

An Interview with Women Deliver Young Leader, Helena Likaj



Let's start by talking about why you first became interested in women's health/empowerment/education. Is there a certain experience you remember that first sparked your interest?

My interest in women's health, reproductive health, and access to quality care was a result of what I was born into. As a refugee in America, we experience a number of health barriers, inequities, and difficulties accessing health care. So, at a very young age, I found myself having to navigate these very complex health systems and feeling like we were set up for failure. Health care shouldn't be based on luck, it should be something that all individuals should be able to access.

I'm from Albania and was raised in America, but raised with very traditional Albanian values. Through that, I realized how young women and girls are viewed differently than men and young boys. This is an injustice that I've felt is burning in my heart and not OK. People would say, 'Oh Helena, if only you were a boy' or 'Helena, that's not very ladylike of you.' So, my personal experiences have really guided me into the field of fighting for health equality, particularly for marginalized communities.

How did this first experience shape your career path [work, school, etc.]?

I started my undergraduate career with the intent of being a dentist. Primarily because an immigrant's dream for your children is that they will have jobs that you never had the chance to have. I quickly realized that I didn't want to be a dentist, but that my passion was working with individuals and creating



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programs in the health care system and being an advocate for individuals. I started volunteering with Planned Parenthood and found myself really thriving in that environment advocating for sexual health and access to quality health care. I then realized that I wanted to pursue my public health career.

From a young age, I was a public health advocate before even knowing it, so the next appropriate fit was pursuing my Masters of Public Health. I received my MPH with a focus in Maternal and Child Health and while I was doing that, I volunteered with Planned Parenthood again and also founded a young women's empowerment group in central city New Orleans. I then worked with Planned Parenthood Federation of America and worked on access to quality health care throughout all seven regions of the South, working on program planning, building capacity through training, making sure people were able to access quality care, and advocacy. After a few other positions with Planned Parenthood, I moved to working with Odyssey Health Louisiana, and currently oversee our preventative efforts on addressing and alleviating the impact of HIV and Hep C among youth in New Orleans. One thing that I always make sure to prioritize is that our HIV testing, condoms, etc. are available and accessible to all individuals without barriers.

Through all of my activities, I was really dedicated to empowering, equipping, and educating our youth with the knowledge, skills, and resources to take control of their health.

What impact do you hope that your work will have on others?

On the macro level, I hope that I'm able to link individuals to quality health care, including access to sexual health care for marginalized populations. That means being strategic about the kind of outreach materials you're promoting, staffing, building capacity, etc. I want people to feel more comfortable talking about their sexual health. It's such a stigmatized topic and as health care professionals, we are part of the problem. Sometimes it means rocking the boat and saying to health care professionals, 'Just because you've been providing this kind of care for years does not mean it's OK.'

For example, I went into my gynecologist for my annual checkup and I had informed her that sexual health was my field and she interrupted me and asked 'before I run this, you don't have one of those icky STIs do you?' I was astonished and shocked that she thought that was OK. In that moment, I didn't think about myself because I knew I could advocate for myself in this field, but I thought about what if I was a young woman feeling empowered that I had made my first gynecology appointment and then was met with this. That is unacceptable.

I find myself challenging health care professionals to understand the importance of stigma and the language we use and how it can deter and be a barrier to health care.

Can you tell me about something you've done in the field of women's health/empowerment/education that you've been the most excited about or proud of?



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Working with young women is my passion and something that I hold close to my heart, particularly with young women from marginalized communities. As a young woman myself, I didn't have anyone to talk to and I always wished that someone was there to talk to me about these topics and just how hard life is at times, especially for young folks. So often adults minimize the experiences that young people go through. Empowering young women to believe in themselves and know that they can do anything they put their minds to is what I'm the most proud of.

What about what you do keeps you going each day?

I won't ever give up until every human being gets what they deserve. I just think of what my family has had to go through as immigrants with the sacrifices, and they have instilled that trait in me to never give up. We really have to fight for what we believe in and we always have to fight for others.

What makes it difficult to keep going?

It's mind blowing that individuals cannot wrap their heads around the fact that their lived experiences are their lived experiences but there are also so many other lived experiences out there. And that we are not asking you to live it, we are not asking you to go out of your way to understand it, but just respect it. And the lack of respect now for individuals is difficult.

Where do you see yourself in the future? What do you hope to be doing?

I envision myself in the health care field forever. I think that my work will forever be integrated within sexual health; making sure that we are prioritizing access to comprehensive sexual education and making sure that we're promoting sexual education that is accessible and inclusive for all individuals. I think I'll be working with our youth population in HIV, hepatitis C, sexual health, and the overall quality of health care.

Right now, I'm working with youth in HIV, hepatitis C, and substance abuse, but I'm also working on the impact of the opioid epidemic in New Orleans. These issues are never standalone issues, so we can't really talk about sexual health without talking about the lack of education, lack of jobs, racism, sexism, and all the other issues that are impacting our community.

I envision myself working in the health care system and being an advocate and a leader and having a seat at the table to make sure that we're including all individuals in decision-making processes.

What does being a young advocate mean to you?

Being a young advocate is a privilege and it's a result of how hard I've worked and how I've been really relentless. It's an opportunity for my voice to be heard and even though it's tough at times, I'm very lucky to have the opportunity to make sure that my perspective and the perspective I bring is not only



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my lived experiences but it's also the lived experiences of my family members and those that I've surrounded myself with.

It's an opportunity to really rock the boat. I believe that we haven't been doing what we're supposed to be doing in the health care system and to challenge ourselves to do better every day and hold ourselves accountable.

What advice do you have for youth who want to take a bigger leadership role in issues that are important to them?

Immerse yourself into these issues, there are so many opportunities to volunteer or intern, and while you're there, make sure you're making the most of it. Make sure that you're jumping in and never stop losing hope or believing in yourself. Make other people believe in you too by showing them what you're capable of.

An Interview with Women Deliver Young Leader, Fatmata Bangura



Let's start by talking about why you first became interested in women's health/empowerment /education. Is there a certain experience you remember that first sparked your interest?

Being born and raised in the low resource country of Sierra Leone, we're not really taught how to care for our reproductive health needs. We aren't taught how to care for sexual health and how to prevent pregnancy. I wish that African parents would be able to do that for their children, and even if it's not the parents, that the health care providers could do that. But because of our culture, it's really hard for young girls to be open to their parents or feel close to them to discuss their reproductive health.

But now and in the time to come, I'm hoping I'll be one of those that will be there for young girls, and to let them know it's OK if you're at that stage, it's normal for your body to want to have sex. It's your right to know how to take care of yourself, prevent infection and teenage pregnancy.

How did this first experience shape your career path [work, school, etc.]?

Those experiences made me really want to make sure that girls/women are confident that they have someone to talk to. When you're going through puberty it's really hard feeling like you have no one to talk to and if you talk to your friends, they might not have the best advice for you all the time. It makes me want to be that one that will help educate girls/women about their reproductive health, and be that person they can talk to for solutions and advice about their reproductive health. That's what really gives me the passion to advocate for women's reproductive health and rights.



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What work/activities/volunteering, etc. are you currently involved in around sexual and reproductive health or women's empowerment?

I'm part of the 50-50 group Sierra Leone, US Chapter, and we're focused on helping young women be involved in politics and decision-making to fight against gender-based violence and create a platform where we can empower one another and learn to be leaders in our respective disciplines, even if it's not politics. But we do need women in politics in my country because that's the best way decisions can be made and laws put in place that can help girls and women, which will protect their reproductive health and rights. It's all entangled. If you can protect their rights, their health will also be protected.

Right now, we are working on a social media campaign where we will create discussions for women and girls to empower one another, hear each others' stories, and discuss how to be healthy in their sexual and reproductive health. We are trying to get women to feel comfortable talking about their sexual health. We're trying to break that stigma and make girls feel more comfortable talking about things that concern them.

I also started the Muvah Foundation in Sierra Leone. For the past 3 years we have been helping in little ways possible. This year, we went to a small town where there's only one school and the teachers don't get paid. We were able to help by providing foodstuffs for the community.

I also wanted to do something that wasn't all about giving handouts. I wanted to give the people of Sierra Leone something that can generate income no matter how small. So, I started a poultry farm with my sister. At first it was just one person raising the chickens, and now there are five employees and thousands of chickens. The employees are paid and that means they can feed their families, and even though I can only pay them little, it's better than nothing. For me, that's empowerment. I hope that I can expand with time and be able to employ more workers and help provide for so many families. But at least for now, I've started somewhere.

What impact do you hope that your work will have on others?

Young girls should be educated about their reproductive health and rights, be empowered, and be able to inspire and empower others. With time, I hope to reduce maternal mortality rates in Sierra Leone, to reduce infection, to keep girls from having unsafe sex. At the same time, boosting their self-confidence, self-worth and self-esteem. I believe our sexual and reproductive health is important for the way we view ourselves. If you're not confident in that, you can't strive for your full potential because that insecurity will keep pulling you down.

Can you tell me about something you've done in the field of women's health/ empowerment/ education that you've been the most excited about or proud of?

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When I was in Sierra Leone, I met a young girl who had a child about 1-year-old and she was pregnant with another. For the first time I realized, I can be of help. So, I talked to her and asked how old she was, and she said 16. I asked if she was married and she turned around and pointed at her husband, an older man. I asked if she was going to have another child and she said oh no I don't want to but I don't know what to do. In just talking to her I realized that people in this part of my country don't know about family planning because such information is not accessible to them. It enlightened me to understand what girls are going through and what being underprivileged can do to someone. I encouraged her to talk to her husband about not wanting to have another child. I felt my hands were tied in what I could provide her with, but I talked to her. So, even though there wasn't much that I did, it was a meaningful conversation and I felt proud.

What about what you do keeps you going each day?

Right now, a lot of young girls and young people are so optimistic about the future. They have this passion, there are women's movements are going on social media and I see all this confidence and how highly many girls think of themselves. Young girls are so eloquent and are learning to articulate how they feel and how they want to be treated. There is hope because these young girls are going to be equipped and will be able to do everything the world needs – improve women's health, equality, fight gender-based violence and so much more. I think young girls are working toward making the world a better place. It makes me feel excited about the future. Even though my dreams about women's health may seem far-fetched right now, there are people like me that believe that no matter how long it takes, we're going to get there.

What makes it difficult to keep going?

I wish there was some way to get funding to get contraceptives to Sierra Leone. I think about ways that I can do that and I look at people who are doing this work and I want them to come to Sierra Leone. I wish I could do this myself, being able to help girls/women get quality and more options for contraception. It would be great. It is important that women and girls around the world can get access to quality contraceptive methods.

Where do you see yourself in the future? What do you hope to be doing?

I want to go to nursing school because I want to be able to help girls back at home. In my country, they have clinics for women's health and so I want to get a nurse practitioner degree in women's health. So even if it's one girl I can help, or two or three, when that time comes I'll feel very grateful. Then, in the next ten years, I see myself having in a clinic in Sierra Leone, and also training young women to be able to help others to be advocates for women's health.

What does being a young advocate mean to you?



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It can be challenging. Sometimes you have to be authoritative for people to hear you. For some it comes naturally, and for some you can be trained. Being trained to be a Young Leader by Women Deliver gives you the equipment you need. It takes collaboration and working together. To be a good leader, you have to be able to communicate well, collaborate, and respect others. Even before I became a Young Leader, I explored my leadership in school, in my organization, and amongst friends.

Being a leader for me is not all about being the boss, it's about being of service to other people. You have to look at it as being a servant and serving your people.

What advice do you have for youth who want to take a bigger leadership role in issues that are important to them?

You have to be really patient. You have to listen to everyone because everyone matters. Just like you have to serve your community, you have to serve your people. If you look at it like that, you won't be losing focus on what matters. Always remember it is not going to happen right away, be consistent and resilient.

An Interview with Women Deliver Young Leader, Carly Manes



Let's start by talking about why you first became interested in women's health/empowerment /education. Is there a certain experience you remember that first sparked your interest?

That started for me in high school. I was at a conference for sex education and I remember hearing that here in the United States we had a TV show called 16 and Pregnant and I was about 15 at the time and had seen that show and heard what one of the people on the show was saying about myths about their bodies, how they didn't know they could get pregnant. It seemed like there was so much misinformation and miseducation with young people about their bodies, about sex, and that really just got me fired up. It made me angry that young people were being denied information about their bodies so they couldn't make decisions for themselves, or in some cases, even lied to. We're talking about young people who have been given certain abstinence-only curriculums in school which are comprised of lies about sex, sexuality, and STIs. So that got me fired up and feeling like I wanted to do something to change that reality for young people so they could make decisions that were informed about their bodies and sexuality. So, I first got involved by going to my high school administration and giving my case as to why I thought we needed to increase our comprehensive sex education to not only be 1 year in high school but to be all 4 years. And that was what really started me off on the path.

How did this first experience shape your career path [work, school, etc.]?

What I came to find out was there were really two issues there—a cultural issue and also a policy issue. It made me feel like it was really important for people who shared this belief to help shape public narrative through storytelling and I got really involved in abortion storytelling for stigma busting and empowerment and then also believing that we need a culture shift and policy shift at the same time –



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that you need both in order to really enact change. I focused my undergraduate education on a policy degree, specifically in reproductive health care, and then continued on in a career specific to advocacy in reproductive health care. Because the current political climate in the US around women's reproductive health meant that my advocacy was only going so far, there was more that I could do in my personal life to be an advocate and educator for young people around their sexual health. So I decided to become an abortion doula and a birth doula to really support people in all their reproductive options and realities.

Can you tell me about how your work as a doula fits into your current work in advocacy?

I've been an abortion doula for three and a half years and became a birth doula about a year ago. For the abortion doula work, I go to one of the clinics we have a partnership with and I support people through their abortion procedures. That is volunteer work but that's really my heart work and I try to do it as often as I can. My full-time work is speaking to the strains of culture shift and political shift. I work really hard to ensure that the people we're electing to office believe in reproductive health care and put forth legislation that is about empowerment, personal choice, information, and access to services. So, I'm spending my daytime job making sure those are the people who are elected to office, and in my personal time, supporting people individually through their abortion and birth experiences.

What impact do you hope that your work will have on others?

One thing that's really important to me in speaking to a cultural shift that I want to see is the way that we advocate and talk about abortion and reproductive health care, ensuring that we're not using prescriptive language in telling people what their experiences with abortion or birth control *should* be like, but really giving people the total freedom to experience their reproductive health care in a way that's totally their ownership and where they feel they can express all emotions all feelings regardless of what that looks like. One long term goal is to make sure that everyone has all of their reproductive options available to them. That means getting rid of the Hyde Amendment, getting rid of the global gag rule, and making sure that everyone has a clinic within driving range in order to access abortion care, where they can go home at night and don't have to travel just to access care.

In DC, we started up a network about a year ago to support people who have to travel for multi-day procedures and have been coming to DC because we have two clinics that support people beyond 24 weeks who are looking to terminate. So, knowing the experiences that those folks have and traveling alone to get the care they need. Not only legality, but access to services. So, just making sure that everyone has access in their own backyard, on their own terms for birth and for abortion.

In the greater DC area, how far do you see women traveling to access abortion?

In the US, there are roughly 5-10 clinics that perform abortion care after 24 weeks, and here in DC we have 2 of them. It means that we're getting 9-10 requests from patients every week who need housing



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and rides to clinics and escorts. We started up this completely volunteer network over a year ago now and we're seeing folks from all over the eastern seaboard.

Does this volunteer network have a name or somewhere online we can find out more information?

The network is called the DMV (DC-MD-VA) abortion practical support network. We are hopefully going to have a website but not yet. We work with the Brigid Alliance and with abortion funds around the country. If any of these funds have patients that need to travel for abortion, they refer them to us for assistance.

Can you tell me about something you've done in the field of women's health/empowerment/education that you've been the most excited about or proud of?

The network. It feels like an amazing accomplishment to know that we've helped with housing for over 20 individuals last year and over 150 rides. It's a very tangible thing. On the horizon, one thing that I'm excited about is I just secured a grant to host the first ever abortion doula/abortion emotional support gathering. This is really exciting because abortion doula work is not really seen as a part of mainstream abortion care and there are about thirty groups around the country and some in Canada and Mexico City who all provide emotional support for people and doula support through abortion. All the groups are almost completely volunteer run and have never met before or gone to a conference together. This will be the first time that there's a space specifically dedicated to these groups so that we can build community, talk about best practices, and continue to build out the network of abortion doulas with the vision that anyone who is having an abortion should have the option of emotional support and care.

What about what you do keeps you going each day?

The patients. Every patient that I am with during their procedure and just knowing that I am able to provide a resource and care and love that maybe wouldn't have been available otherwise is everything that I could need to keep me going. No matter what happens with policy and no matter what happens in terms of access to care, we know that people are going to continue have abortions by different means but emotional support will always be available. And for the people in the clinic at that very moment, the politics of it all don't matter, what matters is that this is their personal experience and that someone is there for them. That's what they'll hopefully remember -- that someone is there for them and caring for them in that moment, devoid of everything happening outside.

What makes it difficult to keep going?

Speaking specifically to this gathering, it is all volunteer run and it's been really difficult to get folks to commit to the organizing piece. It takes a lot of labor and love to run any volunteer entity, so just really finding community to build something when everyone has so much going on, so figuring out what's the



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balance of self-care and getting the work done. Respecting individuals but also moving the ball forward. It's always going to be a balance when it's work that's unpaid.

Another piece is how big and disjointed the reproductive rights, health, and justice movement is in the US. There are so many organizations who have different missions and goals and that can sometimes mean that we're not always working in concert with one another and we're not always working toward a shared strategic vision, and that can be harmful.

Can you speak to how you've experienced this and how we might bring people together more?

I've definitely seen this firsthand. One example is this new book that just came out that is all about supporting people in terms of accessing abortion care if Roe v. Wade were overturned and in that book there was so much left out in terms of all the community resources, like doula groups, practical support networks. And I think this shows that even for all this work in the movement, there isn't always visibility for everyone. Larger groups are always those that people will go to for information and resources, but it just means that people who are actually working in the community have to push a little bit harder to be at the table to ensure that their perspective is taken into account too. There's only so much energy for fighting so many awful things every day for reproductive health care, immigration, etc., that to have to do that internally too in movement where I know everyone's values are aligned and it's a shared mission, it's just tiring.

Where do you see yourself in the future? What do you hope to be doing?

I am really committed to culture shift around reproductive health care and reproductive health narratives, as well as emotional care and support and building out doula work for others so that everyone has access to that emotional support in their own communities. I don't totally know what that looks like, I think the gathering is sort of the first step in figuring that out, but I see myself continuing to work in the reproductive health, rights, and justice movement in a way that hopefully continues to move us forward.

What does being a young advocate mean to you?

Being a young advocate to me means making sure that young people's voices and unique experiences in terms of accessing care are always at the table. So when we're talking about differing policies, that young people are always included and represented at the table and that the different needs that young people have are always taken into consideration.

Being a young advocate means challenging the assumed perceptions and norms of what access looks like, what stories look like, and not being shy about questioning and poking holes in the strategic



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plan/policy or whatever we have before us. So being bold and asking questions and pushing us to think further.

What advice do you have for youth who want to take a bigger leadership role in issues that are important to them?

Don't be shy! It shouldn't matter what 'credentials' you have, in that the experience you're coming to the table with is valid, it's yours, and that is enough of a credential to have an opinion. So just being you and having lived your experience is enough qualification to be at the table, have an opinion, and to share that opinion and help shape that work around you based on your experience in your community.

An Interview with Women Deliver Young Leader, Jamie Quam



Let's start by talking about why you first became interested in women's health/empowerment /education. Is there a certain experience you remember that first sparked your interest?

The first time that I got deeply involved in women's empowerment and education was when I started working at a domestic violence shelter, which was my first job outside of my undergraduate career at UW Madison in Wisconsin. I was the development coordinator and it was the first time that I lived and breathed for a women's empowerment organization. I woke up and all I wanted to do was go to work and spend every single day there. I quickly learned that I loved doing development work because of the cause that I was working for.

How did this first experience shape your career path [work, school, etc.]?

I wanted to learn more about intimate partner violence from a public health perspective and that led me to apply to a number of public health graduate programs, and ultimately led me to Johns Hopkins University. When I got there, I realized there was this whole huge realm of women's empowerment, sexual and reproductive health, and policy opportunities. I realized how passionate I was about women's sexual and reproductive health policy. I started doing informational interviews and that led me to meet my mentor and now current supervisor at the Population Council.



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What work/activities/volunteering, etc. are you currently involved in around sexual and reproductive health or women's empowerment?

At the Population Council, we've been working on a project with UCSF-Bixby for the past year on reproductive health research and development advocacy. The field of reproductive health research and development is wholly under-funded and we know that by providing a variety of methods with different attributes increases the chances that a contraceptive user will be able to find an acceptable method for their lifestyle and fertility intentions. Unfortunately, new technologies are still needed, including ones that are lower cost, easier to use, user controlled, longer acting, fewer side effects, those that are for men specifically, etc. So far, we've done a landscape analysis with representatives from across the field, from pharma, to product developers, to donors. I'm also writing case-studies about the Mirena IUD and the Jadelle implant. We hope that this opportunity will spark new conversation and will lead to collective understanding about the need for new investment in reproductive health technologies.

The Council itself has made a lot of progress. More 170 women are using contraceptives developed by The Population Council or based on our technologies. This year, the USFDA just approved our newest contraceptive, a 1-year contraceptive ring called Annovera. This was really exciting for us and the team working on this project.

We really want to increase research and development funding because there are so many contraceptive products in the pipeline that need more funding to continue to develop. Our goal as a community is to help those products move forward.

What impact do you hope that your work will have on others?

I hope that that we help to contribute to the use of evidence in family planning and women's empowerment in the policy and programmatic realm.

Can you tell me about something you've done in the field of women's health/ empowerment/ education that you've been the most excited about or proud of?

One moment that I was excited about was cohosting a congressional briefing with former representative Joe Crowley on female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), which we know is a violation of the rights of the girls and women and has no health benefits. We did this with the Council's in country expert, Dr. Jacinta Muteshi, and what was really exciting about it was that we were putting evidence directly in the hands of representatives' staffers. It was particularly motivating because there was a spending package being put forward at the same time by former representative Joe Crowley for FGM/C prevention. Briefings are some of the most impactful opportunities I've had because they are a direct way of getting research and evidence out there for foreign policy in the US government.

What about what you do keeps you going each day?



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It goes back to evidence for me. Knowing that the work that I do contributes to the use of evidence in making policy and programs.

What makes it difficult to keep going?

At this time, not everyone is currently open to the use of evidence in their work.

Where do you see yourself in the future? What do you hope to be doing?

I hope to continue doing something like what I'm doing now but in a larger role where I'm picking up new projects that I can lead myself, or maybe something in policy analysis.

What does being a young advocate mean to you?

Being a young advocate means having a seat at the table and making room for your peers.

What advice do you have for youth who want to take a bigger leadership role in issues that are important to them?

Take stock of what you can do. If you're already in the field but want to do more, find small projects that you can volunteer yourself for. Put yourself forward and don't be afraid. If you're not already in the field, start by finding an organization and look for volunteering or internship opportunities. Then start doing informational interviews, connecting yourself with as many people as possible. Be open at starting at whatever level you can start at to build your way up into bigger roles.

Is there anything else that you'd like to say?

Our research is only useful if it is used, and that means being responsive to what's on the ground and relevant to the global dialogue. I'm inspired by the Population Council's ability to take our evidence and get it into the hands, including our own, of those who can make programs better or policies stronger and I'm humbled to be a part of that process.