

Like a Tree, Unbowed : Wangari Maathai - Biography

Dr. Wangari Maathai was born in 1940 in a village in Kenya. In 2004, she became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The judges valued "Her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace". She was also a member of Kenya's Parliament.

Maathai left Kenya after high school to study biology in the USA. She got both her Bachelor's and Master's degrees and returned to Kenya. She became the first Kenyan woman to earn a Ph.D. in 1971, she became a professor at the University of Nairobi.

In 1977, she launched the Green Belt Movement to reforest her beloved country while helping the nation's women. "Women needed income and they needed resources because theirs were being depleted," Maathai explained to people magazine. So the movement is started to solve both problems together.

Proving to be very successful, the movement is responsible for the planting of more than 30 million trees in Kenya and providing roughly 30,000 women with new skills and opportunities. Maathai also challenged the government on its development plans and its handling of the country's land. One of her most famous actions was in 1989. Maathai and her organization staged a protest in Nairobi's Uhuru Park to prevent the construction of a skyscraper. Her campaign drew international attention, and the project was eventually dropped. The place in the park where she demonstrated became known as "Freedom Corner." Dr. Maathai became more involved in environmental and women's issues.

Many studies characterize Wangari Maathai as someone whom would "think globally and act locally." This is why she managed to become successful. At the time, she did not have the resources needed to mobilize all parts. However, by forming the Green Belt Movement, she managed to make an impact on different countries. In addition, this movement still exists even after her death. That means her work continues especially at such a critical time when climate change has become a global threat. People now have the chance to continue with her work and help the world achieve her vision.

Maathai shared her amazing life story with the world in the 2006 memoir Unbowed. She died of cancer, aged 71, on September 25, 2011. In her Nobel speech, Maathai said that picking her for the renowned peace prize "challenged the world to broaden the understanding of peace. She remains a potent example of how one person can be a force for change.

Therefore, she becomes an important person in history since she came from the African continent and managed to capture the attention of the entire world. Different nations and powerful leaders have recognized her work. In addition, her academic qualifications also laid the ground for a future in which many African women are now becoming educated and empowered.