



The Limitless Women Podcast
Monica Nyiraguhabwa
Girl Up Uganda

My guest today, Monica Nyiraguhabwa, co-founder and executive director of Girl Up Uganda, is truly the epitome of a limitless woman. Growing up in a small village, she recognized that education was the key to escaping poverty. Yet girls were not afforded that opportunity. She tapped into her potential and determination to complete school and was awarded a scholarship to obtain her Master's Degree from University College London. Now she's helping other girls recognize their worth and helping them complete their education. Her generosity of spirit has impressed Oprah and The Obama Foundation and garnered support of celebrities around the globe. Join us to learn more about this one in a billion woman who will inspire you with her story.

Want to skip head? Episode Highlights

- [00:27] Find out from Laura what will be covered in today's episode.
- [03:15] Listen to Monica share her story off growing up in Uganda and finding her way to London for college.
- [17:34] Learn from Monica how Girl Up Uganda was formed and where her passion comes from to devote her life to lifting up girls and women in Uganda.
- [28:00] Monica shares the exciting story meeting the Obamas, which will leave you feeling inspired and passionate to live as a limitless woman each day.

Episode Transcript

[MC] Welcome to the Limitless Women Podcast. Our mission is to help women business owners, like you, grow profitable businesses and actualize your opportunities to serve and give to yourself and others. Here's your host, the founder of Limitless Women, Laura Gisborne.



[Laura Gisborne] In today's episode, I have the absolute pleasure to introduce you to Monica Nyiraguhabwa, the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Girl Up Uganda. Monica is, to me, the epitome of a Limitless Woman. Overcoming what would look like insurmountable odds to most of us, she found her way from the slums of Kampala, Uganda to London, England to gain her education, then returned again to spend her life giving other young women the chance to heal generations of poverty.

She holds a Master's degree in Education, Gender and International Development from the University College of London and a BA in Adult and Community Education from Makerere University. Monica's been recognized by Oprah, the Obamas, and featured on the Today show for the life-changing impact Girl Up Uganda has had on the lives of over 100,000 girls to date.

I know you'll be amazed and inspired by the story of her life! I encourage you to learn from and ask yourself how you can implement some of the tools Monica uses to see beyond your circumstances and view new possibilities for your own life. Enjoy the show!

[Laura Gisborne] All right. I am here with one of my favorite people in the whole world, Monica Nyiraguhabwa. Monica, thanks so much for making time to visit with me today. I know we tried to make it work with me not being a morning person and me not trying to keep you up late at night because you are a morning person, so thank you for taking time to visit with me. I appreciate you being here.

[Monica Nyiraguhabwa] Thank you.

[Laura] Monica, I met you and fell in love with you immediately. I had a little bit of knowledge about Girl Up Uganda and what you were doing through our mutual friend, Caterina Rando, then we got a chance to be in person and I just felt your energy, your passion, and your love. We got to be together in Uganda when Scott and I came there to work and play with you and get to meet the whole team on the ground. It was really such a gift for us. I just was really curious today if you would take a few minutes to tell me where did it start for you. Here you are, just this gorgeous, young girl growing up in very simple means and simple environment, and now, you've been able to impact thousands of girls. You're such a beautiful leader, but where do you think it really started?

[Monica] Thank you, Laura. Just reflecting on my journey of giving, of being the person that I am today, I think this journey started when I was nine years old because as a young adolescent girl growing up in very difficult times like the ones we are having right now, but these were difficult economically, and because again, growing up from a broken family, it really complicates growing up as a young adolescent.



My journey began when I was nine years old and just realizing that I needed to work in order to have a meal. I needed to keep active, to contribute to my family in order to keep it going. I remember as a nine-year-old girl, I used to go far away from home and go trade sugarcane, corn, you know, to survive. So at nine, I realized that life is tough. You have to work to survive. You have to contribute. Given where I was coming from, it didn't matter whether you're a child or not. You had to work.

I began to get into the idea of working and interacting with people growing up in the toughest times. For me, I think as I worked, I was able to see again that as much as I worked so hard as a girl child, my family valued the boy child more. And because of my context and my cultural background, there's so much value attached to a male child compared to a girl child. Again, I faced those hurdles right from my own family. Given the limited resources, I always came second. My education always came second. So as a girl, as a child, I kept on realizing that I think it's wrong to be in this skin and body because if I was a boy then I would be in class. I would be in school.

I still remember this experience where I needed shoes and I could not get school shoes because I'm a girl, but my brother had shoes. What was so funny was that my brother was younger. He was younger and I was in a higher grade than him, but because he was a boy, there was so much priority given to a boy child. In my family, it's happened that way. So as a young child, I began to experience that kind of economic violence.

I remember that even in school, it was so hard to survive school because whenever they came to send people home who have not cleared their dues, I always knew that my name was on the list, and indeed, I would go home, stay for a few weeks, walk around, help my mom do some work, then money would be good and then I return to school. I really grew up feeling the inequalities. I would see them, but back then, as a young child, I didn't know what to call them. I definitely saw them as a child. I didn't have a name for them. So when I stayed in school and got encouraged in school, this burning desire grew up with me. I always felt like we need to create a new normal for girls.

[Laura]

Yes.



[Monica]

We need to clear these barriers right from the families, right from the parents, right from the teachers. I remember as a girl, I tried to contest for leadership in Grade Five and I was denied being a leader because I didn't have shoes. When I reflected about that, my burning desire of being able to create this new scenario, the new beginning that I wanted to see began to arrive. So as I kept in school, I got to learn more. I got to appreciate gender and patriarchy and how it affects families especially in Africa and in Uganda. Just looking at my own struggles, I felt that having survived and graduated from school, I cannot just go and do jobs maybe in the corporate world and make money. I needed to do something that is community-based.

So when I was going to university, I did ask my teacher for guidance. I told my teacher I wanted to do something with communities and she did encourage me to do Adult and Community Education. That's how I began to give back because I felt that I've gotten a chance to keep in school of course in the toughest of circumstances, but having survived, I felt I am one of the millions or one of the few who have survived, and so it's important that I go back to these same communities and try to create awareness and try to be a role model, to be an example that this can change.

Seeing Girl Up grow from a personal story to a vibrant organization and movement gives me a lot of comfort. It gives me a lot of pride to know that it is possible. You can definitely create a new normal for yourself, for your family, for your community. It starts with you. It starts with you saying, "This is not good. I need to do something about it." That is a bit about my journey.

[Laura]

Fabulous, my darling. Thank you. Yeah, you really are. You're probably one in a million, more than one in a million, maybe one in a billion, I don't know, but you're such a remarkable woman, Monica. I think I want to give a little context here because I would imagine that many people will be hearing this interview or reading this later and not really understanding that it's my perception as a girl born in the United States what happens frequently in places where there is very little access to resources.

There are several billion people that live on less than \$3 a day US standards. When we grow up in a country where we have access to free education, it's hard sometimes to get our head around how hard that is for families to make the decision. So if a family has to decide -- this is just my understanding. You can correct me if I'm wrong, sweetie, but I think if a family has to decide, "Do I educate my boy or do I educate my girl?" historically, the culture or the mindset is that if I educate my son, he'll be able to be the breadwinner. He'll be able to take care of his family moving forward. Is that where you think it comes from?



[Monica] Yes, exactly, because the stereotype is a girl is born and she'll be married off to another culture. The boy will stay in the same culture and be able to grow it and have children. The thing is our parents looked at investments for girls as a waste of time because at the end of the day, these girls have to be married off and actually be taken away, so there are no returns on the investment. That's the kind of culture.

[Laura] Right, so the survival of the tribe or the community is the investment. I don't know if you know this. My husband grew up in a family of six children, very poor by United States standards. I always say this "by US standards" because he had a roof over his head, myself as well. We had freshwater. We could go to school. As children, that was a free thing for us, so that's really a great luxury, I know, in the big scheme of things, but he started selling vegetables when he was seven. He was little like Victor. He was going door-to-door and he would just find vegetables and he would go and sell them. Sometimes he would buy things wholesale and then go door-to-door. He was so cute, so everybody had to buy from him. He was so resourceful. I didn't realize that you and Scott shared that in your childhood, that resourcefulness. It's beautiful.

How did you find your way to college? I know you worked hard and you found a way to have your fees to be able to get your primary education. How did you end up in London? Tell me about that story.

[Monica] Well, how I ended up in London was there was an advertisement in one of the local newspapers and it was an advertisement by the commission -- the name just keeps going off my head.

[Laura] That's okay.

[Monica] There was an advertisement in the newspaper and they were saying they wanted young African people to be able to pursue education at the University College London and they named down their courses. I looked at this newspaper and I was like, "I think I'm going to give it a try." It was from that Commonwealth Commission, and Uganda being one of the Commonwealth countries, this was kind of a giveback to people under the Commonwealth. So I looked at this newspaper. I bought the newspaper. I went and logged in. I got the link and I applied. When I applied, in Uganda, I was one of the 500 young people who had applied for this master's program. From the 500, they had to choose 30. Again, I made it to the top 30. The top 30, they took us through another round of interviews, writing essays just to pick our minds in terms of why we think we qualify for this program. I took on that test and then they picked out the best 15. I was among the best 15. Again, we now had to write an exam and submit it. There were only five people from Uganda at that time.



[Laura] Five out of 500?

[Monica] Yes, and we're only two girls in that list. The rest were young men. It was a newspaper ad and I decided to take advantage of it because when I looked at my grades for my undergraduate, I excelled. Given where I was coming from, I always told myself that I would want to pursue my postgraduate or my master's from abroad. I didn't say I want to go to London because -- I only mentioned it as a wish, as a goal. When I saw this advert, I'm like, "I think this is the process now. I need to take on this." When I got accepted, I'm like, "Yes! I prayed for this. I wished for this" because if you look at the education system in my country, I believe our system is trying the best that they can. Again, it's important for us to change ourselves and tap into other systems of education if we are to be global citizens, if we are to be able to solve local problems, even global challenges using local solutions. We need to tap into that global education. For me, it was part of my inspiration to study from abroad, so when I got accepted to the University College London, I was like, oh my goodness.

People asked me, "How did you get there?" I told them, "I simply applied and completed, and here I was." It was something that I aspired for because I knew that I needed that kind of balanced education, and indeed, it was awesome. It was an education that I've never experienced and I'm forever grateful for being able to experience these different kinds of education because in a way, it shaped the way I think, shaped the way I look at the world. I look at the world as a global community beyond just my own community here, so it's been very, very resourceful.

[Laura] It's so inspiring. The thing that I'm curious about, Monica, is what do you think has a girl like yourself who grows up in a very humble environment think about going to London? What do you think has a young person -- and I think about this as you being a mother of this amazing son who's just so brilliant himself. He's a curious, brilliant mind. What has you think beyond?

I think in the context of this, as what I would say a limitless woman, people look at my life and say, "How did you do it?" and I often think how did I think I could do it is really the question. I can go there. I can do whatever I want to do because nobody in my family around me had that belief system. My family thought I was kind of a crazy person and they might still think I'm a crazy person, but I see possibilities and I go for it, and I see that in you as well, my young friend. What do you think makes that happen for you? You see the world differently. Everything's possible. Does it come from your faith? Where do you think it comes from?



[Monica]

I think number one, the belief in possibility comes from my faith. I'm a very spiritual, young woman who believes that miracles do happen and they do happen especially when we position ourselves with the right people, the right communities, the right networks. Miracles do happen, so I'm a very, very spiritual person, but also, I want to believe that based on my background and experience, having experienced violence, you reach a point as a human being when you feel that change needs to happen. Whether how, when, why, you really feel that enough is enough, so that kind of anger helps you -- I would call it maybe positive anger because you're not going to cause crime or anything. That's what puts you at a point where you're unstoppable or you're limitless, where you feel like "I can go for this" because you've seen the very tough world, and as a human being, you have aspirations, you have hope.

When you get to acquire education, it also gives you that hope and inspiration that you can move from one level to another. I think that positive anger, being in school, acquiring education, speaking to people -- I believe in the resourcefulness of mentors because at some point, you're in a very tough situation and it only takes faith for you to open up to someone who will show you the light, who will show you the encouragement and say, "No, I think you can actually do it," even in times of self-doubt and you're like, "Oh my goodness, I think I'm not good enough" and then someone comes to you and says, "I think you're really brilliant." I think the role of mentors and people around us, we can't really downplay that. I believe that's one of the key factors for us to move to another level.

That's why I say education is the key. Even as you're having children, the best gift you can give your children is an education. What they use that education for, it's up to them, but at least you'll have given them a tool that they can use to improve and better themselves.

[Laura]

Yeah, a hundred percent. I think it's interesting in my morning prayer this morning. I was thinking about children as I was praying and meditating on this conversation that we were going to have today. It's an interesting piece that I find really again, one of your strong tenets of leadership, Monica, is your ability to be supported and allowing yourself to receive support. You're very open-minded as a student even with all the success you've had. You bring your leadership, you bring a strength to your leadership, and I see this in working with your team and working with your organization, how much everyone that works with you loves and respects you because you have this energy that we're all learning and growing together.



I see this is a place where women get stuck. I think about what's the trajectory. Why does one person face adversity and violence and hurt and just shut down, and another person faces adversity and pain and has that be a catalyst for growth and expansion?

I think part of that, being willing to step into your leadership requires you to be vulnerable. It requires you, even after being hurt, to still take a chance, to still open yourself to new possibilities, and you're so good at that. I think women specifically get stuck in not growing because they don't allow other people in. They don't allow other people to support them. Receiving is a practice. If we've been hurt -- and I just can speak from my own childhood and what I've seen happen many, many times with families and children I've worked with over the years -- when we're hurt, it's easier to shut down than it is to open up our heart again and be vulnerable. Do you have anything about that?

[Monica]

Yes. I think for me, like you've said, the ability to ask for help is very important because we do exist as humans and we do experience different experiences that teach us. I think it's only by asking for help that you can grow because sometimes when you get stuck in your little world, you look at it that way, but when you seek for help, for support then people are willing to help you. I think just appreciating my leadership style, just everyone believing in my team, everyone can. All they need is to be supported, to be encouraged, to give them the opportunity to try it out and they will give it their best of best. So for me, it's more of asking for help and saying, "Guys, can we do this?" and just showing them that yes, I could have started this movement, but all of us are different parts of this movement and all of us have a critical role that we play to make sure that this movement actually moves forward, so being appreciative and recognizing that we need collaborators, we need big sisters, we need little sisters, you name it.

I think for me, it's been awesome because when I get to a point where I feel that "Oh my goodness, this just happened to us" and you can't believe it just happened then someone says, "How can I help?" I get to be mentored. The mentorship again takes you to another level of experience. I remember when I met you, Laura, for the first time and you asked me, "How can I help?" I was like, wow. "How can I help?" I'm like, "Laura, I just need to be mentored and supported" because as an organization, yes, it's been seven amazing years, but I believe there is more to the work we are doing if we accept we're part of Limitless Women. You're opening doors for us to be able to meet many other amazing women who want to change the world, who want to work with change, catalysts.



For me, mentorship is something that I believe is core. Just ask for help. It's rare that I'll ask anyone, "I need funding to run our programs." It's rare. Usually, I believe in building a relationship. I believe in knowing this person and I believe that they're so much more beyond money. If this person can be on board, it will help me achieve all the money that I require in this world. It's kind of a leadership approach that I've launched over the years asking for help and just knowing that there are so many amazing people who want to help, but it's a process to build that relationship, get into those networks, and then the rest is limitless, like we say. There's so much abundance in the world.

[Laura] There is so much abundance in the world, and I think again, this is an interesting piece for me, Monica, that your mindset coming from again a place where you don't have what looks like materially, you don't live in a castle, you're not driving a Maserati, you're not jet-setting all over the world here, your abundance mindset is so inspiring. I think this is a place where I always feel so humbled when I'm in Africa, just the generosity of spirit of your community and your culture and who you are as a leader, to really have the brilliance and the wisdom of relationship building first.

I work also in the private sector obviously as well as in the nonprofit sector and what I find is again the flow of money, the flow of abundance and cash flow for the things that we need to fund our initiatives whether we're working in the for-profit sector, like you do, or if we're working in the private sector to build businesses for our families, the same thing is so key that you're saying here, which is build the relationships first. Nurture the value of people. Recognize that every person has something to bring to the movement. One of my favorite, favorite experiences being with you in Uganda was at the end of the day, as we were going around, Isaac -- is Isaac our driver?

[Monica] Yes, he is.

[Laura] I'd have to put this on the recording so I'll remember it. Everyone was going around sharing what their takeaways were. We did basically a Strategic Planning VIP Day there, and Isaac said, "This morning, I came to work and I was simply a driver. Today, at the end of the day, I know that I am an integral part of the vision and mission of Girl Up Uganda." I started crying. I just was so blown away by this young man and his passion and his commitment. I think that again is a testament to you. Every person plays an important role in having our goals met, of supporting women, uplifting them. Having the opportunity to cultivate other leaders I think is so huge because when we lead leaders, they in turn will lead others, and the ripple effect of your work is so beautiful. So many lives are changed and transformed. It's really an honor. It's really great.



[Monica] Thank you.

[Laura] You're welcome. Tell me a little bit about what happened with the Obamas.

[Monica] Yes.

[Laura] Am I making you cry?

[Monica] All right. What happened with the Obama Foundation was part of this journey is the recognition that there are different levels. You need to tap into fellowships, learning labs to continue to build your knowledge in the areas that we work in. The Obama Foundation story started when I applied for the Obama Foundation Leaders: Africa program and I got accepted to the program that was three years ago in South Africa. When we went for the conversations, we were invited for a roundtable conversation and there we met Charlize Theron. Of course, being the girl from the background, we just talked about -- I really didn't know most of these celebrities and who they are, so I was being myself in the conversation and speaking my truth based on the local experiences of this work. Somehow, the Obama Foundation got captivated and connected to what I was saying. After the conversation, they asked me to stay behind, and so they were able to ask me more questions that I spoke to. Before I know it, they put together a video of me and Charlize Theron that Michelle Obama shared on her Instagram page. I was like, wow. One thing led to another.

After that, we received a call from NBC and they were saying, "Michelle Obama is launching the Girls Opportunity Alliance and we are looking at your work as one of those and we feel we should be able to capture and be able to showcase this as she launches this network, this movement for girls all over the world." Again, I didn't know who NBC was, of course. I was very humble and -- I think that's the beauty. I wasn't having any stereotype or any masks around the conversation. I was just speaking to them just like I'm speaking to you. They were like, "We are coming to Uganda." I'm like, "What?" "Can we come in the next two weeks?" I'm like, of course, so we prepared for the two weeks. It's my colleague, Kimberly, who notified me a day before. She's like, "Do you know who is actually coming?" I'm like, "Who? Who is coming?" Of course, she took me through who NBC was in the US and telling me it's Jenna Bush coming. I'm like, "Who is Jenna Bush?"

She's like, "Monica, Jenna Bush is *[indiscernible]*." I'm like, wow. Anyways, the day comes. I go pick up the team from one of the hotels. I connected with Jenna immediately. She just looked at me, gave me this huge hug and said, "I've read your work. I'm so inspired. I'm looking forward to spending the next three days with you."



[Laura] Nice.

[Monica] At the back of my mind, I was wondering, is she the Jenna that my colleague talked about? She was down-to-earth, very humble. I think one thing I learned from Jenna was humility. Humility supersedes everything. I just learned she was so humble, so genuine, so connected to us. I was like, wow, this is what we should always remember. Even when you take over the world, always remember to be humble. It's one thing I really learned from Jenna. Then the crew puts a mic on me. I'm driving. We are talking normally. When I looked at the video at the end of the day, it was all the informal conversations that made it to the video. The video was done -- they spent three days here and worked with us. We ate the same food that you ate as well.

[Laura] Mama Joyce's *[phonetic]* food. Beautiful.

[Monica] Mama Joyce's food. We sat by the gala tent, sat there, had very authentic conversations, no pressure. We did a fashion show with Mazuri, and then they went. As they left, they're like, "Monica, we need to get you to the US." I'm like, wow, okay, so they get me to the US and here I am. As I was on the air going to Santa Barbara because we had a fundraiser scheduled around the same time, when I logged on to the internet while on board, on flight, I got a message from the Obama Foundation saying, "Is it possible for Monica to get to New York today? Because Michelle would really love to meet her prior to the launch of the Girls Opportunity Alliance," so when I got to Santa Barbara, we had to reschedule my flight to leave in about six hours.

[Laura] Oh my goodness.

[Monica] I had to get to New York. My suitcases, my bags, there I was. I arrived. I got into a room with ten amazing, young, brilliant women. We sit. We're having a conversation. Michelle walks in and she walks in by my backside and she's like, "Monica?" I'm like, oh my goodness.

[Laura] It was so wonderful.

[Monica] When she mentioned my name, I'm like, what? I was so humbled and surprised, and then she gave me this hug and said, "I know about your work. I've read about your work. I'm so impressed." That meant the world to me. I sat down and we had this conversation with other leaders, and then I asked her, "Can I have a photo moment with you?" She's like, "Of course!" That was the photo that I have that I treasure so much. It was after a month that it was sent.



That's how we got into partnership with the Girls Opportunity Alliance and they're supporting our annual Big Sister Camp, but just to say that it started from my quest to knowledge because as a leader, when you realize that learning never stops, you're able to look at opportunities and go for them. I'm just wondering, if I'd never applied to be part of the Obama Leaders Program then I wouldn't have met Michelle. I wouldn't have met President Obama. I wouldn't have met them, but because I realized that as a leader, at different levels, you need more capacity. You need to be networking with people doing similar work. It builds synergy to have this conversation of encouragement. Me meeting Michelle Obama, it's one thing that led to another and I feel so grateful that I did.

[Laura] Absolutely, and I'm sure she's grateful to meet you as well, sweetie. I'm really grateful that you shared that story with me. Monica, you've given me so many nuggets of wisdom. It's helpful for me as we continue our relationship and our friendship for me to know a little bit more of the details of your story because sometimes, we get together and we're busy working on the work. We're working on what does the organization need, what's next, how do we grow, how do we fundraise.

So it's really a pleasure for me to hear your story and to hear your laughter and hear your journey. You deeply inspire me again and again, so I just want to tell you how much I adore you, how grateful I am that you're in my life, and how much I can't wait to be with you so I can hug you in person again soon. When the world opens up again and we're allowed to be socially close --

[Monica] Physically close.

[Laura] Yes, so I'll be looking forward to my hugs and kisses, hugs for Mama and hugs for Victor and hugs for all the girls. Sweetheart, thank you again for making time today to have this conversation with me and I'm looking forward to connecting and speaking with you more and more.

[Monica] Thank you so much, Laura. Thank you for creating this.

[Laura] My pleasure, sweetheart, my pleasure. All right. I'm going to stop the recording for now.

[Laura Gisborne] Thanks for tuning in to the Limitless Women Podcast. We love to hear stories of Limitless Women out in the world building community and giving back. Send in a personal story of your own, or nominate a Limitless Woman in your community so we can share her story. We'd love to feature you both.



[MC] You've been listening to The Limitless Women Podcast, with your host Laura Gisborne. Our mission is to help women business owners like you, grow profitable businesses and actualize your opportunities to serve and give to yourself and others. Are you a Limitless Woman? This is your personal invitation to learn how you can join our online community, grow through our business school and play with us at our live events. Go to LimitlessWomen.com for all the details. That's LimitlessWomen.com. Thanks for joining us!