Beat: Business

VOGUE INDIA'S PORTRAIT OF DR. RASHA KELEJ: AN AFRICAN ROLE MODEL FOR ELSEWHERE

SHAPING GLOBAL FEMININE LEADERSHIP

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USPA NEWS - Dr RASHA KELEJ : A NEW KIND OF GLOBAL ROLE MODEL
When Vogue India devotes a feature to Senator Dr. Rasha Kelej, CEO of Merck Foundation, it is not just celebrating an individual success story. It is recognising an African woman who has built a leadership model that combines executive responsibility, social impact and unapologetic femininity. The article, titled "Empowering Change: Dr. Rasha Kelej's Vision for Women?Led Development", positions her as one of the most influential African women of her generation and a catalyst for women's empowerment through health and education.

This matters far beyond the African continent. In Europe as well, many women are still fighting for parity and equal recognition in professional spaces that remain marked by structural biases and informal glass ceilings. Seeing an African woman leader framed as a global reference point in an international lifestyle publication helps redraw the map of who is allowed to be a role model and for whom.

LEADERSHIP WITHOUT HIDING FEMININITY
One of the most striking elements of the Vogue India profile is Dr. Kelej's insistence that women should never feel obliged to compromise their femininity in order to be taken seriously as leaders. She argues that leadership today is multidimensional: it is about decisions and governance, but also about the way leaders present themselves and embody their mission. Confidence, authenticity, professionalism and personal style, she says, can coexist and even reinforce each other.

This message speaks directly to young women in Africa, Europe and beyond who navigate professional environments still coded in masculine terms. By explicitly linking her work to her personal style and public presence, Dr. Kelej challenges the idea that female leaders must erase part of themselves to fit into existing norms. Instead, she offers a model where resilience and perseverance are inseparable from self?confidence and self?expression.

BUILDING HEALTH CAPACITY AND BREAKING STIGMAS
Beyond personal branding, the impact of Merck Foundation's programs under Dr. Kelej's leadership is substantial. Through the Merck Foundation Scholarships Program, more than 2,600 scholarships have been granted to healthcare providers from 52 countries, across 44 critical and underserved medical specialties. This quietly changes health systems from within, by creating a new generation of trained professionals in contexts where capacity gaps are often dramatic.

At the same time, the "Merck Foundation More Than a Mother" movement, launched in 2015, tackles infertility stigma head?on. By building reproductive and fertility care capacity, raising awareness about infertility, including male infertility and supporting women who face social exclusion, the campaign links medical action with cultural change. In both cases, the underlying logic is the same: empowering women and girls through access to information, services and dignity.

EDUCATION, FIRST LADIES AND CULTURAL PLATFORMS
The Vogue India feature also underlines Dr. Kelej's alliances with 33 African and Asian First Ladies, with whom she co?designs programs that empower women in healthcare and STEM, support girls' education and break entrenched stigmas. This network gives Merck Foundation's initiatives a rare political reach across continents.

Her Educating Linda program, developed with African First Ladies, illustrates this approach: more than 1,500 annual scholarships have been awarded to high?performing but underprivileged schoolgirls in 21 African countries, covering school fees and essential educational costs. Alongside these formal programs, Merck Foundation has used media, fashion, music, animation films and storybooks to open conversations on sensitive social and health issues, proving that culture can be a powerful lever for empowerment

and mindset change.

INSPIRING NEW GENERATIONS OF GIRLS
Ultimately, what makes this Vogue India profile particularly significant is the way it connects personal discipline and public mission. Dr. Kelej describes the importance of consistency, persistence and daily routines, from exercise and healthy eating to self?development and stress management, as conditions for sustainable high performance. This insistence on inner discipline sends a clear message to young women: empowerment is not just a slogan, it is a practice.

At a time when women in Africa, Europe and elsewhere continue to fight for parity and recognition, examples like Dr. Rasha Kelej show that professional success and visible femininity can reinforce each other rather than cancel each other out. Through their networks, their programs and their visibility, women leaders of this kind are not only breaking ceilings for themselves; they are opening doors for a new generation of girls who will no longer accept being treated as exceptions in the professional world, but as protagonists in their own right.../
SOURCE:Merck Foundation

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