of my dad, not because of my story’ – her background is undoubtedly an important part of her cause. After her father passed away age five, Noëlla was sent to live with relatives as her mother couldn’t afford to keep her. Upon returning to The Congo aged 18 and experiencing the extreme poverty her mother was living in, she decided to advocate for change, starting with the vital educating of young girls.

According to Malaika, ‘an educated girl will increase her future earnings by approximately 10 to 20 per cent for each additional year of schooling and will reinvest most of it back into her family and community.’ No more is this evident in Kalebuka, where the emergence of Malaika has already had a lasting impact on not only the girls attending the school, but the greater community. The establishment of a high-grade primary and secondary school, a ‘Football for Hope’ community centre constructed in collaboration with FIFA, and 19 wells giving the village access to clean water has transformed lives.



‘Malaika has supported me through my childhood and given me the chance to have an education – a chance that a lot of my friends do not really have,’ says 12-year-old sixth grade student Ilunga Wailunga Dorcas, who lost her mother at an early age. Every young girl has their own story, explains Noëlla, ‘they have their own dreams and it’s good to see that. When they arrive at age five, you have to teach them everything, from going to the bathroom, to eating with a fork and knife and arriving on time, but it’s beautiful to see them grow. They are so grateful and they really grab this chance.’

The passion with which Noëlla speaks of Malaika is inspiring. ‘We started only with three classrooms. I never imagined it would grow to this. After my kids, it is my biggest pride.’ This is an accomplished woman who could be shooting with a luxury brand in London one week, and then working in the Congo the next, in which her husband and two young children join her once a year, every summer. ‘It’s very beautiful to see them grow with it’, she says. ‘Sometimes they will even say “mummy I don’t want my pocket money, I want to buy something for the girls.”’



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Luxury and humanitarianism might appear worlds apart, but Noëlla has had the opportunity to combine the two, namely her 2019 capsule collection with fashion designer [Roksanda](#) and [THE OUTNET](#) which raised money in support of Malaika. Roksanda in fact spotted Noëlla wearing one of her designs at an event hosted with Princess Caroline of Hanover, and after recognising the work she was doing in the Congo, a relationship was established. 'I love this kind of story because it's organic', she says. 'It's not just about the dress, it's about the work I'm doing and discovering the world of Malaika.'

The collection is just one example of how Noëlla uses her platform and profile to highlight the importance of her work. Whilst she has been modelling for many years, the demands of Malaika, her two young children and her role as an active philanthropist – she has given TED Talks, spoken at the 2018 [World Economic Forum](#) at Davos, and even featured alongside former US president Clinton at the Clinton Global Initiative in 2015 – means modelling campaigns need to be selected and carried out with a purpose, aligning with her beliefs. 'I choose very carefully', she says. 'I choose the campaign that I want and where I feel related'.



Despite her ongoing and effectual work to support the education of girls and their communities in Kalebuka, it is easy for Noëlla to become overwhelmed with how much needs to be done. 'It's very hard. Last week when I was in the Congo, it really emotionally and physically wore me out. There's so many things I want to do and help with but I can't.' The country needs peace, she says, following decades of conflict. 'But I have learned through Malaika, that when I go to the Congo there are so many problems, you cannot help everything, so I'm very rigorous in what I do.'

Since having children of her own, Noëlla has begun to understand why her mother gave her away. 'What she sacrificed to send me away, I could never do that. To lose your husband, to lose your only child, I have a lot of admiration. But I didn't understand that until my son came along.' Her story has inspired her to make a long-lasting difference, a transformation which can be recognised in the ambition of the young girls. Ilunga Wailunga Dorcas wants to be a 'businesswoman' when she grows up whilst eight-year-old Tshola Mujinga aspires to be a doctor. 'I can write, calculate, read a book, and read the Bible for my mom. She is always very proud of me', she says. The opportunity to education isn't taken for granted by these girls. 'I feel so happy to have obtained this grace because it has given me a lot of opportunities that have influenced my life and especially my dreams,' says 12-year-old Feliciane Ngoie Shimbi, who has been a student at Malaika since the age of five.



But what's next for Noëlla? Next month she will be launching a new programme titled Mama Ya Mapendo, meaning Mothers with Love, which will provide opportunities for the women of Kalebuka to produce beautiful handmade bags and accessories. All profits generated from the trading of the accessories will be reinvested into Malaika and the community, whilst the women partaking will also receive literacy training, improving their future prospects.

Noëlla and her team are also working towards the launch of 'model Malaika'; a chance for other under-developed countries to duplicate the Malaika model, from the school and community centre, to the wells, agricultural structures and ecosystem. Meanwhile, Malaika's 20th well will be launched in Kalebuka, and we can also expect to see a few more modelling and influencer campaigns from the philanthropist this year (though the details are currently being kept under wraps).



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Just days on from an appearance at the World Economic Forum in Davos alongside model and philanthropist Natalia Vodianova, and an event with Salesforce, Global Fund and Global Citizen Forum celebrating 13 years of Malaika, it is clear that there is no slowing down for Noëlla. Successful yet constantly striving to make a difference, her drive and down-to-earth outlook are what makes Noëlla such an inspiration for women – though she is quick to clarify that Malaika is ‘not only Noëlla, it is an entire team effort. I want to be representative of them.’

Her mission to empower generations through education is monumental, and at times overpowering, but Malaika stands at proof that there is an opportunity for change. Her greatest moment throughout the process? ‘Opening the school and seeing the first one of four girls entering the classroom. That for me was a big moment,’ she says. ‘That’s the change they will have in life.’

Visit malaika.org for more information.