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Inspiring women in leadership: Ebere Okereke

The consultant in communicable disease control and global public health speaks to **Francesca Robinson** about her passion for promoting women in leadership

Francesca Robinson

Ebere Okereke leads a £24m (€28m; \$34m) UK funded international health regulations strengthening programme for Public Health England. This project, now in its fifth year, is working to build strong and sustainable public health systems in six low and middle income countries across Africa and Asia.

Okereke's team works in partnership with public health institutions in these countries, providing technical support and expertise to help them strengthen their capacity to prevent, detect, and respond to public health crises, particularly outbreaks of infectious diseases.

She is motivated by the opportunity to make a difference. "We don't just fly in and deliver some training and then leave," Okereke says. "We work alongside our public health colleagues in these countries, helping them to embed improvements in their systems and structures. We build strong relationships which enable them to pick up the phone to their counterparts in the UK to exchange knowledge and ideas."

What Okereke finds most rewarding is the enthusiasm of the local, mainly young, workforce, and the opportunity to help them to grow professionally. "When, for example, we started working with the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, they had only about a hundred staff doing the work that Public Health England does with a few thousand," she says. "What struck me most was the passion of that workforce to get things right and their commitment to what they were doing. Their capacity to learn, innovate, and develop is so exciting."

When she started out in public health Okereke didn't know about opportunities for leadership training because she was never in the room when they were discussed. Instead, she actively sought out women she admired to mentor her. She is now passionate about providing mentorship to others.

As a successful woman of colour Okereke says there have been times when she has felt isolated in her role. "Being the 'only' anything is both an honour and a privilege, but it also comes with a lot of pressure and it piles on the self-doubt," she says. "You are constantly asking yourself, am I here because I'm the token person who ticks the box or am I here because I deserve it?"

Now with years of experience, and being a natural extrovert, Okereke says she feels comfortable about speaking out about the inequalities that limit women's ambitions and she makes it an objective to promote gender equity and encourage women into leadership positions.

Okereke also works to promote change as a member of the Women in Global Health movement. She believes that a lot of the biases creating barriers for women are unconscious, institutional, and structural, but she is optimistic that systems can and will change and that there is a passion and commitment in global health to do this.

The career achievements of which Okereke says she is most proud are seeing her mentees find their voice and shine. "One of my mentees, at the beginning of the covid-19 pandemic, was on Channel 4 every night explaining epidemiological concepts to Jon Snow. I would watch her while grinning like a Cheshire cat."

She adds that she is always thrilled when someone tells her they heard about something she did and felt they could see themselves in that position. "That, to me, is success," she says.

Nominated by Claire Bayntun

Ebere Okereke is one of the few senior women working in global health in the UK of African descent. She is a role model to women of colour and has been mentoring women from ethnic minorities for many years. She should be recognised for her achievements in her complex role and for inspiring women in the field of health more broadly.

Claire Bayntun is a consultant in global public health at Public Health England.