

Merck Foundation CEO talks about empowering women and youth in Africa

A conversation with Dr. Rasha Kelej, CEO Merck Foundation on the efforts of Merck Foundation for empowering women across Africa and other developing countries.

NIAMEY, NIGER, March 22, 2018 /EINPresswire.com/ -- I am very happy that we are marking International Women's Day in Niger, with H.E. the First Lady of Niger, H.E. Mrs. Aissata Mahamadou Issoufou to underscore our long-term commitment to empowering women in Niger and across Africa through Merck more than a Mother. It is hard to imagine that in the 21st-century women are still being abused and subject to violence, for their inability to bear children. This is unacceptable and must be changed, and we will work hard with all our partners to create this culture shift and emphasize to everyone that women are more than just Mothers. At [Merck Foundation](https://www.merckfoundation.com) we do not mark women's day, which only on the 8th of March every year, but we celebrate women every day, empowering women is in the spirit of what we do, it is a part of our DNA.

Last year we celebrated International women's day in Liberia, with the First African Female President, H.E. Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf - a role model for women across the world. She awarded Prof. Frank Stangenberg Haverkamp, Chairman of Executive board of E-Merck KG, with 'presidential medal of honor' for his support to empower women through Merck Foundation's dedicated efforts. What a great honor.

This year we are pleased to mark International Women's Day with the First Lady of Niger, and to appoint her as an ambassador of 'Merck More Than a Mother' and underscore our long-term commitment to empowering childless



Prof. Frank Stangenberg-Haverkamp, Chairman of the Executive Board of E.Merck KG and the Chairman of Merck Foundation Board of Trustees and Dr. Rasha Kelej, CEO of Merck Foundation, and First Lady of Niger, H.E. Aissata Mahamadou Issoufou



H.E. Madame Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Former President of Liberia with Dr. Rasha Kelej, CEO of Merck Foundation during International Women's Day 2017 in Liberia

women in Niger and across Africa. It's a great privilege to be able to mark this day in the heart of Africa.

In October 2017, we launched Merck Foundation in Egypt with the First Ladies of Chad, Niger, Guinea, Central African Republic and Chairperson of National Assembly of Namibia. They gracefully accepted to be ambassadors of 'Merck More Than a Mother' to empower infertile women in their countries.

In November 2017, we celebrated empowering African women Researchers in STEM through our fourth edition of UNESCO Merck Africa Research Summit MARS 2017, an annual conference of MERCK STEM program for women.

In Jan 2018, we signed an MOU with the organization of African First ladies to mark Merck Foundation's partnership with them to empower childless women and women cancer survivors and build healthcare capacity in their countries.

I also visited childless women in Uganda to celebrate their success and new lives of dignity and independence after Merck more than a Mother intervention, they finally found their purpose in life after many years of suffering from infertility stigma, discrimination and abuse.

In Feb 2018, I visited The Gambia, where Merck Foundation together with the First Lady of The Gambia, H.E. Fatoumatta Bah-Barrow encouraged infertile and childless women and acknowledged them as 'Merck More Than a Mother' heroines for their courage to share their stories of suffering with us. We will set up small businesses to enable them to become independent; we will also train the first fertility specialists in The Gambia, where we make history, and the country will benefit from qualified fertility specialists to help infertile couples and hence save women from this stigma.

We empower childless women across Africa and developing countries through 'Merck More than a Mother,' by improving their access to information, health, change of mindset and economic empowerment. Women like, Jackeline, Berna, Grace and more than 1000 other women from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Cote D'Ivoire and more, have benefited from the "Empowering Berna." As part of this campaign, Merck Foundation has established small businesses for them, so they can have a steady income and become independent and happier.

We also empower cancer women survivors through 'Merck more than a Patient', women like Margaret, Rose and Louise where we helped to establish small businesses for them to reintegrate them into their societies.

In addition to empowering these groups of unprivileged women, we also empower women in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) through providing the required training to specialize in the areas where they are underrepresented such as; healthcare and research with special focus in the field of Oncology, Diabetes, Hypertension, and Fertility. Christine, Nihad, Latefat, Pauline and Nanu Devi, and other women from Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Gambia, Niger, Chad, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Cambodia and Myanmar and more have benefited from those training courses and on the way to reach their potential and contribute significantly in their societies.

This is achieved through 'Merck Cancer Access Program' and 'Merck Capacity Advancement Program', in these programs we focus mainly on women and youth. We strongly believe that the social and economic development of Africa depends on the empowerment of its women and youth,



First Lady of The Gambia, Madame Fatoumatta Bah Barrow with Dr. Rasha Kelej, CEO of Merck Foundation during the launch of Merck more than a Mother in The Gambia

and we focus significantly on this target, to help to achieve the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Women around the world have tremendous potential to excel in any field they represent, this has been a proven fact in many facets of our world. However, they are deprived of a favorable environment to explore their real potential in many societies, especially in developing countries. There is a need to redefine the status of women in the society.

We at Merck Foundation, give special focus on supporting and giving equal opportunity to women to participate and benefit from those initiatives. We have consciously integrated women empowerment as part of our strategy to contribute to eliminating the gender gap in our areas of focus.

As the CEO of Merck Foundation, I strongly believe in women empowerment on a professional level and I am working on realizing our vision of advancing people's lives through science and technology with special focus on women and youth. And on the personal level; as a simple African woman from Egypt who became the CEO of a big Foundation like Merck Foundation, this happened because someday, somewhere, someone empowered me, and now it's my turn to empower other women. With Merck Foundation, the sky is the limit for women, stay tuned to know more.....

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