Rooted in Courage and Resilience:

Narratives of Women Who Protect, Heal And Nurture



March, 2025

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FOREWORD

The path of a woman human rights defender is rarely a straight one. It is a journey shaped by courage, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to justice. This book is a testament to that journey–a collection of powerful narratives from women who have dared to challenge the status quo, stand against oppression, and create spaces of dignity and freedom for others.

Each story in these pages is unique, yet they share common threads: the trials faced in the pursuit of justice, the turning points that defined their missions, and the resilience that carried them forward. From the darkest moments of doubt and danger to the triumph of forgi ng new paths, these women have not only survived but have emerged stronger, inspiring countless others along the way.

Their journeys have not been without cost. Many have faced threats, exile, or even violence. Yet, in the face of adversity, they have found strength–whether in the solidarity of their communities, the unshakable belief in their cause, or the simple yet profound hope for a better future.

This book is a testament to the power of Words That Heal, Hearts That Protect, and Hands That Nurture – an embodiment of the courage it takes to stand for justice. Through storytelling, these women defenders reclaim their narratives, transform pain into strength, and offer a guiding light for those who walk the same path.

To read this book is to walk alongside these SHEROES, to feel their struggles, and to be inspired by their determination. It is a call to recognize, support, and uplift those who dedicate their lives to justice. May these stories serve as a beacon for current and future generations of women human rights defenders, reminding them that they are never alone.

This historic milestone marks the first time women human rights defenders tell their stories in their own words. It is a moment of reclamation–where women shine a light on their journeys, triumphs, and sacrifices. We encourage other women to add their voices to this movement of story crafters. The stories in these pages are just the beginning–each new voice strengthens our collective impact.

I would like to acknowledge the support of Urgent Action Fund-Africa, Wellspring Philanthropic Fund and The Ford Foundation for supporting the work of the Hub and realisation of this work by Women Human Rights Defenders of Kenya.

May this book ignite a movement–one where every woman's story is heard, honored, and woven into the fabric of justice.

In SISTERHOOD,
Salome Nduta
Executive Director, Women Human Rights Defenders Hub (The Hub)- Kenya

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A Tribute to my Kenyan Sisters

In Kenya, ten women from eight counties came **together**,
To share their **stories** and learn from **each other.**
For three days, they spoke with **care,**
Finding **strength** in the stories they **dared to share**.

I came from Nepal with **hope and courage,**
Carrying **dreams** and lessons from my own **Voyage.**
I listened to their **voices**, each **strong and true**,
And found their stories **healing me too.**

They told me about **Ugali**, more than just a food,
It holds **memories**, both sad and good.
It speaks of family, of grandmothers, **of struggles, of love**,
A symbol of **hope**, like the **sky above**.

And their songs-***Nyimbo***-carry their **pain**,
But also their strength to **rise again**.
Each ***Wimbo*** lifts them, helps them **survive,**
A melody of **courage** to keep them **alive.**

Their stories reminded me of my **own fight**,
To turn my struggles **into light**.
I shared my **dreams** of a better way,
Of **justice and hope** to guide each day.

I dream of a world where all **my sisters can stand tall,**
Where **justice and kindness** are there for all.
To these women, I give my **respect and cheer**,
May their stories echo far and near.

धन्यवाद (Dha-nya-baad)/Asante/ Thank you!

Jaya Luintel
Co-founder and President,
The Story Kitchen-Nepal
28 November, 2024 Nairobi, Kenya



Amani "Peace"

- Doreen Kagwiria

Born as the first daughter in a modest family and raised by a single mother, I grew up learning the art of survival. Life was a struggle, and the absence of a father figure shaped me in ways I could never have imagined. My mother, a resilient woman, worked tirelessly to provide for me and my siblings. Yet, as I grew older, she vowed that her children would never endure the hardships she had faced.

In 2012, at the tender age of 22, I met the man who would become the father of my children. Blinded by youthful love and the excitement of starting a new chapter, I ignored the warning signs and the advice of my mother, who urged me to focus on completing my education instead of diving into a serious relationship. Little did I know, this relationship would mark the beginning of a turbulent period in my life.

My husband, hailing from a wealthy family, treated me as if I were beneath him. He saw me not as a partner but as a mere caretaker for his two children from a previous relationship. His controlling nature kept me confined to the house, forbidding me from seeking employment or pursuing my dreams. He claimed he needed a housewife, someone to maintain the home while he dictated the rules. Over time, his emotional and verbal abuse became a daily reality, eroding my sense of self-worth.

One day, after enduring years of mistreatment, I heard a voice deep within me–a voice I couldn't explain but one that gave me the strength to say, "Enough is enough." It was at this moment that I realized I deserve peace, both for myself and for my children. With the little savings I had managed to set aside, I opened a small agro-shop in my neighborhood. Though it was a humble beginning, it was my first step toward reclaiming my independence.

I had always been passionate about agriculture, an interest I nurtured during my school days. As I ran my agro-shop, I discovered not only a source of income but also a sense of purpose. My business slowly grew, and I began to see a future where I could stand on my own without relying on anyone.

In 2022, I attended a training program led by a mentor, Mr. Mwaniki, who inspired me to push beyond my limits. His words, 'Doreen, you can become one of the best in this industry. Give it time,' were a reminder that I could still achieve greatness despite the challenges I had faced. He was a silver lining in the turmoil. He saw potential in me, something I had not seen in myself before. He assured me that he would walk the journey with me, and indeed he has. Since then, I have begun believing in myself more, gained exposure to different spaces and diversified my business. With his guidance, I gained new skills and a renewed sense of hope. The training was a turning point, showing me that even after years of hardship, I could rewrite my story.

Reflecting on my past, I realized how much I had endured in my 12-year marriage. The lack of peace in my home had taken a toll on me, but it had also taught me valuable lessons about resilience and self-worth. Leaving was not as easy as it seemed. I had to weigh the options while praying for guidance, asking questions that had no easy answers. Though I had once feared raising my children without their father, I came to understand that a toxic environment was far worse than no father figure at all. I chose Amani "Peace" so that I could show up as a better individual, and a good mum.

My journey has been one of transformation–from a struggling wife to an individual who has gained her self-esteem, independence, and the ability to inspire those around me. I began to share my story, encouraging women in my community to believe in their potential. My agro-shop became more than just a business; it became a hub for empowering others. I taught women and young people how to engage in agribusiness, providing them with the tools and knowledge to create their own sources of income.

As my confidence grew, so did my advocacy work. Through different capacity building programs, I became more skilled and knowledgeable. I became a champion for people with disabilities and a vocal advocate for women's rights in my region. I used my platform to address issues affecting families, such as dependency on men and the importance of financial independence. My efforts earned me recognition and respect within my community, and I was proud to see the impact of my work.

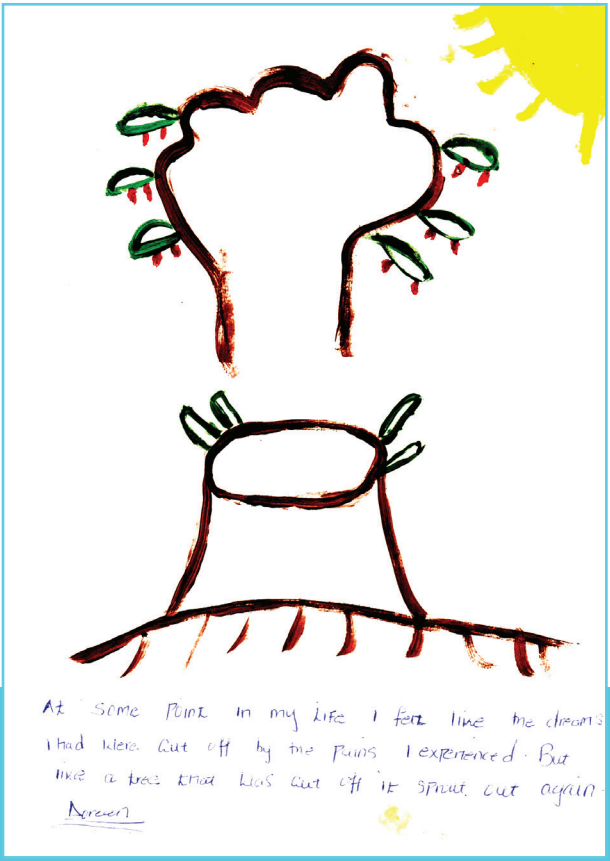
Today, I continue to thrive. I now work at a farmer service center, where I encourage young people to explore opportunities in agriculture. My mission is to help them find sustainable ways to earn a living, reducing the societal pressures that lead many to destructive paths. I firmly believe that empowering the youth will create stronger, more resilient families.

My success has also brought joy to my mother, who takes pride in seeing her daughter rise above my struggles. I now assist my mother in raising my siblings, ensuring that they have the opportunities I once lacked.

As I began building my self-esteem, I developed a hunger and desire to gain more knowledge and skills to stand up for the oppressed and those who were made voiceless, because I was once there. That is how my advocacy journey was strengthened, because I would advocate for their needs from a point of knowledge and skills. I have honed my skills and unlocked my potential.

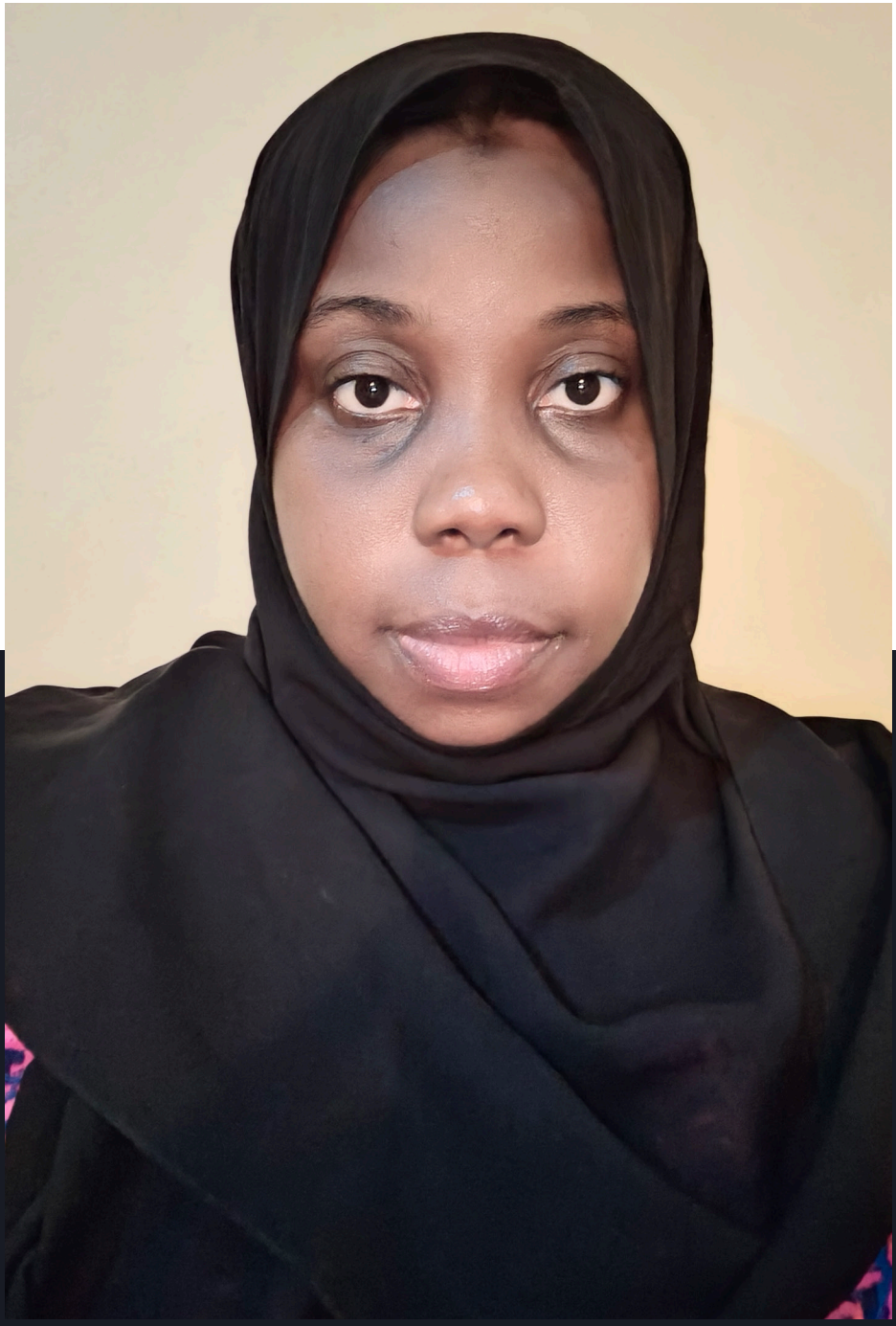
My story is one of courage, perseverance, and transformation. From a young woman trapped in an abusive marriage to a leader and advocate in my community, I have shown that it is possible to overcome even the darkest of times. My journey serves as a beacon of hope for others, proving that with determination and the right support, anyone can find their way to peace.

The peace has finally dawned on me that even when life doesn't make sense, even in the pain, I own my story–every part of it, and this makes me unique. I love the woman I am becoming. I love that I have grown through the storm. I love that I am at peace. Amani!



Through my story of resilience, I hope to inspire more women in the world who have faced similar challenges to embrace life from a brighter perspective.

- Doreen Kagwiria



Empowered Voices: A Journey of Justice and Liberation

- Zainab Mohamed

I was born and raised in Mombasa, a coastal city in Kenya known for its conservative, kind, friendly and warm community. However, beneath this beauty lies fear of openly talking about a harsh reality–one that is especially painful for the young girls in the region. Sexual violence, gender inequality, and the widespread issue of teenage pregnancy are part of the social fabric that many girls here must navigate daily.

Growing up in such conservative environment where women shy away from openly talking about sex, sexual and reproductive health, and challenges related to our reproductive health, I came to believe that having a voice is a form of liberation–it's the power to express one's true self, to resist oppression, and to demand change. For me, using my voice means freeing not only myself but also the people in my community from the shackles of discrimination and oppression.

In Mombasa, the statistics on teenage pregnancy are deeply alarming. According to various reports, the Coast region, including Mombasa, has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancies in Kenya. An estimated one in four girls in this region becomes pregnant before they turn 18, often as a result of sexual violence, early marriages, and societal pressures. Teenage pregnancy is a significant barrier to education and empowerment, condemning many young girls to a cycle of poverty, dependence, and limited opportunities.

Growing up, I witnessed firsthand the devastating consequences of this issue. It wasn't just the physical and emotional toll on the young mothers, but the systemic failure to address the root causes of teenage pregnancies. I saw girls whose dreams were stolen, whose potential was crushed, simply because society had failed to protect them. I also saw how deeply ingrained cultural and social expectations about gender roles often led to the silencing of victims. In many cases, teenage girls were blamed for their pregnancies, while the perpetrators– mostly men–remained hidden in the shadows.

One day, as I sat watching a documentary on television, my heart sank as I learned more about the realities that these young girls face. I learned that the issue of teenage pregnancy was not isolated to a few cases– it was widespread and deeply rooted in the region's socio-economic, cultural, and political systems. I realized that many girls in Mombasa were being deprived of opportunities to pursue an education, build their careers, and, worst of all, were being exposed to even greater risks. The weight of this injustice stirred something deep within me. I felt an overwhelming need to act.

It was during this time that I met Mariam. Our meeting happened during a mentorship program aimed at supporting youth at risk of joining negative radical groups and gangs. This program provided a space where participants could engage with one another, and it was during this time that the narrator was able to connect with Mariam. Despite having met her three years prior without much interaction, the mentorship program created an environment conducive to deeper conversations. Mariam's consistent dedication to her prayers stood out to me and sparked a friendship rooted in mutual goals and personal growth.

Mariam became my accountability partner. Her encouragement was unwavering, and she consistently reminded me that justice does not come easily, but it is worth fighting for. She taught me that leadership is not just about taking action–it's about inspiring others to do the same. She challenged me to reach my full potential, to remain focused on the mission I had set for myself, and to keep going despite the challenges. Through our talks, I learned that even small, meaningful actions can have a ripple effect, impacting not only our own lives but the lives of those around us.

With Mariam's support, I made the firm decision to address the challenges faced by teenage girls in Mombasa, particularly teenage pregnancy. I realized that to create change, I needed to raise awareness, break the silence, and stand up for these girls who had been so cruelly silenced by society. I was determined to advocate for their right to education, their right to control their bodies, and the opportunity for a better future.

I began by speaking to community groups, including local leaders, religious leaders, and parents. I also reached out to schools and organized forums where young girls could come together and discuss the challenges they were facing. The conversations were not always easy, but they were necessary. One of the most difficult parts was confronting the stigma that often surrounds teenage pregnancy. Many parents, teachers, and community members were reluctant to acknowledge the issue, and some blamed the girls themselves for getting pregnant. It became clear that part of the work I needed to do was to challenge these harmful attitudes and encourage more open, empathetic conversations about the issue.

In my conversations with teenage girls, I heard heartbreaking stories of sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation. Many girls had been coerced or taken advantage of by older men, some of whom were their teachers, neighbors, or even family members. These girls often felt powerless to speak out because of fear, shame, and social ostracism. Through these dialogues, I learned that the roots of teenage pregnancy were not just about a lack of education on sexual health or access to contraception, but also about deeply entrenched gender inequalities. In many cases, girls were socialized to believe that their worth was tied to their ability to please men or that their education and aspirations were secondary to their roles as wives and mothers.

As I continued to raise awareness, Mariam's words echoed in my mind. She had always emphasized the importance of mentorship, and I realized that it was not enough to simply advocate for change–I needed to mentor the next generation of young girls. I began to organize mentorship programs that paired young girls with female role models who had overcome similar challenges and gone on to pursue education and careers. The goal was not only to provide guidance but

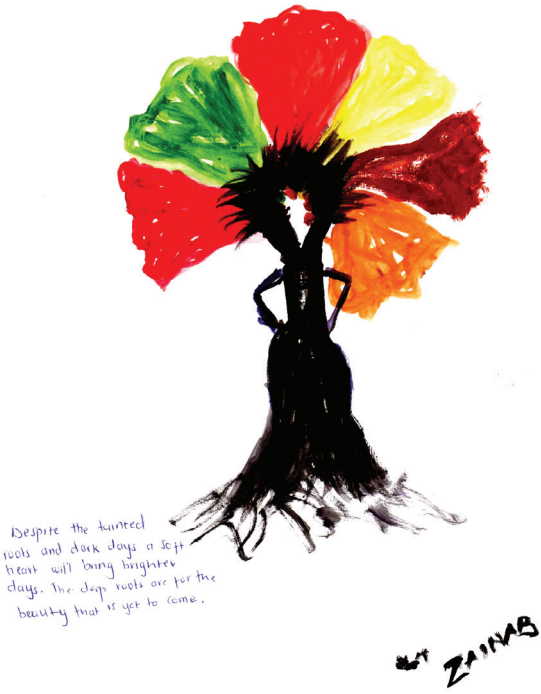
to show these girls that their lives could be different, that they could dream beyond the limitations imposed on them by society.

It became clear that we needed to involve men and boys in the conversation as well. Patriarchy is deeply embedded in many coastal communities, and as long as men and boys remained passive bystanders, there would be little hope for significant change. I started working with male leaders, encouraging them to be allies in the fight against sexual violence and teenage pregnancy. Together, we launched campaigns that emphasized the importance of respect, consent, and gender equality.

As my journey continued, I encountered numerous obstacles. There were moments when I felt discouraged, when the sheer scale of the problem seemed insurmountable. But I reminded myself of an important lesson: "Success requires perseverance, and leadership is about taking action." I remind myself that change is a slow process, but that every voice added to the chorus of justice makes a difference.

Through this journey, I have learned the importance of self-awareness, resilience, and the power of friendship. Mariam's unwavering support taught me that we all have a responsibility to use our voices to fight for justice, to break the silence around issues like teenage pregnancy, and to create opportunities for those whose potential has been stifled. I have come to believe that by standing for justice and empowering others, we can create a future where every girl has the chance to thrive–free from the chains of oppression, sexual violence, and discrimination.

While the road ahead is long, I remain committed to the cause. I know that with continued dialogue, community engagement, and advocacy, we can begin to dismantle the systems that perpetuate teenage pregnancy and other injustices in Mombasa and in the wider Coast region. It is my hope that, through our collective efforts, we can create a society where every girl is free to dream, to learn, and to live her life to the fullest.



For those many times you'll have to stand alone, for those times you'll wonder where life is going, remember you are never alone unless you chose to be. For those times you are surrounded by people, when life is full of joy and excitement, remember to enjoy and to stand with GOD.
This is my hope for sharing my story.

- Zainab Mohamed



Harmony of Healing

-Janet Kathini

Growing up as the youngest in a family of seven children was a blessing. I was surrounded by love, care, and support from my parents and siblings. Life was simple, filled with laughter and warmth. As the youngest, all the attention was on me, especially from my mother, who loved me so much. My parents worked hard to provide for us, ensuring we had everything we needed, and this made us a very lively family. My childhood memories are filled with moments of playing with my siblings, helping with household chores, and going to school with excitement.

Education was important in our family, and my parents always encouraged us to work hard. They believed that through education, we could change our future and make a difference in the world.

From a young age, I was a bright student. I loved learning and always aimed to be among the best in my class. My teachers saw my potential and encouraged me to take leadership roles. I became the head girl, a role that helped me develop confidence and leadership skills. Being a leader was not easy, but it taught me responsibility, patience, and problem-solving. After finishing my primary and secondary education, I pursued a diploma in Human Resource Management. This was an important step in my life because I wanted to understand people, help manage work environments, and contribute to organizations in a meaningful way. Even while studying, I had a deep passion for working with people. I wanted to make a difference in my community, especially for women and youth. This passion led me to work with different organizations such as Chisonet, Jukwaa La Katiba, and the Kenya Red Cross. Through these organizations, I was involved in

various activities, including: political organizing to educate people about their rights, positive parenting programs to help parents raise responsible children, economic empowerment initiatives for women to help them become financially independent. Working with the community gave me both energy and fulfillment. Seeing lives change through the work we did encouraged me to keep going. I believed that with the right opportunities and support, people could improve their lives.

Everything changed in 2007. The post-election violence that erupted in Kenya was one of the darkest moments of my life. Amid the chaos, I became a victim of sexual violence. This experience shattered me completely. Before that day, I had dreams and ambitions. I wanted to grow, succeed, and help others. But after the violence, everything fell apart. I lost my confidence, my joy, and my sense of self-worth. I felt ashamed, broken, and afraid. The world no longer felt safe. For a long time, I lived in silence. I did not know who to talk to or where to seek help. The stigma surrounding sexual violence made it even harder. Many knew what had happened, but I was scared to face it because I didn't know what they thought of me. The trauma affected every part of my life. I withdrew from people and avoided public places.

One day, someone introduced me to Wangu Kanja because they knew my story. At that time, I had nothing. I knew nothing about my rights as a survivor, and I had no idea how to rebuild my life. Wangu invited me to a meeting where I met other survivors of sexual violence. For the first time, I realized I was not alone. Wangu's support transformed my life. She provided financial assistance, mental health support, and guidance on how to move forward. Through our regular communication, I started to heal. She helped me understand that my identity was not defined by my trauma but by my strength and resilience.

Inspired by her, I began reaching out to other survivors in my village. I wanted them to know that healing was possible and that they were not alone. I started small, talking to women informally and encouraging them to seek help. Over time, this grew into a larger network of survivors supporting each other. With the support I received, I was able to do more for my community. I became

actively involved in efforts to reduce stigma, support survivors in seeking justice, and create safe spaces for women.

Seeing these changes gave me hope. It proved that survivors could rise above their pain and create positive change. It also reinforced the importance of working with stakeholders, including government officials, lawyers, and community leaders, to ensure justice and support for survivors.

During my most painful moments, gospel music became my escape. When words failed me, music spoke to my soul. It connected me to God, brought me comfort, and helped me release my emotions. Some songs made me cry, while others gave me strength to keep going. Music played a huge role in my healing process. It reminded me that despite my pain, I was not alone. It gave me a reason to hope again. To this day, gospel music remains my source of strength and renewal.

Networking became easier because of the connections I had built through Wangu Kanja's support. I met different people who helped me grow personally and professionally. I learned about gender rights, legal processes, and advocacy. With each experience, I became stronger and more confident.

One of the biggest blessings in my life is my son. I am proud of the person he has become, studying and succeeding in school. Being a mother has always given me a new sense of purpose and motivation. My son is my greatest source of joy and strength. Raising him as a single mother has not been easy, but he inspires me to keep pushing forward. Every time I look at him, I am reminded of why I must continue advocating for women's rights. I want him to grow up in a world where women and girls are safe, respected, and empowered. My experience as a survivor has made me even more committed to creating that reality.

Today, my focus remains on transforming lives. I continue working with survivors, advocating for women's rights, and engaging in community development. I am now a community healthcare provider in a dispensary in Kitui, where I offer medical assistance and support to people in need. Through my work,

I interact with many women who have faced gender-based violence, poverty, and discrimination. I listen to their stories, offer guidance, and connect them to available resources. Seeing them regain their confidence and rebuild their lives gives me fulfillment.

I hope to expand my work, reaching more survivors and communities. I want to create more safe spaces, ensure more women have access to justice, and empower them economically. My story is evidence that even in the worst circumstances, hope and healing are possible.

I will keep using my voice, my work, and my faith to make a difference. Because every survivor deserves to heal, thrive, and live a life filled with love and dignity.



I hope this story helps other people who are in the same situations or going through the same process to heal and have hope.

- Janet Kathini



Breaking Free

-Diana Mercy Manyara

Music has always had a way of reaching the deepest parts of my soul, and "Wings to Fly" by Westlife is one song that resonates profoundly with my journey. The lyrics remind me of the strength I've found in those who have uplifted me, the love and support that gave me the courage to rise above my circumstances. Every time I listen to it, I'm reminded of the dreams I've nurtured, the battles I've fought, and the freedom I now strive to create for others. This song is an anthem of hope, resilience, and empowerment.

It mirrors the unwavering support my uncle, grandma, comrades, peers, and especially my wonderful mentor gave me, and the belief that I could soar beyond societal expectations and limitations. It reflects the challenges, the love, and solidarity I have experienced, the kind that makes you feel unstoppable, even when the world seems heavy. It is a constant reminder that I am not alone. It's a call to keep dreaming, to keep fighting for a world where every girl and woman can find their wings and take flight toward their own greatness. It's the soundtrack to my life's journey, a melody of hope, courage, and breaking free. I am grateful, hopeful, and determined to change the world and free it from gender and age discrimination.

The unwavering support I've received from my uncle, mentors, and the incredible women in my life has been the foundation of my strength. They've taught me the value of community, solidarity, and the power of a guiding hand during life's toughest moments. Whether it was my uncle's love and his chapatis that gave me a sense of belonging, or the inspiring mentorship of women who saw greatness in me, their presence has shaped my identity as a leader.

Above all, this story reminds me that breaking free is not just about overcoming challenges–it's about embracing the love, courage, and resilience that others have poured into us. It is about standing tall and creating a ripple effect of change, proving that when we rise, we lift others with us. I carry this vision forward with pride, knowing that my wings are not just my own, but are built from the strength of everyone who has believed in me.

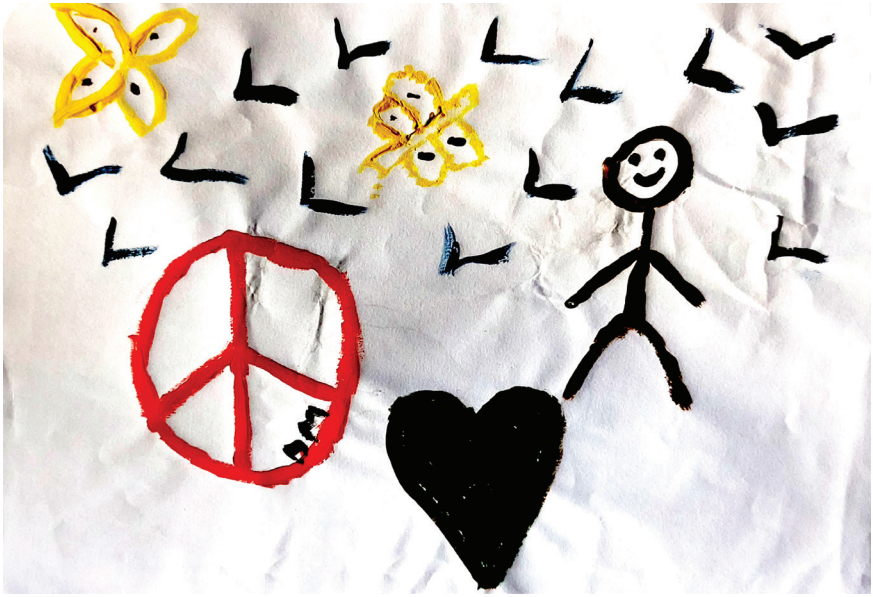
Fueled by their unwavering support, my dreams have taken flight. I imagine a world where women stand tall and young girls see no limits to their potential. I dream of holding the hands of my fellow young women, lifting them higher, and creating opportunities where none existed before. Just like "Wings to Fly," I want my life to be a melody of hope and empowerment. My wings are spread wide to a freer future for girls.

As a young lady advocating for my peers' rights has still come with a lot of backlash from the community, especially while I was in school. As a peer counselor in high school, my role was to report any form of "illicit behaviours" in school, including lesbianism. The innocence in these young girls' faces changed my perspective of this from being a "cult" to just being their choice of life, and I turned from their "informant" to their friend and someone they could freely turn to in times of need or for advice. At this time all my hope was to protect them from the harsh punishment of school which led to their expulsion, while also helping the school understand them as the young people they were.

This was not easy, as I walked this bold path. My teachers saw a girl who, instead of focusing on her own life, focused on changing the lives of those around her. Instead of focusing on my education, I invested all my energy in changing the lives of the young girls around me. This became a concern for my teachers and my family thought my energy was caused by living with my grandmother and uncle who left me to explore the life of speaking up. I was unafraid to speak up for what was right all the time. While many admired my courage, some thought I was a rebel, but through all of this, I believed in the greater good that this brought, as it gave the young girls the opportunity to continue with their education and better their future. The world is harsh toward young girls with dreams and no clear guidance. For me, I got my uncle to lean on at a very young age. He became my armor, in the journey and through challenges. I would turn to him at a young age, and he would guide me through life and advise me to follow my dream. Maybe my journey has been channelled due to the history of politics and vibrance within the women in my family. My grandmother, a vibrant woman, became a politician at her age and was a woman who would speak her mind and condemn injustice when she saw one. The backlash took a toll on me, and I took a break, until I met human rights defenders in the adult world-yet another journey to explore and speak for justice, yet another time for me to use my voice.

Today, I live a life where I have mentors-a wonderful woman from the Civil Society world, wonderful people who privately guide and advise me in my leadership and organizing life. My life has changed, and has become brighter. I have been groomed to understand the true meaning of comradeship and solidarity. I envision a world where women are able to explore their true potential and create opportunities where no woman is left behind. I want my life to be one filled with hope and growth. Whatever I do now, I do it to create a future free from discrimination for young women.

My journey fills me with hope, that despite all odds, we can create a better future. I want to give back the kindness, the mentorship, the opportunities to grow, the solidarity and sisterhood I received from fellow young women. I want every young girl and woman out there to be seen, heard and to achieve their dreams without their background being questioned. I have risen above my circumstances, found strength in the love of incredible people, and transformed into a leader determined to leave no one behind. With every step, I am breaking free, proving that we are all capable of greatness.



Sharing my stories is more than just telling a personal experience; it is an act of resilience, growth, healing, and advocacy. My artwork visualizes emotional connection that allows people to not just hear, but feel my story. My hope is that this combination of storytelling and art will ignite conversations, inspire action, and offer solidarity to those who see their own struggles align with mine.

-Diana Mercy Manyara



Finding My Voice: A Journey of Resilience

-Bampe Daf

Born in 1982 as the firstborn in a family of five, my childhood was far from ordinary. Our family dynamics were complicated by the presence of my stepfather, which delayed my schooling. As a child, I was subjected to the cruel sting of racism – not from strangers, but from my own younger sister. She nicknamed me "Black Mamba," a name that stuck and became a weapon others used to strip away my self-esteem. It destroyed me, leaving me feeling like an outcast in my own home.

Despite the challenges, I nurtured a longing to understand where I truly came from. I wanted to know my biological father, a man whose absence made me anxious about what to expect if I ever got to meet him. I felt the urge to find my father because I believed I would feel a sense of belonging, especially since my stepsister always told me I wasn't one of them.

In 1999, when I was 14 years old, that dream came true. After working hard to locate and meet my father, I was fortunate to travel to Uganda with my auntie (aunt) to see him. The first time I saw my dad, I didn't know what to expect.

To this day, I can remember the song that was playing in his car –"Sacrifice" by Elton John. That song holds a significant memory in my life, marking the first time I saw my father.

While in the vehicle, driving to our destination, my auntie asked my father, "Do you know this child?" A pin-drop silence followed. My father didn't give an answer until we reached home. After my auntie introduced us properly and he got to know me, he opened his arms wide and hugged me. I felt so good and complete.

Later, as time went by, I came to understand why he hesitated. It wasn't that he didn't recognize me – it was that my existence had been a secret. I later learned from my mother that when she was pregnant with me, my father's family and her own had hidden the pregnancy. Only my maternal grandmother knew the truth, and my auntie found out much later. That moment of silence in the car suddenly made sense – it wasn't just shock; it was a buried truth that had finally come to light.

Meeting the rest of my father's family was equally overwhelming. The love and acceptance they extended to me were beyond anything I had imagined. For the first time in my life, I felt a true sense of belonging.

I stayed in Uganda and resumed my education, pushing forward with renewed hope. After completing my Form Six studies in Uganda, life took an unexpected turn – I became pregnant. My father wasn't mad at me, instead, he supported me since he already knew the man responsible. After some discussion, we decided that I would move to Rwanda, where my partner lived and worked. Before leaving, he promised my father that he would take care of me and ensure I continued my studies after giving birth. That promise gave me hope, and I trusted him.

However, once in Rwanda, things changed. His family did not accept me. They insisted that their son had to marry a Rwandan woman, making it clear that they were not happy with my presence in their household. My husband, on the

other hand, failed to keep his promise of supporting my education. Every time I brought it up, it turned into a heated argument. Over time, I gave up on going back to school and instead focused on being a wife and mother. Before I knew it, I had three children.

In a leap of courage, I walked away from the marriage, returning to Nairobi, Kenya with my children. I never confronted my husband or anyone else because my love for him had died. When I visited my mother back in Kenya, I felt at peace, and that's how I knew my time in Rwanda had come to an end. My mother welcomed us with open arms, becoming our rock. She supported my kids' education by providing school fees, enrolling them in the best schools, and ensuring we had food and shelter. She worked tirelessly on her farm, selling the produce to meet our needs.

However, during tough times, her frustrations surfaced in harsh words, but we persevered, understanding her struggles.

Surprisingly, even after I moved back to Nairobi, my husband sent us air tickets to return to Rwanda and continued sending upkeep money for the children while they were in Kenya. But I didn't take them back, and eventually, he gave up.

My biological father also supported and encouraged me from afar. His love and guidance kept me going, but in 2017, I lost him. His death was a devastating blow.

In the midst of my grief, my mother introduced me to Ibrahim Junior. He was impressed by how I handled assignments he gave me and how I spoke to other women. He became a light in my darkness, a man who believed in me even when I struggled to believe in myself. His faith in me brought so much joy because, for the first time in my life, I didn't face backlash, oppression, or rejection. For once, I was viewed as a strong person who could make things happen–a person who belonged in society.

He continued to trust me even when, after some time, I moved out of my mother's house to rent a single room with my kids. I wasn't financially stable, but I still contributed to some of my mother's bills, trying to ease her burden.

Ibrahim introduced me to advocacy, helping me discover my passion for standing up for women's rights. Through this work, I found my voice – something I never knew I had. It felt like the path I was always meant to take, one that could have saved me from so much pain if I had discovered it earlier.

Today, I use my voice to empower others, especially women, to recognize their worth and fight for their rights. My journey has taught me that when working with survivors, you don't have to be loud to bring about change. It also takes time for one to open up and accept that they are survivors. In my work today, I give everyone enough time to build that trust with me so they can open up, and I can support them.



Hope is the light that keeps on shining. I believe that my journey of resilience/survival and my strength can inspire others and create a change. Hope is knowing even in vulnerability, there is power!

- Bampe Daf



Unapologetic : Embracing My Principles and Finding My Peace

-Sydney Mwaura

I've always believed that our principles shape who we are because they guide how we think, act, and make decisions. To me, principles are like the truths we hold dear, the things we believe in and follow. They are the values and rules that we choose to live by. Our principles help us know what is right and wrong and show us how to handle different situations. I think they make us who we are because they influence the way we see the world and interact with others.

I came to think this way because of how I was raised. Growing up, I was taught to always stand by what I believe in, even when it's difficult. This lesson stuck with me because I saw how powerful it was when I stayed true to my values, no matter what happened around me. Over time, I realized that our principles are like the foundation of our lives – they hold everything together and guide us toward becoming the people we are meant to be.

A few years ago, back in high school, I learned just how important principles are. It was a time when I started noticing that people have different ways of thinking and living, and it really bothered me. I grew up believing that our principles were everything, and I thought everyone should think the way I did. But it was one of my friends, Linet, who taught me an important lesson.

Linet and I were in the same school, and while most of the students didn't come from the ghetto, she did. She had a very different way of thinking about life,

especially when it came to our backgrounds. She would often say things like "Ghetto for life" or "Siwezi hama ghetto," meaning she could never leave the ghetto, and she was proud of it. This confused me because my biggest goal back then was to leave the ghetto behind. I thought that leaving the ghetto was the best thing for me.

One day, I asked Linet if she would ever want to leave Dandora, and she said, "Leave where? Being ghetto is for life." At that moment, I realized something important –my truths and principles were not the same as hers. I learned that everyone has their own way of thinking, and their principles guide their decisions, just like mine did. This helped me understand that my principles, and the way I saw the world, were very important to me. They shaped my choices and the person I was becoming.

After high school, the desire to make myself and my parents proud by leaving the ghetto made me adopt a harsher personality. I began isolating myself from others to avoid peer pressure. It became known that Sidney would never succumb to it. When my friends would organize meet–ups, I wouldn't join because they wanted to stay true to the ghetto life, while I was striving for something different. Before long, my friends and I drifted apart, and I found myself spending most of my time at home or in school, losing touch with what it felt like to have real friendships.

I thought I was doing the right thing by trying to change my life, by standing firm in the belief that leaving the ghetto would make me successful. But as time went on, I realized that isolating myself and pushing away those who didn't share my principles wasn't really making me happy. I was holding onto my beliefs so tightly that I didn't even stop to consider how they were affecting me.

I joined college at the age of 17, and at 18, I started working at a company as a skilled casual worker. It was there that I met a guy. A few weeks into our friendship, we began a romantic relationship, and I felt like the happiest person alive. But soon, he started talking about marriage, and although I was excited, something in my spirit was unsettled. I repeatedly rejected his suggestions that

we move in together because I felt uneasy. By July, he proposed the idea again, but when I asked to meet my parents, he refused, offering excuses. I played the understanding girlfriend and tried to accept his reasons.

I was too happy to notice the red flags. He would say things like, "I don't care who your friends are or who you meet, but don't ever mention me in your conversations." I thought it was just a sign of him caring for my privacy. Once, I wore an off–shoulder blouse, and he was upset. I thought it was just a matter of him being protective, but looking back, these were clear red flags that I couldn't see at the time.

In August, a colleague casually mentioned that this guy was planning a wedding, and soon, the rumor spread. When I asked him about it, he brushed it off as nothing. Fast forward to November, my birthday month, I found out I was pregnant. I didn't tell him right away because he had blocked me. After his honeymoon, I finally shared the news, and he suggested we get rid of it. I refused, but then he and my parents began pressuring me. Although I was working and could financially take care of myself and the baby, the overwhelming pressure from both him and my family made me feel like I couldn't do it on my own, and I succumbed.

Making this decision marked the beginning of my sadness. It felt like there was nothing to live for. My harsh personality emerged as bitterness took hold of me. I became angry with myself for not standing up for what I believed in, and this bitterness spread to everyone around me. I began to dislike being around people or engaging in conversations because all I could feel was anger.

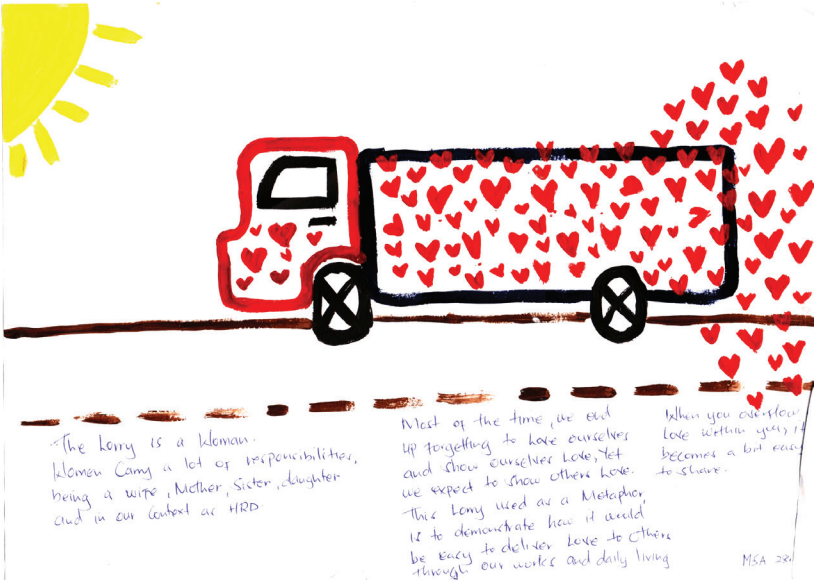
My elder sister, who is outgoing and extroverted, was the complete opposite of me. Whenever she went out to meet friends, it made me mad and resentful. I thought to myself, "Why does she want to be like everyone else instead of standing out?" At that point, the happiness of others angered me.
In May 2021, while my sister and I were stuck in traffic heading to the CBD, I became so angry that my skin even turned pink. She asked me if there was anything I could do to make us get there faster, but of course, there was nothing.

This made me rethink my entire day. We were on time, and there was no reason for my anger. She told me, "Sidoh, go slow on yourself." This advice made me resolve that, by the end of that year, I would stop being angry at myself and others.

In 2022, my sister invited me to a prayer meeting, and that's when I truly found God. I discovered prayer as my sanctuary, my place of peace. The friends I made there helped me realize that I needed to seek help. With their encouragement, I understood that I was a good person, overflowing with grace and love. I realized that love starts with me.

Three years later, I can proudly say that I'm proud of the strides I've made. Since 2022, I've made myself a priority, ensuring that I find joy and peace. I now understand that happiness doesn't need to come at the expense of others. I find happiness within myself, even during difficult moments.

If only I had been brave enough to stand firm in my beliefs earlier, I wouldn't have made others angry at the cost of my own happiness. This is why I value principles. When we stand by them, we make decisions we can be proud of. Sacrificing your beliefs is essentially sacrificing your happiness, which will ultimately affect others too, because they will feel that energy.



Just like a Lorry, women carry many reponsibilities - being a Wife, Mother, Sister, Daughter and in this context, a Human Rights Defender. Most of the us end up forgetting to love ourselves, yet we expect to show our love to others. The Lorry demostartes how much easier sharing love with others would be- this is only possible if we ourselves overflow with love. My hope is that WHRDs will strive to love themselves, not only carry love, but overflow with it.

-Sydney Mwaura



Finding My Voice in a Patriarchal Society

- Zeitun Mohammed

I grew up in a society deeply rooted in patriarchy, where men dominated every aspect of women's life. From household decision-making to leadership roles, women's voices were often relegated to the background. Women were expected to remain silent, their ambitions and opinions overshadowed by societal norms and expectations that confined them to roles of service and obedience. Challenging these norms often led to stigma. For years, this system has deemed women voiceless. I internalized the idea that my opinions didn't matter and I lacked the confidence to speak up even when I had something meaningful to say. My voice felt insignificant–a mere sound drowned out in a society governed by men. As silence became my reality, I was left with a sense of powerlessness.

Nonetheless, a spark of defiance remained deep within. I began to realize that having a voice meant more than just speaking–it meant challenging the status quo, inspiring change, and standing up for what was right. This realization marked the beginning of my journey toward reclaiming my voice and challenging the patriarchal mindset that had kept me silent.

While still navigating this awakening, fate intervened. I met Margaret Super, a mentor and guide who would change the course of my life. Margaret wasn't just a friend, she was a force of inspiration who introduced me to advocacy and the fight for gender equality. She connected me to networks of individuals and organizations committed to addressing issues like gender-based violence, reproductive health, and economic empowerment.

Through Margaret, I realized that I had a role to play in challenging societal injustices. Her unwavering belief in my potential gave me the courage to step out of my comfort zone and embrace advocacy. With her guidance, I discovered strengths I hadn't recognized in myself–patience, resilience, and a deep-seated determination to make a difference. With time, I found my voice and began using it to empower women and girls in my community. I started organizing

community engagements, workshops, and discussions on issues such as sexual violence, reproductive health, and gender-based violence. These safe spaces allowed women to share their experiences, learn from one another, and build solidarity. My goal was simple yet transformative–equipping women with knowledge and confidence so that they could make informed decisions and stand up for their rights.

I began to recognize the importance of having a voice–not only to speak but also to challenge, inspire, and make change. However, despite my unwavering efforts, the journey has been far from easy. Resistance from the community has been a constant challenge, with the majority of community members viewing my efforts as rebellious and disruptive, labeling me as someone who sought to upend tradition and norms. These criticisms were painful, but they only strengthened my resolve. I knew that discomfort was a sign of progress–challenging ingrained norms would never be comfortable, but it was necessary.

In moments of doubt, I found strength in the women and girls I worked with. Witnessing their resilience and transformations reminded me of the importance of my work. They inspired me to persevere, even when the odds seemed insurmountable. Margaret's mentorship continued to be a source of encouragement, teaching me the value of patience and the importance of celebrating small victories.

Today, I am proud to be a resource for my community. Through advocacy, I've built networks and partnerships that provide support and opportunities for women and girls. I've become a trusted voice, helping others find their own. Seeing women and girls pursue education, start businesses, and challenge harmful practices has been the most rewarding part of my journey. Their successes are proof of the power of knowledge, solidarity, and resilience. As I continue this work, I remain committed to advocating for women's rights and dismantling the structures that perpetuate inequality. Together, we can create a future where every voice is heard, valued, and empowered.

One of the most profound lessons I've learned is the importance of sharing. Sharing our struggles and victories creates connections that strengthen us as individuals and as a community. It reminds us that we are not alone and that our voices can inspire others to rise. This journey has also taught me that even in the face of deeply entrenched norms, change is possible. Margaret's belief in me ignited a spark that has grown into a flame–a flame that now lights the way for others. By working together, supporting one another, and amplifying our voices, we can create a society where gender equality becomes a reality.



Brown color describes the indigenous people of our community with black symbolizing the difficulties they're facing but as time goes by there's hope rising and we have hope that we'll be living in a just society.

- Zeitun Mohammed



The Journey to Today

- Ruth Kinuthia

I come from a very patriarchal community where men made most of the decisions, while women were expected to remain silent. I remember one particular incident when I was about 10 years old. There was a town hall meeting to discuss important issues, and only men were allowed to speak. I saw my mother standing silently at the back, her face filled with frustration because she had an opinion but no one would listen to her. It made me feel confused and sad, and I often wondered why women were treated differently.

Growing up, I noticed this happening many times–women were not given a chance to share their thoughts, even when the issues being discussed directly affected them. This made me feel powerless and angry, and I often wished for a world where everyone had an equal say.

Thanks to my mum, who strived to change that. She gave me a voice by providing opportunities for exposure and academic exploration. My mum, Regina Wanjiku, is a strong and determined woman. She worked as a teacher in our local school and always believed that education was the key to changing lives. She would tell me stories about how she had to fight for her own education when she was a girl because her brothers were often given priority over her.

I remember one day when I was about 12 years old. I came home from school crying because a teacher had told me that girls should focus on chores instead of dreaming about big careers. My mum sat me down, wiped my tears, and told me, "Ruth, you are smart, and you can be anything you want to be. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise." She worked hard to ensure I had opportunities she never had. For example, she saved money to take me to better schools, even when it meant sacrificing her own comfort.

She also encouraged me to speak up. At family gatherings, when girls were expected to stay quiet, she would ask me to share my thoughts. Slowly, I started gaining confidence. My mum is my mentor. She has mentored me to become the strong, resilient woman I am today.

There's one time when my mum sponsored me to attend a Youth Exchange program in Norway. Before I went, I was a bit shy and unsure of myself. I had never traveled far from home, and the thought of meeting people from other countries and experiencing a new culture made me nervous. I wasn't sure if I would fit in, and I worried about not being able to speak up or share my ideas.

But when I got to Norway, everything changed. I met young people from different countries, and they were so friendly and open-minded. We talked about our cultures, shared our dreams, and discussed how we could make the world a better place. At first, I felt out of place, but the more I listened and spoke up, the more confident I became. I learned that people from different backgrounds may have different views, but they all have valuable things to say.

When I came back home, I was a different person. I felt more confident and brave. I wasn't afraid to speak up anymore, and I knew that my ideas mattered. I started seeing the world in a new way, and I wanted to share what I had learned with others. This experience in Norway helped me believe in myself even more, and it gave me the courage to stand up for others, especially women in my community.

Coming from a patriarchal community, this exposure in Norway empowered me to begin community development work. In 2010, I attended a public participation forum in my community. I thought it would be a good chance to hear everyone's ideas, but when I got there, I saw something that made me feel upset.
Women in the community were not allowed to speak, even though the issue being discussed directly affected them. They had to stay quiet while the men spoke, and I could see how much they wanted to share their thoughts.

It was then that I truly realized how important a voice is. I understood that without a voice, you can't express your thoughts, and others might make decisions for you without knowing what you really need. The women were not allowed to speak, but I knew they had strong opinions and feelings. I saw how their silence made them feel small and powerless. This made me realize that with a voice, you can speak for yourself and tell your own story. Without it, others will tell your story for you, and it might not be the truth.

I started organizing workshops to teach them how to find their voice, and it was amazing to see their confidence grow. At first, many of them were shy or afraid to speak, but after learning about their rights and how to express themselves, they began to speak with strength. They were no longer afraid to stand up for what they believed in. Seeing the women in my community begin to speak out and stand up for themselves filled me with pride. It fills me with joy to see how much they've learned, and it's inspiring to know I played a small part in helping them find their voice. This journey has deeply inspired me, and it fuels my passion for helping others do the same.

Tomorrow, I want to see a community where women are aware of their rights, where they not only have access but equal access to education, leadership opportunities, and a safe space to thrive. This is important to me because I believe that when women know their rights, they can make better choices for themselves and their families. If women have the same chances as men to go to school, get good jobs, and become leaders, they can change the future for everyone.

When women have the same opportunities as men, they can use their talents and skills to make their communities stronger. It would make a huge difference when women are able to speak out, get educated, and lead others. The whole community would benefit because women bring different ideas and ways of solving problems. If women have a safe space to thrive, they will feel more confident and supported to follow their dreams. This is why I believe it is so important to fight for equal access and opportunities for women.

This is what having a voice can achieve today. When women find their voice, they can speak for their rights, shape their own futures, and lift up their communities. That's why I say VIVA–Long live the voices of the people, Long live the voices of women! VIVA-WOMEN-VIVA! VIVA-WOMEN-VIVA!



My story is about strength, speaking up, and building a better future for women. The artwork- a bright and simple drawing of a cat under the sun, shows innocence, warmth, and hope. Like the sun shines on everyone, bringing warmth and light, my story hopes to brighten the lives of women and girls. It encourages them to find their voices and believe in their strengths.The cat standing proudly under the sun shows the power of self-expression and confidence. I hope that, just like the cat enjoying the sunlight, women who hear my story will feel hopeful, speak up, and step forward with courage, knowing they belong everywhere.

- Ruth Kinuthia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND GRATITUDE

The Story Kitchen (TSK) envisions a just society where SHE is heard, empowered, and lives with dignity. Its mission is to use storytelling for self-awareness, healing, and movement building. By challenging biases in knowledge systems, TSK promotes social justice, inclusivity, and democratization of knowledge. For TSK, storytelling is a political act-reawakening agency that challenges dominant ideologies and creates alternative narratives. It goes beyond recounting events to foster self-connection, empathy, and relationships that empower rather than exploit, shaping a fairer, more diverse knowledge landscape rooted in lived experiences.

This book is the result of a collaboration between Salome Nduta and Jaya Luintel, two feminist friends, and two feminist organizations: Women Human Rights Defenders Hub (The HUB) in Kenya and The Story Kitchen (TSK) in Nepal. It exemplifies the power of sharing knowledge, resources, skills, and wisdom to strengthen the movement to amplify Herstory.

The idea was conceptualized in August 2024 when Salome traveled to Nepal for the Human Rights Defenders Retreat and Visioning Conference. A conversation between two friends led to the vision of transferring the knowledge and craft of story-receiving and writing to women human rights defenders in Kenya. In November 2024, I traveled to Nairobi to facilitate a "Story-Receiving and Writing Workshop" based on narrative therapy principles. Since December 2024, these remarkable women have poured their hearts into documenting each other's stories, engaging in mentorship and virtual sessions to refine their narratives. Through this process, they have become not just storytellers but co-authors of their lived experiences.

This book amplifies the voices of women who refuse to be silenced, showcasing resilience, courage, and transformation. It shares stories of support, resistance, healing, and self-discovery. These women challenge norms, fight for justice, and emerge stronger, freer, and determined to shape their own destinies despite adversity.

I am deeply grateful to the incredible women in Kenya who bravely shared their stories. Your strength and resilience are at the heart of this book, and I am honored to have been part of this journey. While in Nairobi, I was inspired to write a poem as a tribute to all of you, a piece that has now become part of this book.

My sincere gratitude to our Guru and Mentor, Eileen Alma, Executive Director of Coady International Institute, for bringing Salome and me together in 2016 through the Global Change Leaders Program. During our time at Coady, we embraced the motto #JustDoSomething, which was introduced by our dear friend Anita Yadav from India. It became a commitment to action against inequality and injustice.

Since 2015, TSK has applied Narrative Therapy principles to storytelling and writing, adopting a more informed approach in 2017. I am grateful to TSK's mentors from Dulwich Centre, Australia White, David Denborough, and David Newman, as well as our coach, Prathama Raghavan, for their guidance in Narrative Therapy principles and contextualization of the practices in Nepal.

I sincerely thank the incredible team of the HUB for their unwavering support and love, and I also want to thank the Equality Fund for supporting TSK's work.

Together, we have created a space where voices that were once silenced now resonate with strength and power. This book is a testament to the power of storytelling, feminist solidarity, and collective resistance.

Thank you!

Jaya Luintel
Co-founder & President
The Story Kitchen



"It was very educational and great. I realized that we don't need to be loud so as to feel like we're helping out as Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)."

Zeitun Mohammed



"I felt vulnerable, relieved, courageous and a sene of liberation came through. At first,it was heavy revisiting the struggles though a sense of empowerment also came out strongly knowing that my work matters and inspires others. I felt like going through a moment of vulnerability that transforms into strength, healing and hope".

Bampe Daf

WE OWN

"I felt a sense of belonging and ownership of the story , I felt relieved and healed as I wrote the story."

Janet Kathini



"I felt privileged to be part of a team of brave and resilient women. Despite difficult personal experiences, they were able to still make changes in their communities. I walked in the session not knowing anyone and I came out with a great sense of sisterhood finding sisters from different parts of the country and beyond."

Zainab Mohamed





"Telling my story was a strong and emotional experience. It brought back painful memories but also showed me how strong and determined I am. It helped me see that every challenge I went through made me the leader and advocate I am today. Sharing my story was not just for me, it was also to inspire others to speak up and use their own voices. I realized that your voice is your power; when you speak up, you shape your future and uplift your community."

Ruth Kinuthia



"This process was not only illuminating to me but also a time of reflection on my journey. With every word that came out of my mouth, it made me realize and appreciate the efforts I made to have a success story. I realized that telling your own version of your story, gives a sense of pride in realizing your journey."

Sydney Mwaura

OUR STORY

"Going through this process was both overwhelming and empowering, it entailed revisiting painful moments, but also reclaiming power in telling the story in my own terms. At first, it felt like reopening wounds I had buried deep. But with each word, each stroke of paint, I felt light. Stories are like art; they make you realize how beautiful life can be, it makes pain visible in an artistic way."

Diana Mercy Manyara



"Even when broken, the roots of resilience dig deep, bringing forth new life and new beginnings."

Doreen Kagwiria



Women Human Rights Defenders Hub- The Hub

The Women Human Rights Defenders Hub is a feminist initiative led by Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) who have been in the forefront advocating for rights, giving safety and support to women defenders in Kenya and establishing feminist networks of WHRDs through community organizing.

The Hub envisions a world in which fundamental human rights and freedoms are universally recognized and respected by all, and where everyone has the right to defend these rights and freedoms without fear of threats or attack. The Hub supports WHRDs through holistic programmes that are designed to strengthen WHRDs collective and individual capacities in order to manage their activism work.

The Hub's strategic interventions are organized around six thematic pillars, identified based on the context analysis and our own understanding of gaps in the national and regional human rights defenders' movement regarding the needs and concerns of WHRDs. These pillars focus on safety and security, livelihoods, wellbeing, femtorship, movement building and institution building. The Hub believes that investing in these strategic priorities will create a conducive environment that empowers WHRDs to advocate for fundamental human rights for women in all their diversity and demand for accountability by state and non-state actors.

Women Human Rights Defenders Hub- The Hub

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