

Interview with Thelma Awori  
November 9, 2017  
Interviewer: Carla Hills  
Recorder: Linda Chapel Jackson

Interviewer: I did read a little bit about you, and I read that your mother taught reading and writing in your rural community in Liberia.

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: ... and that your aunt was a "Zo."

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: Is that how you say that?

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: ... which is a person who has the cultural knowledge that you pass on without the European influence.

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: I suspect that these were significant influences in your life.

Thelma Awori: They were.

Interviewer: So I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about yourself and that start and your memories of doing that and how it influenced you on your academic path, first on your academic path and then later on your professional path.

Thelma Awori: I find it very interesting that when you're growing up with your parents, you often say, "I'll never do what my mother is doing," or "I'll never do what my father is doing."

Interviewer: Yes.

Thelma Awori: ... and then you end up doing just that. Both my parents were in literacy education. My mother, yes, she was a teacher and did a lot of teaching of women, teaching in schools. My father was Director of Literacy for the whole country. I thought I'd be doing something very different, and I end up being an adult educator as well, so here I am.  
[crosstalk 00:01:57]

Interviewer: I saw where your PhD was from Columbia.

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: ... the teachers' college there.

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: What was your specialization?

Thelma Awori: Adult education, looking at learning and leadership.

Interviewer: Okay. That doesn't lead me to think that that's a natural path to some of the work that you did with the UN. Although, there was a lot of administration work with your work with the United Nations, right? A lot of program work?

Thelma Awori: There's a lot of program work. There's a lot of policy work, a lot of negotiations on concepts and ideas for how to move forward, concepts about development, a lot of convening of people to talk about these things. So there were other people there to do the administration; I didn't have to do the administration. Normally we are called administrators because that's the title, but we're doing policy work. We're doing a lot of conceptual work.

Interviewer: The conceptual work that you were doing, was it to benefit all of Africa? Was it to benefit your country? Because there's a transition there, and I only pieced things together a little bit, but you moved to Uganda. Is that true? Tell me your path.

Thelma Awori: My path was this. From Liberia, as a young girl, I came to the United States to do my first degree. I ended up in Mount Holyoke. I was chosen to go to Mount Holyoke. I was part of a very big program that was started by John F. Kennedy, President Kennedy to bring Africans to the United States. At that time, it was the time of the Cold War and the United States was trying to ensure that it had friends in Africa so that the Soviet Union wouldn't be the one having all of the friends in Africa. There were ... I can't remember how many of us.

They just went through Africa and took the crème de la crème and brought us here and put us in their top universities: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Berkeley, U of Penn, Ohio State, everywhere. I'm sure some came here to MSU. They brought us here, and we had American families, so we got to know Americans and to become empathetic with this country. That's how I came here. When I was here, I was at Mount Holyoke for two years and met a Harvard man from Uganda. I married him, and that's how I got to Uganda.

Interviewer: And he's a diplomat?

Thelma Awori: A politician.

Interviewer: A politician.

Thelma Awori: But he also served in a diplomatic service. He was a Minister Plenipotentiary in Washington D.C. Then he was Ambassador to the Benelux countries and to Belgium.

Interviewer: Were you able to continue your work while moving around with him, then? Is that how that ... Or did you take a break?

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: And there's a reason I'm asking.

Thelma Awori: Yes, why are you asking?

Interviewer: Well, one of the things that is interesting is how your experiences have sort of brought you to what I thought I observed as an intersection between government and policy and academia and the financial entrepreneurial world. I mean really you have quite a resumé that has well-rounded experience.

Thelma Awori: Uh-huh (affirmative). Okay. When I went to Uganda, my first job was with a university, so I started off in the adult education work of the university. At that time, it was called extramural. It was trying to get a university to engage with the community. That was the first job I had. After the coup d'état in Uganda, we moved to Nairobi, where I again worked with the University of Nairobi. There I worked in the Institute for Adult Studies that was training adult educators. So, that was largely my experience in working directly in adult education.

After that, I went to London and worked for an organization called The World Association for Christian Communication. That was very interesting because my mother was a radio broadcaster, and she worked for a religious radio station. I did that job for four years, traveling all around the world, looking at the educational institutions of Christian radio because many of the churches ... The World Council of Churches had a lot of radio stations, and they had schools that were ... Then we were bringing those broadcasters to places like the BBC and those kinds of places to learn broadcasting, both print and electronic media.

Interviewer: So during that time, your experience was broadening because you're talking about Africa broadly now and not just a pocket ...

Thelma Awori: Yeah.

Interviewer: ... of Africa. And that's where some of your ... What's the right word? I'm searching for the right word. ... the policy sort of experience expanded. Right? Is that sort of ... Okay. Here's where I'm going with this. How do you transfer from doing adult education in one community to representing the entire African continent and talking about programming and things like that?

Thelma Awori: I see.

Interviewer: How do you expand that?

Thelma Awori: I see. How did I expand that? When I worked for The World Association for Christian Communication, I wasn't even only working for Africa. I was working for the whole world because I was in Jamaica, I was in Asia, I was in Latin American looking at institutions of learning, institutions that were doing communications, so that was global. Then from there, when I went to the UN, again the first job I had in the UN was global because I ... Well, the first job was really with Africa, but then afterwards it was for UNIFEM, which was the UN Fund for Women.

I became the Deputy Director there, which was again global. I was looking at women and the advancement of women in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and making decisions about all of that. So really from working in Uganda and Kenya ... Those were national-level jobs rather than at a small community level. Those were national-level jobs. ... into London, where I was then doing global jobs, and then coming onto the UN, where again I was working globally. So really, besides working in Uganda for my first job, where I was just working at a national level ...

Interviewer: You expanded.

Thelma Awori: ... the rest of my jobs have been global. I mean now that you say it, I'm beginning to see it, but ...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Thelma Awori: ... I never saw it before.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: Let me see here. There were a couple of things that caught my eye. One of the things that I read was a brief excerpt from, I think it's a journal called Africa Recovery, way back in October 1997.

Thelma Awori: Wow.

Interviewer: And you said that "Development work should go beyond the donor/recipient relationship and become a true partnership," so my question to you is, have true partnerships evolved in the past 20 years or so and do donors and recipients have a deeper understanding of what it takes to build and sustain these partnerships?

Thelma Awori: Well, as long as we keep using the terms, donor and recipients, we lose the whole idea of partnership.

Interviewer: Okay.

Thelma Awori: I think that's a ... I mean it's not just your use of it. That is standard parlance in international development cooperation, which is what it should be: international

development cooperation. When you're in the UN, member states sometimes forget that this is an organization in which they're all equal members and they bring their contributions to that common point. Then they're supposed to see how to do divvy it up to help according to needs, but somehow or another, I think because of ancient beliefs we have, which are now even embedded in our subconscious that comes out of our colonial experience, we still feel that there is a north-south path that prevails.

Interviewer: That is an interesting segue to saying, "How can the US work in global communities?" How can US university institutions build and sustain partnerships? I think that you participated in a conversation with President Simon and some African university leadership since you've been here to talk about the challenges and opportunities for partnerships. I wonder how your observations about how MSU does their work, how other US universities do their work in Africa, and how can they do it better? How can we prepare faculty to do it better?

Thelma Awori: That's a very good question. If we knew the answer to that question, we would already be doing it better I think, because we have the will.

Interviewer: And that could be a question that puts you on the spot, but if we pivot just a little bit and say, "Are we getting better? Are we learning to ask the right questions?"

Thelma Awori: I am very pleased, really, to see that the will to do it better is there. I think that's a very good beginning because it's very, very hard to dig up those subconscious beliefs about our identity in the relationship. If we are used to thinking of ourselves, our identity in this relationship as the giver, the one who has the knowledge, we minimize the other. And if the other also continues to say, "I'm receiving," and "Do you have the money?" those kinds of things.

Interviewer: Yes.

Thelma Awori: So one has to spend a lot of time trying to work on unearthing those subconscious beliefs and getting rid of them.

Interviewer: Does that mean, too, that your academic training gives you an intellectual perspective on goals and objectives or evaluation? Does your academic background sort of come into the design of a partnership? Or how do you—

Thelma Awori: Yes. Let me try to answer the question as far as you have put it. My academic background in adult education ... Or are you asking for ...

Interviewer: No.

Thelma Awori: No, mine.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Thelma Awori: My academic background in adult education is I trained at Berkeley, and you know Berkeley always turns things upside down.

Interviewer: Yes.

Thelma Awori: We can't help it. That's just the way we are.

Interviewer: We talked about that. Sort of the disruptors.

Thelma Awori: Yes. That's right.

Recorder: [crosstalk 00:15:46] a good job.

Interviewer: Yes. They teach you how to think 360°, right?

Thelma Awori: That's right. It's critical thinking. I was trained in a humanistic school of thought, looking at the radical educators, the [Coulsons 00:16:04] and those kinds of people. If you've been trained like that, you're trained to really see the other, and that's very important because when you step in front of a group of people as an adult educator, you need to become humble because you don't know what their experiences are. You don't know what their knowledge base is, and if you come in there with a power of the teacher and the knowledge, you might fall flat on your face and embarrass yourself.

So there's always that caution that you must value the other first and open the door for them to flower and that your work really is the work of a facilitator. You're facilitating the other to reach into their power and come into fruition. That is what my academic background has done for me in terms of my work because in the United Nations that's not easy, when you're working in the United Nations to try to bring that kind of thinking into a huge bureaucracy that is born of another kind of thinking.

Even if you're not working on the donors ... We used to always say, "Well, everybody needs education. Even the donors need education. They need to learn what's happening and see how to understand the recipients." But you have to work so much on the recipients to get them to have the confidence of their ideas. It's not just the United Nations because, you see, they are suffering from other institutions that are beating them down every day.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Thelma Awori: You see?

Interviewer: Yeah, we see that on the news.

Thelma Awori: Yes. So it's a very big dynamic there that you are working in. I'm very grateful for the kind of education I had, the kind of training I had, and I'm very grateful that I feel I could be helpful to people to have a pride in themselves and to try to influence some of the

decisions that were being made in the United Nations so that we would move towards a more healthy relationship amongst ourselves. Yes.

Interviewer: Let me just see here. This is one of my favorite questions whenever I'm talking to anybody. There are some important lessons that everybody learns along the way, and sometimes they have nothing to do with learning from a textbook. These are things that have really stuck with you along the way. Any insight as to what those would be?

Thelma Awori: I think the first one is you just never know.

Interviewer: [crosstalk 00:19:39]

Recorder: A woman after my own heart.

Interviewer: Right. Yes, that is so true.

Thelma Awori: You just never know.

Interviewer: You just never know. That is so true.

Thelma Awori: So be open, reach out. You never know. Reach out.

Interviewer: You work with a tough, uphill battle in some regards with your work with empowering women and gender equality in some pockets of the world that don't always shine at gender equality.

Thelma Awori: I wonder who shines anyway.

Recorder: I'm thinking [crosstalk 00:20:22]

Interviewer: Yeah. Right.

Recorder: Maybe we just don't know enough [crosstalk 00:20:25]

Interviewer: Yeah. There are supreme challenges that I will never know that other women are still ... Those battles have been sort of taken on where I have been. How do you go into these areas where ... I apologize. I forget what you call it. ... with women who have ... Oh my goodness. ... the entrepreneurial ...

Thelma Awori: Oh, the market women?

Interviewer: Yes, the market women.

Thelma Awori: Ah, okay.

Interviewer: How do you go into these areas when there is still culturally such resistance? Aren't you sort of doing two things at once: both trying to educate women, but also to change a system?

Thelma Awori: Yes, you're always trying to change the system, and that's why I think it's important not to just work with women; you need to work with men as well. That's very important. Market women are very rewarding to work with because ... If you're going to work with any set of women and really be encouraged, you want to work with market women because those are the women who have overcome their inhibitions and they're out there doing something. Those are the women who will put you to shame because here they are with this little size of this table full of things they are selling, and they're putting their child through university. And here you are with your big salary, and you're not even managing to put it all together.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yes.

Thelma Awori: So market women are a great set to work with, but there's some other women: women who are just coming out of conflict. Because they're depressed ... They've been raped. They've lost their children. They've lost so much.

Interviewer: Yes.

Thelma Awori: They've lost so much. They're depressed, so there's a lot more work to try to get them to come to the place where they believe in themselves again or believe in the world around them again.

Interviewer: How do you compensate for some of the unrest that still exists in some of these areas? It's hard enough to go in and inspire and train and teach and work with women, but when you are continually faced with unrest in these areas, how do you sustain the efforts?

Thelma Awori: I don't know how ... Those people who are working with women from Syria and places like those, I don't know how they are doing it because you look at the pictures and you say ...

Recorder: [crosstalk 00:23:42]

Thelma Awori: Yeah.

Interviewer: Where do you start?

Thelma Awori: ... "Where do you start?" For women in Africa, it's not a matter of compensating, but it's a matter of trying to see how you can help them to put themselves together again. This is one of the stories that I was telling yesterday: this organization that I was chair of the board of. We went into quite a few parts of Africa where there was conflict, one country at a time, asking women, "What happened to you here during the war?" When they would tell you the stories, the stories would be so horrendous.



I know in one country, just to be able to take the woman's picture, one of our staff had to take out her blouse and give it to her just so she would not be looking so bad on the picture, so down and out on the picture. In terms of "How do you compensate?" in that project, we did things like bringing medical staff to the area to take out a woman's entire reproductive system, repair it, and put it back because there had been multiple rapes. They'd just been torn apart.

Then trying to help to repair their livelihoods because some of them, they were farmers or they were market vendors, but they had lost all their livelihoods. Housing, they had lost their housing. Wars break down buildings. They had lost their housing. And then dealing with trauma because many of them were suffering from depression. I remember once meeting ... I went to Rwanda to take a solidarity mission right after the genocide. We were visiting some of the people who were victims at that time, and we met this woman in this house. She had lost everything, and she just looked ... She looked like a stone almost. You know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Thelma Awori: No emotion. We were saying, "So what can we do?" And she says, "Well, if at least I could start again." So it's a question of helping people to start again, see them start up their lives again. That's what I know about how you ...

Recorder: That's happening in Puerto Rico ...

Thelma Awori: ... compensate for—

Recorder: ... right now.

Thelma Awori: Yeah. How to start again.

Recorder: [crosstalk 00:26:16]

Thelma Awori: Yeah.

Interviewer: Any more goals to go? Anything that you haven't gotten to yet that you're working on or want to work on?

Thelma Awori: Don't you think I should be tired by now?

Recorder: Oh, sure.

Interviewer: I don't know. It sounds like you're pretty capable.

Thelma Awori: [inaudible 00:26:43] I have miles and miles to go before I sleep, huh?

Interviewer: Yeah. You know the reward for good work is more work.

Thelma Awori: It's more work, that's right. But there are many things that I'm still working on.

Interviewer: Well, yeah, that's ... I have found that people who are very talented and very capable typically always have a goal.

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: I think you made reference to the fact that it's time for some other people to take over some of this work.

Thelma Awori: Yeah.

Interviewer: ... things like that, but that doesn't mean ... I'm not letting you off the hook because that doesn't mean that you don't have something cooking.

Thelma Awori: No. The thing is I think there are levels of work, and that is how I see what I'm doing right now. There are things, they're the more traditional types of activities, which we have trained younger women to do, and they can go ahead and do that, so you can leave that to them now while you try to do more strategic things: making connections. Like for instance, I was just sitting here with ...

Interviewer: Kurt Dewhurst?

Thelma Awori: ... with Kurt Dewhurst, talking about culture and talking about an organization that I'm on the board of that is run by the Nnabagereka of Buganda. She's the Queen of Buganda. She's married to the King of this kingdom, and what she's trying to do is to see how we can re-instill in our young people what it means, "What is your sense of identity of who you are? What does it mean to be a well-bred person?" because after you go through war that whole sense of being well bred somehow ...

Interviewer: Evaporates.

Thelma Awori: ... disappears.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Thelma Awori: Yes, it disappears because in war people are just ... Nobody cares. Nobody is holding you accountable for your social values. The norms are just thrown out. So how to bring people back and using culture as the avenue for doing that. That's what he and I were talking about. And therefore, what the younger women perhaps don't have the gravitas to do is to make the kind of connections that we can make. I can leave a woman running the organization I started, and she will be doing training of market vendors, etc., but I will come here and start to see how I can connect Kurt Dewhurst with the Queen of Buganda. You see?

Interviewer: Yes.

Thelma Awori: So it's that kind of level of work that now I'm interested in doing or that I find myself doing now.

Interviewer: That often times comes with a great deal of life experience too.

Thelma Awori: Yes.

Interviewer: And sort of knowing where a good fit goes for some things.

Thelma Awori: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Interviewer: Well, it's been delightful to talk to you.

Thelma Awori: Oh, you're welcome.

Interviewer: Anything else you want to add? We were very delighted that you were coming to MSU. Actually, I haven't asked you. Is this your first visit here?

Thelma Awori: No, no.

Interviewer: No, you've been here.

Thelma Awori: I was here before. If not twice, for sure once.

Interviewer: Well, we were delighted. It's always nice to talk to somebody who has just a lot of experience in a lot of things that I personally am unfamiliar with. There's a lot out there, right?

Thelma Awori: There is a lot out there. Oh, there is a lot out there. I was just saying to Julie today ... I said, "This ..." I graduated from Harvard, so I am so attached to Harvard. I get very emotional about ...

Interviewer: It's a loyal ...

Thelma Awori: I get very emotional about Harvard.

Interviewer: ... experience.

Thelma Awori: Yes, that's right. But I said, "Hmm. It looks as if this University is beginning to push Harvard away a little bit and take center stage in my heart."

Interviewer: How often do you get back there? Are you on a board there or anything?

Thelma Awori: At Harvard?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Thelma Awori: No, but I'm an active alumni. I go for all my reunions. It's just ...

Interviewer: I know.

Thelma Awori: It's just [good 00:31:00].

Interviewer: That's what they want, though.

Thelma Awori: Yeah.

Interviewer: They have such a loyal following.

Thelma Awori: Yes.