

Secret aid worker: 'I was the obscure African girl in a room full of white faces'

The room still falls silent when I speak but it no longer bothers me as I'm here to make a difference, not be a nodding head



📷 'It has become my responsibility as the only African in a room to bring the reality of my home, my continent.' Photograph: Alamy

It was sitting in a conflict resolution lecture – an intern in my early twenties and eager for life – when I knew that was it, I wanted to be an aid worker. I wanted to be the one who makes the difference.

I started my career as that obscure national staff member who took the minutes at important meetings and was good at it. Many times however, I would be the only African in those meetings and my role would solely be to take minutes. Strangely, and contrary to popular belief, minute taking is the best way to learn and adapt to new concepts. Nobody noticed me, or asked for my opinion; even when what they discussed affected how much food I had at dinner. So I listened, took notes and learned. Soon I knew more than most people coming to the meetings.

A few years later, I landed my first international job. I had managed to convince a HR officer that I knew what I was doing better than anyone else going for the position, and that I deserved the job. This time, I became the obscure African girl who could relate to the context and whose opinion was closest to the reality of those affected by crisis. The room would fall silent when I spoke, and I felt relevant. I was making the difference, and I thought I was good at it.

That was until I was told: “you speak African, we cannot understand what you say”. That was actual feedback I got from one capacity building initiative set up by an organisation specifically to raise the profile of its “native” staff. I wanted to get on though so I changed my accent, pronouncing phrases like IDP camp as “IDP kemp” instead of “IDP kamp” in order to appeal more to an American audience. Now I start to construct my sentences before I pronounce them. I’m no longer making the difference, I’ve become an illusion of it.

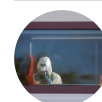
■ ■ *The continent I call home is now ‘the field’ and the people we serve are indicators in the reports we churn out*

The continent I call home is now “the field” for me and my colleagues, and the people we are contracted to serve have become indicators in the reports we churn out. When I’m in the field, the only difference between me and the starving mother of seven who I’m excited to photograph (in order to attach to my trip report), is the sheer fate that life brought us. Because I know how it feels to be hungry and desperate, I take it upon myself to make the field more than just numbers and check boxes. At the next meeting, I make a point to remind everyone that we are here to serve human beings.

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The room falls silent when I speak. I notice a slight look of surprise from those around the table. I'm used to this, an expectation that I, like others would attend and take notes, agreeing to everything. But I'm no longer the obscure African girl that impressed her European audience because she is fluent, outspoken and confident. I am part of the decisions made on the lives of people. That is enough to outweigh comments like "you have such impressive intelligence" or "you don't sound like most natives" that often come from well-meaning colleagues but are condescending and disrespectful.

I speak out when the politics of aid stops it from being useful, when we get derailed by bureaucracy and forget the starving mother of seven who hopes that her picture attached to a foreign report will provide her next meal. It has become my responsibility as the only African in a room full of white faces to bring into the room the reality of my home, my continent.

The silence in the room has stopped bothering me, and I no longer care that I must introduce myself multiple times to people because "all Africans look the same". I am making a difference, even when it is sometimes difficult to see it. I remind myself that my place is deserved, I earned it and that I owe it to myself and others to let my presence be the difference.

Do you have a secret aid worker story you'd like to tell? You can contact us confidentially at globaldevpros@theguardian.com - please put "Secret aid worker" in the subject line.

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