

WHAT YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT...

DR. ELLEN
ABAKAH

EARLY CAREER ACADEMIC &
RESEARCHER



INTERVIEW BY ANGELICA OJINNAKA
AFRICAN WOMEN AUSTRALIA INC. (AWAU)

Ellen is a young Ghanaian early career academic, who migrated to Australia in 2016 for her PhD studies. Having recently completed her studies, Ellen worked as a project officer at Nakango Vision Inc. and also an administrative assistant at African Women Australia Inc. (AWAU). She is currently a faculty member at the School of Continuing and Distance Education, University of Ghana, Legon. Her research interests include professional learning and development and women and political participation.

WHEN INTRODUCED AT A PARTY, HOW DO YOU TYPICALLY DESCRIBE YOURSELF?

I usually go like "Hi, I'm Maame, Nice to meet you!" I probably will not talk again until I feel comfortable to engage in a conversation.

WHAT DO YOU GET UP TO IN YOUR SPARE TIME?

Starting off as an early career academic seems like the 24 hours in the day aren't just enough but surely when I finally do get some free time, I love to engage in Church activities. I also love to watch some Korean series or listening to podcasts on PhD trajectory stories just to ease off some stress.

WHO DO YOU LOOK UP TO AND WHY?

I look up to my grandmother particularly, and also very strong women who challenge norms and status quos. Growing up, I observed her struggles and resilience in venturing into a male-dominated occupation as a "canoe owner" during her days and thus making her the first woman among the men in our community. So right from my childhood, I learned from her you can defy the odds and break the gendered glass ceiling as a woman. She was also my teacher, from whom I learned many life lessons across different spheres; religion, cultural norms, and practices, which have all been instrumental in shaping my life and perspectives today.



*"You can defy
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"There are many people with less your capabilities and intelligence out there doing great things... create your own paths and opportunities while having your 'self' intact!"

WHAT DID YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU WERE A KID?

I had multiple dreams; from a medical doctor, a newscaster and a lawyer and in all these instances I was inspired by women who had already excel in those fields but then at age 12, I realised I couldn't stand the sight of people's suffering and groaning in pain and for that matter could not become a medical doctor. But then I turned out to be a doctor anyways, one who generates knowledge to proactively improve people's lives.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE YOUR TEENAGE SELF?

There are many people with less your capabilities and intelligence out there doing great things, so 'self', go your all-out, create your own paths and opportunities while having your 'self' intact!

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE BLACK GIRLS AND WOMEN LIVING IN AUSTRALIA?

Never conform in order to feel accepted! Do not be embarrassed about who you are and where you come from for it is really okay to be the queer among your peers, but that doesn't stop you from dreaming big and exploring your inner potentials.

WHAT WAS YOUR MOST CHALLENGING CAREER SETBACK? HOW DID YOU OVERCOME IT?

I was told after my Masters degree to take a pause to get married; else I wouldn't find a man! I was advised my Ph.D. would be meaningless if I don't have a husband to compliment me. While raising family is equally important, the constant pressure was disheartening and very demoralising especially when such comments came from people that you think should know best and support your dream. But fortunately, I had a mentor who would not relent until he saw me 'up there'. With his counsel and encouragement, I became more resolute about my decision and even more confident to start my Ph.D. studies in order to progress in my career.

WHAT WILL YOUR NEXT BIG PURCHASE BE? WHY?

I'd want to purchase a house, big enough to host my entire family. My family has been incredibly supportive of my career and I've been always looking for ways to appreciate all their efforts. So having a big house where we all can occasionally convene, reminisce about our childhood and growing ups is something I really look forward to doing.

WHO HAS BEEN INFLUENTIAL IN HELPING YOU TO GET TO WHERE YOU ARE TODAY?

My mum! She's been my foundational support and my mentor, Prof. Michael Tagoe, who saw my potential right after my bachelor's degree and did all he could to unearth that. He was the reason I enrolled in a master's program and through what I'll describe as 'tough love' geared me up to continue to aspire to be where I am today.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE IN THE NEXT DECADE?

I'd want to rise through the defences of the academic ladder, work assiduously to become a top-notch in my area of expertise and possibly a professor in the next decade. I'd want to be known globally for my works and contributions to improving the lives of the marginalized in societies.

HOW CAN AFRICAN WOMEN LEARN MORE ABOUT YOU AND YOUR WORK?

Check out Dr Ellen Abakah on
Instagram: @maamesasah
Email: esisasah16@gmail.com

African Women Australia Inc. (AWAU) is a women-led, community-based and non-profit organisation that aims to strengthen national intellectual capacity on African Women in Australia. We are doing so by being the hub for the most comprehensive, up-to-date and Afrocentric information about African women in Australia. We do this by employing an approach that incorporates African feminist, human rights centred and intersectional understandings to our work with African communities.

AWAU's mission is to raise the voices and profile of African women in Australia. Visit our website: www.awau.org.au to learn more.

If you know an African woman living in Australia who we should celebrate, please contact Dr Tinashe Dune and Angelica Ojinnaka on: secretariat@awau.org.au