

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MONTH

Honouring Graca Machel's Advocacy

"Women must redesign the table, and not just expect to be at the table."

~ Graça Machel.

March is the month dedicated to honoring women. However, truthfully speaking, every day should be a celebration of the countless battles women fight, the barriers we break, and the futures we reshape. Women do not simply exist within society; we build it, nourish it, and push it forward. And among us stands a woman whose life has been defined by her unshakable resolve to uplift others, Graça Machel.



Her name is often mentioned alongside giants of history, but her work speaks for itself. A revolutionary in education, a fearless advocate for women's rights, and a leader who refuses to accept systems that exclude women, Machel is not just a figure of history, she is a force of transformation.

Graça Machel's journey began in a world that expected little from, and gave little to women. Born in Mozambique under Portuguese colonial rule, she was the youngest of six children in a family that understood the power of education, but colonialism had no place for educated African girls. Many of her peers were married off early, their dreams crushed under the weight of societal expectations.

Yet, Machel refused to let her story be written for her. Against all odds, she earned a scholarship to study at the University of Lisbon, one of the few African women of her time to do so. It was there, in the heart of Portugal, that she became politically awakened. Seeing firsthand how deeply colonialism oppressed African nations, she made a decision — her life would not be one of quiet acceptance. She would fight.

Her activism led her back to Mozambique, where she joined FRELIMO (the Mozambican Liberation Front) in the armed struggle for independence. It was a dangerous path, one that demanded everything from her. But for Machel, freedom was never just about breaking from colonial rule. It was about ensuring that women were not left behind in the new Mozambique.

In 1975, Mozambique gained independence, and Machel, at just 30 years old, was appointed Minister of Education. It was a position of immense responsibility, seeing as Mozambique had one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, and girls were the least likely to attend school. However, she believed that education was the key to women's liberation. She launched the **National Literacy Campaign**, which resulted in an increase in primary school enrollment within just a few years. She personally visited rural communities, speaking directly to parents, urging them to educate their daughters.

It was not easy. She faced pushback from male leaders who saw girls' education as unimportant. In some communities, men resisted, arguing that educating girls would disrupt traditional family roles. Machel countered their arguments with an unwavering belief in equality. She believed that when you educate a girl, you educate a nation.

Her fight for women's empowerment extended beyond education. She took on child marriage, gender-based violence, and economic exclusion. Her work was radical — not because it should have been, but because in a world that had long silenced women, her voice was impossible to ignore.

Machel's activism has not been without resistance. When she spoke at global conferences demanding that African women be given more leadership opportunities, she was met with polite applause but little action. When she challenged world leaders to prioritize women's economic empowerment, she was told that "*other issues*" were more pressing. If investing in women's economic empowerment isn't a priority, then what future are we really building?

Thus, she never softened her message. For instance, at the **Africa Climate Summit** in Nairobi in September 2023, Machel criticized the underrepresentation of women in climate debates, stating that the era of decisions being made solely by men in suits is over. She advocated for women's central involvement in decision-making, emphasizing that women should no longer be speaking from the sidelines but be integral to the process. The truth was undeniable. Excluding women from leadership had stifled progress.



Her resilience led her to establish the **Graça Machel Trust**, an organization dedicated to advancing women's leadership and economic independence across Africa. Furthermore, through the **Women Advancing Africa** initiative, she has ensured that women have access to funding, leadership training, and spaces where their voices shape policies — not just react to them.

Her message is clear: women must not wait for power to be handed to them. We must seize it, create it, and redesign the systems that have historically shut us out.

Graça Machel's work remains painfully relevant today. Women are still underrepresented in leadership, economic opportunities remain skewed in favor of men, and patriarchal structures continue to hold women back. In Africa, while progress has been made, challenges persist — digital exclusion, wage gaps, and restrictive laws on reproductive rights continue to shape the lives of millions of women.



But Machel's legacy is not just one of struggle — it is one of transformation. And the question now is: how do we carry it forward?

We honor Graça Machel by refusing to be silent. By questioning policies that exclude women. By challenging male-dominated leadership spaces. By ensuring that young girls today know that their voices matter. Supporting women-led businesses, advocating for fair pay, and demanding gender-inclusive policies are not just acts of feminism — they are acts of justice.

In a world that still debates whether women belong in positions of power, Machel reminds us that the debate is over. Women are not asking for a seat at the table. We are designing the table itself.

As she stated, "There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish when we refuse to be silenced." And so, we must ask ourselves — what are we doing today to make sure her words are not just remembered, but lived?

For further reading:

- Machel, G. (2017). Women Advancing Africa Forum Speech. Graça Machel Trust.
- UN Women. (2019). Graça Machel's Impact on Women's Rights in Africa.
- Machel, G. (2020). Keynote Speech at African Women's Leadership Symposium.
- World Economic Forum. (2021). Women's Leadership: Lessons from Graça Machel.
- The Graça Machel Trust. (2023). Empowering African Women: A Legacy of Leadership.

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