THE SCHICK SIT-DOWN: PHILANTHROPIST AND ACTIVIST, NOËLLA COURSARIS MUSUNKA DISCUSSES HER ROLE IN EDUCATING AND EQUIPPING CONGOLESE WOMEN
Noëlla understands, first hand, the importance of education and how that can greatly affect a person’s access to opportunities. She was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo to a Congolese mother and Cypriot father, but her family soon went through a dramatic change in circumstances after the sudden death of her father. That led Noëlla down an entirely new path, where she was sent to live with relatives in Belgium, and then Switzerland, in hopes of a better life.

Her drive, determination and hard work all paid off eventually, as Noëlla bagged a first degree in Business Management in her early 20s, as well as built a successful modelling career. But her heart still longed for home and after 13 years of living abroad, she returned to the Congo to be reunited with her mother.

It ended up being far more than a homecoming. With her eyes opened to the poverty and lack of opportunity in her homeland, especially for women, she set off on a new journey to play her part in bringing about much-needed change. Now, Noëlla has founded Malaika, a nonprofit organisation that seeks to empower Congolese girls and their communities, through access to education and better healthcare. She has also spoken in front of international audiences, including the 2018 World Economic Forum at Davos, UNICEF and also appeared alongside President Clinton on a Clinton Global Initiative panel.

In an intimate chat with SCHICK, Noëlla talks about the impact of her philanthropic work around the world, the social issues plaguing African women till date and the most important lessons she’s learnt on her journey.
Why did you choose the name ‘Malaika’ for your foundation?

Malaika means ‘angel’ and when we first set up the foundation it was called ‘George Malaika’ after my dad. Subsequently, I changed it to Malaika because I didn’t want it to be seen as just mine. I may have found it but it took the contributions of many donors and supporters, and then over time, a team of international staff and volunteers to get Malaika to where it is today. I want everyone involved to feel a sense of ownership of it and that we’re achieving an impact on the community in Kalebuka (Congo) because of our work together as a team.

How has your own life been impacted since starting the foundation?

I am very attached to it, with all my heart. I give a lot of time to it voluntarily and visit Congo twice a year. In the Summer, I take my family for several weeks. I have also been very impacted by the people who come to our school. Malaika is a primary and secondary school for 346 girls and we also have a community centre where we educate over 5,000 youth and adults through sport and vocational programmes.

It’s hard to say what would have happened if my childhood had been different but growing up without parents shaped me into the person I am today and revealed to me the difference that having an education makes to a child’s life.

The community has so much potential and they have impacted me in many ways over the years, as I have seen their resilience and enthusiasm in such difficult, rural conditions. Over the years, it has been hard work to run Malaika. It is difficult to fundraise and create an organisation in a village where there is no infrastructure so there have been painful moments as well as much joy and satisfaction.

In what ways do you believe growing up in different circumstances would have shaped your life?

It was not easy growing up without my mum and dad around. My dad passed away when I was five and my mother sent me to live with family in Europe so I’d have more opportunities. It’s hard to say what would have happened if my childhood experiences had been different but growing up without parents shaped me into the person I am today and revealed to me the difference that having an education makes to a child’s life.
Of your vast achievements, which mean the most to you?

My two children, JJ and Cara, are my most important achievements. They make me proud every day. Malaika is an incredible achievement but one I do not see as being all my own. It is a combined effort and that makes me very proud. When I see the girls come into the school on their first day at five years old and watch them grow and change into physically and mentally stronger children, who have realised their potential and started to believe their dreams for the future could come true, it means the world to me.

We have built and refurbished 20 wells to provide clean water and have agriculture that provides food for the school and enables us to teach organic farming. We have recently launched our brand, Mama Ya Mapendo, which produces bags and accessories that we sell at the school and community centre and in the local supermarket. At the moment, they are sewing masks to help with the current Covid-19 crisis. The ladies who sew the products learned to read and write at our community centre and then learned sewing and entrepreneurship. It is incredible to see small businesses birthed out of the education we provide at Malaika.
I’ve read that your passion is to “model with meaning.” What does that mean to you?

It means that all my modelling work will have a positive impact on the world around me. In practice, that means I work with brands where I believe in their product and I know they are ethical in their production of clothing or beauty products. For example, they are showing consideration to sustainability and they ensure good and fair working conditions for staff in their supply chain.

If there was anything you could change about working in the modelling industry, what would it be?

Probably all the travelling involved! I find it hard to be away from home sometimes, though I do love the cities that I have worked in, such as New York and London. Also, we need to be more sustainable as an industry and hold brands to account for how ethical their clothing is.

We need to see more African women educated and equipped to participate in the global stage of business at a high level and in key political positions.

Aside from the empowerment of girls through education, what other social issues do you believe should be on the front burner for African women?

I think equality in business is a big issue globally and does need to be addressed in Africa. We have had some wonderful advocates for women over recent years and some inspirational examples of African women who are leaders in business. However, we need to see more women represented and more African women educated and equipped to participate in the global stage of business at a high level and in key political positions. Africa has so much to offer in terms of resources and people.

You’re an inspiration to so many but who inspires you?

My mother has always been an inspiration to me. She has sacrificed a lot for me and been an incredible example of caring for others even if it involves great personal cost. I am inspired by the women of Kalebuka and the surrounding villages who provide for their families in very challenging conditions. Their positivity and resilience has impacted me deeply over the years.
What makes you feel most fulfilled?

Time with my family. I love to be with my children and doing things like reading and baking together. I feel fulfilled when I'm in Africa with our family, friends, and colleagues in Congo and Africa. I also feel very content when I'm doing a modelling campaign for a brand I feel connected to and whose products or garments I am proud to wear.

What career advice would you give to a young woman struggling to find her way right now?

Don’t give up. Stay true to yourself and your vision for your life and career. Anything worth doing usually requires a lot of hard graft and commitment so keep learning and don’t let challenges or negative opinions hold you back.

If you could say a few words to your younger self, what would they be?

You don’t need to say yes to everything somebody asks you to do. If you don’t truly believe in its value or it isn’t a priority right now, say no. Set boundaries for your time and energy and stick to them.