



THINK PIECES

Education And Its Role In Increasing Diversity & Sustainability In Fashion

By Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

My name is Noëlla Coursaris Musunka and I am an international model working with incredible brands, such as Roksanda, The White Company and Max Factor.

I have always been proud of this industry and what it can achieve in culture. But like many other industries, over the years, it has come to light that this beautiful and creative industry is contributing to an environmental crisis for our planet. As a Black African woman, I have also experienced the lack of diversity in fashion in all areas of the industry, not just in modelling. I am excited to see the progress that has been made in recent years with more diversity in people with different ethnicities and backgrounds being represented.

But there is much more to be done, and I believe the main solution is education for the generations coming after.



Credit: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYR0js0uw2Y/>

Modelling is not my only passion. I am a philanthropist and the founder of an NGO called Malaika, based in my home country of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Our mission is to empower girls and their communities through education and health programs. It is through my own story that I became deeply aware of the importance of education when, at the age of five, everything was turned upside down for me as my father suddenly passed away. My mother did not have the resources to provide for me and sent me to live in Europe with some relatives. I had a challenging childhood and was not raised in a loving environment. I knew I had been given an opportunity as I began my education, and I resolved to work hard and make the most of it.

I returned to Congo at the age of 18 and was reunited with my mother for the first time since leaving. I had only exchanged a few letters and had a couple of phone calls with her during those 13 years apart, and I did not expect the situation I found her to be living in. There was no infrastructure, no running water or sanitation and no electricity. It radically struck me how she had helped me in sending me away, and I knew I needed to make a difference. I could see many, many children were not in school in surrounding communities and I had a realisation—education is key to empowerment, health and progress.



At the moment, there are nearly 260 million children and youth not in school globally. A shocking number. And there is clear inequality towards girls, especially in developing nations. Over 50 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa are out of school. Yet, according to the GPE, for every year a girl is in education, her country's resilience to climate disaster improves significantly.

It's much easier to shape and mould a child than it is to persuade entrenched beliefs to change and so, when it comes to addressing sustainability and diversity, we need to educate children and look to the future. The fashion industry loses out in terms of diversity when millions of children in developing nations aren't given access to free education.

We are seeing the profound impact of quality education on a community in the DRC. The rural village of Kalebuka in Katanga Province, where Malaika is based, has no infrastructure. There is no running water or sanitation and no electricity. In 2007, we founded Malaika, a nonprofit organisation that seeks to empower girls and their communities through education and health programs. Over the past 15 years, we have seen an incredible impact on the community through the work of Malaika and our incredible Congolese team.

We have a primary and secondary school that provides 400 girls with a free, world-class education that includes STEM, art, music, theatre and sport. We provide annual health checks for every student and two healthy meals per day. Our community center offers vocational and educational training to 5000 youth and adults, as well as technical classes in partnership with Caterpillar Foundation, and through engaging the community in football we have been able to teach on topics such as social cohesion, health and equality. We even lead the community in a village-wide clean-up each month.



There were wider needs to be met in order to support the community in benefiting from our educational offerings, such as the lack of clean water. So we built and refurbished 25 wells (which provide clean water for more than 35,000 individuals!). We also have agriculture program where we teach sustainable farming as well as stock up the school canteen!

But the key aspect of our school is that it actively promotes leadership and self-confidence among girls and women. We are teaching every girl that sits in our classrooms that she has the power to make a difference. With an education, she can give back to her neighbors and see her community rise. We are teaching these girls that no matter what their skin colour or their background, they have great potential that the world needs. We bring many role models to speak with our girls either in-person or virtually—representation is key. These values will stay with them for the rest of their lives. They will take them into the workplace, into higher education and into their families. They will have the self-belief to push their way into industries like fashion and make their mark.

One of our students has aspirations to be a designer, and I'm thrilled to witness her taking her place in the fashion industry and bring more diversity to our ranks. Many students wish to be engineers, and I can see them being part of creating the environmental solutions that the fashion industry and the world needs as we face this ever-deepening crisis.

Education is a human right. But it is also essential for seeing the fashion industry become more sustainable and diverse, which will in turn see its creativity and influence explode and give it longevity into the future.



Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka is a Congolese/Cypriot philanthropist and international model. She is the Founder & CEO of Malaika, a grassroots nonprofit that empowers girls and communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and a voice for the power of girls' education worldwide. Noëlla has shared her insight at a number of world-class forums spanning the World Economic Forum in Davos to the university halls of Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, and MIT, and in 2017, was named one of the BBC's 100 Most Influential & Inspirational Women of the Year.

www.malaika.org

RELATED POSTS



ALL ARTICLES, THINK PIECES

Going Cold Turkey: Will We Save The World With Meatless Meat?

BY Laxmi Haigh



ALL ARTICLES, FOOD & TRAVEL

The Sustainable Travel Edit: Papaya Playa Project, Mexico

BY Beatrice Barbato



ALL ARTICLES, STYLE

The Sustainable Style Edit: Spring Wardrobe Essentials

BY Talia Collective