

TOWARDS STRENGTHENING PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN



The Untold Stories of Women's Rights Leaders

KATIBA
Institute
Constitution as an Instrument of Change



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Women's Rights Leaders

ACRONYMS

- ❖ CBO- Community Based Organization
- ❖ CUC- Court Users Committee
- ❖ FGM- Female genital mutilation
- ❖ GVE- Gender Violence During Elections
- ❖ HIV/AIDS- Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus/
Acquired Immuno-deficiency Syndrome
- ❖ ICT- Information & Communication Technologies
- ❖ KI- Katiba Institute
- ❖ MPs- Members of Parliament
- ❖ NGOs- Non-Governmental Organizations
- ❖ SGBV- Sexual and Gender Based Violence
- ❖ TVET- Technical and Vocational Education and Training

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet is aimed at recognizing and celebrating women's rights community leaders who are making a difference at the grassroots level through leading different community development initiatives and challenging injustices on behalf of their communities. The book acknowledges women in community leadership positions and the role they play in empowering their communities through community activism, and acting as a link between the community and the leadership. The book provides an avenue for women's rights leaders to share their experiences in leadership and inspire future generations of women's rights leaders and young girls. The booklet also highlights the work that women's rights leaders are doing, with a view to change the negative narratives around women leadership, and making the public more appreciative and supportive of women. Each women's rights community leader featured in this booklet has been directly interviewed by Katiba Institute and the stories are told as narrated by them.

Katiba Institute (KI) with the support of National Endowment for Democracy (NED), has been spearheading an initiative which is aimed at strengthening civic and political participation for rural women's rights leaders from different regions in Kenya. KI has been engaging women's rights community leaders (hereinafter referred to as women leaders) through participant led leadership clinics to provide platforms for the women to engage and find long-lasting solutions to challenges they face, and further build up their public confidence. Through this initiative, KI seeks to encourage women's rights community leaders to speak up and reconstruct some of the negative traditional social perceptions, which suppress women's voices and restrict them from being vocal on matters affecting them. Further KI is working towards ensuring the women's rights community leaders understand their rights better and are actively informed on public and political affairs affecting their lives. While our interventions may be geared towards promoting women leadership, we are also making an effort to reach out to other actors within the communities including male actors to encourage them to become more appreciative and supportive of women's rights leaders. KI is also carrying out community outreach to challenge socio-cultural gender norms, stereotypes, beliefs and attitudes often used to discriminate against women and question their ability to lead. KI is further mobilizing women and girls to take action and influence decisions made by the people in power.

KI partnered with women's rights community leaders such as women's rights champions, youth leaders, community elders, civic educators, community mobilizers, religious leaders and women led networks among others. This was done through:

- 1** Creating opportunities for women to speak out and engage, and opening up safe spaces which support women leaders to gain the confidence, skills and knowledge to represent other women;
- 2** Encouraging women to get involved in leadership at the local and national level;
- 3** Nurturing women's leadership through exchange and documenting of lessons learnt and experiences and mentoring of young women leaders, through intercultural dialogues;
- 4** Working towards changing perceptions and challenging attitudes of communities, including of male actors towards women;
- 5** Strengthening existing platforms for civic and political engagement platforms for the women;
- 6** Increasing media exposure for the women leaders through providing opportunities for them to participate in discussions on local radio;
- 7** Legal-rights education, and awareness raising around elections and holding elected representatives to account.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS BOOKLET

The objectives of this booklet are among others;

1

To honour the work of women's rights community leaders by highlighting the work they do with a view of making the public more supportive of the initiatives they lead.

2

To document the stories and achievements of women's rights community leaders and allow for sharing of their leadership experiences in turn allowing for learning and having a better understanding of the initiatives they lead at the community level.

3

To inspire younger girls who are the next generation of women leaders at the community level to take up leadership and lead initiatives that could improve the lives of their communities.

4

To start conversations around the role that women community leaders and women's rights champions play in social transformation, most of whom may go unnoticed because of not being so popular in the political circles or mainstream media.

5

To highlight challenges facing women and girls from reaching positions of leadership and bring to the attention of the public and current leadership some of the most pressing issues that women leaders hope can be addressed to enhance their participation.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

‘Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for achieving equality, development, and peace…….’¹

Empowering women to participate fully in the social, economic, and political processes is key in ensuring that women's voices and interests are meaningfully represented in public and political affairs. While women empowerment may take different dimensions, it is essential, as a starting point, to look at women empowerment at the individual level, i.e., how women are using their skills, knowledge, self-confidence, and ambitions to influence change through their own choices and decisions. This is because when women have a sense of self-awareness on the capabilities they possess, it becomes easier for them to have the desire to learn and build on their skills and find ways to mobilize for resources they may need to fulfil their aspirations.

To have women speak up during meetings, for example, (be it at local chiefs' baraza meetings, community forums, campaign rallies, board meetings in schools or places of worship etc.), not only builds their public confidence but also motivates them to attend other meetings where they can present their concerns and negotiate for solutions to their problems. It is, however, important to note that participation of women cannot just be achieved through their attending meetings but rather through being able to freely express themselves and contribute to the discussions to the best of their capacity. For example, if women are invited to attend a meeting dominated by prominent political figures, they may shy away from giving contrasting views for fear of unfair dismissal of their contributions. This also means that in order to participate actively, women require an enabling environment and a neutral platform whereby they can openly speak without fear of reprisal or discrimination on the grounds of their gender and opinions. Additionally, to create an enabling environment, there is a need for communities to consider the social structures within which women operate, which could include: religion, education systems, cultural practices, government and economic markets, and the relations through which women negotiate their lives such as family, neighbours and authorities and how they tend to affect their effective participation.

¹Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action https://www.bdpfa_e.pdf

Interestingly, so many women out there may not be aware that their day-to-day actions actually amount to political engagement. This is because traditionally, politics has been linked to elections and holding political office and hence when you talk of politics very few people will think of other political processes such as public participation or participating in community-led initiatives, e.g., campaigning for a specific cause or escalating the problems the community is facing to relevant authorities to seek redress. While few women may be in leadership positions within the government, it is still possible that they could be actively participating in the political scene through other processes. Therefore, it is important that, even as we talk of empowering women to participate in political life, we make them, and the public, understand what political participation really entails.

Is it all about vying for political seats and voting?

No it is not. Political participation entails a broad range of actions that citizens can take to influence public policy or shape the decisions that affect their lives. Political participation can take the form of women expressing their opinions on how the societies they live in are governed, signing petitions to relevant government entities, participating in opinion polls, participating in political campaigns, and monitoring the performance of elected representatives. It could also include creating strategic partnerships with the government through formal committees where citizens can sit as members.



There are many more ways through which women could further be empowered to influence change. These could be through leading community development initiatives, participating in grassroots activism, vying for political posts, and becoming electoral observers. Women could also pursue educational opportunities that build on their basic leadership skills, take part in peace talks, and undertake advocacy and lobbying on behalf of their communities. Further, women could participate in media campaigns to challenge injustices and participate in the budget-making processes that encourage citizen participation. Women could also get involved in the civil society space and join self-help groups, which would allow them to access the resources necessary to participate in political life actively. However, despite all these opportunities to participate, women continue to struggle with under-representation, which has stopped them from impacting key institutions.

Who do we need to reach out to if we are hoping to actively get more women to participate in socio-political life?

Most people would probably be quick to think of approaching influential community members such as religious leaders and community elders, political leaders, or anyone with a level of influence over the community. Yes, they could possibly have a say in politics and the selection of leaders and cannot be ignored in the quest to have more women in leadership positions. This, however, does not guarantee the participation of women because most influential figures within communities operate on ideologies that appear to be patriarchal. Given a chance, they would easily front a male candidate over a female candidate.

Most may not recognize that there are women who are making a difference in their own unique way within different communities, and they continue to do this voluntarily. These are women who have earned respect over time and continue to represent the interests of their communities while holding accountable those in power. Many community members may look up to these women to help them solve problems they face and even consider them leaders due to their dedication and service to the community, without necessarily demanding something in return. They include women championing different rights within the communities, many of whom have been at the forefront in challenging injustices and making follow-ups with authorities on behalf of their communities. We could refer to these women as women's rights leaders or even women's rights champions due to their ability to influence the community members and their work in leading advocacy efforts around improving lives in the communities they come from.

2.0 WOMEN'S RIGHTS COMMUNITY LEADERS. WHO ARE THEY?

They are powerful agents of change who work individually or in groups to steer their communities in the right direction and are pivotal in addressing injustices and finding solutions to some of the socio-political challenges facing their communities. They also have the bargaining power to influence other leaders to take action on some of the most pressing issues affecting the communities which they come from. They further mobilize community members and inspire confidence in them to stand up for their rights and take action on matters affecting them by fostering a culture of community activism. Further, through their actions, they challenge injustices by bringing them to the public's attention, and they are also able to pursue justice on behalf of the communities by holding those in power accountable.

The nature of the work that women's rights leaders do is in most cases of a voluntary nature. They tend to work with minimal resources to carry out critical community development initiatives. This is mainly due to the barriers that exist to accessing formal channels of power and financial resources for the women community leaders despite their determination to serve their communities. For this reason, most of the women's rights leaders have opted to work with the limited resources they can get to create strategic avenues for voicing the concerns of their communities and putting pressure on the leadership to take action on some of the issues affecting their communities². These avenues as established by KI during the leadership clinics, include; women's groups, community-based initiatives working uniquely to address violations, public forums, local radio, organizing peaceful protests, and board meetings. The women leaders also participate in chiefs' barazas, public participation meetings, peace talks, and lobbying leaders within the local administration. The informal approaches have been vital in indirectly influencing formal decision-making and escalating issues from the community level to the leadership for action.

²**Beijing Platform for Action** https://archive.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/u1281/bdpfa_e.pdf paragraph 184. "Owing to their limited access to the traditional avenues to power, such as the decision-making bodies of political parties, employer organizations and trade unions, women have gained access to power through alternative structures, particularly in the non-governmental organization sector."



A participant shares her experiences during a workshop for women leaders organized by Katiba Institute

Who can be considered a women's rights community leader?

We often hear about women leaders who have made headlines for their accomplishments in the socio-political scenes and the respectable place they hold in different societies. Stories have been told of famous women leaders who have been instrumental in the fight for gender equality. In most cases, the stories focus on women leaders who have made an impact in history and even in the present, to a point of gaining massive recognition from the public. The reality is that there are more women's rights leaders out there than common knowledge may suggest, and in most instances, their stories go unnoticed due to factors such as limited exposure and opportunities to highlight the change they are impacting in their own ways. A women's rights community leader could be anyone from a trailblazing politician to a dedicated activist, to volunteers, women championing for different rights, members of women-led groups, village elders, community peacemakers, and the list goes on.

They do not have to be holding any specific position in power for them to be considered leaders because the leadership at the community level or in different professions is equally important.

2.1 DO WE HAVE A SHORTAGE OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE SOCIETY?

The reality is that women have been excluded from formal governance structures for a long time, which has resulted in some of their needs not being addressed at the decision-making tables. The Constitution of Kenya 2010³ gives clear provisions for the inclusion of women and even provides affirmative action to ensure women are adequately represented through the two-thirds gender rule and creation of affirmative positions in parliament and in county government structures. There has, however, been a reluctance on the side of the government to implement such directives, which has further resulted in women being left out of formal decision-making processes. Women face a myriad of gender-biased challenges in their quests for leadership, such as targeted violence, sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and negative stereotyping, which leaves them unable to freely exercise their rights and contribute to political discussions and debates on issues of concern. Giving women the opportunity to lead anywhere grants them greater control over matters affecting their lives. Further, it brings about change as they push to address the most pressing issues such as gender violence, poor service delivery in health facilities, extreme poverty levels that affect the productivity of women, among others, most of which tend to be overlooked when there are no women at the decision-making tables.

Interestingly, even as women continue to make important contributions to their communities and aspire to participate in political life actively, few feel confident in their ability to get elected or appointed to influential positions within local administration and government generally. This could be attributed mainly to the way women are socialized from a young age, whereby they are expected to be conservative while their male counterparts are encouraged to be outspoken and are rarely affected by the domestic burdens that hinder women from fully exploiting their potential. The women further lack the support and affirmation from certain sections of the community who may feel threatened by their zeal to reverse the traditional norms or wanting to take over roles that have, for the longest time, been the preserve of men. So many more constraints stand in the way of the active involvement of women, and so for there to be increased participation, there is a need to reverse the current trend whereby men dominate the socio-political scene mainly because they have the traits that have long been associated with leadership.

³Constitution of Kenya 2010

[https://www.klrc.go.ke/Article 27 of the Constitution of Kenya on equality and freedom from discrimination](https://www.klrc.go.ke/Article%20of%20the%20Constitution%20of%20Kenya%20on%20equality%20and%20freedom%20from%20discrimination)

2.2 WHAT ARE SOME OF THE PARTICULAR BARRIERS TO THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN FROM ETHNIC MINORITY COMMUNITIES?

Based on open discussions and insights from the leadership clinics held by KI in the different regions, a common finding was that cross-cutting obstacles stop women from being involved in decision-making at all levels of society. Women face all forms of violence — including gender violence during elections which affects their wellbeing and self-confidence; high poverty levels, which result in a lack of balance between domestic burdens and participating in leadership; and gender-based discrimination, which is built on the negative social perceptions that men make for better leaders than women. Barriers such as low literacy levels, discriminatory laws, such as those on land ownership and inheritance, and limited access to information further restrict women from becoming leaders or voting in elections. Political parties, which are considered vessels for ensuring women get elected, have also contributed to further marginalization of women by failing to ensure inclusion and prioritization of women in party lists, and coercing female candidates to step down to pave the way for male counterparts. The patriarchal nature of Kenyan politics has contributed largely to the exclusion of women who decide to contest even as independent candidates as they are faced with targeted violence during campaigns, stolen ballot papers, insults, sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and the list goes on. Interestingly, in some areas, women are not allowed to vote, and voting is left for the head of the family and in some cases, the women are forced into voting for particular candidates by male family members.

Women are also less likely to have the financial resources, connections, and influential contacts who can endorse them to the public and further increase their chances of being elected. Notably, even the women who manage to get elected or nominated to leadership positions continue to face daily gender-biased prejudice, harassment, and violence, and in extreme cases, they may be forced to step down to pave the way for a male counterpart to take up the positions. All these factors provide reasons why women are more likely to be excluded from decision-making and participating in public and political life.

Women, therefore, need to be supported through networks which not only include the women but also have mentors and more seasoned women leaders and sponsors who can support them in their work as women leaders. This can help the women have the voice and agency that is essential in elevating them to formal leadership. Further, having the right connections as a women leader is important in accessing crucial information, getting opportunities and resources required to run effective campaigns and development initiatives on behalf of communities.

2.3 HOW ARE WOMEN'S RIGHTS COMMUNITY LEADERS COMING TOGETHER TO ADDRESS BARRIERS TO THEIR PARTICIPATION?

For a long time, women have been marginalized in the formal leadership and governance structures, and they continue to face challenges in the political sphere while trying to acquire an equal footing to their male counterparts. And despite growing up hearing the rhetoric that prevented women from participating fully in politics and public life for a long time, most of the women KI has engaged with believe that if equipped with mentorship and a conducive environment, they could take up leadership positions.

Most of the women community leaders have resorted to pursuing leadership by coming together to create networks, women's groups and women-led organizations and community-based organizations within the civil society space, as an alternative means of pushing for change and mobilizing for resources to better serve and involve their communities in finding solutions to pressing problems. Most of the women's rights community leaders are attempting to operate by vying at the local level and national level with a view of accessing greater control over matters affecting their communities, and to meaningfully represent the voices and needs of women in decision-making.

The women are also using different networks and groups to reach out to other women within the community and mobilize them to stand up for their rights, and this includes the young girls who look up to them as mentors. Women are getting into politics through political parties or as independent candidates to increase their chances of getting elected at the local level and national levels. Further, women are acting as role models to the younger generation of women's rights leaders. The more experienced women's rights community leaders have been supporting younger girls in the different regions by providing them with mentorship and building their confidence to demand their rights and challenge inequalities. This has also been key in ensuring continuity of their work as women leaders beyond the current generation. The women leaders are also providing economic empowerment opportunities to other women and young girls, which include self-help groups, village loans and savings groups, education opportunities such as vocational training, and enrolling young girls into formal education systems. These include youth leaders, student leaders in different academic institutions, young girls in vocational training among others.



Caroline Gaita, Mzalendo Trust Executive Director, takes women leaders through a session on media engagement during a national meeting for women leaders held on September 2021 in Nairobi.

Encouraging and supporting women to take up leadership

The women's rights leaders are further encouraging and supporting other women to take up leadership roles and sourcing for opportunities that could elevate other women such as leadership clinics and targeted trainings such as legal rights awareness trainings, engaging in policymaking processes, public speaking, security trainings, and economic empowerment trainings which are very important in getting more women to influence decision-making processes. One of the insights we got from the leadership clinics in the different regions is that there were more women wishing to participate, for example, in elections, most of whom were keen on requesting for trainings that include: according to context, leadership and campaign skills, safety and security, knowledge of laws, political systems and structures, protection against gender violence during elections, access to information trainings and how to develop and propose agendas that uphold women's rights.

3.0 MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH STORYTELLING AND NARRATING LIVED EXPERIENCES- (STORYTELLING IN PROMOTING THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN)

Across the world, there is an emerging trend of women's rights leaders coming out to speak up on their experiences and tell their stories with a view of changing the narrative around women's leadership. Platforms such as Generation Equality⁴ have been used to spread the message of women's rights to participation and to narrate the stories of women as told by them. Storytelling could influence change as it could engender a greater understanding of societal issues and allow people to better reflect on how the issues affect them. It not only empowers the individual storyteller but also acts as an inspiration to other aspiring women and youth leaders, motivating them to pursue positions of influence and responsibility. Through storytelling, we can have empowered women rising up together to speak up and build solidarity, in turn strengthening movements that challenge the prevalent social, economic, and political barriers to their vision, voice, and agency.

Storytelling is educative and is also a powerful strategy for starting conversations around women's leadership. Studies have shown that once one narrates their story, they motivate other women to come out and share their experiences because of that feeling of solidarity whereby one realizes they are not alone in the struggle after all.⁵ Story sharing makes a big difference because it could propel powerful campaigns on changing negative perceptions of women's leadership and further create awareness on the importance of recognizing and supporting women's leadership. By giving an opportunity to the women to share their stories, you are not only giving them an opportunity to speak up but also amplifying their voices and countering the narrative around the capabilities of women to make good leaders.

The following are stories of some women's rights leaders who continue to inspire society through their work. The stories are taken from women's rights leaders in the different regions that Katiba Institute's project targeted, namely: Eastern, Western and Coastal Regions of Kenya.

⁴Generation Equality Forum- <https://forum.generationequality.org/action-coalitions>

⁵Women need to tell their own stories”

<https://www.evoke.org/articles/october-2020/achieve-gender-equality-women-need-tell-own-stories>

The stories are narrated as told by the women leaders but are not representative of KI's views as an organization. In their own words, the women's rights community leaders speak of their leadership journey, including challenges, achievements, and aspirations. The women further urge the public and communities at large to be more supportive of women leaders, and they also send out a message of hope and inspiration to the upcoming generation of young women leaders.

To support women leadership, the women point to the need for:

- 1** Getting more women to speak up on their leadership journey with a view of encouraging other women out there to start speaking up on their own experiences and draw lessons on how to remain resilient in their leadership journey.
- 2** Building an enabling environment for the participation of women by prioritizing and addressing challenges that hinder the participation of women, such as violence against women in elections.
- 3** Working in groups or networks that can speak in unison to challenge discriminatory power structures that leave out the interests of women.
- 4** Sending out a message of hope and inspiration to the future generations of women's rights community leaders for purposes of continuity of the fight for gender equality.
- 5** Reaching out to the public, including male actors and those in power to understand the great contributions women community leaders make.

3.1 TELLING MY STORY





HALIMA DIDA GOLICHA

A woman of faith perspective-"If interpreted and applied appropriately, culture and religion could foster peace and elevate women"

Halima Dida Golicha is making a difference in her community through taking the unique approach of using the ethical imperative, rootedness, and respect that communities tend to have for religion, to impact change. Halima is the chair of the Isiolo Women of Faith Network, an active organization that works towards countering Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), sensitization around ending FGM and forced marriages, ending conflict between communities, countering violent extremism, and addressing other social ills that affect the peace and stability of community members. Halima has also been at the forefront in the fight against COVID-19 and some of the surge in SGBV incidents that came about with the loss of jobs and enforcement of containment regulations such as curfews which put so many women at risk of being exposed to violence.

Some years back, Halima was just a hardworking young woman with some aspirations for her community, mainly because she grew up experiencing the inter-community conflicts that had been in existence for a long time. Halima and a few of her colleagues came together to start a Community Based Organization in Isiolo with the view of addressing peace and security issues in the area and fostering peace between the clashing communities.

With time, Halima says, she tried to initiate proposals on the need for advocacy around women's rights which also meant that women should be included in the peace and security processes, but her male colleagues were totally against it, and they rejected the proposal. As a result of this, Halima decided to leave the group, and she went ahead, with other like-minded colleagues, to form a CBO that advocates for women's rights.

Halima, through her voice and the Isiolo Women of Faith Network has managed to get the support of her community and she has played a far-reaching role in peace and negotiations despite coming from a deeply patriarchal community where women's voices are suppressed. Halima's efforts have also been recognized by the National Honors and Awards Committee in Kenya which recommended her to be among those awarded the Head of State Commendation by the president during Heroes' Day, also known as "Mashujaa" day. Halima believes religion, if interpreted the right way could be an opportunity for women to raise awareness among communities and change negative perceptions through faith-based teachings. "Religion brings together people from different backgrounds and it could bridge the divisions brought about by tribalism, racism, class, and gender biased discrimination because it provides opportunities for people to gather and worship while socializing. It becomes easier to convince people to accept an ideology through religious teachings because sometimes misinterpretation is what leads to discrimination against women" says Halima. She adds that it is also important to be respectful of other people's religions and beliefs as a women leader because we have different faith groups in Kenya. She urges religious leaders to take up the task of ensuring communities become appreciative of women leadership because they have the influence it takes to convince masses on what is right or wrong.

Her advice to the young generation of women leaders: Halima advises upcoming women leaders to stand up against actions that deliberately exclude the voices and contributions of women especially where negotiations to include women have failed. Halima adds that women could always come together with like-minded individuals to come up with alternative initiatives that would promote women's rights and inclusion in important matters of the society. She also advises the younger generation to look at religion as an opportunity for impacting social change and giving a voice to women.



ZAHARA GODANA

"Women need to access information to exercise their rights. Can we do something about this?"

Meet Zahara Godana, a youth community leader residing in Bula Pesa ward in Isiolo. Zahara is a lawyer by profession, and she is passionate about helping her community. She went to school in Nairobi, but upon completing her studies, she decided that she had to go back home and contribute to empowering women and youth to understand their rights and actively participate in matters affecting their lives. Zahara adds that she went back to see if she could make a difference with the education she had acquired through the support of her community. Zahara attended several trainings, and she recalls one training which was a turning point in her leadership journey. The training was on Access to Information, and she adds that it was an eye-opener for her since she realized that most people within her community had no information on how the county government system operates and did not know how to hold their leaders accountable. She linked most mistakes that people make even during elections to limited access to information on how to effectively participate in the electoral process. According to Zahara, most people residing in rural areas are not aware of the rights that they are entitled to enjoy as Kenyan citizens and are often short-changed when it comes to the provision of social services.

Zahara then decided to take action together with other community members by starting an online platform called "Isiolo Rights Watch". They started out by trying to understand the challenges that the public was facing in accessing accurate information on happenings within the county and nationally.

They had hoped that, by providing authentic information on happenings within the county, they would be able to counter misinformation that misleads the public to make wrong choices. Zahara adds that she used the platform to not only address governance issues but also to track the development record of elected leaders, to see whether developments were being done for the benefit of the public or to serve the selfish interests of the politicians. Zahara and her team ensured that the platform was non-partisan, though they faced challenges whereby at first, there were allegations that they had been sponsored by rival camps of politicians to taint the image of other politicians. This is despite the platform they formed not looking at the negatives only but also appreciating the good work that was being done by the leaders.

"How else do you get people to participate if you do not give them the information?, how many people know where to get public information held by government institutions and access accurate information?", she remarks. Zahara notes that they made the platform an information-sharing centre whereby they would update the public on events as they happened within the county. They would share job opportunities, public participation calls, the outcome of meetings held by leaders, any major construction developments planned within Isiolo County, the happenings at the national level, etc. Zahara further used the platform to advocate for youth issues and the inclusion of women in the governance structures within the county. She noted that at some point, the sitting governor had appointed a team that did not include a single woman and did not comply with the gender rule, and they used the platform to pile pressure on the county government to rethink the decision. Zahara was strategic in the membership of the platform, and she made sure that some of the county officials were part of the platform and could easily be reached to answer the public on matters they needed clarity on.

She went a step further and started a Facebook page for women, and it was purely for women empowerment, a platform where women could showcase what they do, the businesses that they undertake, the kind of services that they provide, and interact. The group has grown immensely and has a wide membership, and she hopes to recruit a co-administrator from her community. According to Zahara, the work she does is voluntary, and even as she continues to work on the initiative, she hopes to bring on board like-minded visionary women community leaders to work with her. Zahara points to the need for women leaders to come together and devise ways of accurately sourcing information and reporting it to the public in a simplified manner.

In her parting shot, Zahara says, "times have changed, and the women we had in the past are not the same women we have currently. More women are coming out to learn about their rights and equally exercise them. No woman could vie against a male candidate in the past, and now there are more women leaders in positions such as women representative Rehema Jaldesa and nominated Senator Habshiro Halake alongside other nominated women leaders. We now have opportunities, and a woman can stand and talk, a major shift from the traditional ideologies that restricted women from being outspoken and shunned education for women". Zahara is very proud of her achievements and advises her community members to understand the value of educating a girl and supporting women to enrol in educational institutions regardless of their age. She urges women and young girls to pursue education, be it through trainings, certificate courses, or vocational courses- which she believes empower women to take charge of their lives and make decisions from an informed point of view.



ELIZABETH IBRAHIM EKARU

"We have to overcome our fears, for fear is the worst enemy of women empowerment!"

Elizabeth Ekaru traces her leadership journey back to 1998 when she was the Chairperson of Turkana Dancers, a dancing group that used art to spread the message of peace and unity to communities that were constantly clashing. At the time, Elizabeth was also appointed to the Isiolo peace and resolution committee, a caucus formed to foster peaceful co-existence and cohesion among the different communities in Isiolo County. She also served as the chairperson of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, Isiolo Central Division.

Elizabeth has been widely involved in several peacebuilding and conflict resolution campaigns since the late '90s. Her story is one of resilience, perseverance, and never being willing to let go of her cause. Elizabeth recalls at one time she was caught in the middle of a cattle-rustling tussle. At the time, her homestead was intruded on by cattle rustlers from a neighbouring community who stole her livestock and killed 3 of her herdsman. When she went to report the incident, she was unlawfully detained and was only released upon intervention by a human rights group that recognized her and was able to convince the authorities that she could not have been involved in the crime in question. This, she says, motivated her to continue her fight for peace not just within her community but also in the neighbouring communities. Elizabeth felt that most of the conflicts at the time were a result of misunderstanding and bad leadership, and she, therefore, sought to try and establish good relations with the other communities by getting involved in peace talks and campaigns.

Being a woman was very challenging because there were times when she would be sent away from meetings where elders were discussing matters because traditionally, women were not allowed to speak during such meetings. She spoke of an instance involving clashes between the Maasai and neighbouring Kikuyu community in which a church had been burnt, and she decided to go for the peace negotiations, which were being handled by elders drawn from both sides. She made it clear that she had gone there to represent the voices of the women and see how they could be involved in bringing about peace but was told that she couldn't meet the men and should instead go back to her community and bring men to speak during the meeting. Seeing as it was already late, she asked her son, who had accompanied her to the meeting, to relay her message, after which she was asked to speak as they felt she was there for a good cause. In another peace negotiation meeting in Garissa County, Elizabeth says that she was not allowed to speak, but she kept asking questions until she was given an opportunity to speak, and some of the men even walked out and left. She was vocal on equal compensation for both male and female victims of clashes, and after some time, the men walked back into the meeting. She says she was able to convince them that women can be good mediators and peace champions.

Elizabeth has bagged several awards in her journey as a women's rights leader. These include the Head of State Recommendation Award during the Mwai Kibaki regime, at a time when she was serving as the chairperson of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake organization. This followed her efforts to resolve conflict during the ethnic clashes in the Rift Valley region around the year 2005, involving unrest in Kirema, Mai Mahiu, and Naivasha. Elizabeth also continued to advocate for the rights of children and women, who she felt were the most affected by armed conflict and were also marginalized in the peace-making processes due to the patriarchal nature of the communities. Elizabeth then joined the Isiolo Voice of Women Network as vice-chairperson, a role in which she continued to fight for the rights of young women and girls and also to promote the agency and economic empowerment of women. She was also part of caucuses such as the Burat Citizen Forum. Additionally, due to her commitment and advocacy, Elizabeth was nominated to represent Isiolo in the BOMAS national constitutional conference as part of the process that led to the creation of the 2010 Constitution of Kenya.

Elizabeth, through her work and determination, was appointed peace ambassador representing a group of women from 12 counties who had a goal of enhancing peace and security in the different areas they came from. Currently, Elizabeth is a board member of the Isiolo Gender Watch. She continues to mentor young girls in different wards and across the counties of Kenya.

Elizabeth is also at the forefront in mitigating the impacts of climate change in her community and in other pastoralist communities.

Her message to the younger generation of women leaders: Elizabeth's advice to women and young girls is that they shouldn't give up on anything. She says, "Younger girls and women should strive to move forward and take the lead in advocating for women's rights and take up the responsibility to ensure nobody is left behind when it comes to participation and development. Currently, we have women in leadership who are performing way better than their male counterparts. If you look at different organizations, you will find out that those led by women are performing better; it is where you can get justice actually. If you go to places like the hospitals, you will find out that women are in large numbers, and I appreciate all the women in that field. I would like to tell women in parliament that we, as women leaders in the grassroots, support them, and if there is a bill concerning women that should be passed, they shouldn't give up or escape from it. They should be in the front line on any matter that concerns the women".



AFYE MBARAK

"We have to remain brave for every small step is a milestone in this journey"

In Shella, Malindi township, we meet Afye Mbarak, a dedicated women's rights community leader and a peace and security champion. Afye is also the chairperson of the sub-committee on the prevention of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in the Court Users Committee in Malindi.

Afye Mbarak traces her leadership journey back to a time when she was a young girl of school-going age. "..... I grew up in an area that was known for all social ills including drug abuse, human trafficking, students dropping out of school to join gangs and become beach boys mainly due to poverty", Afye remembers. She adds that the presence of tourists in the area, most of whom would target young girls and boys for romantic relationships, influenced a lot of adolescents and youth to drop out of school with the hopes that they would find a better life from the foreigners — most of whom would also provide them with the drugs to sustain their addiction. Afye says that, initially, she kept asking herself where the problem was, and as a young girl, she felt that someone had to do something about the situation and help the victims reform. Afye remembers a time when youths were dying due to ignorance and lack of information on the management of HIV. She says such happenings motivated her to start advocacy during her youth. Afye at the time lived with her parents, and it was not uncommon to see a neighbour or a community member asking for a hand in marriage from the parents of young girls once they reached the adolescent stage.

She says that this was mainly linked to culture and religion, whereby a girl was considered an adult once she reached puberty. Afye worked hard in school and convinced her parents not to marry her off at a young age. This forced her parents to move her to another town in order to allow her to complete her studies and look at life from a different perspective. She says the environment was full of peer pressure, and the community would judge one harshly for refusing to give out their daughter for marriage.

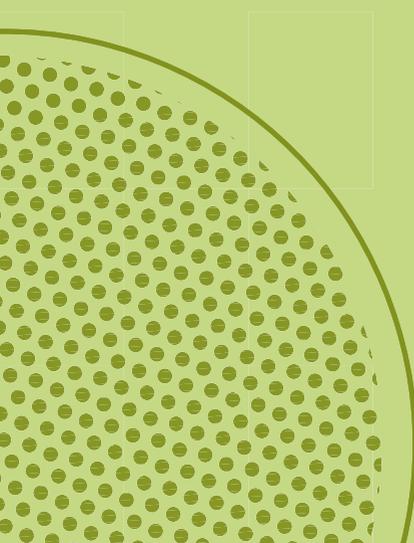
Upon completion of her education, Afye went back to Malindi only to find that the situation was even worse than before. Some of her peers were in abusive marriages, some were wallowing in the world of drugs and alcohol addiction, and others were just wasting away with nothing constructive to do. Afye felt that it was the right time to intervene now that she had gone to school and had acquired some knowledge. She decided to start by volunteering in a local hospital and later joined family health options to support a program on peer education and community camp service. Through these opportunities, she started undertaking sensitization on HIV/AIDS and was further trained in providing free counselling services to victims. Afye adds that the lack of awareness of the disease had resulted in the loss of many young lives, some of whom could have made important contributions to improving the community had they known how to manage the effects.

Concerned, Afye came up with a plan to mobilize a few women who shared a common vision with her to start a local group called Shella Shifaa Women Group with the objective of assisting the vulnerable within the community including those living with HIV/AIDS, fighting SGBV within the community, and advocating for the education of young girls. The group also worked towards addressing the issue of early marriages and teenage pregnancies, which affected the development of young girls. The group also assisted girls in enrolling in different TVET institutions through which they could acquire skills to set up businesses and also create jobs for other girls within the community. Through the group, Afye tried to source funding by applying for development funds and tenders within the county, but she was disappointed when she faced sexual harassment. That was, however, not the only source of resistance because Afye also started receiving threats from some of the people within the community who were involved in unscrupulous trade and deals that were not only misleading the youth but also forcing girls to drop out of school with the promise of a better life.

Afye says that all the challenges only made her stronger, and she continued with her fight against what she felt was pulling her community backward. With time Afye was recognized by the community and authorities for her work. She started getting invitations to attend chiefs' barazas and security meetings where she would represent the voices of women in her community. Afye currently sits on the Peace and Security Committee in Malindi Sub-County in Kilifi. She is proud of herself and the impact she is making within the community. Afye uses radio and other media to reach and sensitize her community members, and she is also invited to different stations to speak on issues affecting women, girls, and youth within the community.

Her message to the younger generation of women leaders:

Afye advises the upcoming generation of women leaders to be resilient and resist peer pressure which could make them lose their focus. She says that times have changed, and unlike in the past when women would not be recognized at all, communities are beginning to be more receptive to women leaders, and therefore, with the right determination, they can make a large impact. Afye further emphasizes the need for the more experienced women leaders to support younger women leaders and act as mentors to them. She further urges the public to be supportive of women community leaders because the efforts they put in are for the benefit and betterment of the community at large. Afye also calls on the public and authorities to prioritize the involvement of women in different activities, be it projects at the community level or community meetings, to ensure their contribution to community development.



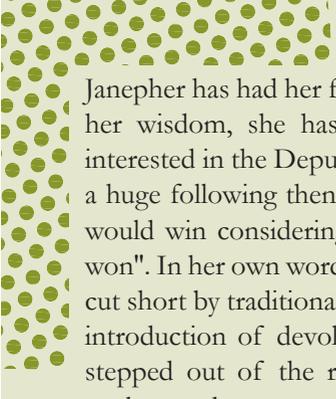


JANEIPHER MBATIANY

"The journey isn't easy for us, but we should push forward always"

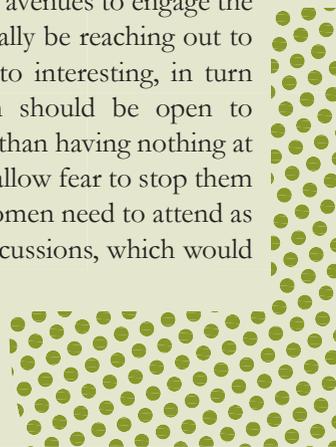
Meet Janepher Mbatiany, a women's rights leader from Mt Elgon, Kenya. Janepher started out as a dedicated activist working under the umbrella body of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, which supports women by nurturing and empowering them socially, economically, and politically to be able to deal with the unique challenges they face in society. She has in the past been a parliamentary aspirant in Mt Elgon and has also vied for the Deputy Governor position in Bungoma County. She has been actively involved in the peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts around Mt Elgon, an area that has historically been affected by ethnic and land resource conflicts. She has been at the forefront in holding leaders within her area accountable through their development record and performance.

Janepher has also been involved in rescue efforts of young girls within her community who have been forced to undergo FGM and early marriages. She has been encouraging young girls and victims of FGM to go back to school and build their futures. Janepher also works as an SGBV advocate. She continues to condemn outdated and harmful cultural practices that destroy the lives of girls and women and affect their productivity and ability to exploit their full potential in life. She has also been a gender advisor to the governor of Bungoma County. This is despite operating in a context whereby leadership is associated with men, and women are considered to be children or not mature enough to lead.



Janepher has had her fair share of challenges as a women's rights leader, but through her wisdom, she has managed to rise above the challenges. She recalls being interested in the Deputy Governor position when devolution was introduced. "I had a huge following then and had mobilized enough supporters, and I was sure that I would win considering I was initially a running mate to the candidate that finally won". In her own words, Janepher says that her bid to become Deputy Governor was cut short by traditional beliefs and coercion by elders who felt that the seat being the introduction of devolution deserved to be handed to a male candidate. She later stepped out of the race but continued to mobilize her supporters and tried to explore other opportunities for getting into leadership. Eventually, she was appointed as the gender advisor to the Governor of Bungoma County, and she felt this was a win for women despite earlier disappointments. According to her, she was glad that her efforts had been recognized and saw it as an opportunity to carry forward the agenda of women. Janepher continues to support women and mentor them through Mwanga Women CBO and other initiatives such as the Chamtayet Women Development Initiative and the Berur women group in Kapsokwony. She continues to sensitize the community and acts as an inspiration to many young girls in school and members of her community.

Her message to the younger generation of women leaders: Janepher's message to the younger generation of women leaders is that the journey will not always be easy but how you handle the challenges you face and how you own your leadership journey is what will help you sail through. In her own words, she says that women leaders should develop a thick skin and not react to every stone thrown at them as it could result in frustrations and loss of focus. "You have to hold your head up high and tell yourself that this is your cause, and nothing should stop you from achieving your goal", Janepher says. She encourages women to foster good relations with all community members and sections of the public, and even though there may be some resistance from people who may feel threatened by their determination, with time, they will start seeing results and become supportive of them further expanding their support base. Janepher also urges women to look for strategic avenues to engage the authorities. She notes that declaring to vie in itself would ideally be reaching out to current leaders and sponsors who might find your manifesto interesting, in turn pledging support for you. Further, she says that women should be open to negotiating opportunities because getting something is better than having nothing at all. Janepher concludes by urging women to be vocal and not allow fear to stop them from expressing their views and being heard. She adds that women need to attend as many meetings as possible and speak or contribute to the discussions, which would slowly build on their confidence and public speaking.



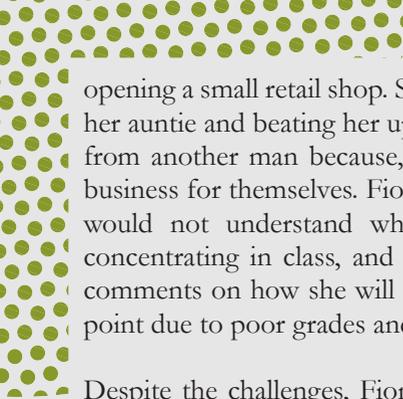


RACHEL FIONA

"We have to learn to start out young and take lessons from those that came before us"

Meet Rachel Fiona, a young women leader from Malindi who identifies as a peer counselor, anti-human trafficking activist, SGBV advocate, child protection activist, mental health advocate, and psychologist by profession. Fiona is very passionate about the education and empowerment of girls, especially those from marginalized areas. Fiona is also a co-founder of a community-based organization known as "She is more" which works on issues of peace and security, ending gender-based violence, women empowerment, countering human trafficking, child protection, parenting, leadership and governance, adolescence and youth sexual reproductive health, and rights and mental health. Fiona and her colleagues have managed to get support from an organization called "The Impact Project", to build an empowerment hub for the youth.

Her leadership journey: Fiona's leadership journey began when she was young, having been raised in a household where she was constantly exposed to episodes of domestic violence by her then guardian. Fiona was a very good student in school and often performed very well despite the challenges of school fees and an environment which she describes as not very conducive for a girl to grow up in. She narrates how her guardian at the time was very negative about her education, and she constantly faced demoralization and was often told that girls should stay at home and not attend school because school is for boys. She says as a young girl, this broke her heart but did not deter her from continuing with her education. At some point, the situation in the home they were living in was challenging as her aunt tried to economically empower herself by joining a self-help group for women, which supported her in



opening a small retail shop. She says that this resulted in her aunt's husband attacking her auntie and beating her up while demanding to know whether she got the money from another man because, according to him, women could not afford to start a business for themselves. Fiona faced further challenges at school in that the teacher would not understand why she went to school late or appeared not to be concentrating in class, and for this reason, the teacher would make demoralizing comments on how she will never make it in life. She had to repeat classes at some point due to poor grades and the financial situation back home.

Despite the challenges, Fiona did not give up and did not allow the demoralizing comments from family members and her teachers to kill her dream. In form 2, she applied for a student exchange programme that facilitated her travel to the United States for a year, where she was taken up by a host family. Fiona says she was surprised that, for once, she could sleep in peace without fear of someone starting a domestic wrangle in the middle of the night. She also says she learnt quite a lot on how SGBV cases were handled with the sensitivity they deserve in first-world countries, and when she came back, she advised her aunt to report the violations she was facing in her marriage to FIDA and the authorities. Upon completion of her secondary education, Fiona enrolled for a certificate course in psychology, and she later volunteered for the Red Cross Society- a period she says gave her a clear picture of the challenges that women and young girls from marginalized communities face, from their voices being suppressed due to patriarchy to not being entitled to inheritance and land ownership. Cases of defilement and teenage pregnancies were also on the rise, and Fiona says all this motivated her to start fighting for the rights of marginalized women and young girls in rural Kilifi.

She currently volunteers as a counsellor at "Action at Duke", where she mentors schoolgirls who have been assessed and enrolled in EFL (Education for Life Program) after which they are enrolled for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to undergo training in apprenticeship courses such as hairdressing, tailoring, plumbing, electrical engineering, entrepreneurship, etc. Fiona has also been involved in peer education initiatives for adolescents and youth in schools in the marginalized rural areas of Magarini in Kilifi County. She is also the clerk at the Kilifi Youth Assembly (Bunge la Vijana), a caucus that works towards addressing problems affecting the youth in Kilifi County and allows the youth to make important contributions to public affairs affecting them through engaging the county government.

Fiona hopes to mentor more young girls and also reach out to other women who may not be aware of their rights to mobilize them to stand up for themselves and further support other women leaders, and demand equality. Fiona points to the need for women to work in solidarity to end the discrimination against women leadership because, according to her, the future is female.



MAGDALENE THUVAH

"To try once is not enough. The race for inclusion requires a fighting spirit and self-motivation to keep going"

Magdalene Thuva introduces herself as a mother, a woman community leader from the Giriama community, and a psychologist by profession. She is also an advocate for the rights of young women and girls, and she runs a local CBO in Kilifi known as Dawn For Women, which targets victims of SGBV, and young girls affected by pregnancy. She offers pro-bono counselling through psychosocial support to households affected by SGBV and unplanned early pregnancies. She rescues women affected by SGBV and helps them to get justice. She further intervenes in situations whereby girls drop out of school due to pregnancy and strained relations with their parents brought about by teenage pregnancy. Magdalene speaks of how she offers to counsel parents affected by teen pregnancies and further offers livelihood support and school fees to enrol their children back in school. Magdalene always seeks opportunities for the young girls she supports through individual sponsors, bursaries, scholarships, and NGOs. Magdalene intimates that poverty is the main contributor to early pregnancies and SGBV, and therefore, a lot of awareness-raising needs to be done to promote education and economic empowerment for women regardless of their age.

Magdalene is also dedicated to ending violence against women during elections because she has been a victim in the past. She narrates the challenges she faced when she at one time she decided to vie for a member of parliament position. In her own words, "...I faced a lot of discrimination and resistance, which I could see from the very moment I declared my interest to vie for a political position", Magdalene Says.

"I became a victim of party politics whereby I was moved from one party to another because apparently there were other preferred candidates for the position. The nominations were shambolic, and in the end, my name was unfairly removed from the ballot", she says. Magdalene adds that she was discouraged from pursuing the position of member of parliament and coerced into vying for the lower ranking seat of a member of the county assembly, which meant she would be representing the ward, unlike the member of parliament position, which meant she would be representing an entire constituency. Upon raising her grievances, she was insulted, and she had to walk on foot to go report the matter to the nearest police station. She added that the move to lock her out of the MPs race did not discourage her, and she continued with her work even though she was demoralized as no assistance was forthcoming. She then stated that later on, when there was a repeat of the presidential elections in 2017, she was approached by the party to be the secretary of the campaign group, and even though she was not happy with the way she was treated earlier, she felt it was still a step towards ensuring inclusion. She added that she still remains a leader and an SGBV champion, and she still has aspirations for participating in elections in the near future.

Her advice to upcoming women leaders: Magdalene's advice to upcoming women leaders is that they should be ready to face a lot of challenges, but how they go about tackling the problems and emerge victoriously is what matters most. She adds that, throughout her leadership journey, she has met all sorts of characters, including people who demand handouts in order to sit down and listen to her. She says that as a women leader, you need to identify volunteers and community members who are interested in development initiatives to stand with you and support your cause. She says that creating a culture of giving people handouts whenever they demand for it could be leeway to being blackmailed and does not necessarily guarantee that the people will be devoted to supporting your cause. She, however, adds that it is important to mobilize resources that are required to successfully run campaigns and that women leaders should always explore funding opportunities in preparedness for any election. "The future is bright since we already have women in leadership and more are willing to take up the challenge", says Magdalene.



CONSOLATA LOMILIO

"We have to come together and change the narratives that keep dragging us behind in this journey"

Meet Consolata Lomilio, a women leader from the Turkana Community residing in Isiolo County; she is a woman leader and chairlady of "Isiolo Voice of Women Network", which consists of 70 groups led by women and youths. Consolata, through her network, has been able to contribute to the economic empowerment of women through the creation of a Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA), of which most women in her community have been beneficiaries.

Consolata traces her leadership journey back to a time when she would witness evident discrimination and mistreatment of women around her. Consolata says, "In the community where I come from, women are the ones that bear the domestic burden of providing food for the family through farming and doing menial jobs, and surprisingly the money they make from the farm produce or the menial jobs they do is taken by their husbands". She further reveals to us that the women often face violence and are not allowed to challenge the decisions of their husbands or stand up to elders. Consolata attributes this to the cultural attitudes brought about by patriarchy and some of the community members, such as elders leading anti-SGBV efforts, which focus on putting families together at the expense of the well-being of the women.

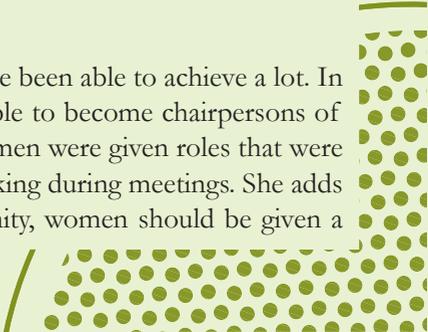
Consolata came to a realization that most of the women in her community were facing mistreatment due to the high poverty levels and lack of education which made

them depend on men to make critical decisions about their lives. Consolata had a vision of economic empowerment of the women in her community to provide them with the resources they require to better their lives and make better choices regarding their lives. She joined forces with like-minded women on the ground, and they formed "Isiolo Voice of Women", to represent the voices of women.

Consolata also envisioned a situation whereby girls would be educated, and early marriages would be a thing of the past. She says that teenage pregnancy rates were high, and girls were dropping out of school, which meant that the marginalization of women would continue. Consolata came up with an idea to start a mentorship programme whereby she would visit schools and speak to adolescents on early pregnancies and encourage girls to take their studies seriously in order to come back and make an impact in their community. She would mobilize resources and provide girls in school with sanitary towels and soap to ensure their well-being and concentration in their studies. Consolata has dialogues with young girls and encourages them to join school clubs and other extra-curricular activities, which would keep them busy and engaged. Consolata adds that through the mentorship programme, they have been able to come up with a club for girls which meets every month to discuss and encourage the girls to speak up on any plans of marrying them off or domestic labour burdens back at home that affect their performance and hinder them from attending classes.

In her work, she says that she is faced with many challenges mainly because she has to use the little resources that she can mobilize to visit different schools to mentor the young girls and also to respond to cases of FGM and young girls being forcefully married off. Consolata says that the distances are long, and it is not easy to travel and cover all areas to sensitize women, most of whom do not have means of accessing information as a result of residing in very remote areas. She is also faced with the risk of being attacked and insulted for the work she does. Consolata recalls an ordeal where she had gone to sensitize a neighbouring community on the need to educate young girls and put an end to FGM. She was attacked and insulted because they felt that she had gone there to look for votes and take up positions meant for them. The attacks she says came mainly from the men who are accustomed to women being marginalized and not being able to speak up on it or have someone to represent their concerns.

Consolata adds that things are changing, and they have been able to achieve a lot. In schools, they have women leaders who have been able to become chairpersons of boards, a shift from the traditional system where women were given roles that were not so important, which would restrict them from talking during meetings. She adds that, through advocacy and lobbying in the community, women should be given a



chance to lead, and they have been able to take up those chances of leadership positions such as chairpersons, and those posts that involve decision making at the community level. Also, they have been able to connect with the office of the county woman representative, which has been able to recognize and support women's groups in their community by issuing tents and books for table banking. This has further helped women to access loans and to save money to sustain themselves.

As a women's rights community leader, she remains at the forefront in advocating for the rights of women and young girls and making the voices of women heard. She has been to several radio stations to sensitize the communities against FGM and encourage women to demand for their rights, including land ownership. Consolata has been able to mobilize women around her community to engage the leadership in a land grabbing case, which could potentially result in the displacement of communities in the affected area. Consolata reached out to the women representative and the senator and also took the initiative together with other community members to file a case in court on the land injustice in question. She continues to involve the women in the community in the case as they await direction from the court.

Her message to the younger generation of girls: Consolata's advice to the younger generation of women is that nothing is impossible and what men can do, a woman can do much better. She urges girls to come out in large numbers and speak up against injustices. She asks girls not to give a blind eye to mistreatment and unfair denial of opportunities to fellow women. "...Girls should be confident and use their voices to challenge institutional mindsets which portray women as voiceless. Even in schools, girls should not think that a certain position such as school captain or a certain subject is meant for boys only", Consolata adds. Consolata believes that with the current crop of strong-willed women leaders in Isiolo, it won't be surprising to see women taking up majority of the positions within county government and national assembly, in the coming 5 or so years. In her opinion, a time will come when tables might turn, and it will be the men who will have to benefit from affirmative action and nominations. "... Women have started to open up their eyes and take action for themselves and this is evident as we now have women in leadership in Isiolo, who were duly elected, and they have been able to set good precedents to be emulated by other women. The women representatives have brought the Isiolo community together and have made services accessible to everyone, and that has encouraged and motivated more women to engage in politics. Even in the remote areas, we encourage women to support fellow women who aspire for leadership positions", says Consolata. In conclusion, she says that in the times to come, women will take up more leadership positions, and it will even be possible to have a female president in Kenya. We just have to keep up the hope.



AZIZA ISAACK GODANA

"Let us support our girls to go to school for education is empowering not just to the current generation but to future generations too"

Aziza is a women leader, livelihood specialist, trainer, and community mobilizer who is very passionate about the empowerment of women and youth within her community. Aziza is a member of different women-led networks within Isiolo, and she has been very vocal about the economic empowerment of women and youth in her area, including members of pastoralist communities.

Growing up in Isiolo, Aziza experienced her fair share of challenges. Aziza is born to parents coming from two different tribes with contrasting cultural views and beliefs. Due to the cultural differences that came in play in her parents' marriage, she grew up facing discrimination, which motivated her to work hard in school and also start empowering women and young girls in the community. Aziza is grateful to her mother because she managed to go against societal expectations and raised her single-handedly, and instilled good values in her, which in turn motivated her to become a fighter and an advocate for women empowerment. Aziza believes education is an important tool in emancipation of women. She narrates how she would do casual jobs and save money which she used to enroll for a diploma course in community development, which has enabled her to work with different organizations working towards improving lives of communities.

Aziza is currently making a change by participating in the BOMA Project, an initiative that seeks to empower women with the skills and confidence to become entrepreneurs and respectable leaders in communities that are deeply patriarchal in nature. Through the initiative, Aziza and her team are also empowering women largely affected by poverty to participate in income-generating activities to raise their living standards and provide basic needs for their families, such as food and education for their children. Further through their work, they are empowering women to take the lead in fighting the effects of climate change, such as drought, which negatively impacts women and productivity when it comes to agriculture.

Her advice to the younger generation of women leaders: Aziza believes that women have the potential to become good leaders of the future. She says, “our current fight for equality is what will determine how the upcoming generation of women leaders will be treated. With more and more women taking up leadership positions and delivering exceptionally, the chances are that in future it will be impossible to not consider women for important positions”. She advises young girls to take every challenge they face as a learning opportunity to improve themselves and that of their communities. It is also important to accept compliments and criticism from people because it takes both the sun and rain to make a flower bloom”.



WANJIRU MBURU- (JAJABDHU FEMME)

"Women are gifted in so many ways and we have the ability to use our power to empower others"

In Isiolo, we meet Wanjiru Mburu, a young and vibrant youth leader and a co-founder of "Jajabdhu Femme" (Voice of young girls advocating for women's rights), an afro-feminist community-based organization working towards supporting the realization of the rights of women and young girls. Having grown up in rural Isiolo, where women continue to face challenges when it comes to accessing resources and critical information about the developments at the national level and international level, Wanjiru saw an opportunity to use technology in empowering women and young girls at the community level. Wanjiru is very passionate about people, culture, and social work and applies the use of media and ICT in development and community work, particularly on enhancing the rights of young girls and women. Wanjiru identifies as an Afro-feminist, Pan-Africanist, and a mentor to the girls she works with within her community.

Wanjiru envisions a world where African girls and women are treated with dignity and respect, where they are able to access opportunities for development and flourish in their authentic spaces. She adds that her devotion to improving the lives of girls and women is demonstrated by her organization's mandate. Wanjiru, through Jajabadhu Femme, uses social and digital platforms to advocate for matters affecting the well-being of women with the intention of promoting open and candid conversations on topics that may be considered taboo by some sections of the

community such as reproductive health rights, sanitation and hygiene, SGBV, and menstrual health - and encouraging women to participate in conversations on matters that affect their well-being. Wanjiru believes that education, exposure, and technology can improve the quality of life of most women and young girls in rural settings, and she further feels that this is what inspired her on her journey whereby she uses social media as her medium for informing and educating her target audience and inspiring positive change further and carry on the conversation about the role that the physical and emotional well-being of women plays in ensuring they participate actively in all aspects of life, and guarantees the inclusion of women in important matters.

On her leadership journey-Wanjiru speaks of her journey as a feminist leader, which she describes as transformative for her own growth as an individual- ".....I have learnt to view the world in a new perspective of equity; I have unlearned to limit and devalue myself but to flourish and excel in my femininity. My feminist dream is to build an empowered, resilient and sustainable community for the African girl child. Which I endeavour to see through my leadership style and mentorship". Women's leadership in Kenya is improving and shows that Kenyans are ready for it; this is evident with the recent swearing-in of the country's first female Chief Justice and the way counties that elected female governors are running. Also, here at home in Isiolo, we boast of having our first elected female senator, Hon. Fatuma Adan Dullo, who is also the deputy majority leader in the senate. This is a clear indication that we are not short of capable and willing women ready for leadership positions, and Kenyans have shown their faith in women's leadership.

Her message to younger leaders: "Women in leadership roles can help restore balance and wholeness to our community. While all this also comes with its challenges, I would advise fellow upcoming female leaders not to despair, keep your head up, and do not be afraid because every great dream begins with a dreamer keep on believing and working towards a better and brighter future for fellow women and that your dream is valid"- says Eva Mburu, Jajabadhu Femme.



MARY KEPEN

"Change starts with you rising up to define your own path by refusing to conform to discriminative social norms"

Meet Mary Kepen from Burat ward in Isiolo County, a member of the Ndorobo Community. Mary is an advocate for the rights of women and young girls and has coordinated several activities aimed at economically empowering women and promoting the education of girls. She is also an anti-FGM advocate and works closely with communities to try to put an end to the harmful cultural practice. Mary grew up in a household where they were around 11 girls, and all 10 of her siblings became victims of early marriage. In her community, women were seen as a source of wealth, and it was not unusual to see a young girl barely 13 years being married off to older men above 70 years of age. Coming from a patriarchal community that did not consider educating a girl to be of any value, Mary decided to define her own path from a very young age. She moved away from home and managed to work her way through school until she finished college. Upon completion of her education, she decided to go back home and was saddened by the state which most women in the villages were in. She noted with concern that most of the women were living in extreme poverty and could not save themselves because of the abusive marriages they were in, and the fear instilled in them by their husbands and kin.

"The women were not allowed to have friends or join any groups like the merry-go-rounds other women participate in as a way of saving and raising income to elevate themselves. The women would be beaten up by their husbands for trying to join self-help groups that had been introduced at the time", she notes.

Mary was not happy about how the women were being treated, and she immediately tried to find a solution to emancipate the women, most of whom she had known from the time she was a young girl. Mary decided to engage the men in her community, and since she was educated, most of them listened to her despite not being welcoming to her idea of economically empowering the women. Mary started a self-help group and, despite facing criticism and being viewed as someone who was misleading other women to start disobeying their husbands and abandon their homes, she never backed down. She was able to convince some of the women to register. Mary had visited some of the women in their homesteads, and she was disturbed by the fact most did not have cups to drink water, and there was only one cup that everyone in the household was using. The first contribution made was used in purchasing cups, then, later on, they moved to plates, then slowly moved to purchase iron sheets that the women used to renovate the houses they were living in, which were in a dilapidated state. Upon seeing the changes, the husbands became supportive and even started selling some of their livestock to give the women money to put into the self-help groups. Mary believes that there has been an improvement. The women now benefit from micro-finance institutions where they get money to run start-ups to support their families and elevate themselves. According to Mary, cases of SGBV have dropped drastically now that women are trying to source their own money and do not necessarily depend on their husbands. She adds that the men are now more aware of the benefits of economically empowering women and are the ones pushing them to join self-help groups—a major shift from the past. Mary adds that more girls are being enrolled in schools because the women can now afford school fees for their children.

Mary is very proud of her achievements, and she says that growing up in a small village, she never thought she would one day go back home to a town complete with businesses running and young girls going to school. She says at the moment, she is fighting to end FGM, which remains a challenge. Mary reaches out to young girls and families to sensitize them on the long-term effects, and trauma FGM tends to have on the victims. She now considers herself a mentor, and she someday hopes that, with the support of her community, she will be able to represent their interests in the decision-making tables.

Her message to the younger generation of women: Mary sends a message of hope to other women. In her words, women's leadership will be at a better place in the years to come, and very soon, most women will be aware of their rights and will be able to exercise them. Mary appreciates the organizations playing a key role in ensuring that women know their rights and encourages other women to work collaboratively with such organizations. She further notes that economic empowerment is at the centre of ensuring women make a difference and access the resources required to actively participate in socio-political life. Her advice to young girls is that they should be courageous. "You know these things require courage! I could not have made any impact without courage," Mary adds in her parting shot.



JOYCE NAIREZIA

" To reconstruct culture and religion, we need perseverance and a lot of tolerance"

Meet Joyce Nairesia, a women community leader residing in Isiolo county, Burat ward. Joyce is the Chair of the Samburu Council of Elders at the county level, and she describes the journey of becoming a chair as one which was characterized by very many challenges.

Joyce narrates how the customs and traditions of the Samburu community were discriminative towards women - even dictating that women were not to attend or speak during meetings where elders were present. She had observed that whenever women had misunderstandings in their marriages, it was the elders who would come in to solve the cases. Still, strangely enough, they only listened to the man's side of the story and ignored the women who, in most cases, had been subjected to SGBV. Seeing the challenge that the women were facing, Joyce took it upon herself to start attending elders' meetings, and in the initial stages, she faced a lot of hostility. According to her, nobody wanted her in the meetings, and she was seen as being disrespectful, but she still went ahead to attend the meetings without fail. Joyce would use a straw of grass to raise her hand whenever she had a question as that was the only way the elders would agree to give her audience and answer her questions. She remembers a time when the elders asked her why she was always insistent on attending the meetings despite knowing she was not needed there. They then decided to give her an opportunity to speak, and she used the opportunity to communicate her concerns on issues affecting women within the community and, in the process, convinced the elders that she was worth being listened to.

Years later, Joyce has been accepted by the Samburu Council of Elders, and she is the only woman currently sitting in the council. She can now offer advice to fellow elders, and her opinions are respected, unlike in the past. Joyce says she decided to become an elder because of the mistreatment and suffering she had seen women in her community going through. She can also be sent to county consultative meetings to represent her community. Joyce reminds us that the Constitution of Kenya grants women equal rights to men, but harmful cultural practices and traditional negative perceptions have resulted in the marginalization of women. Joyce adds that women should take the initiative to attend meetings on matters affecting their lives and not wait to be invited. She paints a picture of how the situation is back in her community, where women are considered as children and are not seen as worthy of being given any respect. For this reason, she emphasizes the need for women, particularly in patriarchal communities, to come out in numbers and challenge practices that are discriminative and demand to be included in discussions on important matters affecting their communities.

Joyce currently advocates for the education of the girl child and has been leading efforts and campaigns to end FGM. She sensitizes young girls within her community to resist FGM and report any incidents of the same. She always tells young girls not to accept to be sold off early to old men as a show of obedience to their parents. Joyce has been rescuing such young girls and taking them back to school with the little resources she has within her reach.

"A girl should go to school and make her own choice into marrying a man that she likes. A girl of 14 years should not wait to be married off to a man of 75 years; that will make life so difficult, and the girl may become a widow while still very young, then left with kids to look after. I advise women to pursue education and follow good examples of other tribes that have developed. While they may actually be marginalized, they also need to do something for themselves, and this includes not entertaining practices of the past", Joyce says.

As a woman who has managed to earn respect and trust from her community and other neighbouring communities around Isiolo, Joyce advises women to get into self-help groups and roll-out projects that will benefit them and their dependants.

Joyce urges women to explore economic empowerment opportunities and not depend on anyone for money because allowing someone to spend money on you as you sit home and wait gives them the entitlement to mistreat you and do anything they please to you. Joyce believes that groups in themselves, even the local "Chamas" are an avenue for exposure and learning new things for the women.

Joyce is very proud of her achievements. "It took me a lot of sacrifices, and all along, I was doing my work voluntarily while expecting nothing in return. However, it was not sustainable, especially in instances where I had to travel long distances to rescue young girls or women exposed to SGBV. I am very thankful for the NGOs that came along the way and supported our efforts, allowing us to reach more women and sensitize more communities". Her advice as a mentor and an experienced women leader is that women have to start by volunteering with the little resources they have even as they mobilize for more resources or look for external support. "If women don't want to volunteer, they won't be able to improve their lives; they will be stuck at the same point", she adds.

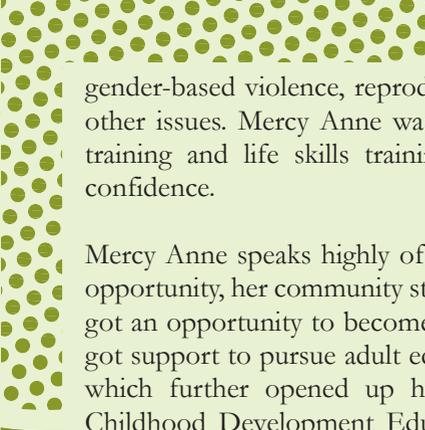


MERCY ANNE

"Is pregnancy and dropping out of school the end of the road?"

In Kilifi, we meet a young women leader, Mercy Anne who is impacting change using sports that have for a long time been associated with male traits. Mercy Anne plays football passionately, and she continues to mentor and nurture the talents of younger girls within her community. Mercy Anne narrates how a teenage pregnancy toppled her life over to the point of being disowned by her parents and being discriminated against. All this happened at a time when she was still discovering herself as a teenager, and it affected her to the point of dropping out of school. "My parents denied me the rights and opportunity to education at 15 years. A disgrace and shame to the family, the community isolated me from the rest of the girls for fears that I would be a bad influence and I faced so much social stigma", Mercy Anne explains. To add salt to injury, she was evicted from home by her parents, and in an effort to seek refuge, she ended up being a victim of early marriage.

Mercy Anne recalls a day when she was passing somewhere, and she spotted girls her age group confidently playing football as they were being cheered on by some people seated across the fence. She immediately became interested and approached one of the girls to understand whether they were playing this for recreational purposes or they had support from somewhere. She learnt that the girls were being supported by Moving the Goal Posts, an NGO based in Kilifi, which uses sports to positively impact the lives of young women and girls in rural parts of Coastal Kenya. The girls would come together to play football, organize matches and take leadership in different activities. They would also discuss issues that affect them, including



gender-based violence, reproductive health rights, economic empowerment, among other issues. Mercy Anne was inspired to join the girls. She underwent leadership training and life skills training which she believes boosted her knowledge and confidence.

Mercy Anne speaks highly of Moving the Goalposts (MTG), because, through the opportunity, her community started looking up to her as a role model, and she further got an opportunity to become a paralegal and a community health worker. She also got support to pursue adult education and attain a Secondary Education Certificate, which further opened up her chances to pursue a certificate course in Early Childhood Development Education. Mercy Anne continues to advocate for the rights of children, adolescents, and women. She supports her fellow peers with guidance and counselling on making better choices in life and overcoming peer pressure which may be misleading and eventually lead them to teenage pregnancy and dropping out of school.

"Today, I advocate for women and girls' rights, doing referrals to relevant offices and supporting them to focus and achieve in development goals. I may have fallen along the way, but I rose up and kept moving", says Mercy Anne.

Mercy Anne also tells us of her struggles with trying to pursue formal leadership. "I grew up in the Coastal region and I always considered myself a local like everyone else. I have been a campaigner and a resource person for a political party at the grassroots for a very long time and due to my commitment, I got a nomination but was later removed from the list for being from a minority tribe in the community and also because of my gender", Mercy Anne says. Mercy further adds that she decided to vie for member of county assembly position as an independent candidate but was discriminated against because of a walking disability that had been caused by an accident, she was involved in. She says that the comments were disheartening but they have not killed her dream of representing young girls and women in future. She also adds that she has plans to vie for a position in the local administration as she hopes to push forward the agenda of young girls and women to be granted equal treatment and access to social services.

Her message to the public: Mercy Anne calls upon communities to be more supportive of young girls through mentorship and sensitization on consequences of teenage pregnancies and child marriages. She believes that the community needs to embrace conversations on the sexual and reproductive health of teenagers and not isolate teenage girls who have fallen victim to teenage pregnancies. According to Mercy Anne, getting pregnant is not the end of the road but an opportunity for one to learn from past mistakes and work towards making better decisions. She urges young girls to take their studies seriously and identify mentors who they can open up to on the struggles they face as teenagers.



UMMI MUSINDALO

"We have to start supporting each other as women leaders if at all we want to move forward in this fight for equality in leadership spaces".

In Bungoma, we meet Ummi Musindalo, a women's rights community leader and a community mobilizer. Ummi is the county secretary of Maendeleo ya Wanawake in Bungoma County and the chair of a community-based organization known as "Luanda Junction Yetu", which focuses mainly on the economic empowerment of communities through investments and farming, among other economic activities. Ummi does a lot of advocacy, civic education, and mobilization under Maendeleo ya Wanawake on behalf of the government on sectors affecting women such as education, health, agriculture, etc. Ummi also acts as a mediator on civil issues affecting women or families, especially on land ownership. She further advocates for the education rights of girls and boys. She mobilizes in the community to ensure children from low-income families get bursaries or scholarships and widows to get support through free farm inputs from the government. On matters of gender-based violence, Ummi and her team report the cases and make a follow-up to ensure justice and safety for the victims. Ummi also fully participates in the county budget-making process and any initiatives affecting the communities around her. She adds that she has personally led initiatives in raising fees for poor girls to access education and better their lives.

"In the last 2017 election, I worked as both a community-driven volunteer and a mobilizer drumming up support for women candidates. Because of my well-known presence, I ended up enjoying the support of two parties, whereby I was rewarded

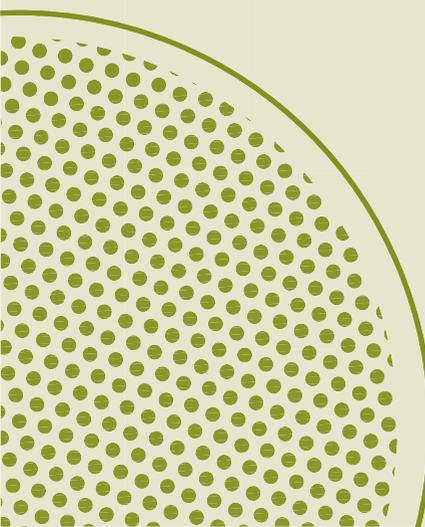
with a nomination to represent women in one of the parties, and my name was even gazetted. However, the challenge came in when some days later I was de-gazetted and replaced with a male counterpart" Ummi laments. She says that she was outrightly denied the opportunity because of her gender and supposedly her religion. In her view, the positions were only being given to one as a strategy during campaigns, but once the campaigns and elections were over, you could be dispensable any time. She says she has learnt a lot that she could apply in the next election, and this time she hopes she can participate beyond just being a community mobilizer.

Ummi is currently mobilizing women to raise funds to acquire a piece of land on leasehold which they could use to put up establishments and generate income. She is also mobilizing women to vie in the next coming general elections and ensuring the participation of women on matters of peace and security. She adds that the women she works with are now part of the Nyumba Kumi initiative. Additionally, the women she supports are members of different committees involving citizens from the ward level to the county level.

Advice to the younger generation of girls: Ummi's advice to other women and young girls is that they should not settle for less. She urges women to go for leadership and refuse to be used to drive the agenda of a selfish few. "It is important that as women, we understand our strengths and how we can use them to elevate ourselves and impact change", Ummi says. She adds that women's rights community leaders need to use the positive influence they have to mobilize their communities to support them to take up the positions that, more often than not, end up in the hands of the wrong people.

coast who come together to train and share resources for working in particularly challenging environments. Through the network, Christine and her group have been able to strategize with other activists and find solidarity in promoting security and tackling many sensitive issues.

Her message: Chausiku speaks of the need for peaceful co-existence between communities and security agencies. She also says that more women need to join in the fight to end police violence because it could target anyone, including those in leadership. "Sometimes it could be a case of mistaken identity or even a misunderstanding, but you may never live to tell your story", Chausiku laments. She says she has been observing the rising cases of police violence nationwide and feels there is an urgent need to come up with interventions targeting the force, including dialogues and targeted trainings.





HELDA LAMECK TUJARA

"If we can beat gender violence, we can open up doors for so many women to freely exercise their rights"

Helda Lameck is a proud mother of four, working in Kilifi county and, over the years, she has had a special focus on survivors of SGBV, helping them to pursue justice and rise above the stigma. Helda offers pro-bono counseling services as she is a certified professional counsellor. Helda is also a co-founder of WIMA CBO, which mentors women to unite and fight against SGBV. During the pandemic period, Helda has worked hard to ensure children are safeguarded and protected. Further, she has rolled out community mentorship programmes targeting young girls, parents and community members. Helda has also initiated drives to collect and distribute sanitary towels, which has benefited adolescent girls in the community. Helda also participates in radio programmes where she holds discussions on the promotion of the rights and well-being of women, including ending SGBV, and through this, she has managed to get a huge following and influence over the communities around her.

Helda's message: "Communities need to be at the forefront in this fight for equality. We are faced with different cases on a daily basis which could be avoided if communities step up and speak in unison against all forms of violence targeting young girls and women. Women can only participate when in a good mental state of mind and GBV unfortunately robs them of opportunities to go out in public and speak up on their agenda. If we can come together to condemn SGBV and create an enabling environment for women to flourish, we can have so many women coming out to exercise their rights", says Helda Tujara.

4.0 WHAT CAN WE PICK FROM THE DIFFERENT STORIES?

- 1** By narrating their stories, the women leaders are sending a message that leadership has no gender and can take many forms. It may not necessarily be about positions but rather the commitment towards taking up community-centred initiatives that are life-changing and impact others positively. The different stories as narrated by the women leaders point to determination, resilience, and the willingness to take risks in order to achieve any goal.
- 2** There are cross-cutting challenges that women continue to face, most of which are driven by patriarchy and the inequality it brings about in terms of discrimination of women in leadership, barriers to access to resources, and resistance from the communities they are trying to support.
- 3** Women have decided not to wait for the government to solve some of the most pressing issues within the communities and are working voluntarily with little in the way of resources for the benefit of their communities.
- 4** Education, whether formal or informal, is a critical tool for ensuring women access formal leadership and build on their skills and knowledge as leaders even as they handle different issues within the community.
- 5** The women leaders believe that the support of the public is critical in effectively carrying out their work. For this reason, they continue to make calls to the communities and authorities to support them and do away with the negative perceptions around the capabilities of women as leaders.

6 Women leaders believe in the need to encourage the upcoming generation of women leaders and sending a message of hope to ensure that there is sustainability in the work they do and continuity even in the many generations to come.

7 Economic empowerment is central to the work of women leaders and the empowerment of women in different factions of society. Women leaders are coming together to form local self-help groups whereby they are involved in income generating activities. And this is because financial resources are required in order to effectively mobilize communities even during campaigns.

8 Women leaders now see the need to adapt to technology to boost their activities. We see some women leaders carrying out their work through social media, radio programs, and other forms of media to ensure they reach their supporters and increase their visibility.

9 Most of the women leaders have had opportunities to move to larger towns to study and even for work, but they still choose to go back home to support people in the areas where they were brought up, and this is mainly due to compassion and desire to improve the situation back home.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Times are changing, and we now have more and more women taking up leadership positions, and demanding for their rights and those of other women and young girls. Unlike in the past, whereby women were not allowed to speak, we now have women coming out in large numbers to conduct their own meetings and design initiatives that directly benefit the communities they represent. It is now evident that women community leaders are an important part of our society, and they cannot be ignored due to the important contributions they continue to make, which has earned them the public confidence and trust, and influence in their respective communities. More women are now self-aware that they need to take action on some of the issues that have for a long time affected them and resulted in further marginalization of women in leadership and decision-making roles. Women leaders have also taken the approach of involving other actors within the community including men and have demonstrated to them that they can make useful contributions to the development, and with time, they have amassed massive support from the public. However, some stumbling blocks still remain, and even with the law being clear on the need to support women through affirmative action, very few women are able to get to power through the available mechanisms. Further, women have refused to take the backseat as they now understand better the challenges that come with formal leadership, and they are organizing at the grassroots levels through participating in women-led networks and community-based organizations, self-help groups, citizen-led committees on peace and security, and other channels of citizen engagement to get their needs addressed by the relevant authorities.

Finally, women, if provided with the right platforms to express themselves and showcase their work, can gain the confidence required to become better leaders. They could also encourage other women leaders to come out and speak up against social ills and contribute to solving some of the problems that continue to affect society.





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