Pathfinders for Women's Economic Empowerment

Women's Movement and Self-Mobilization for Women's Economic Empowerment

Edited by: Nkatha Kabira, Wanjiku Ngunjiri, and June Ombara

UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

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AFRICAN WOMEN STUDIES CENTRE (AWSC)

Pathfinders for Women's Economic Empowerment

The Women's Movement and Self-Mobilization for Women's Economic Empowerment

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University of Nairobi
African Women Studies Centre
Women's Economic Empowerment Hub
P.O. Box 30197-00100, Nairobi | Kenya
Email: awsckenya@uonbi.ac.ke | weehub@uonbi.ac.ke
Website: awsc.uonbi.ac.ke | weehub.uonbi.ac.ke

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the trailblazing women who paved the way for women's economic empowerment in Kenya. We celebrate all the women featured in this book, and in particular: Lilian Mwaura, Dr. Mary Okello, Esther Mwaura, Grace Wanjiku Kingatua, Hellen Seidon, Hellen Nkaissery, Lizzie Wanyoike, Rachael Gatabaki, Rukia Subow, Catherine Ichaya, Terry Kantai, and Winifred Mujesia. We acknowledge and sincerely appreciate their invaluable contributions and those of countless others, for advancing the cause of women's economic empowerment.

We also pay tribute to the pioneering women who came before them, including Field Marshal Muthoni, Muthoni Likimani, Professor Wangari Maathai, Jane Kiano, Rahab Wabici, Grace Ogot, Asenath Odaga, Sarah Wambui, Maggie Gona, Wilhemina Oduol, Milcah Ocholla, Margaret Wambui Kenyatta (Senior), Margaret Ogolla, and many others.

We salute you. We celebrate you.

Preface

The narrative of women's struggles and triumphs in Kenya resonates with resilience, determination, and unwavering courage. From grassroots movements to activism, shattering glass ceilings in boardrooms and courtrooms, Kenyan women have consistently propelled societal progress forward. Despite constitutional guarantees and supportive policy frameworks, gender disparities persist. Women continue to face limited access to financial resources, unemployment, and property rights. These challenges are compounded by cultural norms, discriminatory practices, and systemic barriers, further exacerbating the the full realization of their economic potential. Nevertheless, amid these hurdles, a burgeoning movement of women entrepreneurs, advocates, and policymakers continues to steer transformative change. Their collective resilience and determination serve as beacons of hope, inspiring future generations to carry forward the struggle for a more equitable and prosperous Kenya.

This book, The Women's Movement and Self-Mobilization for Women's Economic Empowerment, is a testament to the power of collective action and advocacy in the pursuit of gender parity and economic justice. Within its pages, readers will embark on a transformative journey, exploring the stories of Kenyan women who have defied conventions, challenged systemic barriers, and forged pathways to economic empowerment in diverse sectors. From Lilian Mwaura's pioneering strides in championing women's rights in the legal arena, to Grace Onyango's groundbreaking political journey as the first female mayor and parliamentarian, these women boldly carved paths very few would dare to tread. Dr. Mary Okello's impact in banking and education, alongside Grace Wanjiku Kingatua's grassroots initiatives to foster economic independence, exemplifies the transformative power of visionary leadership. Additionally, Esther Mwaura Mwiru's steadfast dedication to marginalized communities, Hellen Sadion's grassroots' activism to empower Maasai women, and Hellen Nkaiserry's innovative dairy farming initiatives, highlight the enduring impact of grassroots advocacy. The experiences of these women and other trailblazers are meticulously documented in this book.

This book serves as a tribute to the indispensable role of women's empowerment in fostering inclusive and sustainable development, illuminating the transformative impact of their endeavors across diverse spheres. Numerous studies have unequivocally demonstrated that when women are economically empowered, entire societies thrive, benefiting from their multifaceted contributions. Empowered women not only invest

in the education and health of their families but also serve as catalysts for economic growth by driving innovation and entrepreneurship. Moreover, their presence strengthens the fabric of communities by fostering resilience in the face of challenges. Thus, the imperative to dismantle barriers to women's economic participation transcends mere justice; it becomes a pragmatic imperative for societal progress, essential for unlocking the full potential of the country. Through the narratives of remarkable women documented here, this book offers insights into the significance of empowering women economically and underscores the importance of gender equality in shaping a brighter future for all.

This book also serves as a call to action for future generations. It offers insights, lessons, and strategies gleaned from the experiences of trailblazers who have paved the way, empowering readers to become agents of change in their own right. Whether through grassroots activism, policy advocacy, or innovative entrepreneurship, each individual can make meaningful difference and advance the cause of women's economic empowerment. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, the urgency of advancing women's economic empowerment remains paramount. Persistent issues, such as the gender pay gap and unequal access to financial services, continue to impede the full realization of women's potential in Kenya. Yet, amid these structural barriers, there remains a resilient sense of hope and momentum of change. The stories in this book bear witness to the transformative power of solidarity, resilience, and unwavering determination.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the women whose voices fill these pages – visionaries, the leaders, and advocates who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of a more just and equitable Kenya. May their stories inspire and embolden us to come together to fight for gender equality and women's economic empowerment. Together, let us respond to this call to action, harnessing the collective power of our collective voices and efforts to build a future where every woman and girl has an opportunity to thrive.

Foreword

In the annals of Kenya's history, the contributions of remarkable women have often been overlooked or relegated to the sidelines. Yet, their impact on the nation's progress and development cannot be overstated. The Women's Movement and Self-Mobilization for Women's Economic Empowerment seeks to illuminatethese unsung heroes, whose resilience, courage, and unwavering determination have shaped the course of our country.

Within the pages of this book, readers will encounter a diverse array of narratives chronicling the extraordinary journeys of women who have defied societal norms and shattered glass ceilings. From Lilian Mwaura's groundbreaking efforts in the legal field to Dr. Mary Okello's pioneering work in finance and education, each story serves as a testament to the transformative power of women's agency and activism. Through their tireless advocacy and grassroots initiatives, these women have not only challenged entrenched systems of oppression but also paved the way for a more equitable and inclusive society.

At its core, the The Women's Movement and Self-Mobilization for Women's Economic Empowerment is a tribute to resilience, tenacity, and collective action. It underscores the pivotal role women have played in advancing social change and economic development in Kenya. By amplifying their voices and honoring their contributions, this book aims to inspire future generations to carry forward the struggle for gender equality and empowerment. It stands as a rallying cry for all Kenyans to unite in building a more equitable and prosperous future for our nation.

Professor Margaret Kobia (PhD), EGH

Foreword

Throughout Kenya's history, the women's movement has stood as a beacon of hope and progress, blazing the path toward a more just, inclusive, and prosperous society. As we turn the pages of "The Women's Movement and Self-Mobilization for Women's Economic Empowerment", we are reminded of the unwavering spirit of Kenyan women who have bravely advocated for their rights, breaking down barriers in the pursuit of equality and empowerment.

The women's movement has been a force for change, challenging entrenched social norms and institutional barriers to gender equality. From grassroots mobilization to legislative advocacy, women across the country have united in solidarity to demand recognition, representation, and economic empowerment. Their resilience and determination in the face of adversity serve as a testament to the power of collective action and the enduring spirit of hope that fuels the struggle for justice and equality. Each story is a testament of resilience, creativity, and perseverance in overcoming numerous challenges that confront women in their pursuit of economic empowerment.

From the rural villages of Kajiado to the bustling streets and informal settlements of Nairobi, these women have defied the odds and charted a new course towards a more inclusive and equitable future. As we celebrate the achievements of the women's movement in Kenya, we also acknowledge the ongoing challenges and obstacles that persist. The struggle for gender equality and economic empowerment is far from over, and it requires the collective efforts of all stakeholders, including actors in government, civil society, the private sector, and individuals to create an enabling environment where women can thrive and prosper.

This book brings to light stories of resilience, courage, and triumph , that inspire us to redouble our efforts in the fight for gender equality and women's economic empowerment. As we reflect on the past achievements and future aspirations of the women's movement in Kenya, let us pledge to continue the journey towards a more just, inclusive, and equitable society, where every woman has the opportunity to realize her full potential and contribute to the nation's prosperity.

Professor Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira (PhD), EBS, CBS

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Abbreviations

AfDB	African Development Bank
AGM	Annual General Meeting
AGOA	African Growth And Opprotunity Act
AIC	African Inland Church
AIDS	Acquired Immuno-deficiency Syndrome
ASAL	Arid and Semi Arid Land
AWSC	African Women Studies Centre
ABSA	Amalgamated Banks of South Africa
BBI	Building Bridges Initiative
CBO	Community Based Organization
CDE	County Director of Education
CDF	Constituency Development Fund
CDO	Community Development Officers
CID	Criminal Investigations Department
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CREAW	Centre for Rights Education Awareness
CS	Cabinet Secretary
CWS	Commission on the Status Of Women
DEB	District Education Board
DC	District Commissioner
DDC	District Development Committee
DO	District Officer
DP	Democratic Party
EAC	East African Community
EAWL	East African Women's League
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationists
FORD	Forum for Restoration and Democracy
FEMNET	African Women's Development and Communication Network
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FIDA	International Federation of Women Lawyers
GC	Gender Committee
GPO	General Post Office
HELB	Higher Education Loans Board
NEC	National Executive Council
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus

ICEA	Insurance Company of East Africa
ICW	International Council of Women
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IGA	Income Generating Activities
KANU	Kenya National African Union
KCB	Kenya Commercial Bank
KCC	Kenya Creameries Coorporation
KEYOP	Kenya Youth Empolyment Opportunities Project
KICC	Kenyatta International Convention Centre
KNHCR	Kenya National Commission on Human Rights
KU	Kenyatta University
KWAHO	Kenya Water for Health Organization
KWFT	Kenya Women Finance Trust
MCA	Member of County Assembly
MYWO	Manendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization
MP	Member of Parliament
MDG	Millenium Development Goals
NC	National Council
NEC	National Executive Council
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NIBS	Nairobi Institute of Business Studies
NCCK	National Council of Churches in Kenya
NCWK	National Council of Women in Kenya
NYS	National Youth Service
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OGW	Order of Grand Warrior
PC	Provincial Commissioner
PCEA	Presbyterian Church of East Africa
PS	Permanent Secretary
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
STEM	Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics
ToT	Training of Trainers
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment
WEF	Women's Enterprise Fund
WUSA	Women's Union for Social Action
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

Introduction

This the book is a sequel to "Conversations with Pathfinders: Strategies that Worked for Women in the 2010 Constitution-Making Process," capturing in detail the stories of women involved in the process and the spirit that guided their pursuit. It chronicles the experiences of women in Kenyan political parties through conversations with key figures, including Honourables Phoebe Asiyo and Martha Karua, Jael Mbogo, Kamla Sikand, Professors Julia Ojiambo, Wanjiku Kabira, and Eddah Gachukia, among others who took on roles in the constitution-making process and the second liberation struggle. They passed the baton to younger women, paving the way for new voices such as Daisy Amdany, Honourables Beatrice Elachi and Mumbi Ngaru, Professor Patricia Kameri Mbote, among others. Despite ethnic, religious, cultural, economic, and political differences, these women worked together toward a common goal—women's inclusion in the new Constitution.

The book explores the impact and contributions of the Women's Movement and self-mobilization on Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) in Kenya between 1963 and 2010. Historically, the experiences of African women have been marginalized from mainstream knowledge production and seldom acknowledged as valid sources of information to inform development across the continent. Women's experiences and insights have not been sufficiently utilized to shape discourse, policy, and societal structures. This book seeks to make African women's knowledge visible through academic and policy discussions. The women featured in this book hail from six regions, in Kenya, comprising the following counties: Busia, Kakamega, and Kisumu in the Western region; Kajiado, Nakuru, and Baringo in the Rift Valley; Nyeri, Muranga, and Kiambu in the Central region; Machakos, Kitui, and Makueni in Eastern region; and Kwale, Mombasa, and Kilifi in the Coast region; and Nairobi City County.

The study aimed to: (1) map the historical contribution of grassroots women's groups to women's economic empowerment (WEE) between 1963 and 1975, during Kenya's early independence; (2) examine their continued role in WEE from 1976 to 1997, leading up to the introduction of the affirmative action fund; and (3) assess how the national women's movement has influenced WEE-related policies from 1990 to the present, highlighting key lessons on care work and effective mobilization strategies to inform future policy discourse.

The study predominantly employed a feminist narratology approach to draw key insights. The stories respond to the core question: What has been the impact of self-mobilization within the women's movement on economic empowerment? In pursuit of this objective, the research posed the following specific questions: What contributions did grassroots women's groups and associations make to WEE between 1960 and 1976, and from 1976 to 1997 when the affirmative action fund was introduced?; What role did the government play in WEE between 1963 and 1976, and from 1976–1997?; How did the women's movement influence national policies impacting WEE between 1990 and the present; and what self-mobilization strategies did post–independence women's movement employ for WEE, and what lessons were learnt.

Through consultations with selected women leaders-purposively identified based on their contributions to Kenya's women's movement, this book aims to provide a collection of conversations that illuminate the experiences of women in the movement. Women coalesced into formal and informal like-minded groups to carry out economic activities, driven largely by economic hardships and the desire to improve their livelihoods. They were involved in various economic activities, including table banking, livestock and crop farming, land buying, and handcrafts sales, among others. Respondents noted that women's struggle for better living standards—particularly in response to extreme poverty caused by landlessness in the post-colonial era—was a key driver of their mobilization. In addition, access to education and income diversification were other motivating factors. Data from all the regions indicate that poverty and the desire for self-improvement were core triggers for women's self-mobilization. Similarly, women's pursuit of economic emancipation–seeking independence from their husbands and communities–was central, among other motivations such as political leadership, gender equality, and freedom from gender-based violence (GBV).

Lessons learned from processes of women's self-mobilization for economic empowerment

Findings from conversations with women leaders reveal several key factors necessary for fostering economic empowerment: creating an enabling environment to provide capital skills, and support for women's group activities, particularly income-generating ventures; access to financial and patient capital, identified as critical to resourcing women's activities; visibility through group fomation; allowing women to attract resources such as funding, programs for building skills, and attention from other development organizations, government, and other women's

movements; a supportive legal framework, necessary for institutional structures that sustain women's economic activities; training and skills development, addressing literacy challenges, fostering innovation, and exposing women to broader opportunities; investment visibility studies, helping women make informed decisions when launching businesses and engaging in high-impact initiatives initiatives such as land buying, value addition, and cross-border trade; and building resilience, recognized as acritical success factor in sustaining women's economic activities.

Brief of the Trailblazers

Rachel Gatabaki

Rachael holds a distinction of being the first high-ranking woman at Kenya Airways. She studied economics at the University of Nairobi and coming from a business background, she worked to organize women in small business groups. She successfully led women's groups tokey global conferences, including the Business women Conference in the Hague, the Dakar Conference in 1994 and the Beijing Women's Conference. As a woman's leader, she played a crucial role in the Council for Economic Empowerment for Women and Women in Agribusiness. Her guiding philosophies remain: "Self-empowerment is a must before empowering others and hard work and self-reliance are key." She encouraged women to reclaim the camaradie that once existed among them, dispelling the myth that trailblazin womenwere only active on podiums and conferences. However, she expressed concern that WEE structures are often mismanaged, preventing women's groups from fully owning their projects. She emphasized the the importance of packaging empowerment messages to reach grassroots woman effectively.

Dr. Mary Okello

Dr. Mary Okello is the founder of Makini Schools and the vice-president of Women's World Banking (WWB) in New York. She studied at Butere Girls and later Alliance Girls, where her classmates including luminaries such as Justice Effie Owuor, Professor Florida Karani, Educationist Elizabeth Masiga, and actress Elizabeth Mwangi (popularly known for her role in the TV series Mother-in-Law). She hold a Bachelor's degree in History from Makerere University. After brief stint in the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, Mary took up a graduate trainee position at the Barclays Bank (Now Absa), becoming Kenya's first female banker despite the bank's initial exclusion of women. She persistently advocated for women's access to financial resources hence forming the Barclays Bank Women's Association to support female membership and professional development in banking. Recognising the lack of loan access for women. She was instrumental in establishing the Kenya Women Finance Trust (KWFT), which has since grown into a bank. KWFT, originally a limited guarentee institution, enabled womento secure loans, significantly improving their financial independence. Dr. Mary later served as senior advisor to the African Development Bank, where she developed the Women in Development Policy Paper, which became instrumental in shaping financial policies that benefited women. In 1978, with her husband founded the Makini Group of Schools. After leaving Barclays Bank in 1985 and was appointed the regional representative and first African representative to the Women's World Banking (WWB), where she served until 1987 when she was appointed as a Senior Advisor to the Africa Development Bank to the Bank's President. In 1990, she was appointed vice-president of WWB in New York. She left her banking career in 1992 to focus on developing Makini School. Throughout her banking career, she lobbied for the removal of rules and regulations that were discriminatory against women in financial institutions. She was awarded the Moran of the Order of the Burning Spear (EBS) by His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Kenya, for her oustanding contribution to education in Kenya.

Catherine Ichoya

Catherine Ichoya is a renowned gender activist and former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Federation of Associations of Women in Business in Eastern and Southern Africa (FEMCOM), now known as the COMESA Federation of National Associations of Women in Business (COMFWB). The institution operates across 21 African countries, fostering women's empowerment in business. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Nairobi.

Between 1963 and 2010, Catherine made significant contributions to women's movements for economic empowerment. She rose to the position of manager at the National Bank of Kenya during a time when

societal norms largely confined women to domestic roles. While at the bank, she witnessed first-hand the challenges women faced in accessing credit, as many lacked property to use as collateral. Women were often encouraged to pursue small ventures, such as poultry or dairy farming, but remained locked out of large-scale business opportunities. Through her leadership and advocacy, Catherine championed the idea of women forming cooperative movements, which enabled them to access unsecured loans and strengthen their economic participation. She played an instrumental role in pushing for inclusive banking practices that empowered women to expand beyond subsistence-level enterprises. The UN Decade for Women was a transformative period that further advanced women's economic empowerment through network building. It was during this time that pioneering women, such as Mary Okello, began setting up schools, expanding the scope of women's leadership in education and business. Later, the 2002 Gender Policy endorsed in Addis Ababa elevated the recognition of women's rights and gender equality across Africa. Catherine herself facilitated the development of a landmark gender policy that was endorsed by Heads of State in 2012. This policy later informed broader African Union frameworks, leaving a lasting imprint on the continent's gender equality agenda.

Lilian Mwaura

Lilian Mwaura is the founder of the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Kenya chapter. She has been an advocate of the High Court of Kenya for over 45 years. Born in 1947, she was raised by her mother, a peasant, who single-handedly ensured that her children, including the girls, completed their education after their father left to fight for independence in 1949 and never returned. Lilian studied at Loreto Limuru before proceeding to pursue a law degree and later founded Mwaura Advocates in 1985. Following the UN Women Conference in Nairobi that same year, she founded the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Kenya chapter, a non-profit Organization aimed at protecting women's rights. She brought together women in the legal profession, including Rachael Omamo, Abida Aroni, Joyce Khaminwa, Anne Kariuki, and Anne Mutua, among others to tackle a critical question:

"How can we make the Kenyan woman to become more aware of her rights?" Disturbed by the divide between elite and grassroots' women, who were seemingly constrained by cultural barriers, she soughtto empower women at all levels. For instance, she organized a trip for Kiondo women to Washington D.C., which enabled them to showcase and sell their handmade crafts. For the five years she chaired FIDA, it actively participated in movements dedicated to women's empowerment, including: the Greenbelt Movement led by Wangari Maathai, where she served as a board member from 1990 to 2007; the National Council of Women, where with Eddah Gachukia they are among the longest-standing members; and and FEMNET, the political movement advocating for women's empowerment since 1992. She attended international conferences organised by FEMNET including the Dakar conference (1987) and Brussels (1988), where she was elected President for the Women in Africa and the Middle East.

Hellen Nkaissery

Hellen Nkaissery is one of Kenya's most renowned women leaders from the Maasai community. She is the founder and current Chairperson of Ushanga Initiative, a group spread across several predominantly pastoralist counties, inclduing Turkana, West Pokot, Baringo, Narok, Kajiado, and Samburu. Pastoralist women in these counties, have come together in cooperatives to produce and market bracelets as campaign tool against sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including female genital mutilation (FGM). She has been a leading advocate in tackling challenges that hinder girls' access to education, enrollment, retention, academic progression, and performance. Hellen has Championed action against restrictive sociocultural norms, advocating for women's access to and control over family resources. Recognizing milk as a economic tool for women, she established a program in 2003 targeting Masaai women's economic empowerment. Through sensitization meetings, she inspired women to improve their livelihoods and sustain their daughters' education. Starting in her home village in Bisil, Hellen networked, sent emails, and engaged experts from the Dairy Board and Kenya Creameries Cooperative (KCC) to conduct training programs to enlighten women about the benefits of pooling their milk for

bulk sales, an idea that was embraced, and gained traction despite initial transport challenges. Today, over 400 women are actively involved in the supply chain, producing milk for butter and cheese processing. With the support of her late husband, General Nkaissery, who was the MP of Kajiado Central, she expanded the program across the entire constituency, using the CDF funds to establish milk collection centers in Kajiado County in 2005. With backing from the County and National government andWorld Bank funding, the women's groupspurchased vehicles to transport their milk to KCC. Hellen continues to spearhead their efforts, focusing on group registration, education, capacity building, mobile banking, and management for self-reliance.

Lizzie Wanyoike

The late Lizzie Wanyoike was born in 1951 in Murang'a County. A renowned Kenyan entrepreneur, she is celebrated for leaving an indelible mark in Kenya's education sector, business, and philanthropy. In 2018, she received the Social Entrepreneurship Award for Women. She was the founder of the Nairobi Institute of Business Studies (NIBS), Lizzie Preparatory Schools, and Emory Hotel. Her educational journey began at Gathuki-ini Primary School in Murang'a County. After completing her studies, she launched her teaching career in career in 1972 at State House Girls' High School in Nairobi. Lizzie later joined her family business, where she worked for 25 years while saving her earnings diligently. In 1975, she established the Temple College of Secretarial Studies in Nairobi, serving as both principal and instructor which later became the Nairobi Institute of Business Studies in 1999. By 2018, the college had expanded to branches in Ruiru, Ongata Rongai, Thika, and Nairobi's Central Business District, enrolling over 5,000 students.

Throughout her career, Lizzie played an instrumental role in mentoring young women, inspiring them to pursue careers in engineering, business management, and other fields traditionally dominated by men.

Terry Kantai

Born in 1942, Terry Kantai was instrumental in mobilizing women at the grassroots level after realizing that many women in rural communities lacked access to key benefits. She encouraged leadership among grassroots women and established the Women's Union for Social Action (WUSA) in the 1960s, a union that continues to exist today. Terry also founded the Women's Bureau for women's empowerment and became its first chairperson. In recognition of her outstanding service, she was awarded by His Excellency, The President of The Republic of Kenya with the Order of the Grand Warrior (OGW).

Rukia Subow

Born in Lang'ata, Nairobi City County, Rukia grew up in Nyeri and Nanyuki, moving frequently as her father, who served in the Kenyan military, was stationed in different regions. Her mother introduced her to the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO) in 1964 while she was still in high school, making her the first Somali woman to gain membership. This early exposure shaped her lifelong commitment to advancing women's rights and economic empowerment. Rukia pursued studies in Labour Relations in Israel, specializing in Violence Reduction Programs, and later worked with the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). She also served as Kenya's Ambassador to Iran. In recognition of her outstanding service to the nation, she was awarded the Order of the Grand Warrior (OGW) by the President of the Republic of Kenya. Her leadership journey within MYWO was remarkable. Elected Vice Chairperson in 1995 and later serving as Chair between 2006 and 2013, Rukia was instrumental in transforming the organization from its colonial origins—which focused largely on etiquette and domestic skills—into a dynamic movement dedicated to women's economic empowerment.

Together with fellow women leaders, she championed cooperatives and entrepreneurship, particularly in small-scale businesses such as vegetable vending. These initiatives enabled women to replace grass-thatched huts with iron-sheeted houses, giving rise to the renowned "Mabati Women Group" in Kabete. The groups also supported each other in purchasing land and constructing decent homes, reinforcing solidarity and collective progress.

Beyond housing initiatives, Rukia spearheaded 18 MYWO programs across diverse areas, including women in leadership, peacebuilding, constitutional reform, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS awareness, FGM eradication, bakery and cookery enterprises. Through partnerships with the Ministry of Trade and the Chamber of Commerce, she helped launch economic empowerment initiatives for women, including international exhibitions in China, Japan, and the Middle East. Her leadership extended into environmental conservation. In collaboration with the Ministry of Energy, she initiated a tree-planting program to enhance sustainable water supply. This project spurred business opportunities for women in Rift Valley and Kisii, who began commercial tree sales. She also trained women in farming, informal businesses, hardware trade, and table banking, equipping them with tools for financial independence and resilience. Through her dedication, Rukia not only redefined women's roles in society but left a lasting legacy of empowerment, entrepreneurship, and leadership across Kenya and beyond.

Esther Mwaura Muiru

Born in Limuru, on the outskirts of Nairobi County, she attended Rironi Primary School before joining the prestigious Loreto High School and later Chania High School for her A-level studies. She was admitted at the University of Nairobi to major in double mathematics, but switched to sociology and economics to enable her better address the needs of her community. As a social planner, Esther dedicated her career to working with underpriviledged communities in Nairobi's infromal settlements. Her early life was profoundly influenced by the missionaries and colonial rule, particularly their efforts to consolidate agricultural productivity. Her advocacy was shaped by colonial-era land

structuring, where fertile land was allocated for tea and pyrethrum farming, leaving less productive areas to local communities. Esther ememrged as as aleading voice in women's economic empowerment, pioneeringthe women's movement in Kenya and remaining an unapologetic advocate for gender equality and women's rights. Her works included advocating for women in property, driven by the impact of settlement schemes and labour conditions; working as a community development officer at the Dutch Embassy; and serving as an Urban Planner and expert in community development under the Ministry of Local Government where she was involved in integrating gender-focused strategies.

Grace Kingátua

I would say that, the women knew what they wanted to do, and they knew their work and they loved their peers.

Born in 1944, Grace Wanjiku Kingatua is among the trailbrazers of women's economic empowerment in Kenya. She received her early education in the Rift Valley and later working as an employee of the Local County Government of Kajiado. A trained social worker, Grace specialized in providing social services to people living with disabilities. Her contributions began in 1968, when she provided training for community development officers, encouraging women to form groups to enhance economic opportuinities. She play a vital role in the formation and leadership of organizations such as Nyakinywa, Wezesha, and Muungano, persuading women and men in Kajiado, Ngong, and Loitoktok to join communal groups to promote self-sufficiency. Through her guidance, these groups engaged in diverse activities such as farming, charcoal trade, classroom construction, knitting and beadwork training, emphasizing education for Maasai boys and girls, group registration, securing access to government resources and financial support. Her influence on Masaai women's education and entrepreneurship since 1976 has been profound leading to: registration of communal groups, pig and cattle rearing, opening of bank accounts, and land purchases to secure financial autonomy and stability. Grace's resilience has enabled her to navigate political interests while advancing women's economic empowerment, leaving an indelible mark on Kenya's development landscape.

Hellen Seidon

Hellen was born in 1944 in Oloolua, Ngong in Kajiado County. Her father's deep appreciation for education saw her attend DEB Primary School in Kajiado County (now Maasai Intermediate School). During the years 1962 and 1963, Hellen, a proud Maasai by birth, took the initiative to teach herself the Kikuyu language. Between 1962 and 1963, she was sponsored by several women leaders to undertake several women leaders to undertake intensive certificate courses in civic education, nursing, and home science courses at the Young Women Christian Association (YWCA). This opportunity arose at a time when Masaai girls were encouraged to pursue higher education.Upon completing college in 1964, she secured a home science science teacher position at Isinya Primary School, thanks to the influence of Mrs. Tameno, who facilitated her admission and oversaw education in Kajiado County. Over time, she expanded her teaching scope to include sewing, beadmaking, and instruction for fourth-and fifth grade students. Nine years later, Hellen was transfered to Ngong Township, opening new opportunities for her. The establishment of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) in Ololosios Centre, marked a turning point in her journey. She was selected by the church council to act as a translator for the white missionaries, facilitating maternal health services, child immunization, and nutrition pograms. In 1970, she began working as a social worker at a community office in Ololosios, specializing in social services. As dedicated member of the Women's Guild, she played an instrumental role of educating women about family planning methods, despite opposition from some spiritual leaders. She has also been able to support orphaned children and those with disabilities at the Dagoretti Children's Centre, and has played a leading role in *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*, particualrly in mobilizing women to enroll in adult education classes and acquire literacy and life skills.

> *There reached a point when women were being sensitized about income-generating projects. Women started engaging in small initiatives like pig farming.*

Winifred Mujesia

Winnie is one of Kakamega County's most influential mobilizers of women and serves as the county chairperson of *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*. She played a pivotal role in women's economic empowerment by introducing

We are united by love, especially when we meet, also education....we sit together; we educate ourselves, even in those small groups: how to cook, look after our children....to hustle, not just waiting for your husband to provide.

table banking, an initiative that allowed women to access loans easily for investments. Through table banking, women having started individual projects, including as poultry keeping, among others. Winnie also encouraged women to establish kitchen gardens, ensuring they wcould grow vegetables instead of purchasing them, an initiative that boosted both their income and nutrition. She has successfully linked women to organizations, such as Women Economic forum (WEF), UWEZO Fund, and the Ministry of Social Services. These partnerships saw women get empowered through capacity building and access to affordable loans, further strenghtening their financial stability. A fierce advocate of women's rights, she fought to reclaim the *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* organization's plot, during her tenure at Maendeleo, from a prominent land grabber. After a lengthy court battle, they won a case that had dragged on from 2014 to 2020. During this time Winnie and her team mobilized and organized women to stage demonstrations to stop construction on the plot and raise funds to cover legal fees. Winnie has also been instrumental in addressing gender-based violence through creating awareness and personally ensuring legal process due process in GBD-related cases. One notable instance involved a woman whose house had been demolished for failing to bear a son. Winnie advocated for justice, ensuring that the case was won in court, and helping rebuild the house. Under her dynamic leadership, M*aendeleo ya Wanawake* has played a key role in women's economic empowerment.

Chapter 1: A Conversation with Rachel Gatabaki

Women are willing listeners and they are willing learners"

"When you are empowered economically, you can stand the test of time. You can stand competition, even from the other gender. When you are economically empowered, you can be a role model to the young generation because they will say, "I would want to be like so and so".

Rachel Gatabaki

Biography

Rachael Gatabaki is a mother, grandmother and a women's leader. She is a university graduate with a specialization in Economics. Her background in business was greatly influenced by her father, an industrious and successful entrepreneur. Rachel has been instrumental in mobilizing women's businesses in the informal sector and in agribusiness, particularly by helping women add value to their dairy products, such as producing commercial yogurt..

Through her effective leadership and mobilization, she spearheaded the Women's Business Conference in The Hague, Netherlands and in Bangkok. Rachel participated in the women's leaders' conference in Dakar in 1995 and the Beijing Conference. She has played a lead role in the Council for Economic Empowerment for Women and was among the pioneer women managers at the Kenya Airways. Her efforts in mobilizing women's businesses led to the exportation of kiondo baskets and Maasai shukas to international markets. She is a member of the Professional Women's Business Club.

She has worked in the Women's Movement alongside senior ladies like Beth Mugo, Maria Kitiambi, Professor Eddah Gachukia, The Late Jane Kiano, The Late Martha Mugambi and Jane Odwak. Her understanding of Women's Economic Empowerment has enabled her to mentor and support young women entrepreneurs, including some with low literacy levels, and groups with projects on chicken rearing in Ukambani and other counties. She has helped themexpand their businesses and access loans through networking with senior women in the Banking sector, such as Mary Okello.

Her organization of women's groups introduced her to farming, which she embarked on in 1992 after her retirement. She introduced these groups to

French bean agriculture for international export, to countries like Holland. She was instrumental in empowering women from Githunguri in bakery, bed tucking, and soap making for sale. Together with professional and business women pillars like Rosemary Mugo, the late Jane Wambaa, Catherine Waithera, and Virginia Kirumba, they held annual candlelit dinners where they opened Professional Women Business Chapters across the country to mentor businesswomen and for them to showcase their businesses.

In partnership with the Greenbelt Movement, championed by the late Professor Wangari Maathai, Rachel took the lead in organizing women to plant trees for environmental conservation and also to generate income from it. She has made an indelible mark as a founder member of commerce and business for Kenyan women and the National Association for Kenyan Women in business, significantly impacting their economic empowerment.

The Conversation

Rachel Gatabaki, former chair of Kenya Professional Business Women's Association in Kiambu was intterviewed by Professor Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira (Interviewer 1) and (Catherine Ichoya Interviewer 2) ____Who is being referred as Daktari in this interview? , (Interviewer 3) and Catherine Githaga (interviewer 4).

The first interviewer begins by appreciating the interviewee (Rachel Gatabaki) for showing up. She then proceeds to tell her what they are involved in and further tells her that Catherine Gichaga had recommended her as the best person to interview concerning women's economic empowerment. She highlighted that the research team hoped to learn about her journey and the strategies she used to overcome poverty. Finally, she asks the interviewer 2 to intorduce herself to Rachel Gatabaki, and the interview proceeds.

Interviewer 1

Mrs. Gatabaki, it's a pleasure for us to have you here today. This is a very important occasion for us because we've been working on the project of Women's Economic Empowerment. We've been thinking about the great work that women did in terms of becoming the drivers of community of women's economic empowerment. In our search for meaningful deeds, particularly in the '70s and '80s, we came across Catherine Gichaga here, who was your colleague in the movement and played different roles. She told us, "If you really want somebody who knows about Kenya's coalition and businesswomen and other organizations, and the public deal for Kenyan women in terms of economic empowerment, then you must speak to Mrs. Gatabaki." So, we are very happy that you have come, that you have accepted our invitation, and we hope to have many other women like you speak to us. We believe that we've made progress in terms of women's representation, particularly because of some of the provisions in the Constitution of Kenya 2010. And we believe that there's a lot in the constitution of Kenya 2010 that actually should promote women economic empowerment and that it is time that we learnt from the best in this particular area.

The idea is also to see how we can encourage networking and alliance building, working with women across the country to establish that kind of commitment like the one we had in the '70s, '80s, and also in the '90s in your various organizations. We know that Kenya Professional Business Women and the Women Economic Empowerment Forum are very important in this particular field. As a leader in that field, we felt it was very, very important we listen to you, and we will continue listening to you and other women. This is so our younger generation—and even the older generation can learn about the strategies you used and all the struggles you went through, and we can learn how you overcame those struggles to strive in the women's economic empowerment movement. This is so we can get out of poverty, but also so women get into leadership positions in government, parastatals, and even in the private sector, to drive the economy. We believe that if women were in charge of the economy, a lot of changes would take place. So, we are very happy that you have come to partner with us to talk about this journey. I'm going to ask your friend, Catherine Ichoya, to introduce you briefly, and then we will go ahead with the interview. Thank you so much. I'm from the University of Nairobi. Thank you.

Interviewer 2

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to introduce a very important lady, who has championed the way forward for a lot of women in business. Her name is Racheal Gatabaki as we have known her. First and foremost, she was a manager at Kenya Airways and when I was in National Bank of Kenya, we had a lot of women who had began to export the Kenyan Kiondo. Rachel, if I may call her that, was very instrumental in ensuring those businesswomen were able to get their tickets—that's very important. The other thing that happened was that she personally invited me to a meeting for businesswomen in Bangkok. When we went there, she told me that it was very important for me to buy some clothes to come and sell back home. I thought I was important as a banker then, but she really told me, "No, you cannot come here and then go back empty-handed." That is something I will never forget because some women were there and they also started doing the same.

Now, with regard Business and Professional Women's Club, Rachel worked very closely, under the leadership of senior ladies like Mrs. Beth Mugo and other women like the late Jenowa Pit. We also had Maria Kitiambi. What we learned was that we didn't deal with issues of tribalism in our generation at that level. We worked as Kenyans, and it's important to bring this issue on board. The other thing which is so key about what we did as a group, of course led by none other than our professor here, was during the Women's Decade conference. They used this venue, the University of Nairobi, to make all the arrangements for the women who had come from all over the world.

You encouraged us with the drive that you had, which was important for us to work under your guidance, including Dr. Eddah Gachukia. Because we were young, Rachel and I, and other young ladies, we were given the responsibility of ensuring that we dealt with the issue of hospitality. Why hospitality? Because it was important, as we got it from the leadership of ladies who were in that particular committee, for us to showcase to Kenyan women and other women from all over the world, that we did not only live here, but we were able, under the leadership of the late Jane Kiano, the late Martha Mogambi, and Jane Odwak.

With the support of the government, we were able to organize buses to go all over the country to show our women who had come from every corner of the globe, strictly speaking, who we really were. They were able to interact and dance with our women in the villages. So, when we talk about our sociocultural values, there we were showing our visitors that had it not

been for the lessons we had learned from our mothers and the cultures that we embraced, we would not have been where we were, even if we were educated.

Interviewer 3

Thank you so much, Catherine, for that good introduction of Rachel. We are glad to have you here today. From Catherine's introduction and from what Professor Kabira said, we hear of your significant contributions to the women's economic empowerment. So, at this point, Rachel, we would want you to share with us your journey in working with women. We have heard about the Kenya professional and business women, we have heard of your involvement with UN women decade for women. So, you could tell us your journey towards working with women.

Rachel Gatabaki

Jane Kiano was the Chair of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. The whole 1985 conference was chaired by Professor Eddah Gachukia.and Jane Kiano was the chair for the hospitality committee, and she picked my friend Catherine to deputise her while I became the secretary. In 1985, we were not very young. At least we had families. And it is out of that that we had that passion, which pushed usduring the preparations and the places that we took the visitors to, because we had all these women—the president's wife from Nigeria, from wherever were all here. This is what really made me feel this soft spot for women being empowered.

I still want to remember during one of the field trips, we took these womenn delegates to Ukambani to see some projects. Because these Ukambani women said, "You must bring these women to view our projects." When we got to Ukambani, we realized that the projects they were talking about, about 10-15 women had only three chicken.[laughing] That was what they were trying to bring, a kind of group empowerment for each other. I have never forgotten that bit. It was pathetic that we were taking dignitaries to see a project with about three chickens. I said, "This cannot be in Kenya. The question was, what can we do about it?" That story is long because we started thinking about how women could be helped, how they could be helped in groups. We asked them to form themselves into business groups where they would be given money to enlarge their businesses through the banks thanks to Mary Okello.

Mary Okello is a very senior lady who was also the first woman banker in the whole country, a bank manager in particular. She was very instrumental in making the banks finance these small groups.

My friend Catherine has talked about going to places and buying things to come and sell and make money. So, when I talk about empowerment, I always talk about self-empowerment before you can go to empower another person. From my background, whenever I get a chance, I would go out and buy things to come and sell. And I wanted to give credit to my secretary at Kenya Airways because they facilitated me to go out. And one time, this is another funny story, my secretary came and told me, "Mrs. Gatabaki, you people go out on official trips and you get per diem. You go and stay in very expensive hotels, and you come back broke. Why is it?" And I said, "Nancy, what are you talking about?" She said, "Whenever you go out, make sure you come with something to sell and then you get money out of it so that you can have something inside your pocket, so do not spend all the money you are given." Now some people were calling themselves 'bosses when in fact, one of my hosts had borrowed money from her secretary [laughing]. I had borrowed money from her and was not able to pay. She told me, to ensure that whenever I went. I would come back with something to sell and make money out of it." And that is how I started my boutique businesses following that challenge from my secretary. Indeed, she also held my hand and showed me where to buy certain merchandise , for re-selling in the '80s.

Retracing my steps in this decade, we started organizing women into small groups. We got women who were also farmers who could be contracted for French beans farming, and we got companies to buy. In fact, when I retired from Kenya Airways, I had an early retirement in 1992. I started farming too. I contracted some women to grow French beans and pick them up and bring them for exports. I made sure that they also learning just as I was also learning. So, when I left, I had my hand in agriculture. I also ventured into flower farming for export which led me to be flown to overseas countries like Holland to see how our flowers and our French beans, are handled when they leave Kenya and when they arrive at the port. So, for me, the decade was an eye-opener and increased my passion for making women empowered because I believe passionately, up to today, when you empower a woman, you have empowered the nation because an empowered woman will move mountains. Even Mt. Kenya will come to the lake. Even Jesus knew this! [laughing] Because of women, it will move. It is very important to do that.

My other highlight is now on the Professional and Business Women plan, we were all members under the leadership of Rosemary Mugo, Wambaa and the late Jane. And I am saying, I feel so happy to go back to those memories. Like I was telling Professor, women were so intimate and ready to help one another, and it opened the doors for women. It's not like today where people are so selfish. We were carrying each other in their own hands. During the annual candlelight dinner, we used to paint these Nairobi big hotel halls, with the annual dinners for the Professional Business Women, and we could also go to Mombasa because we had various chapters. We opened chapters for the professional business women all over, and the highlight was the candlelight dinner in every chapter. And during these chapters, women would showcase their businesses; they would help others. They would mentor others to do the same.

And I would like them to come back to what we did, how we fought to get to an international and professional business women conference in The Hague. I always tell people that I went to Hague before Ruto [people laughing]. And during this trip, do you know we carried illiterate Maasai women? As you remember, I was given to be in charge of three Maasai women in their mashukas, and I said, "You are going to carry your things. Your box and all your Maasai regalia, which the tourists like. I am not going to be the one to sell them for you. You will go, and we shall take you to a stand." Thank God for the Kenyan government and the Embassy in Hague, they had given us stalls to do this. I had those Maasai women by my hand. At one time, we even got lost in the train going somewhere in Netherlands. We took the wrong train and because I could not leave them behind; I had to hold on to them. But what came out of that is that they showcased their items in Hague, and out of that came a lot of businesses, with some continuing up to today. They started being exporters themselves because they got the networks, the contacts, and they started becoming direct exporters of their wares. What else can you do for a woman but do that? Unfortunately, these days you will find that people try to exploit rather than to expose, but that is the spirit we worked with—of helping expose the women and empowering them with the knowledge and even equipping them to do better in their jobs so that they can become better persons. You contribute not only to the economy of this country but also the welfare of families and the leaders.

Interviewer 4

Okay. Gatabaki, now that we are trying to reconstruct your journey, we would like to know when was it that you went to The Hague with these women.

Interviewer 1

Which year was that?

Interviewer 4

Yeah, because it will help us in this journey so that we know the way women have been growing and so on.

Rachel Gatabaki

That was before Beijing Conference was held. I am trying to remember which year it was, but we can get you the year. It was exciting. My other highlight I would say is that of exposing women during the UN Beijing conference. When we came from the Nairobi conference, we formed different pillars for the women. There were the political pillars, the women's economic empowerment pillars, and I think Catherine Waithera was lucky. People like the late Virginia Kirumba, late became sponsored very early by the British council. They took this burden of empowering the Kenya women, and they were our main supporters.

So, this unit of economic empowerment, like I said, small group, we held it up, and we were charged with making a presentation on a workshop in Beijing. I think I was validated to present a pickup of economic empowerment for women. But before the Beijing conference, we had a pre-conference preparation which was in Dakar in 1994. And when our Kenyan delegation went to Dakar, we insisted on having this commission be recognized. The economic empowerment, we were calling it the Council for Economic Empowerment for Women in Africa (CEEWA). And when we got to Dakar, the council was ratified as a National African

Organization, and we were lucky that we got the first president of that council, Beth Mugo, appointed from Dakar. The council agreed that we also have country chapters. I became the first president of the Kenyan chapter of the Council for Economic Empowerment for Women of Kenya. And we went to Beijing. We had a presentation there graced by Valarie Kemunto, and we were happy that in our actions. When she saw what we were doing and what we were presenting to the women, we were able to earn an observer status in the United Nations out of the document I presented in Beijing. It is there in the archives, you can find it. But the Council for Women in Africa and the position for United Nations that we have an observer status in the UN out of that initiative.

What did we do in Beijing? I remember I carried five illiterate women from the grassroots. My husband was a Member of Parliament for Githunguri. I don't know whether I was campaigning for him or what it was, but I carried five women from Githunguri. As you remember, I did a fundraising for them and told them, "You must also come and see the world." A person who has never left the village, and here they are in an airplane with prominent women, the likes of Nyiva Mwendwa in Hong Kong, and we were told we are getting into a lift. That's the first time they had seen a lift, including myself [laughter]. It was an open lift that we were going like 2000 meters up, very high up, and you can imagine the excitement of these women, that exposure. They also carried their wares to go and sell in Beijing. By the time we came back, they did not only have money in their pockets, but also the avenue of exporting whatever they showcased. So, for me, I feel that even today, I feel excited that I played a little bit for a little exposure to empower the women of Kenya and exposing them to the outside world and making sure that in their pockets, they have something. I get a little embarrassed when I meet some of these women with their children and they tell me, "Do you remember you did this, you did this, and you did this for us?" But I say, "Yes, I do," but it was because of these other women who mentored me for me to be able to do what I did, and my prayer is that we can do the same for the new generation that is coming. Do you want me to pause there?

Interviewer 4

Thank you. Catherine. Oh, sorry, Rachel. It has been quite a journey working with women, there's also this whole aspect of women's economic empowerment. So, we would like to go back just a little bit to try and clarify a few things that you have told us.

When you spoke about the UN Decade for Women and your involvement and your initiative in bringing women together, the small groups together, were you doing it? Who were these who were doing it? Who were these that you were working with to bring these women small groups together? The formation of the group and what was the outcome of the formation of these small groups of women?

Rachel Gatabaki

It has become a movement now. You know, previously people just used to talk about *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* and you know *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, was kind of an arm of the government which was being used for political purposes, whereby you are mobilised to go and dance for these politicians during elections period. I don't think, and I need to be corrected, that *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* Movement has that aspect of economically empowering women. It was used as a vehicle to drive a certain political agenda within the government, but ours made sure that women can stand on their own. You can be unfortunate and be widowed, but you have power in your pocket to make sure your life goes on; your children achieve what you intended them to do. And I still remember some were in Githunguri. We even introduced women to start a bakery, to do soap making and bed tucking. At that time, getting women to a center and teaching them how they can make soap for themselves to keep clean and also for commercial purposes was good. And I can't forget to bring in Wangari Maathai with the Greenbelt Movement. I remember we used to traverse the country, getting women's groups to start planting trees not only to conserve the environment but also to sell and make an income out of that. That was our agenda.

Interviewer 4

Thank you Rachel, I think you have mentioned our next question. You have already mentioned Prof. Wangari Maathai, Dr. Eddah Gachukia, Mary Okello and Jane Kiano. Were there any other women, any other trailblazers around that period you worked with that you could mention by name before we go to the next set of questions?

Rachel Gatabaki

I mentioned people like Ann Wambaa,Michael Justin Mututho andJames Mutua. We started Commerce and Industry. We started a chapter which was a National Association of Kenyan Women in Business. With the late Cecilia Chege, and Ida Odinga, we formed an association of women in agribusiness, and we were sponsored by the American government. We invited even women from Uganda. The late Cecelia Chege was the owner of Milk Dairy in Limuru. She was the first person to start making yogurt. She had cows in Limuru, and she was making yogurts for commercial purposes, and she became the chair of that organization of women in agribusiness because we also realized there was a lot of potential in the agricultural field, and being women who had a business, they had nobody to move them to another level.

Interviewer 2

Thank you. Maybe you can tell us a little bit about how you formed the Kenyan Business Women's Association. And what was your role in it?

Rachel Gatabaki

Let me say a very active member and I think also the deputy chair for the Kiambu, because like I said, we went to the district. Yes, because we felt that we could not only be having everything in the city. We needed to reach out to women and include them from all levels from women in the enterprises.

Interviewer 2

Okay, so which were the other chapters?

Rachel Gatabaki

There was Mombasa Mrs. Mutua after Tototo industries.

Interviewer 2

The late Martha Mogambi.

Rachel Gatabaki

Mogambi. Yeah. You cannot forget the late Martha Mogambi in Meru.

Interviewer 2

In Ukambani?

Rachel Gatabaki

With her baskets. She started selling baskets even in the US. Later, she would get women from Meru, Ukambani and all over to make baskets and go for the conference in the US with her. Because I know the most prominent was Mombasa, there was the Meruand Ukambani.

Interviewer 2

And Mutua?

Rachel Gatabaki

Ukambani to Maasailand.

Mrs.Msando was in and also Wilkister Monzalu, from Kakamega and we had a lot of ladies from Nyanzaled by Julia Ojiambo.

With that said, my memory is that they were ver enterprising and ready to hold somebody's hand to show them the next step, unlike what is happening today. And that is the comparison I always make when I have an opportunity, especially when meeting the current Kenyan women leaders. I tell them, "Your representation is not about us but it's about you. Me, myself, and I," unlike what it was that time. It was about uplifting other women, not about an individual.

Interviewer 2

And to add, from different sectors, look at our women lawyers. They really came on board. Lilian Mwaura was there. Then we had the former Judge, Justice Joyce Owuor. We went to the Hague, and she was there.

Rachel Gatabaki

She was there receiving us. She was the chair. Yeah

Interviewer 2

Justice Oluoch?

Rachel Gatabaki

Yes

Interviewer 2

Joyce Oluoch. Yes. Later on, we had our current chief Justice Martha Koome. Let's put it this way, women lawyers formed their own group, so we had sector-specific leadership. Also, in the university, your team, Dr. Gachukia, Kaseo, and many others, really encouraged our young women in the media to start their own businesses like Eunice Mathu and many others in terms of writing.

Norah. Yes, Norah

Rachel Gatabaki

Wambui Otieno

Interviewer 2

Wambui Otieno was a fighter.

Rachel Gatabaki

Ooh, she was a fighter.

Interviewer 2

She was a fighter. She championed in the area of policy and empowering women. You know, you need not fear. You get my point?

Phoebe Asiyo.

Phoebe Asiyo was a fantastic lady who, even this minute, I am still communicating with her to see how we can be able to facilitate our women in Kisumu. Luo economy. This is something I am very passionate about because when you watch the newspapers and you see how those women are abused when they go to, you know, buy fish from men and the men are abusing them, and it's our responsibility to ensure that this stops. You see the we have that burden.

Interviewer 4

I hope this project that you are working on, will bring out those issues where we can be able to identify those areas with potential where women can be able to come up and go there. And because some of us can use our resources, no problem. All of us... and go and speak to them. At times in life, you need somebody to encourage you. That's just what you need.

Just somebody to get you, then you can make it, just like what she told me when we went to Bangkok. 'How do you go home without anything?' and I was able to buy some stuff to come and sell, but in my mind I thought I was a banker and that was it. So, this business of professionalism that has entered our heads, that you can only do what you read in your books, it shouldn't be that. We should look at the comparative advantage of what our country is offering and be able to take advantage of that.

Interviewer 1

True.

So, what held you together? The whole of that team we have talked about in community empowerment women group, apart from the one you have articulated very well. The commitment to promote women economic empowerment? Both at the personal level and the collective level.

Rachel Gatabaki

I think it's because, you know, when you are always...

Interviewer 1

A beginner of something, you don't want it to fail.

Rachel Gatabaki

And the numbers were few. You know, we were few. That's why we were able to point one there. Today, if you call families, if you say, 'can I have all the women economists?' they will fill this hall. Isn't it? That time you could pick. How many women bankers were there at that level and the humanitarian level? They were very few. When I joined Kenya Airways – because I joined Kenya Airways in the economic planning section. I was the only woman and for many years, the only person I saw in a skirt was my secretary. I worked with men. Today, there are many more like that. So, we were limited with numbers. If we called for meetings, all of us were there and there was a network intimacy and the urge to do what you needed to do. And we wanted to embrace the opportunity the government was offering at that time. And I forgot to say, when we started working – and Catherine can bear me witness – as a woman, you could not even own a bank account without your husband's permission. I think I was a victim when you could not open a bank account without

your husband's permission. Even to save for yourself. And remember you were maybe at the same level but there was that discrimination.

Interviewer 1 How did that one change?

Rachel Gatabaki

We fought it, we fought for political space, we fought for the policy space for women and for the economic space for women. And I am there to say that it was during those fights that we started sensitizing people and the government, and using the people in the government to take out our issues. Even like the minister when they were going for the OAU meetings. We would get a minister and we really state our issues by telling them that, 'You should be able to go and say this in the meeting and support the Kenya women.' And it was out of that, even women started being appointed at senior levels in the government. They started with appointing them as deputies because the male dominated. That is where women like Dr. Ruth Kaggia climbed up. She is a policy adviser to the President, and that time she was the second woman at the World Bank. Yeah. It is out of that movement we were fighting for our rights, rights of women in the physical places, that we found women being appointed at different positions. She even served as the Deputy Chief of Staff in the office of the President. That was the time women started entering into these spaces, the power spaces, and these small groups of women, and we worked together, which is very different from what is happening today.

Interviewer 1 How would you define that group? That networking...

Rachel Gatabaki

I would call them the trendsetters.

Interviewer 1

The trendsetters?

Rachel Gatabaki

Yes, I think that's what I would call them. All the trendsetters of the Kenyan women.The position the Kenyan woman finds herself in.

Interviewer 2

What do you have in common?

Interviewer 1

I think what we had in common was that we were calling for acceptance. Those networks were very important because for instance, the example I gave about Racheal, she was able to empower me. It was actually all about the economic empowerment of women, depending on which sectors one was in. I remember, like when I was in the bank, and a lot of women didn't have any land to provide as collateral; that's when I started asking them for the logbooks, then we give them some loans, then we organize for them to begin opening letters of credit. You know. So, we were so close.

It's amazing how close we were to most of those ladies I found them somehow, sometime in the bank. It didn't matter because they would know that Rachel is at Kenya Airways, and they would go there. Catherine is at the Bank, so they could go there. And even for you, I must say that I look at Mrs. Perenz Magazine after the Decade, you will realize that a lot of women gathered the confidence. Confidence building really was the issue where they felt like, yes, I can do it. You set the pace especially at the University level that women would be in a position to start their own business as writers. And this is when we began to see a number of women increasing even in the media. But we used to be so close, I don't know what has happened now. I don't see that drive.

Rachel Gatabaki

What has happened, Catherine, everything has become very personal and the greed. You do not want to think about the other person, and I would like to mention it like – you know – as a by the way.

Remember like these very powerful movements which were there and the organization which was the lead Kenya women group. It was so powerful. In fact, it was started by Iddah Odinga. It was very powerful and it was financed so well by the donor because they wanted to make sure the women were finding their space even in politics. And that organization could even identify which woman was where, who should be supported to be somebody in the government decision-making. But you come and find some greedy person gets hijacked by either an organization or the government. Some of our women, and that's why I'm saying the women of this day don't carry the collective dream. Somebody comes and takes away that organization and makes it a personal entity.

Interviewer 3

So, I would want to hear a bit. Just a few strategies and I know you have been mentioning them here and there.

Some of the strategies, you know, right from the UN Decade for Women, the Kenya professionals, and the business women. What are some of the strategies that you can touch on that led to your success? I know you mentioned about working together, there was no greed, there was selflessness, what were some of the strategies that led to success? It's also important for us to hear.

Rachel Gatabaki

Aah, going to the grassroots, picking out the opinion leaders in the grassroots, and then identifying like-minded women who could form groups. As I mentioned, the group movement has significantly advanced the position of Kenyan women because you realize that when you work alone, you cannot do much. However, when you are in a group, you can succeed; as I said, you can move a mountain. That's the strategy we used, and it worked well.

Interviewer 3

Do you feel like there was some government support to your initiatives, your coming together, all these initiatives? Do you think there was sufficient support?

Rachel Gatabaki

I think the support we got was from our development partners. That is what we got. Imagine that time, we are trying to get something from men's space, how can they support you? But we were able to get development partners and they came up and championed this the idea of empowering women. I want to give an example of even how we were going. When we were going to Beijing, you can't imagine the government had appointed a man to lead the delegation (laughter) Yeah, they had appointed a man and women even cried.

Interviewer 3

Who was this man?

Rachel Gatabaki

The minister. He was appointed to lead the Kenyan women delegation.

Interviewer 2

Was it Matiba?

Rachel Gatabaki

No, it was not Matiba. (laugh)

Interviewer 2

Sorry, Matiba was there in 1985.

Rachel Gatabaki

It was the funniest thing, Professor. You are taking a women's delegation and you want them to be led by a man. That's the funniest thing, and the government now changed and they made Nyiva Mwendwa the minister for social services. That can tell you or can answer your question, and I think the other thing I would also say is that we were also fighting for women economic empowerement. I remember we came up with an idea of CEEWA, the Chapter that I was heading, the Council for Women Economic Empowerment here in Kenya. The idea of starting an an African Women Development Bank came from Dakar, and we said we would want that Bank to be here in Kenya. We lobbied our ministers to fight for us to have that bank in Nairobi when they go to OAU. Unfortunately, you know, we lost it to Accra, Ghana. We were fighting with Uganda, who also wanted to have the bank there although the initiative was ours. Due to lack of support, that Bank went to South Africa.

Interviewer 2

And it is very interesting Rachel, because when I was at the National Bank as a manager - because I wasn't born to be promoted, whatever, I went for further studies. When I went to do my program as Wanjiku, is when I realised all along I was questioning policy. We didn't have policies. We were using our mouths because we didn't have any paper, anything that would have held the government accountable. When I left the bank, I went to COMESA. I said the first thing that we should do here is to make sure that we have a gender policy. You get my point? And that way, when we pushed it up to the heads of states level, then we knew with a women's policy, you can hold Kenya accountable using that policy for not supporting the women. You get my point? And Rachel again, I was frustrated very much about this. When we came here, when we were at the summit of the heads of states here in 1999, you cannot believe it that the first ladies, I still remember we went to the KICC, even when I was in COMESA my duty was now just to go and take them to the market *[laughing]*. *Tuko pamoja?* Because we are dealing with the issues of women, taking these first ladies to the market, I was very hurt, but thank God, because of being very hurt, when we went – and it's good always to have people who would listen. I am forever grateful to the former Secretary

General of COMESA.

When we went back, we had a meeting there, and I said, 'Is there not something that we can be able to borrow from SADC and from other regional economic communities and ensure that at least our first ladies are not just going to be told to go to the market.' We are dealing with a first lady, and it means that even me who is there as an officer, I was being grouped with Catherine. We managed to establish the First Lady's Roundtable. It has been so helpful, I am telling you, because I didn't know how to start, the first thing I did was to make sure that I started with Rwanda because of the gender issues there, then Uganda. And the first meeting was with Uganda's office of the first lady's roundtable. So, we sat down with other ladies and said, 'Now we have the first ladies' roundtable, what recommendations are going to come out from it?' So, all frustrations that we have had, we made sure with the decisions of the authority.

This country is also bound to implement the decisions of the first ladies' roundtable because they were actually endorsed by the heads of states authorities. So, what I have said is that there is a disconnect, Rachel, between the continental policies that are being made for women and even regional organizations and the national because if they can be recalled, then the governments would be bound to ensure that most of the recommendations that are made at that level, especially for supporting activities of women, they are actually done because they are bound. Once they sign, they become part and parcel of the summit. You know, they are bound to implement them, but then of course at the county level when you come back here, you begin to ask yourself, who is even going to do that. Yeah, so there is that disconnect, and maybe in the future those are some of the issues we need to address.

Interviewer 1

Do we still have like ministers in charge of women and gender affairs?

Interviewer 2

Yes, we do.

Interviewer 2

Yeah, we do. We do. What happens, what we did was after the COMESA gender policy was adapted, then we organised a small task force for which you know, we were assisted a lot by the likes of Getrude Mugeu from

Tanzania. They came. They were there.

The women from West Africa, they came, they were there. Once we were from Beijing, now we were going to the Africa Union. They were there, all of us, we went together and ensured that we came up with an Africa gender policy. So, Kenya is bound. Any country that belongs to the African Union is bound to ensure that they implement the continental policies that have already been endorsed because they endorsed them. So, it's recalling them and working with the right industries to ensure that is done.

It's very unfortunate, that some countries where the leadership was women, like in Malawi where we had Joyce Banda, and you know she was so very much with us in these activities. She ensured that those policies are actually being implemented. So, I think we need to have very strong women who should be able to actually lift up some of those recommendations or a task force that would be able to lift the gap and make sure that we discuss with our government because, let me tell you, it is very lonely to be a minister of gender like here. For you to be able to do much, you can't. You need a task force that can be able to support you.

Rachel Gatabaki

Like what we were doing to lobby so that you are able to implement one ministry with one person and the known networks from the private set ups, from different sectors. It becomes very difficult.

Interviewer 1

So, let us go back to the team. I liked what you said that you were able to hold together because you were few. You were intimate and committed and you were focused on an agenda that was aimed at uplifting other women. What do you think we should do today? Or rather what should women do today?

Rachel Gatabaki

I think the first thing is for us to ask "where did the rain start beating us?" And I'll go back to being selfish. We have to change our focus now from being about 'me' to about 'others' and 'us'. Because like now, I would call the women especially those in leadership and the political leadership.

How many of them today think about that woman who woke up in the morning to queue and vote for women. They have taken the kind of perception of men that women are there to be bought and used, and when their usefulness is over, they are needed after another 5 years. You are okay because I have the 500 shillings such that I can pay you to come for my meeting and all that but we don't think about tomorrow. When that 500 shillings is over and the elections are over, what is it expected out of you? I don't know how we can enforce to have these leaders, I am still talking about the women leaders, because they are the ones who can make a difference. We are talking about if the ⅔ Gender rule is enforced, and if enforced, what will be the output of those numbers? When a woman is inactive in either the National Assembly or in senate, what is women's contribution towards women empowerment? I think before we elect these women, we must put them to task. This is what our expectations are from them. When we elect a woman to that parliament, we expect a, b, c and d. And even–I think we can have them sign these Memoranda of Understanding. [*Laughings]* To have them sign so that back in their minds, they know there is an expectation. It's not only being invited there to go and become flower girls who can be diverted into wherever the wave is going. I think we need somebody like Martha Karua because, Martha Karua can stand by her principles and she will know what she wants. She can stand by that. But how many of our women leaders can have a stand? *[Laughs]* And stand is to make sure that Kenya would be better tomorrow. It becomes a better Kenya tomorrow for us, for our children and our grandchildren, especially those of the female gender. We need to hold them accountable and tell them they have a major role and we expect a lot from them. In fact, a month ago, I was with some of them in a conference because we were trying to work on a policy document for one of the political parties. I just tell them, "you know what? And I look at the women in leadership today, I tell them, it's none of you I can stick my neck for because you do not represent me and when you do not represent me, you don't also represent the other women. Because you are not meeting my expectations of you." When I find a woman up there in those open vehicles, speaking unspeakable words out there. Because they are trying to compete with men, but even for men to speak some of the things that we are speaking, they are still despicable. But to come from a woman, and I tell them, "This gender thing that you are trying, the affirmative action, for me I will fight it if that's the calibre we are getting, I will fight against it."

Prof. Kabira

You know Rachel, this thing has disturbed a lot of people and I have been discussing it a lot with some of our ladies who rose up to the positions in the government where they would get up to may be PS position.

Interviewer 4

Do you know we have a lot of women who are like that? And they are so knowledgeable. They know so much but the moment they leave the office, they are very demoralized because they have so much knowledge but they lack a forum. They don't know what to do next. This is a crop of women that we need to see how we can bring them together and tell them not to give up but to look for a way they can be useful in the society. There are so many of them! Honestly, there are so many intelligent women. One, if you go to the agricultural sector, it's amazing. They are there, so there is a big gap and yet it happens that when a lot of our men leave, somehow, they get things to do. They are somehow mainstreamed somewhere unlike our women. I know a lot of them who sometimes come and tell me, 'now what do I do Catherine? What is it that we can start to be able to push women's agenda? And they are very much frustrated because they have a lot of knowledge on how things are supposed to be done. We need to see how we can be able to help them. And maybe, through this project, if we could get them together,you will be shocked, they have words of experience, ideas that can be extremely useful for the country. This is because we know them within various sectors, when they wanted to be for example PCs, the system could not allow them to be.

Interviewer 3

(Laughing)

Interviewer 4

You are laughing?

Interviewer 3

Yeah. I am interested because there has been this fallacy that women trail blazers were only there for themselves, and they were effective on forums, conferences and so on. But when I listened to you, I really see what women trail blazers have done. Through her journey now, I am able to see how they even tried to impact lives of that woman out there. So, the issue of intimacy still comes back because without this intimacy, without women working together, just as you have said, there is very little that can be achieved. So, my question would be, what else used to bring you together as women at that time other than economic empowerment? Were there other issues? Maybe if we start there, we may want to widen the scope within which women are able to operate. Were there any other interests other than economic empowerment that brought you together?

Rachel Gatabaki

But economic empowerment is the nerve centre of women. What can you do when you are economically empowered? That is why our concentration was there. When you get that woman empowered, that woman will not accept abuse because if it's gender-based violence even in the homes, she is capable of walking out and go to rent a house for herself.

You know, a lot of gender-based violence issues are common when a woman is not able to support herself. She will be asking, "where am I leaving to go to? How am I going to feed my children?" That's why I am calling it the nerve centre of Empowerment. These other things are secondary because when you are empowered you are even able to fight for your rights. If you are empowered, you can say, "I don't like this job here because the organization is discriminating against me, and I know I could be more valuable elsewhere." So, you can move, you are not static. And it is from this nerve centre where you find women now fighting for their rights in the political space. When that woman is empowered, she can go and start fighting for a political seat.

Campaigns need money and maybe the husband, is not supporting the woman because they think it's an area for men. But when you are economically empowered, you can stand up the test of time. You can stand competition even from the other gender. When you are economically empowered, you can be a role model to the young

generation because they will say, "I would want to be like so and so. How did so and so become this?' They would want to follow those step. So, you are able to divert to other areas.

I don't know whether I am answering your question?

Interviewer 3

Yes, you are.

Rachel Gatabaki

Even if you are able, you have to start from the central because that is what can impede the progress and the development of women in Kenya. All these other things are centered around them, and I think that was the idea. Let the woman be empowered in all these spheres then she would be able to penetrate theough education, that's why we are having even women Vice-Chancellors, people like Prof. Olive Mugenda of Kenyatta University. How can they be there if they were not empowered?

Interviewer 2

I agree with you, Rachel. I still find a disconnect and I think this is very key and there is a disconnect between us, the likes of Olive Mugenda and others like the ones I am talking about. like Margaret, Permanent Secretaries among others in critcal positions.

Rachel Gatabaki

Margaret Githinji.

Interviewer 4

Yeah, Margaret Githinji and I was very happy when I saw Biwot's wife. What was her name, Kamari? Yeah. They are coming and doing politics. But then in my mind I said, "aaah, it is because you have really done so much, then you are there, you don't have a forum." Women do not have a forum. If there is a way women could be able to have a forum, we can come up

with the list of all the women we know. The women that have worked in the government in senior positions. Let's have dialogue like the one we had during the Decade because a lot of us, we thank God that at least we can feed ourselves, we can dress, we can drive. But just giving back, even bringing this culture of being able to respect oneself like the way you have put it, everything is not all about swinging around, which I have now seen happening a lot, Rachel. Where are we going? I'm like, 'What is this?' You know, 'Is this how we want our children to be? Really? That's all you can do is dress up like you know, and there is something wrong, a disconnect."

Yeah. I like the way you have said many things that are very important. The last one being that women economic empowerment is the nerve centre of empowerment, and I think it's a very good statement. I will explain it. Because it means that you have been empowered to do certain things, but looking at the group of women that started Professional Business Women's Association, the way you were giving, we were just wondering whether one of the things you had in common was the level of education? That you were also, like you said, how do you try to also economically empower others? So, you were able to deal with your basic needs and therefore you were able totake over and go for a meeting. But what bound you together was that closeness as well as the desire to promote others. I wonder whether there is something that you can say that made it possible for you, not only about all these people you have talked about in Kenya professional of business women and you walked together the likes of: Jane Kiano, Eddah Gachuki, Julia Ojiambo, Njoki Wanaina ypourself and others. What is it that happened in your lives that brought you together? Was it one of you who brought all of you together?

Rachel Gatabaki

What brought us together? Because there was a need to be addressed and maybe we had also been victims of business humiliation at various levels of where we were, and then even socially. We met a lot of social gatherings.

If Jane Kiano had a party in her house, you would find all that whole group together and you were able to share all those areas that you felt dissatisfied in the government, in the business, the work for the job, etc. You suffered a certain kind of discrimination across the board. We had something in common to talk about. So, you are not only going to a wedding to enjoy the ceremony but find time to find out what is happening in the other person's life. And you find you have a common enemy operating, you are not fully utilised, your potential is not fully

utilised wherever you are in that level. And we started asking ourselves, "why are we keeping quiet? Why are we not talking about these things?" So, we decided to become the mouthpiece of ourselves and for the other women.

Interviewer 4

Let me ask you another question, when you were chair of Kenya Professional Business Women in Kimabu, how did you bring together the women? What were the challenges?

Rachel Gatabaki

Getting women together was the easiest thing. Today, if you go to Kiambu market and tell women that after you finish running your mbogas and your carrots, can we have 10 minutes together? And women are very loyal. They will be there because they are willing listeners and they are willing learners because first of all they will say, "oh Mrs. Gatabaki is calling us, there must be something in it, you know, I don't want to miss anything."

Interviewer 1

That's a very good thing also you have said that women are loyal listeners and are willing learners.

Rachel Gatabaki

Yes..they are willing listeners and learners.

Interviewer 1

So, what do they need?

Rachel Gatabaki

An instructor.

Interviewer 1

Yes, an instructor. Somebody to begin the process and sustain it.

Rachel Gatabaki

Yes.

Interviewer 2

And also, character is key.

Interviewer 2

You know, they will not look at some of these women they find in the media and follow. They will look at somebody like Mrs. Gatabaki, who has a solid background of decency. And this is something that should be recognized. Not everything is about beauty.

Intellectual capacity is very important, especially in the business sector. Look at teachers—some have done very well. They have started their own nursery schools because they observed others who set the pace for them. In every sector, people consider the characters present and want to follow that. Let me put it this way, Rachel, you remember Perenz? I keep talking about Perenz when we went to Baruni. Baruni for training.We were being introduced to graze cattle and whether you were in school or not, you had duties to make sure you go and milk before you go. So, it's this work ending culture that even for you, you told us you inherited from your parents.

Rachel Gatabaki

Hard Work not handouts?

Interviewer 2

Hard work not handouts.

Interviewer 2

You better put that one there. Not handouts. That's why you find that even when some of these families lose one, if the other one is a lady, she is able to continue. So, there is that element of sustainability because of the cultural experience and being able to follow up. A lot of youth, young women today find something, then after one month or so they jump into another. There is no patience. Yeah, so there are quite a number of things we can share, but it's okay for another day.

Interviewer 3

Let me ask another question Rachel. There is a time Kenya rated very highly in terms of feminist mobilization. This was around the period of constitution making. We rated very highly. Now, I would like us to look at the current women groups or the associations, whether registered or not. Would you say that they are non-existent? I think they are there. Would you say that they are weak? And by weak, I mean, they are fully dependent and there's a lot of influence from external forces. Yeah. Would you say they are fairly strong? They are existent, yet they are visible and active, but sometimes they do suffer from external forces? Or would you say that they are very strong? As a women's movement, we are very strong currently, whereby we are fully autonomous, there is no external interference. Where would you rate the women's movement currently? Weak, fairly strong or very strong?

Rachel Gatabaki

I think it depends on how you range, the parameter you put in of the weak or strong. Today, you have what you can you see probably around more women is activism. You will find people with placards outside there trying to draw crowds. But the effectiveness of a movement depends on the result that you get. You can walk around with your placards and close the streets, but have you been able to pass that message to the right channel? And that is where we require lobbying skills. How do you get your message across? And I will say that is what we had at that time: where to touch and where to go. We did not depend on those placard things and a lot of activism. Another thing I want to say is that today, there is a confusion about ideas or ideologies, with the feminism movement being about women trying to be equal to men. That means you do not identify yourself as an entity; you want to be like the men and you can never be like them. Even biologically, you can never be, and that is the starting point. You have to start from a point of understanding that a woman can never be a man because we are made differently, biologically. So, when you're trying to make a movement, make a movement which has your identity. Which can again stand the test of time. I'm not going to carry placards saying A, B, C, and D, because I'm not an activist. I'm an ideologist, and I'd like to propagate policies that are beneficial, not for propaganda, you know. But that is what is happening.

Interviewer 3

So, are the lobbying and negotiation skills lacking currently?

Rachel Gatabaki

They are totally lacking. I was happy when I was asked, especially by the young women aspirants of these political spaces, to mentor them on how to do it. How do you get yourself to that place that you want to go? How do you deal with the inhibition that you find in between without losing your identity? You do not have to lose that identity as a woman trying to be somebody else, which you are not, for you to achieve. So, I think we have a duty to mentor, especially our young women. That's why we are talking about women and equipping them with the right skills for them to achieve what they want to achieve. In fact, I remember in one of the sessions, I told them, one of the things that you have to learn to do is how you present yourself. Because the first impression you give is the lasting impression. Have you ever heard of it? When you walk into an office, the first impression you give is what is lasting, and you'll be remembered for that. So, how do you package yourself? How do you present yourself? And this is holistic, starting from the way you are dressed. You do not have to go into it and finding out what is right for the place. If you are going to campaign in the rural area, you do not have to go with these torn jeans young people are wearing or a miniskirt, and then you're going to address your grandmothers and your grandfathers, and you are walking like the way you're walking in the streets of Nairobi with your colleagues going to a disco.

(Laughing)

Rachel Gatabaki

Why are you laughing? *(Laughs)* You know me, I say one should learn to package themself with a target. How am I going to reach or achieve that target? By package self. A holistic packaging because that is the impression one wants to give to people. I want them to remember Rachel because she was smartly dressed, such that when she found herself in a melee, her eyelashes were not falling during a commotion.

(Laughter)

One must be able to know what they want to achieve. So, we have to have a lot of mentoring, we have a lot of training, training them how to handle the real world because they don't know the real world. So, when they go there, even in those campaigns, they are abused by men, they want to abuse back. Does it give you mileage because you have abused back? It doesn't. It is your agenda that will sell you. It is your agenda that people want to remember and would want to hold you accountable for. Yes. And in addition to that, Rachel, the observation has been that you find now there is a disconnect. Because when you go down, like to the churches, and you find the usual normal women's groups, they're busy going on with their activities. So, the good thing is that the structures are there but it's very clear like what my sister here is talking about. There is a disconnect. I don't know whether it's because of the media. I would expect even like you were saying, some of our ladies out there who are vying for certain political positions to really use the women's groups' infrastructure, whether in church, because it's there already. We do have women who are already there. But that disconnect is there. There's no communication at all, and it's very dangerous, I dare just put for country, because you have now people going parallel. These are here, and these are going to be the policymakers! Give me a break! And for who? Whom we are not interacting with. One of the advantages Kenya has had from our parents' point of view is the women's groups' infrastructure that exists. I would call it sometimes sector-specific. Like what you are saying in Ukambani, we had women who were just there. They were making the baskets. In Maasai, we have women who were there. There are structures on the ground. There's no question about it. But that disconnect between our women leaders, the other groups down there is very serious because all they do, they are just being told what to do. But they're busy with their business. So, you can imagine.

Interviewer 1

I was thinking about the many women's groups movements in Kiambu district. You know Kiambu, and they actually started as early as after independence. Was there anything that your team learnt from them?

Rachel Gatabaki

The structures of the women's groups that started immediately after independence were there, and the ideas were good. Those days you had structures in the hands of people who were willing that we have 50 women, and if we can contribute 10 shillings or 50 shillings, that money goes to buy shares or goes to buy land, and we get it. Today, the structures that we are talking about here, that we have, I personally believe that they are in the wrong hands. We let them get in the wrong hands. If I want to go and start a group, I mean of a bead-making group in Maasailand, you will find that person wants to exploit those women. If I go to Machakos, Kitui, to get the kiondos, that person will exploit them instead of assisting them to reap the maximum benefits from that project. That is the difference today. That's why those ladies, those mothers, or whatever, they are shareholders of Embakasi land chain, Kenya women group have plots here and there because the structures were right, and they were in the right hands, which is very different today.

Interviewer 1

And they started these businesses themselves?

Rachel Gatabaki

Yes. They started themselves.

Interviewer 1

It was not like the government came and began creating groups?

Rachel Gatabaki

No. Even now the money that has been given to the Women Enterprise Fund, it goes to who? If you know the billions that the government has given for the Women's Enterprise Fund. Can you have a documentary about the women who have benefited from that assistance? You will find even if they are there, they are what? I'm saying, they are used by other people. Just like when they came to know about the 30% of the government's procurement for the youth, women, and persons abled differently.

You find that yes, the loans have been given out, but who is benefiting? Because that person, that woman and that youth does not have the finances to do that tender by themselves. So, they are financed by someone else who does not qualify but has the resources. So, the target groups get the tenders but by the end of the day, it is other people who benefit.

Interviewer 2

And what is disturbing from the experience I have had; the little knowledge is that Kenya is so advanced. Honestly. They use Kenya as an example of the women's groups' infrastructure. Like you are saying, Rachel, There is some disconnect somewhere.

Rachel Gatabaki

I don't know how. I think you can address that one.

(Laugher).

Interviewer 1

Am handing over to Ruth.

Interviewer 2

To Ruth? *(Laughs)* It has to be addressed because people have the initiative, they have the ability, there are even people who are prepared to provide their own services on probono. But then, they need to be organized properly. Rachel can talk too. Rachel, you were dealing with some women when your husband was a member of Parliament there. You facilitated the establishment of a number of groups bringing them together.

Rachel Gatabaki

Even opening a bank account for them. The whole idea here, what we lack is that you don't like these groups to do the ownership of the projects. And ownership. I belong to a Rotary association, and we do a lot of projects. Big projects are being funded from a lot of business.

You can even get a project for 50,000 US dollars to the village including water projects, chicken projects among others. They use gravity to water supply water in Ukambani. But what we do, even when we are applying for that grant, it has to be owned by the community. The projects belong to the people that you are getting for. So, you must train them on how to handle the project. You have to guide and not become part of that project. I really like thisapproach by Rotary of not becoming part of the project but letting the people to own their project. Rotary only guides and facilitates. They do not earn a shilling from those projects. You are providing something, but even before the project is approved, you must make that disclosure. What do we do here today? I come and get 100 women, I apply and get funding for them. I take away 80% is for myself and leave 20%, for them, which I also want to micromanage. That has to change if we have to make a difference. People must be accountable, be responsible, and the word greed must be removed from our dictionaries. (Laughter) It has to be removed because I still like quoting Mahatma Gandhi who said, "In this world, there is enough for everybody, but there is not enough for greedy ones." And that is the message I would like to pass. There is enough for all of us, but there can never be enough for the greedy ones. We have to come out from that and become people of integrity. People who aresensitive to other people. And this culture of about how much I must get out, it can only start with the women, and we show the way.

Interviewer 3

Thank you Rachel. I don't know whether there are still some more questions, and then we bring it to a close.

Interviewer 2

I want to say something to you. Whatever you do, it will be very good if you would be speaking engagement, you know, activities, even through the media to make sure people get the message. If a project can do anything, it's just like hammering. Like the 2 arms of the government, it is like these are the 12 principles... If that can get across the country, people would begin to think. Yeah, sorry. I wanted to say something about policies.

My serious experience is when we were coming up with the COMESA gender policies. All those things are documented, the policies; but they are not implemented. When you have different or a new leadership, they are forgotten. They are like, they belong to so-and-so, and therefore, we can only go by this. Maybe... and I want to believe that the relevant ministries, like the Ministry of Gender, should be able to take stock of all those policies, articulate them, document them this year, wherever they look—the journey so far from that time to date. What has happened? What is it that we can be able to do? What can we do now to ensure that some of them are implemented? Because policies will be there, but if they are not implemented, they'll be forgotten.

Rachel Gatabaki

What I can say, maybe to add to that, for continuity, it gets back again to the kind of leadership that we are even electing. It goes back to what lobbying skills you have. Because it does not matter whether it is a different government, if you were an initiator of a certain policy that you want to be effected, and the current establishment did not finish that, and you would want to follow it up, you must have the skills to lobby even the next skill. And how do you do that? By making sure even the people who are going to come in the next are people that you can approach and say, "Hey, listen, we have this and this going this side. Please don't put it in the drawers or in the dustbin because it was good for A, B, C, and D, and it'll even give you mileage if you put it on." So, you have to really establish lobbying skills. I don't have to be in the government to follow that. But I can have a contact whom I can call and say, "there is this and that, Can you see about it?" Let us develop the skills that can lobby. Not only that but because you are not going to be there all the time. But if there's somebody else that you have mentored to follow up that we'll be able to see that it comes to be. You know that's a valid observation, because when we came up with the First Lady roundtable, it was about that, to say, "Can we use the structure of the First Lady roundtable to ensure that the gender policies or any other economic activity policies that have been endorsed by their husbands, the heads of states, are implementable?" Rwanda followed that, and they have been able to implement. Burundi too have been able to implement. I think, I don't know what we can do also to give our First Ladies certain responsibilities that can be able to push some of those agendas. Let me put it this way, you are not listening to this. You remove it from the record, when we came here for the summit of the heads of states, and we had the First Lady roundtable that was during the late Mama Lucy Kibaki, do you know that

those policies to do with the cross-border traders were implemented? The polices were implemented and she was able to influence. When we were at the Serena hotel, she said, "I'll go and talk to my husband and I will make sure that those women that cross the border are not going to be frustrated." To make it worse, she even said that she didn't want flashy women in the meeting of the first ladies. She wanted practical women who were actually doing cross border trading. So that's another avenue that can actually be used, because it is very easy for the person to talk to the husband and things are done.

What we were trying to do behind the scenes is to make sure the First Lady, even in the county, will have an office, a fully furnished one.

Interviewer 2

Exactly

Rachel Gatabaki

Where women can go openly and take their issues?

Interviewer 3

Do we have one ourselves?

Rachel Gatabaki

I don't know, but that's what we are fighting to make sure that the First Lady will have a fully furnished office running so that as a woman, when you have an issue or you want to advance, you can walk into that office and get attention.It is extremely effective. When I was starting this First Lady roundtable, I went to Uganda to the First Lady there, and she had her own office.

Interviewer 2

The same thing with Rwanda and when the women, the Paradiso women started the idea of exporting their small baskets through the AGOA channels, they used their first lady. They lobbied her and she was able to involve her husband. So, even for some of the statements that would be

put in her husband's speeches. When we went to the US for the AGOA, he was talking about practical things, and when we got there, Rachel, I was shocked because these had already been supported. Displaying their products, and then on top of that, they had brought the Embassy Commercial Attachés there to support whatever issues. So, that thing is needed to be there.

Interviewer 1

You have also said something very important. That we don't have to be men to contribute to the nation. In fact, when you become like a man, you will find you want to be equal with men. Why do you want to be equal with the one who is abusive? That is what I have heard some of you say. That they have been able to stand on their own as women.

Rachel Gatabaki Oh, yeah.

Interviewer 2

The serious experiences, the way that I have seen, is they remain women, and in fact, you find out that in some countries like Uganda, I was so shocked because they eat their matoke, and when they were making the food, it's not like they are going to high hotels. They use jikos. They are using the jikos, the women are making their matokes, you know. Informality is key because it makes everybody feel like, yeah, I belong. So, there are ways that this can really be done. We can give you examples, and then you see how you can channel that agenda.

Interviewer 1

You were the chair of Council for Women Economic Empowerment, tell something about it?

Rachel Gatabaki

I really cannot say what happened, but I think I left, I left Maria Kitiambi. She was a lecturer at the University of Nairobi. I don't know what they did with that mileage after my turn. But it's no longer there.

Interviewer 1

When you think about Jane Kiano and Maendeleo, andVirginia Kerumba, Ann Wambaa, and Jane Ogwapit, Beth Mugo, all of of Kenya Professional Business Women Association
the National Council for Women of Kenya, I don't know what has happened to all these organizations because it's like they went under the carpet. All of them. The other time we were discussing with Dr. Ruth Kaggia, asking ourselves, how can we revive these organizations because they were powerful and very effective? But then we need now to go into the archives through the registered office there. How do you start now calling for AGMs and making people gather again to revive them and maybe put them in a different form? But they have been very quiet.

Interviewer 2

I came back here Rachel, when I joined COMESA to look at some of these organizations, hoping that we would work with them. I realized some of them were highly personalized. That's one big mistake. They were highly personalized and some of them also became vehicles of fundraising money and travelling.

Rachel Gatabaki

It is true.

Interviewer 2

I'm just saying, what it is. So, the intended purpose, somehow disappeared along the way.

Interviewer 1

How has *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* (MYWO) survived?

Rachel Gatabaki

It has survived but is it in the same form? (Laughter). When you bring wrangles into an organization for personal gain, it can't survive. How often do you hear of Maendeleo today?

Interviewer 2

It was politicized.

Rachel Gatabaki

It was turned into a political vehicle during Moi's time. It was a vehicle to deliver Moi's plans. You know, when you make politicians guide you or when you have other agendas, I know that betrayal. The way we knew Maendeleo, is no longer the same.

Interviewer 2

So, thank you so much, Rachel, it has been a pleasure. As Professor is saying, we can sit here on and on and listen to your story. Hearing you mention some of the names we used to hear is quite nostalgic, and it's good to hear these are some of the people you've worked with, you've interacted with, and to see the change and where the journey of economic empowerment for women has started, some things that maybe some of us have never heard. So, thank you so much for giving us your time. It's a pleasure. So, I'm sure that we would be able to document your story. It's quite a story and a journey that you've taken, and I would be able also to share with you.

Chapter 2: A Conversation with Dr. Mary Okello

"Keep supporting one another. If you are in a position to help, help others. When I started this mentoring program, I had to tell the girls that they can also be managers, had I not told them that they can go beyond what I am, they would have not taken me seriously."

Dr. Mary Okello

Biography

Mary Okello is a distinguished global corporate executive, a seasoned banker, and respected educationist. As a co–founder and executive director of Makini Group of Schools, she has been instrumental in the schools' success. She is also a founder of the Kenya Private Schools Association. She schooled atButere and Alliance Girls schools and earned a bachelor's degree in history from Makerere University. Mary began her career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and later excelled as a corporate executive at Barclays Bank of Kenya (now ABSA), where she played a pivotal rolein establishing Africa's first women-only bank. Mary has extensive experience in local and international microfinance and is a passionate advocate for gender rights. She served as the Vice- President of Women's World Banking in New York. In 1977, she became the first woman bank manager in Kenya and was also the first African representative to the World Women Banking Organization in 1985, Additionally, she was the first female woman advisor to the president of the African Development Bank (AFDB), the vice president of the Women's World Banking, and a member of the external Consultative Gender Committee at the World Bank. She was instrumental in the establishment of Barclays Bank Women's Association, which advocated for women to access loans and join banks. She lobbied for the removal of rules and regulations that discriminated against women in financial institutions. Mary established the Kenya Women Finance Trust (KWFT), which has eventually evolved into a bank, and enables women to acquire loans. As a Senior Advisor to African Development Bank, she played a key role in developing the Women in Development Policy Paper, which significantly revolutionized financial terms and conditions for women in financial institutions. In recognition of her contributions to education in Kenya, she was honoured with the prestigious Moran of Burning Spear (EBS) by the President of the Republic of Kenya.. She continues to mentor,inspiring and supporting many the education of man girls in Kenya.

The Conversation

The conversation happened at Dr. Mary Okello's home. The interviewers included: Ruth Wamuyu (Confirm the interviewers present).

Interviewer

Can you walk us through the journey of Dr. Mary Okello's life, her origins, education, and the key milestones that shaped who she is today? When was she born, and where did she go to school?

Dr. Mary Okello

Where do I start? I am Mary Okello, a proud mother of three, a grandmother, and a fulfilled retiree. I have retired from running a school and working in a bank. I grew up in a village, which is why I have returned to retire in Siaya County. I come from a large family, of 17 children, where I am the 14th child. I however had a very happy childhood and our family was filled with love and warmth.

I am a daughter of a clergyman in the Anglican Church and so I was raisedin a highly disciplined, yet a nurturing environment. With a strong christian foundation and deeply loving and caring parents, we received everything we needed to grow and thrive. My educational journey began at a local primary school, setting the stage for the path ahead.

Interviewer Which primary school was this?

Dr. Mary Okello

I attended Nambale Primary School, which atthe time was one of the sector schools. One of my teachers was my elder sister, and as aresult, I had a happy childhood, being taught by my own sister. From Nambale Primary School, I proceeded to Butere Girls Secondary School,a missionary school for my O-Levels. I had a great time there as I met girls from different parts of the country. After Form 4, I was among the 13 girls selected to join Alliance Girls High School for A–levels. It was a challenging experience because we were the first group admitted to A-levels, and there was a lot of pressure. We were warned that our failure would jeopardize future government investment in higher education for girls. So we worked hard, and I am glad to say that many of the girls in

our class excelled in their respective professions. Among my classmates wereLady Justice Owuor who became a judge at the High Court of Kenya, Elizabeth Mwangi, popularly known by her stage name, Mother-in-Law in one of the TV series, Floridah Karani, who later became a University Vice Chancellor; and Elizabeth Masika who became the first woman inspector of schools.

We had wonderful teachers like Mrs. Bruce, our headmistress who had studied at the University of Edinburg and, Mrs. Musyoka, our teacher of English, who had studied at Oxford University. Both had graduated from top universities and instilled in us a strong sense of excellence. We were taught to approach everything with dedication and precision, and we remain deeply grateful for the lessons and the mentorship they provided.

After completing my A-levels at Alliance High School, I worked for a short time at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Later, I joined the Prisons Department, where I trained as a cadet officer. The training was similar to the one offered to the military, we would march with our polished shoes, shinning to level that you could see your shadow in them. It was a rigorous experience, but I enjoyed it because it instilled discipline in me. Daily routines included walking and training exercises, ensuring we maintained a high level of fitness. The discipline was reinforced through early morning wake-up calls, including shooting practice. I am grateful for the military-style training I underwent, and to this day, I often say I miss it.

Interviewer

Was it part of National Youth services (NYS)?

Dr. Mary Okello

Yes. NYS should continue training young people in that way because it instills discipline and stamina, which stays with you forever. I trained with there and worked in the prisons for a period of time until when time came to go to the university. I joined Makerere University for a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. During my time at Makerere, jobs were easily available. As a matter of fact, employers would come to the university and interview students, and it was up usto choose where we wanted to work. I remember some employers coming asking me to join them. Another group from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approached me. In short, there were so many opportunities for young people. I decided to join the

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but there was a problem there for one of my bosses started sexually harrassing me. At the time, I did not understand the meaning of terms such as sexual abuse or harassment, and democracy. I knew that I would not accusemy boss because nobody could belief me or offer help. So, I decided to resign not knowing where I was going or what I would do next. I didn't have a job but it was better to leave than staying. I knew I would not compromise myself, because if I would, then I would have lost who I was.

I was out unemployed, but fortunately I saw Barclays Bank recruiting graduates for management training programs. I applied and was rejected three times on the basis that one, they were not recruiting women, second, I had studied History instead of Finance, and third, they simply were not taking women. However, I persisted and eventually they hired me. During that period, selected candidates were sent to London for further training. While working, we also undertook professional training at the Institute of Bankers' Professional Studies, earning qualifications in finance, economics and essential banking skills.

Upon my arrival in Britain – my first time in the country – I quickly realised just how different the environment was. I had been posted to a part of London where I found it difficult to adjust, having grown up in a mission sitting. On my way to that place, I encountered intoxicated individuals who hurled racial slurs at me, shouting things like "Blacky" and "Long lips!" – even going so far as to say, "People of color don't belong in banking." It was a deeply uncomfortable experience. The following day, I reported to our head office at No. 64 Street and spoke to the head of the team. I explained that I had grown up in a sheltered mission environment and I had never encountered drunkards before – let alone white ones – and that I found the situation deeply distressing. I feared that speaking up might jeopardize my career; after all, how does one tell their supervisor that they cannot go where they've been assigned?

But, by the grace of God, they must have recognized some diligence or promise in me, because they agreed to transfer me to a different part of London –Hampstead – where I did not face the same hostility. I remained in London for some time, completing my training. It was during that period and that I met my husband, who was pursuing a PhD in Forestry. We got married in London and had our first child there. It was not without challenges. When I informed my supervisor I was getting married, he questioned my priorities, asserting that I had come to London to establish myself as a career woman, not to prepare for marriage.

I explained to him that, in our culture, women typically get married within a certain age,and I did not intend to miss that opportunity. Of course, having a child meant I had to leave my job temporariry to care for the baby. After completing my training, I returned to Kenya and was poted to a local branch. There, encountered racism once again. The white manager treated black clients and staff poorly very poorly, which was not uncommon during the colonial period. One day, after he had been particularly harsh with African clients and verbally abusive towards a staff, I followed him to his office and told him firmly, "Sir, you cannot treat people like that." He responded dismissively, asking, "Who are you to tell me that?" Of course, he viewed my statement as an act of insubordination , and as a consequence, I was transferred to another branch. Nevertheless, I continued to work diligently, and in 1973, I was promoted and transferred to the Nakuru branch.

Interviewer

In that incident where you challenged your boss, what do you think gave you the courage to stand up to authority when things were were truly wrong?

Dr. Mary Okello

I grew up in a home where my father would encouraged us to challenge what was not right, rather than just accept anything without question. Yes, to speak out and to take a stand. He was a pioneering clergyman in charge of many churches, where he taught people about Christianity. When you are teaching Christianity, certain philosophical principles come along with it. You encourage people to be strong and defend their values. The values instilled in us were clear, that we should not compromise. It is better to stand alone for the truth than to accept wrong doing just because someone in the authority demands it. You have to uphold fairness and justice. My boss was being racist, and I could not withstand it, watching him treat people so poorly when, in reality, he needed those people to grow the business.

Interviewer

You have already touched on your experience working at Barclays Bank, and from what we have read, you also started the Barclays Women's Association.

Dr. Mary Okello

Yes, when I was at Barclays Bank, I was the only female manager, actually the first woman to hold that position. Most women in the bank were clerks and cleaners, and that made me very uncomfortable. The only way I could help them was by telling them that they could also achieve more.I encouraged them strive forbetter positions, including managerial roles, instead of remaining in lower ranks. Many of them were very intelligent, but banks discriminated against women and that is why they were stuck in lower positions.

Interviewer

So the the system was structured in a way that pushed pushed women into certain some jobs.

Dr. Mary Okello

Yes, we were constrained by historical laws that prevented women fromowning property. Although we had gained independence, colonial laws and regulations were still played. As a result,women were excluded from managerial positions. In fact, there is a book written by a man named George, which explicitly states that "women cannot manage banks because they tend to panic in several ocassions." But it was simply part of the system.

Interviewer

Which year did you start the association?

Dr. Mary Okello

I can't remember, maybe in 1972. I organized women and brought them together, and I was wrongly accused of inciting them. So, I decided to look for young women who were ready to learn, and gave them my notes from the Institute of Bankers. I told them that they would not be promoted unless they demonstrated that they were able to do the work.I stressed that one way they could show that they could handle banking tasks was through getting the right professional training and enhancing their skills. If they studied the notes from the Institute of Bankers, they would qualify, because when they presented themselves and confidently stated, "I can do this and that," they would stand a better chance of get promoted.

Interviewer

What about the motivation behind forming the Women Bankers Association? What was your aim when establishing it?

Dr. Mary Okello

The goal was to help women to be managers and to acquire professional qualifications that would enable them to manage the institutions. Yes, mentorship was a key part of it, but the biggest challenge was the mindset- women being told that they could not become managers. Some internalized that belief, but I didn't because my parents instilled in us the idea that we couldbecome anything we wanted, and that is why I had to fight against those injustices.

Interviewer

In forming the association, what kind of challenges did you face? What kind of obstacles did you encounter- whether from the government, the bank or even your colleagues?

Dr. Mary Okello

Initially, my colleagues thought I was trying to start a union, by bringing women together.The resistance was frustrating, and I had to clarify that we were just meeting to support each other.
I experiecned a strong opposition from my colleagues and the managers because they had never witnesseda group of women coming together in that way. It made really them uneasy for they wondered, "What are they talking about?" Some women even challenged me, reporting to the manager that I was training and encouraging them to aspire to managerial roles. So, it was far from an easy journey.

Interviewer

So, did you train them secretly, or how exactly did you go about it? Would you secretly teach them, or did you provide them with materials?

Dr. Mary Okello

I photocopied for them my notes from the Institute of Bankers. I also recommended some books for them to read and for those who wanted more information, I would some spare time to guide them

Interviewer

Was the association registered at this point?

Dr. Mary Okello

No, it was just an association, unregistered one. Over the years, it has grown into serious levels of mentorship in the banking sector. That is why, at one time point, Barclays bank had the highest number of female managers in the country. Today, I believe most companies have got about 50% of their board members being women, which is an significant improvement. Although we started small, I think the bank later embraced the initiative and it worked.

Interviewer

Tell us about the Kenya Women Finance Trust (KWFT), which you were a pioneer member.

Dr. Mary Okello

In 1975, there was a women's meeting in Mexico. After that meeting, women began advocating for their rights, focusing on issues such as access to decison-making, the right to own property, and economic empowerment. American women who attended the meeting travelled across Africa and around the world to assess the progress of women concerning power, capital, and economic advancement. When they came to Kenya,they sought insights from women in banking. Since I was working at the bank, they asked me about the situation. I explained that there were no women in managerial positions, women couldn't borrow money, and they had no access to capital or own property ownership. Following this, a global meeting was organised in Amsterdam, bringing together women from around the world to discuss barriers to women's success. I was honoured to be invited. After the event, participants returned to their countries to explore ways of improving women's access to capital and I was fortunateto be part of this initiative.

The then managing director of Barclays Bank, Mr. Thomas Donald Miles, backed my trip to Amsterdam. He was a very supportive man. I was deeply moved by the realization that women's struggles extended far beyond Kenya, they were global. When I returned, I approached Mr. Miles and requested him to allow me hold a meeting in my office at Barclays Bank, Harambee Avenue, to discuss women's access to credit. He agreed, and that marked the beginning of my efforts. I invited women lawyers, bankers, and professionals from various fields to join the conversation.

Interviewer

Could you be in a position to mention some by name?

Dr. Mary Okello

Yes, They included Dr. Florence Ngugi, Mrs. Christine Anyanga and many other women lawyers. They joined us and we discussed how we could establish a facility or an organization that could address women issues. Let me go back. Before that, I was struggling with thefact that women had no access to financial services. I approached the bank andasked if we could open children's accounts, and they agreed. What they didn't realize was that I was using this as a way to get women to start engaging with the bank – to help them begin learning the language of banking. Women started coming and saving through children's accounts. It was a very major breakthrough because I could see more and more women interacting with the bank.

Banking facilities can be intimidating, starting from the guards at the entrance, - some of whom are even armed. Imagine for a woman coming from the village, even stepping inside a banking hall is difficult. We had to start breaking psychological barriers. Even the guards needed guidance. We told them, "Please do not intimidate women who come to the bank." Often, a woman would approach the bank, and the guard would bluntly ask, "unataka nini hapa" (What do you want here?). That was intimidating. So, I spoke to the guards and suggested a more welcoming approach: "When a woman comes in, ask her, "Mama nikusaidie aje?" (Mom how may I help you?) It may sound like a minor issue but simple, respectful gestures like this make a big difference. I had to talk to the bank officials and suggested, "Let's train our guards at the entrance to be more welcoming. It is very difficult for a woman who has never stepped into a bank to be confronted by a man who doesn't have a smile or to greet her properly." These may seem like small things but pose as major barriers to women. Many women visited the bank to collect their salaries especially civil servants whose pay was processed through the banks. However, I noticed that despite keeping their money in the bank, these women were not receiving the support they needed because the managers, mostly men, lacked training in addressing the psychological needs of female customers. The managers were not friendly. I believe that their lack of courtesy was a legacy of the colonial era. So, I also approached the bank's managing directors and suggested that bank managers should be trained on how to interact with female clients more considerately. These were among other things I had to address. Although they were not very noticeable, they created major barriers. I would repeatedly go back and speak to the managers, urging them, "Please talk to your staffs, the way they treat women makes a lot of difference."

Interviewer

What drove you to this cause?

Dr. Mary Okello

Well, I am a woman and I used to see and feel these struggles first hand. When I was growing up, there were no institutions for the disadvantaged people, e.g people living with disabilities, and others in need. Instead, they were usually brought to the church compound.

Our home also served as a home for those in need. Our home offered refuge and shelter forpeople in distress, including the blind, deaf, and women who had escapedfrom abusive marriages. We helped the blind blind cross the road, assisted them in dressing, and provided them with many other forms of support. Compassion and care were instilled in us froman early age. We understood that taking care of vulnerable people in society was simply being a good human being. You have to be your 'brother's keeper'. We didn't need to be taught this, it was not something we grew up with. At the time, we had to help my parentsbecause there were no orphanages. So, caring for people was already a part ofme. Then I entered the banking industry, only to find that bankers were not treating women well.

Interviewer

I am trulyinspired by how your parents raised you.

Dr. Mary Okello

As I had mentioned, both of my parents were church clergy who ofen and often supported and cared for people with special needs. Growing up, we were taught to help and support others, which I believe is why my brother eventually married married a woman with a physical disability. We were brought up with the belief that we should always work to improve the conditions of others. That is why, when he was in prison, he advocated for reforms. Similarly, I have dedicated myself to fighting for educational reforms,to ensure that our education system is relevant and we change the mindset that everything from outside is superior to what we have. We need to teach our children about our culture so that they grow up with

Dr. Mary Okello

confidence in their identity as Africans. That is why, when I was in London and they sent me to any place simply because I was an African, I refused and I said, "I may be an African, but I need to know where they are sending me to."

Interviewer

This is both encouraging and challenging. It's fascinating to see howour upbringing shapes who we become, and it is a reminder to those raising children to instill these values into them. I would now like you to take us through the formation of KWFT.

Dr. Mary Okello

As I said earlier, when I came back from Amsterdam, I asked my managing director for permission to hold a women's meeting in my office. The goal was to explore how we could form an association that would help women gain access to credit. Before that, I often went to the nearest market, Dagoretti, to talk to the women selling vegetables, the mamambogas. I would ask them, "how do you manage your money?" Those conversations sparked the idea of introducing children's accounts. I would follow up with, "Do you have a child? We have accounts for them." Some women began saving through these accounts, and I taught them basic money management – how to separate their capital from their profits.

Interviewer

You mentioned meeting with some women lawyers.

Dr. Mary Okello

Yes, they came to my office. We met and discussed about the structure we could use. That is how we established the Kenya Women Finance Trust (KWFT), an organisation limited by guarantee. We formed an association and invited one hundred women to contribute a membership fee of Ksh 2,000 each.Those women were the founder members. With those funds, we approached the Ford Foundation and requested them for funding to run the association.You realize that when approaching donors, it is difficult to secure funding if you do not have anything to show yourself.

KWFT was formed and officially registered with the government in 1982. I must say, we are proud because there were women who were willing to contribute Ksh 2,000 , which was a significant amount of money at the time. I approached those women who were ready and willing to support the initiative, and I believe Mama Ngina was one of them. I will check the KWFT records to confirm the names of the women who contributed the initial 2,000 shillings, which enabled us to secure funding from donors, including the Ford Foundation.

After that, we established an office, and appointed a general manager. I did not become the chairperson because I was still in active employment.

Interviewer

What challenges did you encounter while forming KWFT?

Dr. Mary Okello

Well, when the Ford Foundation gave us money to rent offices and hire general managers, some people thought that the money was meant for them. When we began lending money to women, some started saying, "Oh this money is from donors, it is a gift, don't repay it." That created a serious repayment problem. Some people were borrowing but not paying back, which was really difficult for us because we had negotiated a tripartite guarantee with Women's World Banking, Barclays Bank, and KWFT. The banks knew that we had lend money to women, but among those borrowers, some were refusing to repay their loans.

Then came a time when donors were pouring huge amounts of money into women's organizations, and unfortunately, some of those funds were also no repaid. Another big challenge was teaching people on how to manage money, it was not easy. Eventually, KWFT faced significant serious financial problems. By 1986, I left the association because I was appointed as a senior advisor at the African Development Bank and also became the bank's director. Although I was no longer involved, I later heard that KWFT continued experiencing a lot of problems.

Interviewer

Was there any resistance from the men since your initiative mainly focused on women? Were they supportive?

Dr. Mary Okello

Not really. One person who was very supportive was the managing director of Barclays Bank. Through his support, we were able to negotiate agreements that gave us a lot of leverage. I remember travelling to Ghana, and later, I was appointed as the African Regional Representative for Women's World Banking. I was tasked with the responsibility of setting up similar organizations across Africa. This appointment required me to travel across multiple countries, including Uganda, Senegal, Ghana, and Zimbabwe to help set up similar organizations.

The support I got from my senior manager played an important role in these efforts. My experience with Barclays Bank Kenya, was also very useful because whenever I visited a different country – whether Ghana, Senegal, or any other, I would refer to the support I got from Barclays bank by saying,"Barclays Bank Kenya has signed this guarantee, and women are enjoyingaccess to financial services." That credilibity was very useful and the support I received from my own country helped me big.

My time in the Women's World Banking, where I represented Africa. My role was to set uporganizations similar to KWFT in other countries, which I successfully did in Uganda and several other countries in Africa. While I was involved in that work, the African Development Bank (AfDB) was started. It became particularly important to me because that is where I was tasked with drafting the Women and Development Policy Paper for 52 African countries. This was a very important initiative because, although the bank was generating huge profits across many countries, its projects were not designed withwomen in mind.

This policy paper was crucial, as it addressed issues pertaining to women's access to credit and their involvement in development projects funded by the bank. Far too often, banks implement projects without considering women's specific needs. For instance, they might set up huge banking institutions without ensuring that their services are available and beneficial to women.

Interviewer

It would be very interesting to know if this policy is something that can be found online?

Dr. Mary Okello

Yes, the Women and Development Policy Paper is online. Most of the projects the bank is developing are required to include women's issues. It is the same work I did for about 6 years. I was part of the World Bank's external gender committee, where we reviewed the bank's projects to assess how sensitive they were in addressing the special needs of women and how women will benefit from such projects?

Interviewer

What do you see as some of the successes of the Gender Committee?

Dr. Mary Okello

It was an already existing committee, but we examined the bank's projects. For example, if the bank was going to provide a loan to a woman, we assessed the process, if they had they considered the specific needs of a woman? How would women benefit from the project? Our role wasreviewing what the bank was giving while ensuring the women's special needs were taken into account. For example, if they were constructing a dam, were they obstructing the water source women relied on? Were they implementing measures that helped women to sustain their livelihoods?

Interviewer

Before wemove from banking, consider what is happening today – with so many bank products specifically targeting women - what would you say has resulted into this shift?

Dr. Mary Okello

Well, the government has played a role. In 1998, they set up a task force on laws relating to women, chaired by Justice Owuor.You need to look at that document because it was a turning point.I chaired the committee, and ourfocus was on laws relating to women in the the bank sector.

Untill those laws were revised, women had no legal rights in banking. Before the changes, especially when I was helping women , I could be challenged on legal grounds. I remember one incident when I almost lost my job for approving a loan to a woman without having a male guarantor. It was a special case because she didn't have a husband although she had a male child. She therefore needed a man to sign for her. When I approved her a loan, I was told, "You know this illegal? Giving a woman a loan without a male guarantor?".Fortunately, she repaid, as a prove that the requirement was not always necessary. Those laws needed to be revisited, andreviewing them became a turning point. The legal changes finally enabled women access credit facilities independently.

Interviewer

We can now move on to Makini Schools? Now, which year were they started?

Dr. Mary Okello

They were started in 1978. Reflecting back, you realize that the country's population was growing very fast. I believe Kenya has one of the fastest growing populations at 5 % per annum. We had a growing middle class looking for quality education for their children. Because of this rapid population growth, the government was not able to build schools fast enough to accommodate the growing numbers. The size of the classes were very large, with one teacher for every 70 students. So, education standards began to decline.

I think the best schools at the time were the missionary schools, those run by Catholic and other churches. Government schools were sruggling because of overcrowding. As classe sizes grew, teachers found it increasingly difficult to deliver quality of education.

To this effect, there was an urgent need for more schools to serve the expanding middle class, and we thought of starting a school specifically for children with special needs. Interestingly, children with special needs often excel faster than others. Our initial vision was to create a school for bright but physically challenged children. However, we soon realized that achieving this required special teachers and significant resources because individualized teaching was essential. We also wanted teachers who could recognize a child's unique talents and nurture them.

Interviewer

So you started the school while still working. Where did you start the first school and how did you manage that?

Dr. Mary Okello

We started the school in my three-bedroom house. As demand grew, we moved out to establish a permanent base. But anyway, I love children. I love watching them grow. However, I am very critical of the colonial education system that we had because it did not nurture a child's talents. It tended to favor an average student, meaning that if you are very bright, you suffer for it - and that is something I noticed early on. As a result, we were losing many highly intelligent children. They often become bored and may lose interests altogether.

Interviewer

How easy ordifficult was it to establish a school in terms of fulfilling the legal requirements and government support?

Dr. Mary Okello

During that time, it wasn't that easy due to government bureaucracies. Obtaining a licence required a significant amount of time and effort. If the government operated like the private sector, where processes are more efficient, you could simply update your CV, submit it, and walk away with a license in a short period of time. However, with government, processing the same document could take a whole week, wasting a lot of valuable time. Securing a license was a time-consuming process due to bureaucratic delays. Furthermore, acquiring land to set-up a school in Nairobi was especially very difficult. Sometimes, we approached the government to allocate us some unutilized land or buildings, butour request was rejected. Accessing the necessary resources, such as land to set up a school required immense effort.

Interviewer

Okay, thinking about other prominent women who were investing in similar facilities,I know you mentioned challenges in obtainingbank loans. How were women managing all these? Perhaps for you, it may have been easier since you were working in the bank and understood how to navigate the system, but what about other women?

Dr. Mary Okello

It may have been easier, but certain obstacles were unavoidable. For example, I remember when we sought a loan from the World Bank to start Makini, an A-level international school.

We took the loan in dollars because we were accepting international students who would pay school fees in dollars. However, in one of the years, students who had been admitted did not enroll because there were challenges on their end. That left us stuck because we had a dollar-denominated loan with no dollar income. We had to return to the bank to renegotiate the terms, because we found ourselves struggling with repayment. We requested an extension so we could enroll Kenyan students and use their fees to repay the loan. Unfortunately, when we first borrowed, the exchange rate was Ksh 40 against the dollar, but by the time of repaying, it had shot up to 80 shillings. Essentially, we were repaying double the original amount.

Interviewer

How did you address that double repayment?

Dr. Mary Okello

We just had no choice but to go back to the World Bank and request for an extension because we were in a difficult position. It was not our own fault, but with banks, you have simply to work with them. While we had agredd to follow the terms, unforseen circumstances arose, and in such cases, you have to go back, explain the situation, and renogiate.

Interviewer

From your experience working with the bank your training, what are some of the lessons that you have learned that could help inform women's economic empowerment initiatives?

Dr. Mary Okello

Keep supporting one another. If you are in a position to help, do so. When I started a mentorship program, I ensured that I encouraged young women to be managers too. Had I not assured them that they could surpass even my own achievements, they might have not taken me seriously. We must support one another. Whenever you have the chance to help, take it. At one point I had seven campuses, and all of them except one were headed by women. This was partly by design because I wanted people to acknowledge that women could be good leaders and managers. So I was encouraging these women to take leadership positions but also making a statement. At the time, we were discussing the gender rule, which had not been implemented. I remember an instance when the Minister for Education attended one of our functions and he asked, "Are all the campuses managed by women?" I responded, "yes, that is how we have done it." Although we had not implemented the 30% rule, our approach was focused on training and empowering women. I also motivated girls to strive for excellence by ensuring women held leadership positions. It was beautiful to see that the headmistress was a woman, and the head prefect was a girl. These seemingly small details reinforced the idea that women are capable and can succeed in leadership roles.

Interviewer

One of the greatest needs that women in business is lack of mentorship, so I am glad that you brought it up.

Dr. Mary Okello

Yes, but I provided mentorship in my school, at the bank, and I know a lot of young women who came to me and said, "Mary, if you had not mentored me, I would not have been a bank manager. If I had not seen your profile, I wouldn't be sitting in this board." I believe we must mentor others. There are things people need to learn, training is essential. People must invest in education. I spent a lot of money during my time in school on such development programs. We would send them to London, among other places, so that they could learn different skills and techniques to become better managers. Training is very important. One mustbe equipped to navigate life, gain empowerment, and grow. You can't advance in employment without knowledge and skills.

Interviewer

These are really treasures of wisdom because if young girls are not trained or equipped with skills, there is no way they are going to be promoted to higher positions.You may mentor them, but mentoring someone who lacks the necessary skills isn't enough.

Dr. Mary Okello

That is why I had to share my notes with women - so that they could read and understand finance. You know, inbanking, you can grasp conceptsbefore stepping into a position of leadership, but again learning alone isn't always enough. Women need to learn on how to work with people around them. During my time, many musicians were men, you had to find a way to visit them in the clubs, the places men frequented. So, to navigate such environments, I had to find a way to visit those places. I did it because I was a mother, a manager and I was also working to help the KWFT team empower women in the market, increasing their opportunities.

Those women were my friends, so I would ask them tell me what goes on in those places. I gathered all the information from them, "so- and- so is going to be promoted." They heard the bosses talking and shared the details with me. These were some of the tactics I used. Waiters were also my allies'when important decisons were being made in the hotels, I would ask who was involved. I had my own way of asking because having a system that provides you with information is crucial.

If I hadn't had access to that information, if the guards hadn't told me that an incompetent man was about to be promoted, how could I have advocated for a capable woman instead? I needed to know who was more qualified. That is why I relied on informal channels to get information. I also firmly believe that being a woman should never limit access to any place. There is no location reserved exclusively for men, we have access to everywhere. That is why building networks and having people who can help gather essential information is so important. In fact even street boys helped me to gather infromation. I would go to the streets and talk to the boys there and they were very nice to me, they were my friends, and they would give me information on what was happening. So, having these informal channels of collecting information was crucial. That was my way, butother people have different ways of getting the information.

Interviewer

While we made significant progress in laws that support women, the systems are still largely designed for men.

Dr. Mary Okello

Women need to learn the importance ofsupporting one another. I used to vote for women more often than men, and that can still happen today. As I have said, it is up to us to lift each other up. Just look at how menshow solidarity, especially in the lead-up to elections. They rally behind one another. Why can't we support our women candidates with the numbers we have? We need to educate ourselves, and recognize that men should not use us like stepping stones. It is time we strengthened our own networks and empower women to rise.

Interviewer

Alright, Daktari, we would love to hear your final thoughts!

In your own words, what message would you like to share on the issue of women's economic empowerment?

Dr. Mary Okello

Women need to have money in their pockets. Women need money to have financial independence because it gives them freedom and the ability to be who they want to be. I have always encouraged women, especially young women, to start saving and investingas soon as they get their first job or start their own businesses. Old age is not easy, and nobody will always be there to support you. That is why it is essential to save and invest as early as possible, ensuring you have the freedom to live life on your own terms, especially in the later years when personal needs increase. Beyond that, we must support each other, be there for one another, and uplift our communities. I always say that it is important to have your own money—you cannot depend on your children. They have their own lives to lead, and sometimes women realize this too late. Many work tirelessly, serving everyone and caring for their children, yet forget to invest in their own future.

I work closely with widows, and what I see is heartbreaking. Some are left without inheritance, forcing them to start from scratch despite their age. It's incredibly difficult. Now, if you were to ask me to start Kenya Women at this stage in life—I wouldn't be able to manage it!"

I always say, it is important to have your own money; you cannot depend on your children, they have got their rights to live and sometimes women realize it very late because they work so hard, they serve everybody, they take care of their children until they forget to invest for their old age. I work a lot with widows but what I see is not pleasing, some lack inheritance so they start from the scratch and yet they are older women, it is not easy. Now if you tell me at this age to go and start Kenya Women *{laughs}* I won't be able to manage it.

Interviewer

We often see you on the TV, but it is really nice meeting you and listening to you telling us your story, it is a very enriching experience. One key objective is to document these stories, and eventually publish a book featuring these conversations.

Recently, we launched a similar book, though that one centered on constitution making and politics. It was unveiled during the International Women's Day, and launched by the CS, Professor Kobia.

Thank you very much.

"It is very important for women to have money in their pockets. Women need to have money, it gives you freedom and it gives you the ability to be who you are."

Dr. Mary Okello

Chapter 3: A Conversation with Catherine Ichoya

"The challenge we have as women is that we have not taken advantage of the enabling environment. The government is fully committed towards advancing the economic empowerment of women; there is no question about that. It is upon us to ensure that we go and demand for what we want."

Catherine Ichoya

Biography

Catherine Ichoya spent her early years studying in various boarding schools across Kenya, including Kapkenda Girls High School in the Rift Valley.

She drew great inspiration from her mother, who introduced her to government policies and training opportunities in poultry and dairy farming. These initiatives empowered many African women economically after independence, even though most lacked formal education and could not communicate in English. Through such policies, women began channeling their milk to cooperative societies, a move that strengthened household incomes and community livelihoods.

Catherine went on to serve as a District Officer and Acting District Officer in Limuru, where she played a key role in advancing women's economic empowerment. During this period, she interacted with the Nyakinywa Women's Traditional Dance Group, which often entertained Kenya's first president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. From them, she learned valuable lessons in discipline, commitment, and unity. The group eventually acquired land and invested in various economic ventures. Catherine was also inspired by Julia Ojiambo, who at the time served as an Assistant Minister.She has served at the National Bank of Kenya in various capacities, first as a trainee manager and later as a manager. In these roles, she supported women who needed banking services, especially those without collateral, in applying for loans. She lobbied for women to secure loans through alternative collaterals like logbooks to other bank managers. She also sensitized managers that women could obtain bank loans using alternative documents such as logbooks. Through this initiative, women were able to secure bank loans, which enabled them to expand their markets, including engaging in export activities. They connected with

Akamba women at Gikomba Market, a move that helped them start exporting Kenyan baskets.

By creating linkages and facilitating friendly banking services and processes for women, she built relationships between the bank and entrepreneurs, leading to the development of the Maasai Market. Catherine has been a member of The Business and Professional Women's Club, which has played a key role not only in establishing women's businesses but also in setting up shops that display Maasai women's artifacts in Nairobi County.

The Conversation

Catherine Ichoya was interviewed by Dr Joseph Muleka and Ruth Wamuyu.

The interview took place at Nairobi county.

Interviewer

Before we start our interview, we could like to hear your name then I will explain why we are here today.

Catherine Ichoya

My name is Mrs. Catherine Ichoya. Thank you.

Interviewer

Thank you, Catherine. It's a pleasure to meet you and to have you this afternoon. We would like to talk to you, Catherine.

We are evaluating the contribution of the women's movement and collective action to women's economic empowerment. We want to look historically, from 1963 to the year 2010, at how the coming together of women has brought about women's economic empowerment.

We have identified you as a leader in the area of women's economic empowerment, knowing that you have made significant contributions in this area. So, we would want you to share with us your journey on women's economic empowerment, specifically covering the years 1963 up to around 2010.

Catherine Ichoya

Thank you very much. My name is Catherine Ichoya. I am married to one man and we had two children; a son and a daughter. Our son passed away, so we remained with one child only, our daughter. I am married to John Ichoya, who was a Lecturer a the the University of Nairobi.

If we begin to think about 1963, when we gained our independence, what goes through my mind is in terms of the contribution of women. It takes me back to the role our mothers played during that period and the years that followed. One of the most significant things that happened at that time is that mostwomen were actually in charge of their homes. During this time, we found out that the government had supported a number of women to attend various courses. I still remember my mother telling me

how she was trained on how to keep diary cattle we still have today. They were also trained on how to rear chicken. In those days, the education sector had a lot of women teachers within its ranks.

When we think about our mothers who had not yet gone to school but managed to make to become economically empowered, it should inspire us to advance the issue of women in our country. Think of our women in Kisumu struggling in the largely male-dominated fish business to feed their children. On the other hand, we had the Masaai women who were selling their goats to raise fees to take their children to school. They may not have been many during those days, but they were there; representing the efforts of women. Ultimately, the role those women played was so critical because it gave as the foundation; it contributed to instilling confidence in a lot of us. That period marked a crucial milestone that I remember to this day.

Another thing I remember was that there was work ethic that was instilled in all of us from wherever we were, whether you were in school or not. That was a very important period for Kenya in terms of work ethic going forward. During that time, the government came up with a policy that most of the women would be taken to Warohio. I don't know if you are familiar with that. They were taken to Warohio for training and that was the time they got to know how to take care of the dairy cattle. The introduction of the European breeds; the new breeds of cattle began then. The chicken-rearing program for women was also rolled out at that time. These were women who didn't know how to speak English. The program was rolled out across the country.

Another notable development at that point was the institution of the policy of economic empowerment for women at that level across Kenya. I am saying that because those were mothers who came back from large institutions. They came back very different women because of the training they had undergone. I am saying they came different because a lot of them were able to rear grade cattle and take the milk to the Cooperative society. In other words, you find that the whole family was engaged in these economic activities. It didn't matter what age, whether you were in school or not. You would be assigned a specific role to play. We are talking about how a household can be empowered, not one person but the entire household. And so there is responsibility. Most of the girls in many households for instance, were able to attend school. And this something that has not clearly come out in other discussions.

The structures that were established then were the same structures that facilitated our women to even get property, start buying land as groups

among other things. The same thing happened in Nyanza; women in Kisumu got together to ensure their presence was felt in the management of the fish industry. So the indigenous knowledge which most of our people, women in particular even the young people now grew up with, was being upgraded to another level. It didn't matter if the women were speaking English or not because this was about development. I dare say that those policies of bringing people together and instilling confidence in them, having gone to school or not, was very important for development.

Even as we begin to talk about women's movement, we must talk about traditional structural set ups that were established by the government and the ability of the said structures to take the women to the next economic level. The rallying mantra was, "Yes, you can make it at whatever level". This was so becasue the training was about imparting practical skills. Currently, we have technical schools carrying out this important duty of imparting our people with the necessary skills for economic empowerment. That is stage one.

Most of us at that time obviously went to school, and I remember that for most of us, we ended up in boarding schools. The boarding schools my sisters and I attened were in far-flung places such as Kajiado and Narok. This was because our parents were trying to remove us from the city, and by taking us to boarding schools, we were able to interact with students from different ethnic groups. In the said boarding scchools, you would find different cultures; you work on fitting into those different cultures, and this made you feel at home.The seniors in such spaces would become our parents for as long as we remained students in those schools. I am talking about places such as Inakoi, where we went, and up to today, we have very many senior women the likes of Olive Mugenda, who schooled there and became influencial individuals they are today. So I want to say that the humble beginnings with all the strictness were useful to us because we learnt to appreciate other cultures and other people. It didn't matter what tribe you came from. I went to Kapkeda Girls for my high school and so most of my friends are from all over the country. And so, during that period, we didn't have the problem of tribalism at all. People in our generation really don't suffer from that; I dare say that because most of our friends are from all over. It happened that when you went to the university, you just found your friends as your university mates. I remember we used to go for Christmas in Kisumu and keep moving up and down, eventually ending up in Eldoret. That is the Kenya I would hope we would have today. So, for the younger generation like you, it is very important you do not listen to any language that will make you feel that

you are not Kenyan.

Now let me talk about why those examples are important. They are important because for me, I learnt a lot when I was attached as a District Officer stationed in Limuru. I learnt a lot from the traditional women dancers. I remember during those days, our then president Kenyatta would drive from Nakuru and stop at the border of Central and Rift Valley provinces and enjoy entertainment from the traditional dancers there.

The discipline that our women had was out of this world. Imagine, we didn't have cellphones but the communication system was so perfect that you would find those women at the disgnated entertainment area, having arrived on time. This kind of commitment and togetherness is what I am talking about. The group structures played a very critical role in the development of both our political and economic environment because these are the same groups that would be trained or mobilised by various politican and economic programs. The Nyakinywaa women's group for instance, ended up owning land with the procceds they got from their joint economic ventures that included chicken rearing.

I can never forget the support system that I got from most of the ladies at that time; I looked up to these individuals who were in senior postions and became my mentors. There were very good role models for me and others. One of these role models was Professor Julia Ojiambo who was then an Assitant Minister. At one time, she visited Limuru and I was like, "one day I will be in a position like hers". That is how powerful those role models were doing excellent work influenced some of us to be who we are today.

At some point, I was lucky to join the National bank of Kenya as a manager, although I started as an officer trainee and rose through the ranks to the position of a manager. As a banker, I had a great opportunity to meet a lot of those ladies when they came to the bank. I would have conversations with them. I also thank God I had an opportunity to be able to assist them with whatever services they needed. The women in the legal fraternity also inspired me greatly, and at times I would find myself wishing that I had studied law. Owing to my background, I thought it was my responsibility to ensure that I supported the women when I was in the bank.

Let me tell you something, I ensured that I did whatever it took to support those women. Most of them came without collateral, though some of them would have a logbook. I had to plead with the managers to accept to extend credit services to such women, something that was largely outside the bank rules.

I would convince the bank managers that we could use log books to give these women loans. My argument was that we could keep the log books and give the women the loans they required. This way, the women would get the financial muscle to export their products. Eventually, we created . We had our Akamba women at Gikomba who started exporting the Kenyan baskets. You know they would go and source the baskets from women back in the villages and it was our bank financing such ventures. So do you see those linkages?. A lot of those women who began to export handcrafts outside were able to enroll their children in universities outside the country. I remember at one time, we even ended up saying to them "why don't you form groups as women traders?" We started getting very concerned again in the banking industry because not all the women had log books to use as collateral and neither did they own land. The idea I mooted was that despite women having their unique challenges, they could be supported by the banking sector to achieve economic independence necessary to educate there children within and outside the country." I am talking about the linkages that we had between the entreprenuers and the bank. I thank God for the networks you see today. Another example is the Maasai networks that eventually formed the foundation for the establishment of Maasai markets.

Interviewer

Tell us more about how you started and your role in the beginning of the Maasai market?

Catherine Ichoya

What is very interesting is that we had very strong women. I dare mention them here because they played a critical role in supporting the women. This support was through business and professional women's clubs, that most of our women who were in business had established. Most of them had shops and they allowed the Maasai women to display their artefacts in those shops. Initially, the Maasai women used to display their wares on the ground outside the General Post Office (G.P.O) in Nairobi. And I really have a lot of respect for those women who allowed the Maasai women traders into their shop premises. Such selfless people include Beth Mugo, who opened a shop at Intercontinental Hotel and she would encourage some of the women traders to take their artefacts there. Thus, when the tourists were coming from tourist sites such as Maasai Mara, they would come to the Intercontinental Hotel and buy what they needed before

they flew out of the country. Do you see the connection between the growth of the handcraft industry and the tourism sector? This was brought about to link these women traders with the tourists in spaces such the Intercontinental Hotel. The women working in the hotel industry would also ensure that at least the products in these hotels would come from these women traders I am talking about.

Those of us in the banking sector, were also very much involved in that particular industry, hence a lot of women benefited. What I am saying is that those structures that had been established made trading easy for women. On the other hand, those of us, professional women, grew in our fields enough to wield power. We became bank managers, accountants etc., and we were able to influence policy in these spaces. Those of us in the banking sector now started to see how best we would have worked with the already established policies to allow the women to borrow as groups. As a result, if they came as a group of ten women and they brought some collateral of whatever nature, we would then give them money to facilitate value addition to their products so that they would be exported at higher prices.

Interviewer

Would you say that there were structures in place in the banking sector,and within government that allowed women to borrow?

Catherine Ichoya

Initially, I can tell you categorically that there were no structures as such those because we had not foreseen a situation where the women would bring their business ventures into the mainstream economy; we had not anticipated those linkages. I think the UN meeting, which was in Kenya, became a game changer. Because what happened was that the UN meeting brought all women together.

Interviewer 2

Which year exactly?

Catherine Ichoya

I985 when we had the women's decade which was coordinated by Prof. Eddah Gachukia and other women leaders at The University of Nairobi which was the headquaters for the NGO forum. This forum worked closely with the UN forum which was based at KICC and was being chaired by Kenneth Matiba – who was the Minister responsible for the Conference. Women who were in the security sector were very supportive because we needed them to provide assistance during that time and they did. I was at National Bank of Kenya that time. The National Bank of Kenya was the official banker of the conference and so we benefited a lot as a bank from the visibility the oppportunity the conference provided. During that time, I was in the marketing departmentand we ended up establishing a temporary bank at the University of Nairobi to cater for the women who needed banking services. You could see a trajectory of the development of structures during that time. And I dare say that during and after the UN meeting, a lot of things changed in this country.

What happened is that the government came in and ensured that they brought certain specific women leaders together. The women came together and we learnt a lot. We had women from *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*; from across Kenya, plus the leadership of Maendeleo ya Wanawake. It also happened that there were no issues of tribalism at that time, by the way, and I honestly don't know where it came from. We worked together, mobilizing the groups out there, we got women from all over the country to participate in different forums at that time. This was really a game-changer for Kenya because the government identified the strength of women in various sectors.

I remember we lobbied incessantly. I was in the hospitality committee which was headed by Jane Kiano. Apparently, the government provided buses during the UN meeting to go to all the provinces; different provinces, to see what was happening in Kenya and that was an expensive exercise. So sometimes, when we say that the government does not put money into such programs, we are being unfair. The governement put in a lot of money. It is also worthy to note that the women leadership at that time, whether they were in the industry or not, worked together. The unity was felt globally, and this made Kenya to become a star. If one went to various countries in the world, once you said you were a Kenyan, they would recall what had happened during the UN meeting in Nairobi. That meeting was truly an eye-opener.

After the UN meeting, I remember that a lot of women were very much empowered in different sectors and we saw a lot of difference. This is

when a lot of women decided to start their own schools. Nursery schools increased at that time. You would also find a lot of women in the banking sector thriving. Such people included pioneerssuch Mary Okello, a role model in the banking industry. Others included Lilly Auko and Julia Ojiambo. In different sectors, such as the legal sector, we saw an increase in the number of women working as lawyers. It didn't matter where you were coming from, these women were supporting each other. This is so because I remember when I was in the bank, I was able to meet a lot of these ladies who would come and begin to ask for assistance. That unity,the togetherness, the emphathy for one another, and caring for another was very important for Kenya as a nation. And so the women in Kenya have played a very critical role in harmonizing the societies, and I must say even up to this day, the networks established then are still active. If I want to go to Kisumu and I want to get in touch with the women, I have their telephone numbers. Whenever and wherever I go, I have their telephone numbers.

Interviewer

Now, let me ask what you talked about the UN decade for women.What you are saying is you can actually talk of the fruits, the aftermath of 1995 UN Meeting. Would you say that this is a major milestone in as far as women empowerment is concerned?

Catherine Ichoya

It really was. I was in the banking industry, and I can speak with authority on matters in that sector. This is because women from different sectors came together, and that means that it was first and foremost about creating networks. We were together as women from different sectors, and that unity was very important because you could have been able to access these ladies, whether they were lawyers, judges, whether they are in the education sector, through a phone call. Are we together?

Interviewer

Yes. And I can see a lot of hard work in terms of unity, andthe coming together of women. But if you look at obstacles you faced, both at a personal and a collective level, what would you say are the biggest challenges you encountered in your journey?

Catherine Ichoya

You know, I learnt about the obstacles when I rose to the position of a manager at the National Bank of Kenya. By the way, I would have loved to go beyond being a a manager. However, I realized the policies at that time and the people's attitude would not have let me go beyond where I was.

Interviewer

The policies were not enabling, or what exactly?

Catherine Ichoya

They were not enabling, we didn't have a enabling environment. We didn't have enabling policies that would allowed women to borrow money. Primarily, women didn't have their own collateral. Ask your husband whether you can get the title deed for the family shamba (farm) to use it as collateral to borrow money from a financial facility, and you will see what I am talking about when I say that it was difficult for women to access credit facilities. It was very difficult for women, and that is what I said earlier on, that is why I opted to argue their cases at the bank. I would ask those who were in the banking industry to allow the women to bring the log books to be used as collaterals for business loans.

Interviewer

So, what was the turning point regarding policies, enabling women to access funds and loans? What would you say was the turning point, or at what point did the government start looking at issues of women?

Catherine Ichoya

I think the co-operative movement was very instrumental because women started fundraising as groups. As groups, they were able to access resources through a co-operative movement; this was very important in their economic empowerment journey. But the formal banks,

like the one I worked for, the National Bank of Kenya, were reluctant to advance credit to women in the informal sector. Due to the rules set by my bank, I found that it was difficult to assist our women if they did not have collateral. It was very difficult across the board in the banking sector.

The fact that women started working and getting together as groups made it possible to mobilize money. What would happen was they would go to the bank and request for assistance with some amount that would be pegged on their savings that they held in the bank. However, it was still very difficult; I dare say that not many women managed to access bank credit facilities. As a matter of fact, what I realized afterwards made me eventually terminate my employment and leave the bank. I couldn't deal with what I was seeing; being in the finance department, yet I couldn't lend to such groups.

I was feeling intimidated, and I remember at some point, the General Manager, a white man, called me into his office. I remember he told me, "Catherine, I think you are in the wrong institution. National Bank is not a charity organization; as a bank, we are here to make money. I think you need to think about that. Yes, I see you have a lot of passion to assist women, but understand the policy of the bank is to make money. Think of what else you can be able to do. Can you join maybe an NGO or something like that?" I think I was becoming a nuisance, but he helped me; my mind unlocked, and I realized that I could not advance beyond that point.

I thank God because that is when I had an opportunity, again thanks to the women, to go to Harvard University. I remember when I was asked for recommendations, I went back to the same women that I thought were my role models. Dr. Eddah Gachukia was one of the ladies who recommended me. I was also looking for mentorship from Mama Jane Kiano. Justice Awour wasn't around, and those other prominent Kenyan women must have been surprised when I joined Harvard University, though they never confessed it to me. Harvard saw I was being recommended by great women, and maybe that's why they decided to admit me. That is the time I studied for my masters; the program gave me an opportunity to learn a lot. I learnt concepts like the cushioning policy. Were we using the right policies? No, we were not. It was very interesting because I continued to learn even after I left the Kennedy School of Government and graduated. Did I tell you that I was actually on the list of the best students? I was privileged because among my colleagues were people like José María Figueres Olsen (former President of Costa Rica. This exposure at Harvard elevated me to a level where I

could not just come back here to those levels I had left.

I decided to stay in the USA for some time to do some consultancies as well as lecturing at Tufts University School of Diplomacy. After some time, I was able to network with the women who had gone to the World Bank and the U.N. I remember I took a train from Houston to Washington, D.C. to meet some women from Nigeria. You should have seen me; I was crying like a baby, and I knew that my life was changing; I didn't know what to expect when I got there. I found very strong women and we prayed together and agreed we needed to get together despite our diverse backgrounds. The idea was to consolidate our efforts: to have individuals with experience in the banking sector, others with experience in business, and other areas. This coming together was the beginning of getting into consultancy. We were able to do a lot of work in the continent with a lot of support from those colleagues and friends. Honestly for me, I don't think there is anything better a woman can get other than having fellow women really supporting you. Some of them were telling me, "Catherine, you got to grow up, you do not have to cry over a small thing, you should shut up and move on." This kind of counsel really helped me. I ended up doing a lot of consultancies across the continent with those women, and later I came back and eventually joined COMESA.

Again, it was very interesting when I got there, we were three senior women with no women in the structure. Luckily, I had done policy, and so I understood that there was a problem. I thank God because the leadership at that time in COMESA was really very positive. I want to say that there is a man I will forever be grateful to, Mr. Mwencha, the former Secretary-General for COMESA, who eventually joined the African Union (AU). This gentleman believed in me, and every time I said, "This is what I want to do," I knew I had his support. It is very important when people allow you to be who you are. Our people don't advance because they are not given the opportunity.Mr. Mwencha once asked me, "You think you can do it?" I replied, "Yes sir, I know what is lacking in this institution is a gender policy. We don't have a policy for women".

Interviewer

Catherine, to keep us in step with this growth, would you mind telling us the dates, the approximate times like when you joined COMESA?

Catherine Ichoya

Will I remember the years really? You know, I am old now! *(laughs)*

Interviewer It helps us as researchers.

Catherine Ichoya

I graduated from Harvard in 1981, then I worked as a consultant, and later I joined COMESA..I worked in the region for twenty years. I am sharing my journey. I joined COMESA around 1995. I joined as an expert on women in business. I worked for a while, then I realized we wouldn't get very far because I already had a lot of experience and could easily tell when things weren't working. The good thing is that the Secretary-General at the time, Mr. Mwecha, listened to me. He gave me an opportunity to implement what I believed was important, and this does not happen in most institutions. As a woman, you make a suggestion, and they tell you no, asking, "where did you get that idea from?" It can't work in such an environment. I received a lot of support from the COMESA secretariat, and that made a difference. The issue was that we were working without a gender policy. Mr. Mwencha asked if I could develop it, and I said yes. He asked me, "how do you do it?" I replied, "let me do what I am able to do."

What did I do? I was in Zambia because I had my network there; I mobilized women from Zambia because one cannot do these things alone. I went to Lugunza University and I found ladies who were advising the president. I found a team who really helped me. I thank God we were able to get some consultancy money. Again, because of the network I made while I was at Durban, I was able to network with our women from UN. At that time, the former President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, was also within the UN, and she gave us a lot of consultancies. I had contacts at COMESA, and I got in touch with them and said, "You know what? Now I am here, and I need you. We need to transform this institution." COMESA is a regional institution, and these contacts came on board and helped. I will forever be grateful. We came up with the COMESA Gender Policy in 2002, and it was endorsed by the Heads of States. It happened during the meeting, the summit of the Heads of States was in Addis Ababa. I will be forever grateful to the late judge, Justice Akiwumi. He used to attend the COMESA meetings, and one time, he looked at me and realized I needed some advice. Then he called me, "My daughter, come. You have done this. You need to push." He used to advise me; may God rest him in peace. So, we can learn a lot from people who are very senior to us, so when they give you advice, you need to listen. Then you go back to them whenever you need their advice. So, what happened was that the Gender

Policy was endorsed in Addis Ababa in the year 2002. The African Union and the regional economic communities were there. One of the ambassadors came and told me, "We would also want you to work with the African Union to ensure that we also push this issue on Gender Policy". And I can tell you the women in the region were so strong in support of ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, and COMESA. We now started networking we go together. I can tell you that SADC was very much advanced. We thank God that we eventually got involved in the formation of African Union gender parity. We also learnt a lot from women from West Africa.

Interviewer

So, from COMESA you went and developed the East African Gender Policy?

Catherine Ichoya

No, from COMESA, our gender policy was now being used at the African Union level. What happened then is that we had a team from all the regional communities, but we were using ours as a first tracker.

I learnt a lot from the women, especially the women from West Africa who were very strong, especially on lobbying. I remember when we were going to push the African Gender issue, the women said we were going to stay in the same hotel. We were not going to move from that hotel, and we agreed on those who would wear yellow, who would wear green, and who would wear red. These are the women from West African countries such as Senegal. I learnt a lot about lobbying; the idea was to ensure that you were all speaking in one voice. We had senior African women, such as Gertrude Mongella, there and other senior women; we all celebrated the achievement on gender policy.

Interviewer

I think it is good to hear the involvement with the women's movement. I would like to look at the policies. If you look at the women's movement, what would you say is the glue that kept it together as the women's movement?

Catherine Ichoya

I think it was the movement of the senior women, the specifically, the likes of Dr. Gachukia and Prof. Wanjiku Kabira. Remember I told you about our women from Kisumu, and by the way, I am in still in touch with all those ladies because the idea is we should not disengage. The networks were established, and the bond that women cultivated then is still there; it really exist to this day. And you will find that if something happens to one of our ladies, others will be there to show solidarity and support. It is not like what is happening today, where young women are all over but they are not together. Such a scenario is really worrying.

Interviewer

Now I want us to look at Women's Economic Empowerment and the whole issue of policy. What would you say is the place of regional policies as far as women's economic empowerment is concerned. Are you looking into Kenya and the whole region?

Catherine Ichoya

Well I talked about the COMESA Gender Policy and the good thing about it together with the African Union Gender parity. You know what it is? We approved it. The policy is recorded, and therefore you can hold the responsible member states accountable. You can refer to that and remind them that they are not following those policies.

Maybe I should say that other than those regional policies in COMESA, we also had an opportunity, again through Mr. Mwencha, to hold a summit in Nairobi. We would approach countries in the summit, especially the First Ladies, because we noted the hotels they were booked in. I remember again talking to Mr. Mwencha, a man I respect very much, to say maybe we could start a First Ladies Round Table so that when the Heads of State are deliberating their own issues out there, the First Ladies would also be talking about their issues too, especially issues to do with women. That is what happened. Mr. Mwencha said, "yes." We in COMESA established the First Ladies Round Table. So, during the summit, we would have the Heads of State and the First Ladies' Round Table deliberating on issues concurrently.

We discussed the issues around women; the economic activities about women. And the good thing is that these recommendations of the First Lady Round Table would now be factored into the final report of the Heads of States. You see where we were headed? We have those structures in place.

What I found very significant was that some of our First Ladies took advantage of that forum to advance various initiatives in their own respective countries. Yes, they did that; we did that with a lot of integrity in the First Ladies Round Table. One of the things we talked about was establishing trading houses at border points; we now have the cross-border program. This came from the fact that at times, you could be at Namanga and find the women traders being harassed and sometimes being labeled as prostitutes. Sometimes you would find these women being abused, and mind you, these are our mothers, trying to make a living. The gender policy program as spelled out by COMESA took it up as a challenge that needed to be addressed. I remember that the same thing happened in Rwanda, a country that was almost destroyed by war, and now we have trading houses for peace in that country. This was courtesy of the peace and security program of COMESA, and this has helped a lot. You find that the women are working closely with uniformed officials who are able to help them understand the rules and regulations so that they won't be harassed or assumed to be prostitutes. And even when we talk about prostitution, who will start that if it is not the men? We cannot keep on blaming the women. The creation of awareness empowers our people to know that the state is taking care of them. All these recommendations came at the summit level.

Interviewer

Coming back home to Kenya, where would you gauge us in terms of women economic empowerment? What gaps do you see?

Catherine Ichoya

I am very comfortable in Kenya because our women are very hardworking. There is no question about it. The banking industry is really advanced because we have very many programs for women, and we can no longer say that women cannot access credit. I think when it comes to that sector, Kenya is doing very well. There is no doubt about it,

and the women in that sector have really advanced that agenda. Look at Equity Bank; they have done wonders, and our women are benefiting greatly. If you have five cows, they are used as collateral for credit facilities. That is different from when you would have been asked to bring a title deed. The chamas (informal women's groups) have also really helped our women. If you put money aside as savings, that money can be used as collateral in a bank. This has really instilled confidence in our people. We are doing very well, and we have some of the best practices among other countries on the continent.

If you go to countries like Burundi, you will find that one of the best things that we ever did was to come up with a women's bank from scratch. We did that in Burundi by working with our women there. What happened is that as you move from one country to another, you find we are talking about empowering women. Sometimes you would go into a room and cry, and you would hide because you do not want to show them your reaction; that you are crying! I had five sisters, and now I am taking care of three of them because of what happened in Burundi. These ladies would come to the hotel at seven in the morning saying they need help, and we would work until midnight because they did not want us to waste time. We worked with these women in Burundi, a country that was coming out of conflict, and we did this both during the day and at night. Thereafter, we were able to establish the Wise Bank in Burundi, which is being run by women. I learnt a lot also from the ladies here in Kenya, the likes of Lydia and many other women who were involved in the development of the banks in the country. We also borrowed a lot from what Kenya's Equity Bank was doing, and we established a bank.

I feel so good. Why? Because I have truly and honestly made a difference in the lives of people, and these are people who appreciate that. Because, you know, sometimes we take a lot of things for granted, but the people I had been helping wouldn't have let me. They would come in the morning. No time to waste, and we would start at seven and work all the way to midnight. The following morning, you think you want to sleep, but they come and they wake you up to continue with the work. We also got support from the government and the lady ministers; it was out of this world.. That is a case study that I can proudly share with you— the game -changer issue in Burundi.

Interviewer

Good to hear about your contribution to women's economic empowerment. What are some of the gaps that you would say are in Kenya in this area of women's empowerment? Is it the policies, regulations?

Catherine Ichoya

I think policies are there, and the regulations too. However, implementation of those policies is where we may have challenges. Some policies are made at the level of the Head of State, and so, it is the ministries that are responsible for implementation. It's a question of taking things seriously and ensuring some of these policies are fully implemented. I am very proud that the banking system has done extremely well. When you look at the milk industry, this is something that is driving it, and it is very fantastic. You find our women in different markets, and you will also find them working together with men.

Interviewer

I totally agree that we should look at the issue of implementation. Looking at our Kenyan women, how do you see the linkage with the region as far as women's economic empowerment is concerned?

Catherine Ichoya

I think Kenya is doing very well in terms of the linkage – we are better than most countries. We are a good case study and there is no question about it. I have worked with women in the region for long. At some point, I left COMESA and was mandated to go and start a women's organization from scratch. I was able to borrow a lot of the processes that Kenya had gone through. I also got a lot of advice and support from various quarters. For instance, the former President of Malawi, Her Excellency Joyce Banda, mobilized women for us. She helped by giving us ten acres of land to put up a regional office for women in Malawi. I thank God that the lady who took over from me, my very best friend from Eritrea, is doing very well in advancing that agenda, though it has not been easy. When I moved from COMESA to start a women's organization, you are talking about institutional establishment from scratch! We established that institution with the government of Malawi and with the support of COMESA. And now that institution is led by that lady from Eritrea, with whom I am also working very closely with. In fact, she is visiting Kenya to interact with some of our ladies. You know, this whole thing is about being there for each other. You cannot make it if you are a selfish person.

Interviewer

Okay. Catherine, at that point, you have said trusting each other and helping each other. And now we also realize that you are quite global as opposed to local, yet you are a keen observer; you have experience out there. I want you to enrich whatever we are talking about. Tell us something about Maendeleo ya Wanawake. Something about it. I know you have been out there, you have been to Malawi. But Maendeleo ya Wanawake was working here at home, and part of our interest is to see how women's organizations, how women's movements, have contributed towards women's economic empowerment. What judgment would you give about *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*?

Catherine Ichoya

I really salute the ladies who came up with Maendeleo ya Wanawake including our dear sister Jane Kiano. She was a visionary leader, and there is no question about it. We had leaders from Ukambani and from across Kenya. These women got together; they worked together. And you know what? As for this working together, it was not easy, you need to look at the environment at that particular time. There were so many obstacles then, which is not the case today. The mere fact that there was that belief, the commitment, the vision that they had—that is what made it possible to do it. This relentless desire to be united, working together, is what has brought us here. You cannot talk about *Maendeleo* without talking about Jane Kiano, without talking about all the ladies from Kisumu and many others from all over the country. They started it, but we also need to understand the environment, and that particular time was very hostile. Add to the fact that as a country, we were struggling economically. What I have learnt from my colleague who took over from me is that there are certain things that she does, and I am like, "Oh yes, do that. I would have wanted to do that, but I couldn't." The younger generation here are coming with new ideas. You are conditioned by your environment. The earlier days of *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* were days of real struggle because talking about strengthening women was not something that was easily accepted. It was a very different environment all together. Difficult, yes, but they did a fantastic job.

Interviewer

As much as it was difficult for them because we understand even the political environment was unfriendly, do you think that there was anything they contributed towards policy, even in terms of where we are today? this particularly *Maendeleo ya Wanawake?*

Catherine Ichoya

They did. I want you to remember that even during the UN decade, the late Jane Kiano was advancing the agenda of ensuring the women visited different parts of the country. We were able to go everywhere in the country. There were structures of *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*; we had our women everywhere. Sometimes when we begin to analyze some things, we need to take ourselves back to that environment; the hostile environment I mentioned earlier. What would you have done if you were there then? The good thing is that we have been exposed to education from universities all over the world, and that has affected our worldview; we see them from a different angle. So, what I would say is that we just need to thank God that these ladies were there, and they started what they started, and they were there for us; for our welfare and well-being.

I had told you we worked very closely as a team. For instance, I was Jane Kiano's vice-chair of the hospitality committee, and there was Rachel Gadabaki who was the secretary. The government provided us with buses. Who would have gone to the government to request for these buses? Jane did that because I wouldn't have. This women's organization had come from far, and the leaders of *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* knew how to approach the political leadership at that particular time. Can you imagine that in Kenya, the government gave all the buses? Can you imagine how much money the government expended for that? Would it have happened if the leadership of the women was not in place? Definitely no, it would not have happened. So, for us who worked with the leaders of our organization, it was a question of following their modus operandi and learning by observation. We learnt a lot from those ladies. They were good; they were ready to act, and they were not scared. Fear is what is killing a lot of our people. Fear of the unknown; fear is dangerous, for it paralyzes people.

Interviewer

Okay. Let me not over bother you, but then I could be wrong, do you see *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* still in existence today?

Catherine Ichoya

You see, every forum was there for a purpose. Just like you and me. You know you were young then, and what you knew then is not what you know now. You are a different person altogether. So, I think for me and you, especially me, who has been involved in policy and all that, I would have come up with a very different judgment of an organization like *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*. I say this because of the exposure that I have and the training that I have received. One needs to put themselves within context, in this case, the situation that existed back in those days. I say this because the situation we had when MYWO was most conspicuous is quite different from what we have today as a country. In short, to pass a judgment, there are so many factors that you need to look at. For me, what I have done throughout much of my life is to learn. From learning every day, I believe we can see where we contribute positively, and if there are some negative aspects, we convert them into possibilities, like Mahatma Gandhi used to say.

You know, vision owners are usually not in a position to implement; it is also true the other way around. Look at our first president of this country and the vision he had of groups working together; instilling that concept of togetherness so that you have confidence you can make it as part of a group—that is what Kenyatta Snr. stood for. That is so important for a nation. Personally, I can say I benefited a lot from my own mother. My father died when I had just finished college. I remember I got married in 1975, and the following year my father died. My brother was in the US and now I had to work with my mother to advance the agenda of my father. I married a man who was more advanced than me in thinking. Are we together? Basically, you have no time to waste. When you are 11, at your own home, and they are looking at you to work with your mother, and mind you, your mother didn't go to school, and if she did, she only knows how to say, "How are you?" and the response, "Fine." You see the limitations I had to deal with? What do you do? So, you have to navigate through all those challenges, and I dare say that a lot of our women went through what I went through. Thank you, *Kwisha maneno* (End of story).

Interviewer

Catherine, as we have come to the end of our interview, and I know we have spoken quite a long time, our conversation concerning strategies that have worked for women's economic empowerment. Maybe you can give us a summary, out of your experience in this journey.

What would you say are the strategies that have worked for women's economic empowerment?

Catherine Ichoya

I think that the strategy that has worked for women economic empowerment has to be, first and foremost, the access to credit. Kenya is lucky because many financial institutions have come up with different packages, especially Equity Bank. You look at specific packages and be able to advance your agenda. We can be proud of that.

The other issue is that we have a very enabling environment. The challenge we have as women is that we have not taken advantage of that.

The government is fully committed towards advancing the economic empowerment of women; there is no question about that. It is upon us to ensure that we go and demand for what we want, what we believe is ours.

Another important thing is that we have a lot of opportunities, which are the markets. We have the international and regional markets that, as Kenya, we should take advantage of them. In terms of the international market, we are very lucky because we do have a very strong Ministry of Foreign Affairs and also the embassies where the trade attachés are doing an excellent job with the government here. As a result, we are able to link up, ensuring that we are promoting or lobbying for our people to export their products.

Interviewer

Catherine, we have spoken about the strategies that work for women empowerment. Now as we come to the end, I would like you to share some of the lessons learnt that can inform women economic initiatives that can

inform other women today. What are some of the lessons learnt through the journey?

Catherine Ichoya

I think because we are in the media world, we need to have maybe a series of programs that come up with key studies, successful key studies of women or even the young people in our programs. I have been looking at the dances along the campaigns, and I would say that this will be a very good forum to empower people. If you are going to Kisumu and you are talking about the processing of food, you talk about fish.

We can use the same train that is being used. For example, I think a local television station like Citizen TV has a very good program that they use to market economic programs for women known as "Mwanamke Bomba". And because you are in the media, this is one thing that you should think about. Because I think that particular station is more pro-people, we could think of that, especially for our women who are in different markets; sharing ideas.

Another thing that I think we should have is cold rooms, in every market, like what happens in India. You have cold rooms and a calendar of foodstuff that are being harvested at whatever time, and then you have the markets out there. Like what happens when they have to sell a lot of food to Dubai. Why can't we do that in our country? But we cannot do that without communicating to our people about the possibilities that are out there. I think the media has a role to play in terms of sensitizing our people on alternative ways of doing things. I have been very passionate about the establishment of business incubators and cold rooms. Every time I am passing through Limuru, and find women seating there at 6 AM in the morning, in my mind I say, "Oh my God, I wish we could have cold room facilities where this food would be put, and then our women would not be struggling like they are currently. How long are they going to struggle?" Structures are there, and the government is committed to these matters. But this can't work unless we engage the women at the county levels. We are lucky now we have governors, and through the governors, every single area can come up with a storage facilities to ensure that we are addressing the issues of post-harvest losses, depending on whatever is grown there or whatever can be harvested. This is the key because Kenya is doing very well, and we can export this surplus food to the region. Kenya is one of the countries that is a good case study in several sectors and I say this with authority because I have worked in COMESA. I feel that this is something that we can do, especially at the level of the women. Yeah.

Interviewer

Wow!
Thank you so much, Catherine, for your time.

Catherine Ichoya

You are welcome.

Interviewer

We really appreciate you for sharing with us on the Women Economic Empowerment. I must say it was enriching and an eye opener discussion and we have been able to learn a lot from 1963, from the time it started with our mothers to where we are today. Thank you so much for your time, we truly appreciate.

Catherine Ichoya

I hope you start brainstorming sessions because they are very important to empower one another. Like the evenings, you would encourage young people who go out there to have one or two bottles of beer to instead come and listen to new ideas. This could then be replicated across Kenya.

Interviewer

Thank you.
Thank you so much.

Catherine Ichoya

Thank you.

"I think policies are there, regulations are there. It is the implementation of those policies that is missing. It is a question of taking things seriously and ensuring some of these policies are fully implemented."

Catherine Ichoya

Chapter 4: A Conversation with Lilian Mwaura

"Education is power. Knowledge is power. Technology is power."

Lilian Mwaura

Biography

Lilian Mwaura was born of a humble background in 1947, in Kiambaa constituency, Kiambu County. She rose through the ranks to become an advocate of the High Court of Kenya. Lilian attended Loreto Limuru High School before joining the University of Nairobi, where she pursued a degree in Law.

In 1975, she partnered with Ben Mwaura and Company Advocates,and in 1985, she established her own private practice at a time when few women worked in the legal profession. This marked a turning point in her journey of economic empowerment. Through her firm, Mwaura Advocates, Lilian has supported women pro bono in cases of inheritance, child support, and domestic violence, and law on burial rights, recognising that many clients lacked the financial means to seek justice in court.

A pioneering champion of women's rights, Lilian has devoted career to supporting the empowerment of women. Following the UN Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, Lilian was instrumental in the founding of the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA). Her vision of FIDA is society that nurtures and empowers women, ensuring equal rights and protection from discrimination. Through FIDA Kenya, she advocated for women's legal rights, addressing the gap between elite and grassroots women, and assisting in marketing of their products internationally. Lilian, also served as a Board Member of the Green Belt Movement Movement from 1990 to 2007, contributing to tree planting, environmental protection, and poverty alleviation.

With the support of the Canadian Foundation and the National Council of Women, she engaged in constitutional reviews, focusing on on women's voting rights, harmful traditional practices such as FGM and early marriages, and broader women's health concerns.

From 2013 to 2017, Lilian served as a nominee to the Kiambu County Assembly, identifying the needs, training mediators, and supporting land and family dispute resolutions on a pro bono basis.

The Conversation

The conversation happened at Lilian Mwaura's home.

The interviewers were:

- Prof. Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira,
- Ruth Wamuyu, and
- Dr. Joseph Muleka.

Interviewer 1

Thank you so much, Lilian, for inviting us to today's meeting. We are from the African Women Studies Centre, University of Nairobi, and we are very grateful to be hosted by you. We are looking forward to discussing your role in advancing women's economic empowerment. To start, could you please tell us a bit about your background — specifically, where you were born and where you received your education?

Lilian Mwaura

Thank you very much, Ruth. I want to thank your entire team, led by Professor Wanjiku Kabira, for coming to interview me. There are so many women who have empowered other women in Kenya, and I truly feel honoured that you have chosen me.

I was born in Kiambaa sub-location, Kiambaa constituency, Kiambu County, in 1947. My mother raised me and my six siblings on her own after my father passed away when I was just a toddler. She worked on nearby coffee farms owned by white settlers (*wazungu*) in what was then known as the White Highlands. To support her, we helped pick coffee – each *debe* (basket) earned us 50 cents. When we tilled the fields, we would be paid one shilling for every 150 – meter stretch. My siblings and I pooled our earnings to buy food for the family. I owned only three sets of clothes: my school uniform, a Sunday best, and a set of worn-out garments. I didn't wear shoes until I reached Standard Seven. Although we were poor, so was everyone around us — and so, I assumed that was simply how life was.

My mother instilled in us strong values: honesty, teamwork, generosity, faith and a deep respect for education. She constantly reminded us that education was key to breaking the cycle poverty. Motivated by her words, I immersed myself in my studies and worked hard. Growing up, I often saw white mothers taking their children to exclusive schools and I dreamed of one day attending such a school. That dream came true when I was admitted to Loreto Convent, Limuru, and later got a scholarship to Msongari, then an all-white school. Years later, I was able to enroll my own children at Msongari and St. Mary's. At that moment, I knew my dream was fully realized.

When I was interviewed for a government position, I wanted to join what we now call the Public Trustee Office but the Registrar then, a *Mzungu*

(white), told me, "Lilian, we cannot employ you here." The late Murage, who was the Registrar of Titles, advised me to join the lands office, but I declined. I knew that was not my calling. I turned to my brother, who had already began a law career in private practice,and I told him, "Why don't we start our own law firm since I can't get employment in government or private firms?" I am a firm believer that if you're locked in a house like this one, and all the exits are sealed, don't just cry but look for a window to exit or escape. That is what I exactly did. My brother agreed, and together we co-founded Ben Mwaura and Company Advocates in 1975. My brother had the practical experience which I lacked and gladly he mentored me. I was officially admitted to the bar as an Advocate of the High Court of Kenya on 26th October 1975, and immediately started my private practice. Now, this is where my journey of women's empowerment begins.

Well, in the early years, few women were in private legal practice. Our number were so small that everyone knew who the female lawyers in private practice were. There was Khaminwa practicing with her husband, Christine Khayanga, also practicing with her husband, and then there was now me paracticing with with my brother. Women often came to my office seeking help for inheritance disputes, child support, and domestic violence cases. Most of them could not however afford legal fees. I handled many cases on pro bono, although our Law firm was young and I needed to earn some income. I constantly prayed, asking God, "How can I help these women without carrying the burden alone." Then, in 1985, a major turning point came –the UN Women's conference in Nairobi. Alongside it was an NGO conference on women's rights which I attended with my friend Terry Kantai, from the Women's Movement, and we learned about FIDA International. I met the international president of FIDA and invited her to my house for dinner, and that conversation solidified our conviction, "we need this organisation in Kenya." The few women lawyers who were practicing law in Kenya, who had attended the conference, supported the idea. I'm proud that FIDA Kenya was founded in this sitting room where you are right now!

Now, I will leave FIDA Kenya and talk about the National Council of Women of Kenya. When I was in practice, the late Professor Wangari Maathai invited me to the National Council of Women of Kenya and requested me to establish a committee on the status of women, and I accepted. I actively participated in luncheons and meetings of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), where I chaired this committee with the goal of advancing women's rights. My involvement in the National Council became even stronger through the Green Belt Movement. I particularly recall a notable case of Wambui Otieno, who was denied the right to bury her husband, by his clan. That revealed

injustices against widows, who, upon losing their spouses, were often left at the mercy of their late spouse's patriarchal cultural traditions. To bring awareness to such injustices, we initiated a 'one million campaign' involving women in higher education, girls, and men. We conducted interviews and posed the questions, "What should happen when a spouse passes away? What are burial rights? Some women even resisted, fearing that raising awareness about women's rights would disrupt societal norms. At one point, some university students involved in our campaign were arrested and held at the Central Police Station. We had to intervene to secure their release. By then, we gathered women's signatures and recommended law reforms regarding burial rights. Meanwhile, we continued working with the Green Belt Movement Movement, empowering communities.

In 1987, I was appointed Chairperson of the National Council of Women of Kenya. Having always had a deep commitment to grassroots women, I quickly recognized a significant disconnect between them and elite women. As Chair, I dedicated myself to bridging that gap and fostering greater inclusion and unity among all women. When reviewing the constitution of the National Council of Women of Kenya, I saw the need for reform. With support from the Canadian Foundation, we initiated a transformational process, revisiting the organization's mission and vision. The outcome of the deliberations was a strategic five-year plan, ensuring equal voting rights among women's organizations and groups affiliated with the National Council of Women in Kenya. This unity strengthened our ability to empower grassroots women, a population that had been historically marginalized.

One of our key projects focused on harmful traditional practices affecting women, including FGM, early pregnancies and forced marriages. So we started educational programs, particularly targeting Northeastern region of Kenya, specifically Samburu, where FGM was prevalent. At first, the local women there did not want us to discuss the matter of circumcision. When we insisted, they just started leaving the hall we had convened the meeting. I reassured them that we were not talking about traditions and FGM but their health, what affects the body. After this, they came back to the hall and we engaged in a meaning dialogue. We extended the FGM education project to other places like Kehancha in Kuria and Meru. Both regions had high FGM prevalence. In Western and Central Kenya, we addressed the issue of nutritional discrimination, where cultural traditions had long forbidden women from consuming certain foods, such as chicken and livestock meat. We discussed these issues, illustrating their harmful effects.

So at the National Council, we educated women in all facets of life. Owing to my legal background, I knew that women were marginalized simply because they did not know their legal rights. So at the National Council, we embarked on a program to sensitize women about their legal rights, as a way of empowering them. We took this project very seriously and we rolled it out countrywide. During my tenure as the Chair, I noted that there existed an hierarchical divisions among women, where only the elite women attended international Council meetings. I decided to include grassroots women in these meetings, and even though many were not fluent in English. I encouraged them to bring merchandise to sell at conferences, as a way to promote their financial autonomy. I recall in 1986, I took grassroots women to a meeting in Washington D.C. under the International Council of Women (ICW). Among them was Nyokabi Waweru, a leader of Ikinu Farmers Women, a group with 15,000 members. Nyokabi travelled with three sacks of kiondos! (traditional baskets). When we arrived in America, she was right there by the conveyer belt as the luggage came in, and she told me, "Chairperson, pick that one, you know how to remove it from the conveyor belt". At the conference, she was dressed in a traditional Kikuyu attire and she was weaving Kiondos. This made us get a lot of media coverage and global attention which enabled the women to easily sell their Kiondos, alongside other artifacts they had carried.

Interviewer

Lilian, can you tell us about the National Council of Women. What was its mandate?

Lilian Mwaura

The National Council of Women was started in 1964, just a year after we got independence. It was started by visionary women like Margaret Kenyatta, Margaret Koinange, Phoebe Asiyo, among others. They wanted women's organizations under one umbrella. Before NCWK, the only significant organization was *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*, which was concentrated in the then Central Province of Kenya. NCWK helped to bring women from all regions and backgrounds together including those already in Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, fostering solidarity and shared solutions to their problems. NCWK was supported at that time by the Kenyan government because even the offices near Central Police Station, were provided by the government. The mandate was to bring women together, discuss issues, and propose solutions, making it a very powerful

organization. NCWK has been chaired by influential women including: Margaret Kenyatta as the first chairperson; Margaret Koinange, Phoebe Asiyo, Mary Gichuru, Eddah Gachukia and Professor Wangari Maathai whom I later succeeded.

Interviewer

Did NCWK include grassroots women?

Lilian Mwaura

Yes, so there were many affiliates, including grassroots women, business leaders, and professional women. Even colonial-era organizations like the East African Women's League – which premarily served white settlers (mzungus), eventually became part of NCWK. The council also brought together Asian women's organizations, Asian community representatives, and grassroots women's networks, creating a diverse coalition of women from all walks of life.

Interviewer

You mentioned that NCWK was getting support from the government, what would you say were its greatest achievements?

Lilian Mwaura

In those days, at least, the organization fostered unity among women. If donors wanted to initiate projects, they could channel them through the National Council. During president Jomo Kenyatta's regime, we had a lot of support since the President's daughter was the Chair. However, when Professor Wangari took over, we were seen as opposition to the system, as we disagreed with so many government policies. A notable example, was when Wangari Maathai opposed president Moi's government's plan to cut off part of Uhuru Park to put up a multi-storied building complex. At another time, KANU, the then ruling party, attempted to affiliate the National Council with the party, as it had done with the *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*, but we refused.

Interviewer

How did the Council manage to stay firm and not get distracted?

Lilian Mwaura

At that time, I was the Chair, we worked very closely with Professor Maathai since I was busy with my legal practice. She was the one in the office most of the time. At some point, we were informed that the Council needed to have an affiliate. A state operative told me, "We have sent somebody from the government," to which I replied, "This is not one organization. It is a multilayered entity made up of many women groups, therefore, I cannot make this decision without consulting first." I have to call a meeting and ask the organizations whether they want to be affiliated or not." Then they said, "Okay, just do it." So, I sought for advice from a trusted individual who suggested for a strategic approach. He told me, "Don't worry, just write letters saying you have got the meeting scheduled on such and such a day, but don't actually send the letters. That way, you have proof that you sent them though no actual meeting took place."

Ultimately, there was no meeting, as women were not aware of it! So,when I informed the authorities that I could not make a unilateral decision, the system started harassing us. Then, our offices were burned down, including the ones next to the Central Bank, a near the Central Police Station, and one for American volunteers. This happened immediately after we returned from the DakarAfrican Preparatory Meeting. After razing our offices, the government launched propaganda war, falsely alleging that the fire was an inside job to destroy evidence of misappropriation of donor funds. The truth was that the fire was orchestrated by the state security agents.

Interviewer

So this was a major challenge for you as a Council?

What other challenges did you face?

Lilian Mwaura

It was a major challenge. Pressure to be affiliated with KANU was another challenge.The burning of our offices was devastating as the fire burnt everything including our archived materials.

The other challenge was leadership wrangles because whenever a major meetings was scheduled, everyone wanted to attend, but not everybody could attend. This createda lot of tension. Despite these obstacles, we did very well in the National Council, particularly during the preparation for the UN Beijing Conference. The National Council was appointed as the focal point for all Kenyan NGOs, and I was appointed as the National NGO Coordinator to overseeing the whole process. We travelled extensively, visiting every part of Kenya to sensitize women about gender equality and empowerment.

We gathered their views, compiled them into the NGO Report, and we submitted them in Dakar as part of the African preparatory meeting. Another important part of the preparation was organizing a re-imagination meeting with Kenyan popular music artists who were known for their negative profiling of women in their compositions. An example of songs that demeaned women was Mama Kiwinya by Sammy Muraya, which portrays older women as predators of young men. So, we decided to get these secular singers and told them to record songs with positive messages about women and we secured support for the project from the Embassy of Netherlands. They sang and recorded very nice songs about women, and we even took them to sing and perform in Dakar. They realized the harm their earlier derogatory compositions had inflicted women and how they had negatively impacted the image of women in society. One thing that made people embrace the songs castigating women was the catchy beats and arrangement, which encouraged people to sing along and dance to the tune.

Interviewer

The other day, I met a popular musician and told him that I was coming to see you, and he was very excited. He said, " Kindly say hello to Lilian, and let her know that the song she asked me to compose is ready, "I actually have it" He was actually very excited about it.

Lilian Mwaura

Kajohnie! I remember they did a good job, and we were happy about it.

The other thing, we had planned to go to Dakar because we women, needed to be empowered grassroots women. We reasoned that although we were going for discussions and deliberations, it would not hurt to do some business as well. You see, in these NGO forums, people bring something to sell to participants; taking advantage of the large numbers of attendees. For this particular meeting in Dakar, I told the women, "Prepare for Dakar and carry things." Days later, the Nation newspaper published a cartoon of me struggling to board a plane, overloaded with Ciondos, necklaces, and earrings!Of course, they were ridiculing me. Still, I am proud that what seemed like unorthodox methods presented a business opportunity for Kenyan women – they sold every item they brought to the Dakar meeting.

Interviewer

Did you manage to take some grassroots women to that meeting? What issues did you present on their behalf? I recall you mentioning the issue of gender equality – were there other concerns or perspectives from these women that you took to the Dakar meeting?

Lilian Mwaura

Well, I must say that gender equality is a global problem. The women in Kenya experience marginalization in both political and economic spheres. Cultural traditions continue to discriminate against women because our society remains largely a patriarchal system. So we discussed these issues and explored how we could incorporate gender perspectives into both the Dakar and Beijing platforms. Besides engaging with women in Kenya, I also reached out to the women across Africa in order to strenghthen our approach to women's empowerment. Our goal was to sensitize women on the platform and identify issues that needed to be engendered. I believe that the Beijing platform was a milestone for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. We sought to highlight challenges in women's health and education among other issues. We noted that most girls faced ostracization after becoming pregnant while in school hence preventing them from continuing with

their education. We advocated for policies that would allow these young mothers to return to school after giving birth, ensuring they still had access to learning opportunities.

Interviewer

So now you have told us about Dakar,and then you went to Beijing, can you tell us something about that and the role of the Council in the Beijing conference?

Lilian Mwaura

As I had said earlier, the National Council was the focal point, and I was the coordinator of the national NGOs. I took women from all over Kenya. The government sponsored many women from the rural areas. The council also fundraised for women from the informal settlements and rural areas.

Interviewer 2

About how many?

Lilian Mwaura

There were about 4,000 women in Beijing, and for the government meeting, I served as the coordinator. The NGO meeting was held in a place called Hairo while the government meeting took place somewhere else. The women from the slums and rural areas, who were part of the government delegation, primarily attended the main meeting, I included. However, in the main meeting,we were given five minutes to articulate our issues. I was not able to address the forum myself, as it was strictly a government affair. The late Grace Ogot was heading the delegation, and we were just observers. I remember very well when Grace Ogot was giving her submission and she mentioned Moi, our women ululated loudly *"arirrirrii!"* Mind you, this was a UN meeting, where such expressions are rare. Meanwhile, at the Hairo meeting, where the NGOs were meeting, tensions arose because delegations from different parts of the world participated, each bringing their agenda informed by their

unique challenges. The only common thread across all groups was the issue of gender equality. Some participants pushed for discussions on LGBTQ+ rights, including gay and lesbianism issues. Journalists followed these advocates closely, spreading news of their efforts. The president, however, was displeased that some women had chosen to focus on discussions on gay rights.

Interviewer 2 The president of Kenya?

Lilian Mwaura

Yes, the persident of Kenya. The women from the rural areas confirmed to him; when we came back, it was bad. Those two items almost destroyed and overshadowed our achievement in Beijing.

Interviewer

It's true both the government and some of the women who attended those two meetings were very shocked by the turn of events.

Lilian Mwaura

I think we can blame the government, but I would also like to say that some of the women wanted to endear themselves to the president in order to manipulate him for favours and other benefits. They relayed to him information they did not fully understand and missed the actual facts, trying to neutralize the lies from the propaganda. Some of the women whom I prefer not to discuss in this conversation were the ones who rushed to President Moi in hopes of gaining favours; we can leave it at that. We don't want to talk about it. So, we also played a role in creating this bad impression (inaudible). Luckily, we were known to the president's secretary. We received calls about these issues, we were able to utilize facts to counter these waves of propaganda. So it also depends on … (inaudible)

Interviewer

Considering all this, especially the propaganda, how did you manage as a council to stay strong and continue to grow the organization?

Lilian Mwaura

I must say that the preparatory process was successful. In fact, we documented it in a book we co-authored with Professor Kabira, *The Road to Beijing*. It was very successful but we played our part. When we came back, we embarked on building the National Council, but we faced challenges.I was elected in 1987, and the term lasted six years in total – (three years per term). The maximum allowed was four terms, and that was my last term. Although I didn't force myself, I was freely re-elected. So many people supported us. You know, the Council was being recognized as a national outfit, and so many women wanted to lead it. I said I would leave the position to a person who could take good care of my women, the grassroots women. There was a very heated debate, fueled by a lot of propaganda.The person I had in mind was the late Jane Kiano, but some women perceived her as a "Nyachae person". They insisted on a candidate of their own.

Interviewer

What do you mean a "Nyachae person"?

Lilian Mwaura

At that time, Simeon Nyachae was not in good terms with the government. He was a challenger to the president. President Moi did not want anything to do with him or have anything remotely associated with him. Some women went to President Moi and told him, "Oh, Nyachae is bringing Jane Kiano to be the Chair of NCWK". At the end, because the grassroots women had a lot of faith in me, they told me, "Whoever you recommend us to elect, that is the person to get the position of the chair." At the last minute, I told them, "My vote goes to this one" and they voted her in.

Interviewer

Tell us something about that election because I happened to have been there at time.

Lilian Mwaura

What happened was that I told them, "I wish to leave this organization in the hands of someone who will take care of the grassroots women. If you want to give me that person, then I will shield you."

Betty Tett. So, what happened was that they went to Moi and were given money to run their campaign. I told Jane, "Don't bother; you have the vote; you do not need to campaign. The only thing you must do is make sure that on the eve of the voting day, you are present here. I know all those women who will cast their votes to you. When you are inside, you know everything. I know if Ruth has a vote, and you don't, sowe will invite all those women here, and not to a hotel." So, I said, "We are going to invite all those voters in this house. We cook for them, and they will be served here. Then, we will decide: "This one will be the chairperson, this one will be the secretary and so on. In short, the government of the National Council will be formed from here." Those who opposed us went around the hotels but could not find the women!Then I told them, "You walk with Jane, and when you are walking to the stadium, you ululate for us." So, our cabinet, which was formed, sailed through and we didn't spend money. Meanwhile, our rivals had been given a lot of money for their campaign.

Jane was a good leader, a grassroots woman who could communicate effectively with all people. However, after one term, she was accused of being pro-government and was voted out. But that was not the end of it. The person who replaced her at the helm of the National Council was not active. What can I say?...Nothing happened after she took office. Political interference and patronage left the council stagnant, and almost lifeless. Maybe someone like me. Or younger generation –could bring change. I believe young people would do something about it; I hoped they will revive it.

Interviewer

So are you saying the government/ politics killed the National Council?

Lilian Mwaura

Yes, because we were even given offices through the ministry. This happened after our offices were burned down. I went to Margaret Githinji, who was a Permanent Secretary (PS) then, and I told her, "You have to give us offices, government offices. Our offices were burned." We were given two floors at the Nyayo Stadium, and the American government, through USAID, did the partitioning and furniture, and even gave us funds to run it for five years. We only paid twenty thousand. It's very sad and I hope someone is going to revive the organization. I'm also hoping that someone will sponsor me to write the history of the organization because I have all the records. The only surviving chairs of the National Council are Eddah Gachukia and myself. I believe there is also, Isabella, but among those ones still around, only Eddah Gachukia and myself know the history of the National Council. I say this because we had written a book, but it was destroyed during the fire incident. Luckily, the history remains in my memory, - but it needs to be documented in a book.

Interviewer

What kind of activities did other organizations get involved in? How did they support you during those 12 years, and where are they today?

Lilian Mwaura

The National Council did not interfere in the management and activities of the affiliate organizations. There was diversity, as some organizations were on business while others focused on professional matters, and so on.

Interviewer

Kenya Professional and Business Women?

Lilian Mwaura

Yes. They had their own structures; we had Mama Fatuma Children's Home, which was started through the National Council, but given to Fatuma to manage: KWAHO-Kenya which was started within the National Council, and Margaret Mwongera was tasked with running it.

Interviewer

And Green Belt Movement?

Lilian Mwaura

So, the Green Belt, of course, was a project of the National Council until 1980. I think it was 85 or 87 when we realized the National Council was about to be deregistered because of the activities of Green Belt Movement.

Interviewer

Because of the politics around it?

Lilian Mwaura

Because of the politics between Moi and Wangari. So, we said, let's take the Green Belt Movement out of the National Council and make it an independent organisation to avoid conflict. We were on the executive board of the Green Belt Movement and remained there even after separating from the National Council. The idea was to continue running of the Green Belt Movement, while allowing it to function independently for survival reasons. When it came to funding, we would write proposals to the donors as the executive of the National Council. However, we structured the proposals in away that ensured donor funds were directed to the individual affiliate organisations. These organizations dealt with related issues, such as the empowerment of women. The proposals we submitted for funding were tailored to reflect the specific projects that each organization wanted to undertake.

Interviewer

What about the 15,000 women you mentioned earlier? What were their projects?

Lilian Mwaura

Their projects involved buying land, contributing funds, and distributing plots among themselves. They also built business premises for income generation. Additionally, they engaged in weaving *ciondos* which they sold to empower themselves and earn money for themselves and their members.

About Tunda na Roho, it was an organization that I encouraged women to start when I was the chair. I wanted them to create their groups to address their unique individual problems because, as we always say, charity begins at home. I advised women from my area and Kiambaa to start an organization where they could support one another regularly while still having representation in the National Council. This organization focused on empowering women economically. At one time, we got into discussions about gender because, like many places in Kenya, Kiambaa has been shaped by patriarchy. Can you believe that more than 50 years since independence, Kiambaa has never elected a woman Member of Parliament?

No woman has ever been elected in the local County Councils, or any political position. So, I helped them to draft a proposal to secure a Carnegie Foundation Grant. We received funds to sensitize the community on gender equality and governance issues that impacted both men and women. We organzied several workshops to educate men on how to support women. This sensitization campaign had a visible impact. Previously, there have been women in the land control board. We saw them being included. We even started seeing women occupy spaces in the local provincial administration.Women stepped forward to apply for and secure the positions as chiefs!

Interviewer

So they started applying for chief positions?

Lilian Mwaura

Yes, and even positions in school boards, and Board of Governors. They actively participated and voiced their their opinions.

Interviewer

Many of the women in your organizations were initially reluctant to take up leadership positions. Maybe you could share a little bit of what changed their mindset. I wish I could say it in Kikuyu!

Lilian Mwaura Back in those days?

Interviewer

Yes, the women you worked with for those 12 years. A lot happened. You took them abroad, you spoke to them at the grassroots level, and you helped to recruit them to take over leadership roles in the organization etc. What was it about the grassroots women that made it possible for you to keep them united and working towards their own interests?

Lilian Mwaura

I think at the beginning of my interview, I said I have a keen interest on grassroots women. I have has special place in my heart for grassroots women. I have passion for helping them. I was brought up by women – my mother and the village women, and I feel I owe them something. I have to give something back. That passion is what drove me to push them into spaces they initially would have not imagined occupying. For example, when I was organizing the international meeting for FIDA International, I brought grassroots women – some from Kibera, Mathare, and the rural areas, and told them, "Come and listen." I had to raise funds for their transport to attend. And they did come.I remember on the last day, I told them, "The meeting is over, but the bosses are going to Lillian Towers for dinner." The grassroots women occupied Kirinyaga Lounge in Lilian Towers Hotel, where elite women such as lawyers, were supposed to take their meals from. The lawyers complained of being displaced, and told me, "You have to ask them (the grassroots women) to leave." I asked, "What? They are not leaving." One of the donors by the name Monroe, who worked with UN Habitat, overheard me refusing to ask them to leave. I told her, "we can go to the other room and leave Kirinyaga Lounge for the grassroots women." And we went to the other room, and that's exactly what happened. While eating, Monroe said, "I didn't know lawyers had a heart, but today I have found one. I'm going to make sure

my organization pays for the dinner for all these women."

That moment reinforced my passion for grassroots women—I couldn't let them be driven out. I shared the same passion for the National Council, and the women felt it. During elections, I would say, "I'm moving because during elections, you move from your seat and sit on the other side." But the women would say, "Go back there; who told you to move?" Even if I said, "No, I don't want to sit there," they would insist, "We are the ones who decide where we sit."

Interviewer

I want to ask you, how do you think this model of women mobilizing themselves for their own interests works? What drives them to form women groups, buy properties, and organize themselves? How do you think this has changed their lives?

Lilian Mwaura

Well, that was then. Women's Self Mobilization was really important because it allowed them to achieve economic independence while also becoming aware of their surroundings. But I must say, I'm disappointed because women's movement is almost dead. It is quite unfortunate. Our young daughters are not like us; they don't want to think collectively. We used to call one another and say, "Oh, let's go; let's do this, let's help these women!"The current generation doesn't want to share. They don't have the same generous spirit we had. Back then, if you wanted to go to the slums of Mathare to sensitize women on health issues, you would get many women to attend. Nowadays, they don't have the time or they're too busy. You can't know. So much has changed in the Women's Movement, it is not the same as it was 10 years ago. Don't you think so?

Interviewer

I have been wondering, at the grassroots level, have women lost contact with those in national leadership? or the national women's movement disintegrated, leaving grassroots women on their own?

Lilian Mwaura

You see, at the grassroots level, I still get involved in their activities, women need the warmth of sisterhood. They look up to educated women, like us, to come to them, interact with them, and guide them. Of course, they respect the educated. Maintaining synergy is essential becausethe women in the grassroots may think about a brilliant project, but won't be able to write a proposal. They need someone, like you Wanjiku, to do that for them. But if you don't interact, how is that woman able to accessfunding? You see? You also need to understand that many grassroots women are timid, they still don't have that confidence. The other day, I attended an annual general meeting where 90% of the shareholders were illiterate.They were so afraid and fearful of the management that they simply accepted every proposal tabled. I was very upset, and I stood up, and I told off the board members.

Interviewer

What was the organization?

Lilian Mwaura

It's called Gatatha Farmers. It's a very rich organuization, but the board members take advantage of the illiterate women. When I spoke and then I left, the women followed me and said, "You have opened our eyes; we want you to be there." I responded, "Ah, I don't want to be there; one of you should take the role. We have young women who can serve as board members." But you see, I think they feel limited because they don't have our level of education and technical know-how to run such an organization.

Interviewer

Where are the educated women in that area? They must be there?

Rachel Gatabaki

There are many, but that's what I was saying; they are only thinking of themselves.

Interviewer

The elite women are just thinking about themselves.

Rachel Gatabaki

Yes, not other women.

Interviewer

So, in terms of fostering a connection between elite women and grassroots women, what you think we should do?

Lilian Mwaura

There is so much you can do to these women. There are so many way to contribute to their growth and empowerment. For instance, you can engage with them, sensitize and educate them on issues they may not be aware of, and help them gain knowledge because education is power, and knowledge is power. Take modern technology, for instance. It plays such an important role in our daily lives, yet these women need to be included in that world. They need to be made aware of it and equipped to navigate it. If we don't move with them, they will be left behind. There are things you can do in social spaces. You can, for instance, sit down for a cup of tea with them.While doing so, let them know you are ready to listen. Ask them to share their experiences and the problems they encounter. Whatever you do, avoid patronizing them by starting an initiative and later expecting them to join, no! That is a wrong approach. Instead, engage them in a conversation, share your ideas, and give them the chance to voice their views and opinions. That way, you learn from them while also making them feel respected. That should be the guiding principle. Always ask them, "What do they want?" Bear in mind that although they are grassroots women, their unique challenges vary depending on their locality. For example, what a grassroots woman from Kangemi may need could be different from what a grassroots woman from Lari needs. Being aware of these individual and situational peculiarities will place you in a better position to support them and close the gap between the elite and the women in the grassroots.

Interviewer

The other thing happening now is that we have started engaging women in discussions about mobilizing themselves, and we have come across very strong grassroots women. They are doing great, but as the professor is saying, the challenge lies with us, the elite, who are not keen on coming together. I don't know what you can say the challenge is for those of us who are educated. It really makes me reflect when I see grassroots women owning property and running cooperatives. I don't feel like the same level of organization exists among elite women or urban women.

Rachel Gatabaki

I think I should ask you the question: what is your challenge?

Interviewer

I think we are very selfish as a people. I think we have become too individualistic.

Rachel Gatabaki

Exactly.

Interviewer

The reality is that I feel I can meet my own needs. Meanwhile, the women at the grassroots level, especially in rural areas are coming together to form a common agenda. They are fighting for something.They are working to empower themselves economically. But because I can meet my basic needs and support myself in various ways, there is a sense that I don't need to be part of a group to secure the essentials for my life.

You heard the story - the struggles she faced with poverty and she became a lawyer, eventually meeting her needs. I believe her background inspired her passion for helping women. Even after gaining economic empowerment as a lawyer, her commitment to supporting others remained and has defined her life. Her passion for working with women and uplifting them has driven her to create opportunities for them - so that they can succeed and advocate their own issues. As a result, many women now own property and have other sources of income. That is why I insist that passion is everything.

Lilian Mwaura

You know, Wanjiku, you mentioned that, and I must say that is true. But let me add something—by the way, I was nominated to the Kiambu County Assembly from 2013 to 2017, and during that time, we traveled around the county and identified many pressing needs. Afterwards, I saw the need for training as a mediator, and I pursued it. Today, I am an accredited mediator. When communities have problems, for instance, families having land disputes, I step in to mediate, resolving conflicts outside the court system. Many families who took their land cases to court have waited for years, and the process is too expensive. That is why I work to spread awareness about mediation as an alternative to the long court process. I usually tell people, "If you have any matter to do with land, family, or other disputes, call me, I'll mediate probono." I love helping people, and I offer my mediation free of charge. I have seen a lot of positive change; there is real progress happening. What I am stressing is that you can impact—even at an individual level. The key is to start small, within your locality, before you think of transforming the entire country. Because of my upbringing, I deeply value education. That is why, instead of tithing in church, I decided to educate orphans and children from underprivileged backgrounds.

I started this program immediately after I began working, and so far, I have educated over 60 children—many of whom have gone on to excel in various spheres of life. In fact, some of them encouraged me to start a foundation so that they can pool resources and fund the education of even more children. I still continue sponsoring students to this day. One notable case is that of a Maasai girl whom I took under my wing because I knew that, if no one intervened, she would be married off at a young age. I told the father that I would sponsor her education and that she would stay at my place during the school holidays.

Recently, I was told she was back home for the holidays. Knowing her family background and the risk of early marriage, I immediately called the father and told him that the girl "should be in my house the same day." I told him, "I want that girl here." She is beautiful, and the Morans might marry her—you understand? I do what I do because I believe that even the smallest contribution can change lives. For me, this is a sign of gratitude to the world and the universe. It is an honor and a privilege to be able to touch and bring about meaningful change.

By the way, Stella asked me about the the International Council of Women (ICW), which is accredited by UNEP. They represented us during meetings held at UNEP. In 2000, I was appointed as the International Council of Women representative to UNEP, a position I held until 2007, when. I relinquished it. The thing about working with UNEP is that you constantly review their documents with the goal of integrating gender equality into policies. Being part of such an organization also gives an opportunity to to engage with women from all over the world and establish strong networks. When working in areas in advocacy, you will agree with me that networking is a crucial strategy. Beyond Kenyan women, I have also empowered women from other countries, such as Uganda. I helped set up a version of FIDA for Uganda after a request from my great friend Rebecca, who was also the former speaker of Uganda's Parliament. Today, FIDA Uganda is a very strong and conspicuous entity, and I am proud to be associated with such a progressive organization.

And, Wanjiku, there is something you don't know-I began empowering people long before my professional journey took shape–as early as primary school at Karuri Primary. I observed that, over the years, only one girl ever made it to Alliance Girls' High School. I told my friends, "We cannot all stay here if only one girl ever gets into Alliance." I gathered five of my closest friends and told them, "You know what? We don't stand much a chance here. Let's transfer to another school." And that's exactly what we did–we moved to Limuru Mission School to increase our chances of joining Alliance Girls' High School or Loreto Secondary. They told me, "But where will we get transport from?" I replied, "God will help us get the transport." I warned that staying at Karuri Primary meant our chances of joining Alliance Girls' High School or any national school would be very slim. They agreed and moved with me. We arrived at Limuru Mission, we spoke to the headmaster and told him we wanted to move to his school. He agreed. Out of the group that transferred to Limuru Mission Primary, five of us were admitted to Loreto High School, one to Alliance Girls' High School, one to Ngandu Girls High School, one to St. Mary's School, and one to Mary Leakey School. In short, we all made it to national schools. So yes, my restless spirit has always driven me, I consider myself a revolutionary. I firmly believe that having confidence in yourself is the first step in the journey to success. Now, would you allow me to talk about FIDA?

Interviewer

Before you get to FIDA, there is a meeting you organized in 1991. The year 1991 feels like a long time ago. In February 1992, there was a meeting where you invited all the women. Can you tell us what was happening in that meeting? What was its purpose?

Lilian Mwaura

You remember 1992 was a very difficult year. That is when we sought to repeal sections of the constitution. ParticularlySection 80...

Interviewer

Section 2A?

Rachel Gatabaki

Yes, we wanted it scrapped, and we went to KICC. It was big meeting.

Interviewer

A very big meeting.

Lilian Mwaura

We wanted to go back to the drawing board to figure out how to move forward. Now that Section 2A had been removed, we faced the urgent question: "How do we ensure women are actively involved in political empowerment and liberation?" We wrote a major report on this.

Interviewer

And I happened to be there, because at AAWORD, we were conducting research. We had Wangari Maathai, Martha Karua, Phoebe Asiyo, Julia Ojiambo, and many key women politicians who were advocating for political parties. But I recall that progress was slow and so I want you to clarify the connection between the political empowerment and the economic empowerment that were being advanced at that time.

Rachel Gatabaki

Yes.

Interviewer

Because it was a major meeting

Rachel Gatabaki

It was a major meeting.

Interviewer

In fact, I remember when we were sitting there, I was the co-chair and we had esteemed women leaders such as Professor Khasiani in attendance.

They were sitting outside, discussing the FORD Kenya Party, trying to determine whether women women were actively involved in it. I remember that at the time, Amos Wako called Professor Khasiani and asked her, "What are you doing with women homosexuals?" Likely because there were a lot of security officers around the area. If you remember, women were sounding very strong in that hall. I guess there was a lot of curiosity about that meeting. Women had started to become radical in terms of pushing their agenda. I also noticed that a lot of propaganda was being spread to counter the women's push for equality and inclusivity.

Lilian Mwaura

You see, the National Council was supposed to be non-political, but that meeting was very important to women. Women felt marginalized in both the political and economic spheres. So, in this meeting, we had to strategize how to move forward with empowerment's of women. In fact, we brought up the issue of political affiliation to women. We told them that they did not necessarily belong to the dominant political parties such as KANU and DP. As I said earlier, the National Council's mandate was to address issues affecting all the women across the board, and find lasting solutions. So, this was exactly what we had tried to do- strategizing for women to create their own political vehicles that could counter political marginalization caused by entrenched hierarchies in Kenya's political landscape. Another major focus was the active inclusion of women in existing political parties. This eventually culminated in the 2/3 gender rule being enshrined in the Constitution of Kenya 2010.

Interviewer

In fact, I am just thinking, Professor Julia Ojiambo presented a paper on the 30% rule for political representation.

Lilian Mwaura

Yes, exactly. The purpose of this meeting was to empower women to move forward after the scraping off of section 2A.

Interviewer

I don't know whether the women you were talking to understood what Section 2A was about.

Lilian Mwaura

Section 2A criminalized the formation of other political parties apart from KANU. It was the law that had made Kenya a one-party state. Political plurality was nonexistent because of this particular section of the constitution.

Interviewer

Did Section 2A introduce an equality clause for the nomination of women as a way to achieve the 1/3 gender rule?

Rachel Gatabaki

No it didn't. It only removed the law that prohibited the formation of political parties other than KANU.

Interviewer

So, it was essentially the criminalization of multiparty democracy?

Rachel Gatabaki

Yes, the 1/3 gender rule was entrenched in the new constitution

Interviewer 2

I think it was Section 2A, or was there another constitutional amendment?

Rachel Gatabaki

No.

Interviewer

Was there another section that outlined equality in nominations? Hon. Martha Karua was advocating for that, and although some were nominated, we didn't achieve the 30% representation as stipulated by the law.

Lilian Mwaura

There was also a policy paper stating that the 1/3 rule should be applied in both elective and appointed positions, and many women benefited from it. They were appointed to various government institutions.

Interviewer

I think, maybe just one more question before we move from the issues of the National Council.

Would you say, as you worked with women at the grassroots level, some developed the same passion for women's empowerment-supporting, mobilizing, and advancing the movement forward?

Maybe you can tell us a bit about that mobilization and how the government supported it. Then, we can move on to FIDA.

Lilian Mwaura

It was a pathway for women to change their lives and those of their families – but in a united way, because alone, not much could be achieved. Another key factor was that the government closely monitored any group with the potential to drive change and development. The state however closely monitored such activities such that you could not meet without an approval from the local chief. Women informed the authorities in order to get approvals, either informal or formal. "We want to meet, and this is the purpose." The chief would then respond "Go ahead." After independence, this freedom and the ability for women to openly discuss education, enrolling their daughters in school, and personal growth became critical for national development. The women's empowerment program made it possible for women to come together as a collective force to advocate for individual women empowerment.

Interviewer

In these forums, they advised each other on the importance of maintaining stable homes.

Lilian Mwaura

That's true. And I also want to highlight that the role of the National Council was primarily coordinating. Any organization working on women-related activities would turn to NC, and together, they would engage the government. The reason for this approach was that there were many individual women's groups, each going through various government offices to seek different forms oms of support. To be effective, we needed one voice, and the NC played a key role.Whether it was about policy changes or advocating for new rules, women could now approach the government as one united community. Have I answered your question?

Interviewer

Very nice. But I wanted to ask her personally, where did you get the courage to speak fight, go to government, and advocate for women who were not working but were fighting for their cause?

Lilian Mwaura

From my mother, I remember when I was growing up, my mother refused to be inherited by my uncles, and as a result, they gave her hell. She had planted coffee trees becoming one of the few women who grew coffee to help her pay our school fees. The proceeds from her coffee farming gave her economic independence. To tame her, my uncles would come to the shamba at night, and shake coffee trees causing them to wither. One day, I found my mother outside the house holding a panga, ready for fight. I looked up to heaven and prayed to God to intervene, because I feared that if she met anyone on her farm, she would slash them into pieces with her machete. I think her determination and willingness to fight for herself scared them, and from that day, they didn't come or bother her again. So I said, "You have to stand up for your rights; you cannot just sit and watch your coffee trees being destroyed by individuals who want to make you vulnerable so as they control you". My mother was very gender-sensitive and made sure we were all given equal opportunities to attend school. She never said, "This boy has school fees, but there is no money for the girls." She made sure all of us – boys and girls- were given equal chances in life.

Interviewer

Do you remember other women in your village who were as courageous as your mother?

Lilian Mwaura

I think she was the only one who was courageous. Yeah, because she was a widow, and she had to fight my uncles. In fact, they refused to give her land - they divided the family land among themselves, 10 acres, 20 acres, they gave her nothing. They only gave my elder brother 3 acres. Today, however, her children own more land than my uncles' children. My uncles' children never went to the university and honestly, they are largely invisible now.

Interviewer

And what did she do to ensure you went to school?

Lilian Mwaura

She worked hard, picking coffee, working on the white settlers' farms, and I was never chased out of school because of school fees. Whenever she struggled financially and couldn't pay fees, she would go to the chief, back then it was Chief Koinange, and tell him:"I cannot pay school fees for my children. Please give me a letter to take to the headmistress or headmaster. When I get money, I will pay the fees." Then, the chief would write her a letter. Remember, she did not know how to read or write, so she had no way of knowing what was written in the letter. She would simply hand it over the letter to the headteacher, and just like that, our school fees issue would be resolved , we were never sent away from school. Later, when she managed to get money, she would honour her pledge without being forced to so. We are talking about a time when school fees was only 5 Kenyan shillings. But as you know, forAfricans, making that amount from the available menial jobs on settler farms was a difficult task.

Interviewer

Thank you, Lilian. Before we dive into your story, work, and involvement with FIDA, could you first tell us about the role of women leaders in maintaining and sustaining the women's movement? You were with the National Council of Women in Kenya for 12 years, but it doesn't look like the movement continued with the same momentum after your exit. What would you say is the role of leaders in keeping the women's movements strong and united?

Lilian Mwaura

I don't like the phrase "women are their worst enemies", but sometimes, I think there is some truth in it. You see, even among the leaders, and we are talking about highly accomplished women, there is a lot of jealousy among the leaders. Unfortunately, such pettiness weakens the bonds that unite women.

Interviewer This was 1985?

Lilian Mwaura

Yeah. We held the meeting, and after the women had gone, we said, "Why don't we start a chapter of FIDA International since we have heard about their noble objectives of helping women and children?" I said, "Fine; let's meet in town". At that time, I had an office, and a law firm, so we started meeting at my law firm's office. But then, some members questioned, "Why should we be meeting in Lilian's office?" I suggested, "Then let's go to the Professional Centre." From there on, we held our meetings there. Sometimes, we would meet at the Professional Centre while other times, we would hold the meetings at Grace Githu's office at Kencom or at Surida Kapila's office at Kapila Advocate's offices. Oure main agenda was tho think on how to sensitize the Kenyan women to know their rights. I proposed, "Let's write a book about women's rights from birth to death in a simple language." The project was a success! The book was published in bothEnglish and Swahili, and we managed to distribute around 10,000 copies to Kenyan women. I co-authored this book with Susan Kahoy and the current Chief Justice, Martha Koome. We then organised sessions to sensitize and educate women on legal matters affecting them. To reach more women, we worked through established women's groups, such as Women's Guild, especially during their meetings. In 1988, I attended an international meeting in Belgium and I was elected as its President for Africa, including the Middle East. Part of the responsibilities that came with this position was organizing an international African-wide meeting for women lawyers–which we successfully executed after returning home. After that, we were able to register FIDA as an organisation. However, opposition from other women was one challenge whichdiscouraged us. Some quarters actively opposed the establishment of FIDA. Despite this, we finally managed to register it. One interesting thing about the birth of FIDA in Kenya is that if you check the records, you won't find my name there because when we presented the registration documents, and I was serving as the chairperson, the registration was rejected on grounds of public interest.

Interviewer Tell us more about that.

Lilian Mwaura

Public interest dictates that if something does not serve the greater good, it cannot be allowed to exist, as it would breach the laws protecting the public's interests. So, I went to my friend, the late Attorney General, Matthew Guy Muli, who was really very supportive. He told me, "Lilian, you have been very controversial and you seem to threaten the status quo, making you 'a political hot potato'." This was largely because of my involvement in the National Council. He advised me to remove my name and replace it with someone less controversial. I appointed Grace Githu as the Chair, Justice Abida Ali as Secretary and Surida Kapila as the Treasurer and FIDA was registered, but. without my name on the documents. That is why whenever I say, "I'm the founder, "it may look like I am lying, because if check the offficial registration documents, you will not find my name there. Regardless, we actually worked hand in hand with the National Council of Women, because NC's mandate was women's empowerment.

Interviewer

Otherwise, you would not have been marked.

Lilian Mwaura

Anyway, we worked very hard in collaboration with the National Council, because NC had the women-that was our mandate. But much of work was carried out using FIDA's platform. That's where we conducted workshops,and we really worked very well. I believe we did a great deal insensitizing and empowering women with knowledge of their legal rights.

Interviewer

You mentioned that some women were against registering FIDA.

Lilian Mwaura

Yes.

Interviewer

What were their concerns? What were the issues they were raising?

Lilian Mwaura

They argued that the Law Society of Kenya (LSK) already existed, and that should have been enough. They kept asking, "Why do we want another organization? What they didn't realize was that this organization (FIDA) was to deal specifically with women issues, while the Law Society primarily focused on lawyers' issues-both female and male lawyers. Then there was jealousy. As I mentioned earlier, some people asked, "Why should Lilian start this organization? In fact, Honorable Phoebe Asiyo once told me, quite prophetically, "Lilian, this organization you are starting will be a major force. It will help women across this country." You see, her prophecy came true. Some women were saying that my name was synonymous with FIDA: "When we mention Lilian, its FIDA; when you mention FIDA, its Lilian." Of course, this created jealousy in some corners. But we got a lot of support from the donor community, a lot of it. This was largely due to the fact that the donorshad known me through my work at the National Council, and they had been supporting me for a long time. So, when we registered FIDA, they came in and supported it.

Interviewer

How was FIDA received by women in the grassroots, given that the government didn't support it? How did they perceive it as a new vehicle for women's empowerment?

You were also working with Wangari Maathai?

Lilian Mwaura

Yes, I worked with Wangari Maathai. Speaking of FIDA among the women in the grassroots, the most recent, I had an interesting encounter. You see, I do a lot of pro bono work there on mediation work in the community. I was mediating for a young couple recently, and the husband was scared. After the mediation session, he admitted, "Ialways thought that coming to FIDA, meant I'll be crushed because FIDA is supposed to be a homebreaker. But now I have a different opinion - the mediation went well. I thought you were going to take the woman's side." What he didn't realize was that, as a mediator, I cannot take sides - I have to maintain neutrality. By the end of the process, the man felt relieved, and our mediation led to a fruitful engagement that helped to

preserve his family. He decided not to dwell on the past, because he confessed, "FIDA was not what I thought it was!" The mediation process helped change his perception about FIDA. However, he is not the only one with a wrong image of FIDA. Even today, in some places, if you mention FIDA, you will see men recoil in fear, Another reason FIDA has earned respect is that we also do our job well, we do not compromise, and we cannot be bought.

Interviewer

What about the women that FIDA had trained in terms of, investing, not only public education but legislative issues, challenging the court cases, and so on and also training women in court proceedings.

Lilian Mwaura

To begin with, let me say that we have empowered women to defend themselves in court. We have trained them such that they can go to court, pick their cases and defend themselves comfortably.

In terms of legislation, we cannot say there is a law we have taken to parliament, but when the parliamentarians are working on a draft, we participate by presenting our views; a case in point being the Marriage Bill; You know now all the marriages are in one ACT. FIDA has also played a huge part in the constitutional review process by interrogating the existing laws on family, such as the Family Act, and presenting the findings to the Attorney General.

Interviewer

I'm also thinking about the court cases, such as the one concerning the 2/3 gender rule, among others. The then Chief Justice, Willy Mutunga made it clear that a government cannot contravene the law at any given time.

Lilian Mwaura

About the 2/3 rule.

Interviewer

Yes, it was part of the efforts and contributions to constitutional review in this country.

Lilian Mwaura

Mmmh; Yes, FIDA has done a lot in this country. For instance, the organization handles cases on a pro bono basis for people who cannot afford go to court or a lawyer. It provides them with a qualified lawyer who then pursues the process of justice to its legal conclusion on behalf of such individuals. In addition, FIDA has been instrumental in educating women, men and communities about their legal rights.

The organization has also been actively involved in mentoring and promoting the welfare of its members. Whenever, the Judicial Service Commission advertises positions for judges, FIDA supports its members to apply for such positions. If you look at the bench today, you will see that FIDA is well represented. The current Chief Justice, Martha Koome is one of us–previously she served as the Chair of FIDA. We also have others such as Justice Njoki Ndung'u, Abida Ali Mohammed, and several other women judges. In addition to serving as judges, FIDA members have also held prominent public positions, including appointments as Cabinet Secretaries such as Rachel Omamo.

Interviewer

So, my next question about political and economic empowerment of Kenyan women is, What role has FIDA played in advancing women's political and economic empowerment?

Lilian Mwaura

You know, most communities in Kenya have historically operated within deeply patriarchal sytem, one that has extended even to the legal structures. As a result, women were largely excluded from owning land, and even the family property, because such assets traditionally belong to men. FIDA played a critical role in ensuring these issues were discussed during the Kenya Constitutional Review. Women lobbied hard

for these matters, and Professor Wanjiku Kabira here was one of the members involved in the process. Thanks to their advocacy and lobbying efforts by FIDA and Kenyan women, these issues were entrenched in the new constitution. If you examine the current constitution, you will realize that women now have legal rights to family property. They can inherit their parents' land.

Interviewer

Thinking back to our earlier discussion about synergy between the national and the grassroots women. I'd like you to talk about that linkage between the grassroots women and the constitution making processes. How do you organize grassroots women as the movement progresses? I want us to see the connection—the synergy—between grassroots organizing and broader movement-building.

Lilian Mwaura

FIDA has established training programs and has trained grassroots women, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge. FIDA has specifically trained three women on how to mobilize and sensitize others on issues such as gender violence. Additionally, FIDA operates two branches one in Kisumu and another in Mombasa. Both the organization and its branches focus on political empowerment, and we actively fundraise to provide training for women aspirants seeking elective positions in government.

Currently, we are training women aspirants for all the elective posts from the Presidency to the Ward level. So, FIDA is deeply involved in the women's empowerment, be it political, economical, or social.

Interviewer

So, how do you link political empowerment to economic empowerment? How does one influence or lead to the other?

Lilian Mwaura

For instance, during General Elections, we have always supported women candidates either by providing campaign materials and training them on their rights and leadership. Once elected, they are better equipped to work with the grassroots communities, courtesy of the support and training we gave them. When the 2010 Constitution was passed, I personally, and as a FIDA member spearheaded a nationwide sensitization program. I approached FIDA, and said, "Listen, people don't know about this new constitution. We need to go out there and educate them, especially women, because this constitution has many gains for women in this country." I added, "I am not going to wait for a donor to give us money. I'm ready to step out, use my networks, and engage my good friends who can support us. I want FIDA to give me young lawyers to assist me with training in the field." And that is exactly what happened!. Young women lawyers joined me, and well-wishers contributed money for stationery and fuel. Through our efforts, we trained 10,000 people, both men and women. We also trained 700 Trainers of Trainees (ToTs) on the constitution. As a result, we were able to empower thousands of people.

Interviewer

FIDA has survived many battles and accusations.; It has challenged the government in many ways and on many issues. My question is - why has it survived, and become stronger since its inception in 1986?

Lilian Mwaura

I believe FIDA has survived and flourished because it always focused on its goals and aspirations. All these other distractions are sideshows, and the key is to ignore them. The focus has always been on the mission and vision of FIDA as an organization and on trivial matters. I think the vision of eradicating discrimination against women, ensuring women's empowerment in all spheres of life, and working toward an equal and just society was more than enough work for FIDA - there was no room for distractions.

Interviewer

Okay, now let me ask, how hase FIDA been selecting leadership? I am trying to understand whether there is a connection between the stability of the organization and its leadership. Have leaders been selected directly, or have institutional mechanisms governed the selection process entirely?

Additionally, I'd like know what support has helped FIDA survive, because many organizationshave come and gone.

Lilian Mwaura

In FIDA, we follow democratic principles, and our elections are always free and fair. We have structures that ensure that elections are transparent, and democracy is upheld. For instance, an elections board is responsible for objectively scrutinizing the election process and results. I believe that following the right procedures bypasses challenges that could threaten FIDA's existence. Furthermore, FIDA's internal constitution allows aggrieved members to seek redress in court, especially when they feel that the elections were not free and fair.

Interviewer

So, how well has this worked for FIDA? And how come the Law Society has not learnt from you?

Lilian Mwaura

First of all, FIDA is non-political. We don't want to align with any political party. The Law Society has been doing very well democratically until the last chairperson started involving the organization in politics; it became political, and that's why I think things have gone wrong. However, when we are training aspirants, we train them across the board.

Interviewer

So Lilian, having listened to your story about FIDA and NCWK, how come FIDA has been able to stand up to the political powers. While FIDA has stood the test of time, NCWK didn't.

My question is, was political influence too much in the NCWK or how would you explain the difference in how the two organizations have fared?

Let me ask you, are there any key women lawyers who have been groomed within the FIDA umbrella?

Lilian Mwaura

Key

Interviewer

Yes

Lilian Mwaura

There are many.

Interviewer

Women who have been able to demonstrate their commitment to the women's agenda, even if it's in courts.

Lilian Mwaura

Even in courts, we have the former chair of the Kenya National Human Rights, Kagwiria Mbogori; we have Commissioner Wakonyo Waruhiu, who was a former Chair of Foundation Resource Centre and later joined the Kenya National Human Rights Commission, and now she is a director of a Witness Protection Program.

We also have some of our members who are judges like Justice Mumbi.

Interviewer

Justice Mumbi, Martha Karua, Martha Koome.

Lilian Mwaura

Our Chief Justice, and there are many others.

Interviewer

What about this one? I can't remember her name - the one who does a lot of divorce and children's cases.

Lilian Mwaura

Judy Thongori.

Interviewer

Judy Thongori.

Lilian Mwaura

Yeah, and Martha Karua was a founder member

Interviewer

Nancy Baraza.

Lilian Mwaura

Nancy Baraza, we have quite a number of them who have really made an impact on the women's movement.

Interviewer

Since we are discussing the Women's Movement and the relationship between the leaders and the others, what kind of mentorship program do they have for young lawyers?

We also want to understand whether mentorship has contributed to FIDA's survival. For example, I believe you handed over the baton, yet still go back as a mediator.

Lilian Mwaura

When we stepped aside, we left young and dynamic leaders in charge. we allowed the younger generation to take over. Those of us from my generation have passed the baton but we continue to offer our expertise, which they greatly appreciate. There is also the Young Lawyers Association, where they can receive mentorship. You know, some challenges young lawyers face are not the same with those of the older lawyers. I'm happy because recently, during our elections, most of the office bearers elected were young lawyers, ensuring the organization's survival and continuity.

Lilian Mwaura

They have learned, and they will keep on learning. we have what we call a panel of older women, older lawyers, who guide them whenever necessary.

Interviewer

Okay. I would want to know about other strategies. You have spoken about leadership, since we are really interested in identifying strategies sustaining organizations and women's movements. Is there any other strategy that you can share with us – something that helps safeguard an organization's longevity?

Lilian Mwaura

Organizations need financial strength to effectively carry out their mandate. In the past, securing funding was much simpler, all you had to do was submit a strong proposal to a donor, and you would be funded. Later, the funding model evolved into basket funding where multiple donors pooled resources together. Over time, this process continued to change. Today, securing funding for a project is very difficult compared to the past. Even if an organization has great ideas, funding remains a challenge as many gropus are competing for limited resources. This increased demand has complicated matters.

Additionally, there is the issue ofnew technology and its role in shaping funding opportunities.

Interviewer What about it?

Lilian Mwaura

The new technology - some of the funding is done through, what do you call it? the internet. How many organizations in the village can access that information if it is shared online? For example, if there is this funding for COVID 19, which you need to present your proposal, and then provide

a budget, the question remains, how many organizations at the grassroots can access this information online? So technology also is a challenge.

Interviewer

Tell us something about the politics of constitutional making.

Lilian Mwaura

As the chair of the National Council, we were deeply involved in mobilizing women, giving views, and collecting views on the constitution. In fact, we used to organize a lot of workshops with Mary Kimonye, she is currently the Cabinet Secretary of Public Service. We worked tirelessly; we really worked, you know, to educate, these grassroots women. We went asking them, "This is the constitution, what do you want it to be? What else do you wish to be included? We made a lot of notes and gave the recommendations to the review commission.

Then there was this issue of electing women to the Constitutional Review Committee. And the women, NCWK, felt that the chairperson of the National Council for Women, now me, should be in that committee. There was also the requirement that we had to do gender balancing. There was also the need to have all parts (read communities) of Kenya included. It happened that Professor Wanjiku and I were from Central, and that was kind of problematic because of the tribal mathematics. Other notable women leaders included Nancy Baraza and Phoebe Asiyo, both under the umbrella body of the National Council of Women of Kenya, and Zipporah Kitony, who was the chair of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*, was of course, an affiliate of the NCWK. These ladies said they had gone to the then president, Moi and that they had agreed to go to court. They said, "We have to go to court, and the lawyer is already there." All this time, I was not aware who was supposed to be our nemesis in this court case. I asked, "To do what?" Zipporah answered, "National Council cannot be left behind." I said, "Yes."

But I didn't know they had another hidden agenda. They even went to State House, and they were given a lot of money, but I wasn't with them in that trip. So we went to court and in my mind, I was fighting for NCWK but they had other agendas. So we went to court,and there I found Rachel Omamo, and she spoke English with a British accent, arguing that I should be dismissed. I have never felt so stupid before. This case was

presided over by Justice Aganyanya. So did I sue my friend? The answer is no, but I was there following the multitude of women who had a hidden agenda, which I didn't know. This incident left me with a bad taste in my mouth; in fact, I felt so bad about it thereafter.

Interviewer 2

I think for me the important thing about it is that fact that the KANU government was using Maendeleo to fight the women's organizations because the women had chosen their own representatives. Because I remember we were all called to court. Moi said that there was no way our constitution could be written by a bunch of divorceess.*(Laughter)*

You remember he said it publicly, and then Justice Aganyanya said that the president should stop talking about this issue because it was in court. When KANU lost, we said KANU lost in the court, and they took it to parliament. Remember, they had only one argument that nobody from this caucus would front any women; that *Maendeleo* would be the one fronting the women. This was, of course, because they (the KANU government) had control of *Maendeleo*. It was all politics of controlling the whole constitutional amendment process through controlling the women's movement. The National Council as you said, actually wrote a memorandum all the way from the grassroots level and submitted it to the commission.

Interviewer 1

Thank you so much; I think you have answered my question. I don't know whether Daktari you have any further question.

Interviewer 3

A lot has been said, you know, when I listen to Lilian, I feel that she has done all that is possible by a human being. So, my simple question is, after doing all these, do you still feel there is something you want to do for women that you have not done?

Lilian Mwaura

Right now, I am no longer active in my practice. I actually retired after I joined the County Assembly as a nominated member. Thereafter, I trained as a mediator, and I'm now a chartered mediator.

I feel I have a lot to do for the community. I still practise commercial law and ex-judicial mediation especially in Malindi. If you go there, you can easily get depressed and even cry. The situation there is terrible. You find cases of women being disinherited of land and being treated as second-class citizens. The issue of rape and gender-based violence - in short, all the vices are there and that is why I dedicate time there for both legal representation and mediation. I have been there for a whole month, and I was telling somebody that I am missing Malindi. I don't have to do it here in Nairobi because this city is largely populated by people who know their rights, unlike in Malindi.

Secondly, I would like to write my memoir in connection to the women's movement so that the generations that will come long after we are gone may see what happened and how women did it. That is one thing I intend to do, and of course, it needs some sponsors like Professor Kabira here. You people can also do my biography. Yeah, that's something I really want to do.

Interviewer

Actually, I see there is a need, and it is actually up to young ladies like Ruth to join the work. Allow me to thank you.

Maybe just the last question. We decided to start an alliance called Networking and Alliance Building but one of the reasons we did this is so that we can see what we are learning from women leaders like you have done in the past and see whether we can replicate the same.

So now, I am going to ask you to imagine that you are talking to these women, the ones whom we think need to learn something from you about your past, about what you think they should do in order to make sure that there is a strong movement, even if it takes a bit of time to push the women's agenda in the current society. Tell us two or three things that you think are important for them to do from your long history of working with women.

Lilian Mwaura

What I know is that you cannot go in the field and say, "I want to start this movement". You start by networking, you know, from a cell sort of view. As an individual, you call your friend, tell her to come with a friend, just a small cell and then you discuss, then you spread the word. The trouble with starting big is that if you call a lot of people to discuss an issue, it will not get anywhere. The idea is to start small. Three people can come together and discuss and then, you know, you grow there. Have cells in many parts of the country and start from there. Take the example of Mombasa; you tell somebody, "Can you discuss this?" The idea is you have cells first before you grow to cover the whole of Kenya.

Yeah, you work like the Mau Mau Movement. Starting in cells and then coming together as one national movement.

Interviewer

In cells?

Lilian Mwaura

Yeah, and come together.

Interviewer

I think. What else do you think we should do?

Lilian Mwaura

You should also know that you sacrifice a lot. Personal sacrifice is necessary when you are doing public work. You have to think of your fellow man and woman, the community and the well-being of the society so that you can be able to help them. Don't do it for your selfish needs. Don't do it for me. Do it for public good. One thing about making a sacrifice for others is that it leaves you with feelings of accomplishment. You know, like I was telling my friend here that, "I look at these awards being given for trailblazers, which I think started last year, and I think and wonder about the thought behind such an initiative. There was one held at the State House, I think it was in Mombasa, somebody called me and said, "Hey, I looked for you there, and I didn't see you; where were you?" I replied, "I wasn't invited."

Mind you, this was a meeting, a function to honour trailblazers and I wasn't invited, and people were asking, "why aren't you there?" I said, 'No,

you know what, I wasn't anybody or the government; I was doing it because I believed in it. I believed I could make an impact or a difference through my service to humankind, so I'm happy; maybe I'll be given an award someday."

(Laughter)

Interviewer

Yes

Lilian Mwaura

Yes, yes.

Interviewer

By the way, that is exactly what Eddah said the other day when we were speaking to her. "I was doing it because I loved doing it and not expecting this or that."

Lilian Mwaura

Exactly.

Interviewer

She said, "If I were doing it for other people or to be awarded, I would be a very disappointed person"

Lilian Mwaura

Exactly

Interviewer

What can you say?

Lilian Mwaura

About that?

Interviewer

Yeah, a message for those women who want to do networking.

Lilian Mwaura

I think they should be quite tactful, learn the challenges, and stand above some of these petty things. As a woman, I feel that the young women should not spend too much time knocking at closed doors because they are going to waste time. I think they should start by going through the open doors, and where there is appreciation,do that, and do whatever they want to do. And then, of course, they have to be in a proper position even to knock because one must have the courage to knock.

On the issue of networking, I think it is critical and important. Given the new technology, there are many forms but I think one should network for a purpose, either for friendship, or there is something you are working on through somebody else. A network should be fruitful. It should not be just a question of, "Hey, I heard it went on like this" or "I heard at the workshop that so and so has a baby." You are not in the market, or any other forum to collect information, that will not help you. I think one needs to understand what is important for them professionally, what's important for their family, and what's important for the society, and do it without expecting any gratitude. I think that helped me a lot. So when people say, "Perfect" I am surprised because for me I still feel I could have done better because there is always room for improvement.

I feel that during the movement, the women somehow lost sight of the goal. We allowed too much to disappear after Beijing and Dakar Conferences. I feel that at some point, the new leadership was not pro women's movement but largely in office for personal gains. I feel that there are a lot of sideshows that have derailed the initial vision. The leadership is also not keen on collecting raw data, which is useful for planning, and they largely rely on what they are given. There is a need to leave the comfort of the offices and go down to the grassroots.

Interviewer

Thank you very much Lilian for this opportunity to share your experience.

"Gender equality is a global problem. For the women of Kenya, the marginalization in the political sphere, economic sphere, and those traditions which actually discriminate against them -the patriarchal system, all those are challenges that women in this country face."

Lilian Mwaura

Chapter 5: A Conversation with Hellen Nkaissery

"I looked at our culture and thought of how I could empower these women. And having come from that community I settled on milk. Reason being that in our pastoralist communities, the cows belong to theman but the milk belongs to the woman."

Hellen Nkaissery

Biography

Hellen Nkaissery is a remarkable mother, a retired teacher, and livestock farmer from Kajiado County, Kenya. She is a dedicated community leader, particularly focused on empowering Maasai women and girls, and a driving force behind several initiatives.

Hellen is the chairperson of Ushanga, a group active across Turkana, West Pokot, Baringo, Narok, Kajiado, and Samburu counties. The group, comprised mainly of women, produces and sells bracelets that have been used as tools to campaign against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Hellen has worked with Masaai, the community, particularly women, to address the challenges they face. She has been at the forefront of advocating for education for girls by tracking their enrolment, retention, transition, and performance. She identified cultural limitations around access and control of family resources, for example where men own the cows and women own the milk, as a key area for intervention. Seeing the economic potential of milk, she made it a vehicle for women's economic empowerment. In 2003, Hellen launched a program aimed at economically empowering Maasai women through a series of sensitization meetings. These efforts inspired women to take initiatives in improving their livelihoods and supporting their daughters' education. Starting from her hometown of Bisil, she began networking—sending emails, contacting officials from the Dairy Board and Kenya Creameries Cooperative (KCC), and organizing training sessions to educate women on the benefits of pooling milk and selling it in bulk. Her idea gained traction, and despite early logistical challenges, she successfully brought together over 400 women. Today, they supply quality milk for processing into dairy products including butter and cheese. With support from her late husband, General Joseph Nkaissery—then the Member of Parliament for Kajiado Central—Hellen expanded the initiative across the constituency. In 2005, using allocations from the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) allocations, they set up milk collection centers

across Kajiado County, later expanding to Isinya, Amboseli, Sultan Hamud, Magadi, Mombasa, and the Chyulu Hills. Hellen also played a key role in the formation of TechnoServe, an NGO that registered Maasai Women Dairy Cooperatives. Through her leadership and with backing from the County and National governments, as well as the World Bank, the cooperatives acquired vehicles for transporting milk to KCC. She continues to lead the group's initiatives, focusing on registration, education, capacity building, mobile banking, and management training—all aimed at achieving self-reliance for the women involved.

The Conversation

Hellen Nkaissery Was intervieiwed by the following researchers:

- Ruth Wamuyu

(was there any other one? Ruth Confirm any other reseracher)

Hellen Nkaissery

My name is Hellen Nkaisery. I'm a mother and a retired teacher, so I'm always happy to be around fellow educators. I come from Kajiado Central. You know, when people hear "Kajiado," they usually think of Ngong, but I'm from a more rural side. I live with my community—the Maa, the Maasai people. So, my perspective comes from lived experience as a livestock farmer. In addition to that, I also engage in livestock-related business as part of our family enterprise. I've worked closely with women in the community for many years. It's always been my deep passion, rooted in a clear understanding of the struggles we face as a people. I felt compelled to play my part in addressing some of the challenges women endure. If you recall, during the 1980s and 1990s, the Maasai community faced significant hardship, particularly around girls' education—issues like enrolment, performance, retention, and transition to higher levels of learning. Even when the number of boys in school lagged behind in other communities, we were being left behind, and it was deeply concerning. In the early '90s, those of us who had managed to get education through missionary schools in the '60s noticed that the missionaries were no longer there. We had to step up and become new missionaries for our own people. Each of us, in our own way, began looking for solutions to help uplift the community, especially by getting more girls into school and supporting their academic journey.

In 2003, I launched a program focused on economically empowering Maasai women. We organized community meetings, encouraging parents to educate their daughters. But the question that kept coming up was: *How do I support my girl in school if I have no income?* They wanted to help their daughters succeed, but they needed resources—money for school supplies, uniforms, and other essentials. Even though the men typically owned the cows, land, and other assets, it's often the mother who carries the emotional and practical burden of getting her daughter to school. Her motivation and encouragement are critical. That's when I realized that without economic empowerment for women, we can't fully address other social challenges. You need to first give a woman a sense of agency, of financial independence, for her to actively participate in creating change. As a teacher, my mindset shifted. It was no longer enough to simply tell people to send their children to school. I had to look deeper—backward, even—to find practical ways to help improve livelihoods. Only then could education efforts be sustainable. Only then could a woman confidently advocate for her daughter's education, and even influence her husband's decision. I reflected on our culture and

asked myself: *How can I empower these women within our existing way of life?* Coming from the community, I settled on milk. In pastoralist communities like ours—and not just the Maa, as I later learned—the cows belong to the man, but the milk belongs to the woman.

Interviewer The cow belongs to the...?

Hellen Nkaissery

To the man but the milk belongs to the woman. She's the one who controls, manages. Makes sure the whole family has enough and whatever is surplus, she can look for a way of selling it. So that was in 2000. That's when I started. So I started with my own village, a town called Bisil.

Interviewer Ooh Bisil as you go to Namanga.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes as you go to Namanga. So I started and gathered 400 women, using my networks. I reached out to the people from the Dairy Board and sought trainers who could help the farmers understand that they could pool their milk and sell it in bulk. After that, I approached the processors, and it wasn't easy, because no one had ever imagined, let alone believed, that milk could come from such areas, after all, these were Zebu cows. Gladly, the new KCC accepted to buy the milk and it was amazing. At first, they were a bit very skeptical that it may not be good milk worth transporting. However, in a week's time, they changed their perspective because first of all, the milk from these local breeds contained very high butter content which for processors meant higher profits. The processors make money, not from the milk that you buy on the shelf, but from making butter and cheese. So from there, their perspective changed completely.

I was able to mobilize the women and bring them together. I started with 400 women in this initiative, and from there I helped them source transportation materials for bulk. It was a whole exercise, and it was not

easy – especially convincing them that it was possible and improving the system so that their money would reach them directly. As you know, we mostly relied on hiring young people for support. They would receive the money and then misuse it before it reaches their mothers. You understand all those problems. But, I thank God it gave me an opening to understand how to help them, and in 2005, you all know because it's public knowledge, my late husband by that time had become an MP of Kajiado Central.

So by that time, in his personality, we were always working together and he knew that my strength was in working with the women. So in trying to empower the women, It was very easy for him to pick the idea. So we used the opportunity of him being a Member of Parliament to expand the program to cover the whole constituency. So he used the CDF funds to put up collection centers at every subdivision of the country because by that time, Kajiado Central was like the whole of Kajiado county because it covered from Isinya to Amboseli, short of Magadi, to Hunters lodge along Mombasa road all the way to Chyulu hills. It was like the whole of Kajiado County was Kajiado Central.

So we got women from every ward to register as a CBO. Just a social grouping association which would help them come together. Raise some funds and even be able to put their ideas together but I helped them to put up collection centers. According to us they are dairies, but maybe for people who have long been in dairy industry, they may not see it but for us, that is how we considered them. So, we have about 8 collection centers or eight dairies all over Kajiado.

Interviewer Do they still exist?

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes. They exist up to now, and the CDF did the infrastructure. The women groups owned a piece of land, which we ensured they got from the county government of that time, not as individuals but as collectives. Then CDF helped put up a building. Later, the county government came in and put up milk coolants in some of the collection centres.

Interviewer 1

Sorry to cut you short about the women groups. Just to ask you on the land. This is the collection point where. So that is where you requested the county government to give land to the women.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes

Interviewer 2

So that they can own it?

Hellen Nkaissery

They can own it as a group, and it was registered as a milk collection centre. So each is registered as a milk collection centre under the name of the group. So we have one in Maili Tisa called Ololilaitu milk collection center, one in Bisil called Ololilaiwan milk collection centre, and another at Nkoilet (commonly referred as Bull's Eye), and Nkoileit at Ilkipirash. You know these are local names for the community to own.

Interviewer 1

With a meaning.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes. With a meaning. I understand that you have to give people the opportunity to associate themselves with the name. So Ilkipirash milk collection centre. Then we have one at a place calledElang'ataguas or so people may call it mile 46. Some people may call it but the name is Elang'ataguas and it is called Nareto milk collection centre. Then we have one in Kajiado Town.

Interviewer 1

I should be knowing it *(laughs)*. Enaidura? No enaidura is Bisil. We visited *(inaudible)* in Kajiado.

Hellen Nkaissery

I'll tell you now the stories of Enaidura. Those ones I'll tell you. They're separate, but I'll tell you how but they're young girls so they can run and get people very fast *(laughter)*. I'll remember the *(inaudible)*. Then we have one at Sultan Hamud. It's called Sotua milk collection center. We have one at a place called Enkorika. I've been there one and a half months ago and I am forgetting the name.

Interviewer 2

It's a wide area.

Hellen Nkaissery

It's very wide but you know, these are places I have visited.

Interviewer 1

Okay, that's fine.

Hellen Nkaissery

I'll tell you. So that was in 2003 and 2004. That's when we put them up. None of them has less than 400 women.

Interviewer 1

Members?

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes, Registered members. Now come 2005, I realize that the idea has taken root and I have to look for a way of making the idea workable because there were many logistical problems and nobody was coming on board to help us at all. So I helped the women through an NGO, Technoserve, that I sought and they came on board. They helped us and we are now registered as a cooperative. So if you look you can Google Maasai Women Dairy Cooperative. Now this dairy cooperative is the umbrella organization of all these groups. So all the women in the collection centers are members of the cooperative. They pay shares, then the cooperative is the one that lobbies, hires transport and staff, and transports the milk, and ensures that payment is made, gets loans from the bank to pay members who supply milk, on time.

So through Maasai women dairy cooperative which is the umbrella organization, the new KCC now collects milk from Maasai women through the cooperative and that opened an avenue for other people who may want to help them because now it's a legal entity. It was difficult to work with just a local organization which is not legally registered. So the cooperative has atleast 4000 registered women members, and it is still doing very well. You have to understand our area. Our drought season is very long. The rainy season can come and our milk increases so fast. But by July, because I think that's the time they were still collecting with tankers. They were taking up to 46,000 kilos of milk per day to New KCC. In fact, when Maasai women dairy cooperative reduced milk supply, the KCC's Dandora processing sought to close down because Maasai women were the only entity supplying them milk in such large quantities. By now I think they get milk from as far as Eldoret, bring it in tankers to come and pack it from Dandora Deport, but when our milk is in season they sustain the plant. KCC had to open a small processing plant in industrial area for doing butter and cheese just because of milk from Maasai Women Dairy Cooperative. You can get all that information from them. The records are there. The cooperative is very functional. We installed a digital system to monitor and ease business operations. However, you have to understand that they still struggle with a lot. Even managing HR issues, sustaining the IT system so that you one is able to pay the farmers right on time, are all challenges they continue to face.

But I must say it's a long story and it was a journey starting from 2002 up to now. Other partners have started admiring the work of the cooperative for the last two years. So banks sought them. Like now they get a lot of advanced payments from banks because of security of their money coming from the New KCC which has addressed the problem of delayed payments. Like now, on every 15th of the month their money is deposited into their account, and they're able to pay off their farmers, and then the bank waits for the new KCC to be able to pay them.

Like now in Kajiado we want to go into processing packaging for ourselves, and they got some funding from another organization. I would not know the name. I wanted to call them and get their exact details, but I hope maybe I can connect you with the leadership. You can go to their office and get the full details or send your people to go and get all the information.

Interviewer 1 Okay.

Hellen Nkaissery

Around 2015, the two most active collection centers were in Bisil and Kajiado. This was mainly because the area is vast on both sides of the road and most people there are livestock farmers. During the peak season, for example in Bisil where I come from, they would fill two tankers per day because of the large volume of milk. Kajiado would fill another tanker, making it three tankers daily, with any surplus kept in coolers to be picked the following day.

It was at this point that others, who initially did not understand my vision, began to see it as a business opportunity. Some decided, 'I can also do this on my own as my business,' and that is how they came into the picture. These were young ladies who had little education. Because here I was, working with illiterate women because that was my concern. These are the people I really wanted to help have their children go to school, but then these young women who have only basic education, they saw a business opportunity and they started now their own, and I think there are about three in Bisil competing against each other, but the Ololilaiwan one is still there, and because of the history and the way their money comes with no problem and the members get their money without a problem, and nobody can say it's my own personal business. It's still there and doing very well compared to others. I always say, for me at the end of the day, I wanted to be empowered. So I can't come and tell you to stop it, but I still want to continue to see whether these ones who had no way of being able to understand the idea, their lives could be different. So that is where we are. So there are quite a number of them. Three of them in Bisil. There's another one in Kajiado, actually two. There is also another one in Nkoile.

Interviewer 2

These are for the young girls.

Hellen Nkaissery

Younger people, individual businesses, e.t.c

Interviewer 1

So, Isinya.

Hellen Nkaissery

You know, and I've found they're easy to work with Brookside for reasons I'm still to understand.

Interviewer 1

Isinya there's one that works with Brookside and owned by a lady.

Hellen Nkaissery

You understand now?

Interviewer 1

I know (laughs) yes.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes, so they work with Brookside and maybe because at least by you know new KCC is a government owned processor and they were able to see what we are trying to do. So out of that respect they make sure that they sustain their relationship.

Interviewer 2

But now where do they get their milk because I doubt if they rear cattle as well.

Hellen Nkaissery

Who, these ladies? The other groups? They're also farmers, but what they have done is they go and become brokers of milk from other farmers from the interior, and go and buy the milk rather than allowing these woman in the interior to bring their milk to the collection centre and get maximum value.

Interviewer 2

I'm wondering whether there are brokers.

Hellen Nkaissery

That is what they are.

Interviewer 2

They are brokers.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes, they are serious brokers.

Interviewer 1

You know as you speak you are literally confirming what we heard in Kajiado in October.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes.

Interviewer 1

You are confirming everything that we heard (laughs) about the story of brokers.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes.

Interviewer 1

And how they go. They are the ones who collect the money from the interior and then they bring to these milk collection centers.

Interviewer 2

They know that when they go into the interior, they'll get the milk at a cheaper price and they know how to maximize their profits.

Hellen Nkaissery

Like in July, when there was still a lot of milk, and in August, some of the women, who live about 30 km inland, came to me as a delegation. They told me, Mum, we are tired of others taking advantage of us. We allowed these ladies to come and take all our milk, but they tell us at the beginning of the month that they would take our milk at Ksh 30 a litre and at the end of the month, they pay us Ksh. 15 per litre, while New KCC is paying their farmers through Maasai Women Dairy at Ksh. 35 per litre.

Interviewer 2

Wow. That's very true, whatever you're saying. One of the things you mentioned—I don't know if the collection from Kajiado town near the chief's camp is also included, but I'm not sure about KCC.

Hellen Nkaissery

That is the one. Now I'll bring you another problem.

Interviewer 2

Now, before you go to the next problem, maybe let's try to get a bit more about what you've told us. Now, one question I kept asking myself. This is a question that comes from my own experience. Where I come from would, for example, even plant cotton or maize but when they go to sell, the men collect the money. Money hardly ever reaches the women. So when you started this, I just wanted to know, when the women sell the milk, do they pocket the proceeds from milk sales?

Hellen Nkaissery

I was aware of that problem. It would have been worse for us, looking at our culture.

Interviewer 2

Yes, your culture.

Hellen Nkaissery

But I was aware, so I made sure that it was the woman who is registered, and she is the one who opens a bank account. I made sure that each of them opened a bank account. So they go. I had to take them for lessons that "If you don't have a bank account,you should have a simple phone where your money can be be channeled to, and it should read in your name. We've had cases where men come demanding for the proceeds, and you know our people are very stubborn, shaking, saying, "this is milk from my cows."

Interviewer 2

Yes, that is the conflict.

Hellen Nkaissery

They would come to us and say, "Bring my money, so that I can go take care of my cows." So we would tell them, "By the way, who is registered here? It is the woman and legally, she is the one going to receive the

money. What you have got to do with the money after it leaves the cooperative is up to you as a family. Because my husband was also a leader, he mobilised other leaders and they were able to influence and they said, "this is something we believe in, that let the women be given an opportunity." So if a man tries to go for money from the coopreative, the chiefs, the leadership around in the village is aware and again traditionally the other men will say, "traditionally, milk has always belonged to the women, why do you want to oppress them yet this is what our culture says?" So we were aware of that.

Interviewer 1

Good, I don't know whether you have another question?

Interviewer 2

No.

Interviewer 1

I think we can continue. I'm just marking where you will ask me questions.

Hellen Nkaissery

When the cooperative became so strong, it was difficult for the women to get out of their homes, it required younger people to transport their milk. So every village hires a motorbike the riders are young people. It is our young men, so they are the ones who bring the milk to the dairy and again that caused another problem. A woman is sitting at home thinking on 1st I gave out 20 litters, on 2nd I gave out ten, (inaudible) she thinks that her milk is going as she supplied them but at the end of the month there is a discrepancy between the litres of milk she supplied and the money she receives. These motorbike riders come and register ten liters for so and so, maybe it's his wife or somebody he has talked with, and it brought a lot of problems. But there is nothing that can be done, because the women are not mobile. They can't leave their homes because they are the ones taking care of the children. They are taking care of the homestead, their livestock. Again, I realized that even when we tried to push them, some of the men would tell me, "'mama' (inaudible). Please make sure you don't push the women to be in town too much because that again will pose another problem."

So we are battling with such a problem now. In fact, two years ago, the cooperative just had to open with this, because they tried to resist the young men bringing the milk, then they threatened that whatever milk they brought, they could even take to the brokers if Maasai Women Dairy would not receive as theirs. So they were forced to register them as temporary members, so that they could bring the milk to the coopreative and not take it elsewhere.

Women are going through a lot of problems because they can't really manage to do a follow-up of their milk, an that is where we need to help. The issue of payment has also been another problem. Initially we had to make sure that each woman opened a bank account or had a phone but we only managed to see only about a quarter of the women have bank accounts. If you understand, we are talking of women who come from as far as 40km away, and the milk would come to Bisil, and so, coming and then getting into a matatu, to Kajiado Town or to Namanga where the banks are available because there are no banks in Bisil, Enkorika nor at Bull's eye. Do you see what I mean?

So, that again posed another problem. So they are getting their money on time to reach them. Again that exposed them to a lot of being exposed to being manipulated by young people and losing their money.

Interviewer 2

And is there anything maybe the county can do because is it--

Hellen Nkaissery

They've not come on board.

Interviewer 2

Is it not possible to regularize some of these things.

Hellen Nkaissery

Let me tell you, I have tried you know. Who would not want to take up such an initiative to be able to empower women, but our systems of governance take time to pick up ideas. That's a big problem I've realized.

Interviewer 2

Because one problem that I normally see before someone wants to come in, they want to ask what is in for me? and if they see that, okay, it's just for empowering.

Hellen Nkaissery

They ask that, or they ask it's my project.

Interviewer 2

Yes.

Interviewer 1

They are not the ones who initiated.

Hellen Nkaissery

I will not get the votes from it. In fact they say this is Hellen Nkaissery's work.

Interviewer 2

Infact they will even want it to fail.

Interviewer 1

Yes, interesting.

Hellen Nkaissery

We really have a problem.

Interviewer

So, is there a way then that the groups have mobilized themselves to find a way of addressing some of these challenges, noting that the government is not coming in to assist because of the system failures, or what mechanisms have the group themselves put in place to see.

Hellen Nkaissery

Maybe the work itself has spoken for the cooperative, and therefore people come and wonder, and therefore some people come and support the initiative. So they've gotten a lot of support, grants from other organization. They have, I must say but it is just out of them. Okay, I

encourage the leadership that whenever they hear there is a meeting go and attend and speak for yourselves through that. Again, when the government like the national government is looking for success stories from regions to justify the work that their officers are doing, like the officers for livestock, it is very easy to to pick Maasai women Cooperative *(laughs)*. So that has helped us in that our name is always in the records of the government so it's read always.

Interviewer

Let me ask just a few questions. Looking at these associations and these groups, what is it that you would say has kept these groups together? You've mentioned that you started in around 2002-2003.

Hellen Nkaissery

What has kept them together is the vision that they saw and it is something visible, and that has never happened. Because for a woman to get money, that was what shocked them and therefore everybody wanted to associate with it. The other reason is that now they see they have something they could store their milk. Our collections centers are built in a strong building with electricity with water and a coolant. So they say they can see people coming on tour. Like we had groups from Samburu, from Narok, from Transmara coming to see and copy what is happening. So they feel you know I want to belong to something that is working.

Interviewer 1

I think what you're saying, one of the things that really shocked us in another project still within the hub we were collecting data in Kajiado and other counties. We were very shocked to hear that there are dairy societies owned by women. That really shocked us, and you see the level of organization especially like this one in Kajiado Town which is because the others were more of individual entities.

Hellen Nkaissery

That one for Kajiado Town is Maasai Women Dairy Cooperative.

Interviewer 1

Exactly. The way they organized themselves they were telling us that even Techno Serve takes them out for exposure trips you know where they are taught. We were so shocked.

Hellen Nkaissery

I've even gotten them to Israel. I got the leadership to Zimbabwe—or was it Zimbabwe or Malawi? One of these countries. I was taking them to expose them. Make then know you know that the world is moving. I've gotten a lot of training for them—a lot of things.

Interviewer 2

Okay, now I know that the effort you have been doing actually identifies those who may be having the animals. Have you at times also thought about those others?

Hellen Nkaissery

Who don't have?

Interviewer 2

Because I know there must be some who may not join.

Hellen Nkaissery

It's true. Who may not have.

Interviewer 2

Who may never join even.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes, They have lived with us. They may not be having cows but because the numbers of cows are reducing. You know, with climate change, there are many who may not have cattle. So we tried one of the grants that cooperative bought hay and hired farms to fatten the cows. Then they sold, gave loans to the women to do various businesses. We were going to a stage of having innovations from animal keeping like there is one person who came on board and is doing production of gas and lighting using manure using animal waste.

Interviewer 1 The cow dung.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes. Biogas. The cooperative and partners give part of the support, mainly to help families improve their homesteads. For example, if someone wants to buy cattle, we link them to organizations like KARI, which sell at more manageable prices. That way, a household can at least acquire one cow and learn how to manage it. We also train them on practices such as storing hay and planting fodder crops. Beyond that, we encourage members to diversify their businesses. Instead of focusing only on keeping cows, they can venture into areas like feed production or even running an agrovet. More importantly, these ventures are still linked to the cooperative, ensuring sustainability and mutual growth.

Interviewer 1

The other question I wanted to ask, is there a way you can say that this initiative has helped Masai women in other aspects of their lives. Besides, they finally have money, would you say it has been to the benefit of Maasai women?

Hellen Nkaissery

The sad thing is that when you are working individually alone in such organizations, there is no support system even to record the change, and you see, you being researchers, you know a change if recorded, then you can be able to follow the history of change. If you look at the education system, that is a change. Now, girls going to school, they can see that many of their mothers have gotten a way to support them to improve, and sustain them in school. One aspect I see and I, don't know, I normally use it to measure myself. Back in 2000 when there was a market day in our areas. When other communities brought food like vegetables, you won't see many Maasai women because they don't have an income. In fact, on a market day in Bisil which is the biggest market day in the whole of the county, you'll only see moremen coming because they're coming to sell their livestock.

Interviewer 1

Their cows.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes, their cows. But the story has changed. The women now come to the market. You will see everybody carrying vegetables, it has transformed the nutritional aspect of their families, and then for me I am able see the transformation in the woman herself. Before, you would find a a Maasai woman with one pair of shukas, and that is what she would wear from Monday to Sunday, 24/7 until it gets torn then she would beg the husband to buy her another pair. These days they have pairs to change. On market days they have a set, on a Sunday they have a set and that just makes me happy.

Interviewer 2

What I know is once the woman is empowered, it's very easy as she says for the children to benefit because what I'm even seeing now among men these days, most of them will just drink, and in fact if they were the ones for example to handle this money that comes from the milk, some of these benefits that we are talking about would not be there.

I wanted to specifically ask this question especially for the sake of a woman somewhere who wants to follow your footsteps. You started this and, I've at times seen something like this is started by you, and then competing whatever forces come to claim the opposite.

Hellen Nkaissery

And the vision gets lost.

Interviewer

And how central have you been to the development of the Maasai Women cooperative, Did you take up leadership roles in the cooperative?

Hellen Nkaissery

I was aware of that, and particularly with where I was, it was easy for somebody to come and look at it from a competitive angle, or maybe they want to look for a way of belittling it or killing the vision. So, the women, the cooperative, have their own leadership. I am just a member who takes her milk to the collection center. In fact, I never miss. I have just remained as a patron (matron) but again, I let them choose their leaders the way they want. So I've remained as a matron, and it comes with a cost. It doesn't matter how busy I am, I can never stay away from them. So I keep checking on them. I keep linking them to organizations. Whichever forum I get, I speak about them. So because of the virtue of being a leader in the community, I can even go to a meeting and I'm given a chance to talk. I talk about them. So at least that has helped, the way God helps such that I'm even able to take some of them out of the country. That was easy.

So, through this unity, some of them have educated their children, like the chairlady's son is doing his PhD. Can you Imagine? and this is a lady I found when she had not completed secondary education, but she used the money from the dairy to educate herself, to completion, and her children.

Interviewer 1 What a story *(laughs)*.

Hellen Nkaissery

The leadership like the chiefs and the people from the ground can see and they've been my greatest support. Particularly the chiefs, the assistant chiefs, the village elders. Those have been the ones who really supported and made sure that the idea keeps on moving. But I must say it's not easy. I've been foughtseverally. When my late husband was still in politics, I would be told I'm doing it to get him votes.

That didn't come as a surprise for me. Nobody would want to see that I started it before we went into politics. And, now that I have not sought for any political seat, they still wonder how I am still going on, still being around. So, it is true. There's a cost.

Interviewer 1

The other thing I wanted to askis, Would you say that this has given women a voice and if so, in what ways do you feel it has given women a voice at the family level and at the community level.

Hellen Nkaissery

It has. You know, the minute a woman is given a position of leadership at the collection centre, you see that woman is already a leader just because she's now a leader of the collection centre. When you come to their county and we attend meetings, they want to be heard because they now have a voice to stand and say yes, I am a leader. You do not need to take that woman to school and teach her what being a leader is because the minute she feels she has been given a platform, she already feels a responsibility to represent others.

Now, when they attend meetings, when the government calls for meetings and they are there, they no longer feel incapable because they have proved themselves through the work they have managed to do. I must say that at one point, I really tried to see whether we could lead them to Uwezo Fund, to these national government funds like Uwezo Fund. But now, it comes with strings attached, with the political aspect. That has really been a big problem. So, if you're not, and because this is Mrs. Nkaissery's work, you need to build a political network, and that is another aspect. When politics start, meetings at the cooperative don't happen because we don't want to use it as a quorum for politics. People can go and do their politics elesewhere and this has helped us stay afloat.

But that has also been a disadvantage because whoever comes, wants to see those who spoke the loudest. You voted for them, and they want to see who spoke the loudest? Who stood more? Those are the people to get. So that has been really a problem.

Interviewer

In your journey, what is it that you would say hindered the progress or may have slowed you down other than the challenges you have told us about?

Hellen Nkaissery

The weather, the hardship. The periods of drought are becoming longer. Their livestock numbers are going down. The way the systems are, you just need to have a partner who can sustainably help to put the systems interms of members name, money, bank accounts etc. You need a system or an organization that can walk with you. So with Techno Serve and other NGOs, it was limiting because they were there for a period of time and then the funding ended. So those factors, and then now there are other factors like the logistics of managing these other groups that are coming up. The young riders, the brokers, you know those, and again lately the problem I'm trying to deal with and I pray to God I get a partner who will help them, is to strengthen the collection centers because you know they are really at the center of everything. So that there is a strong link between the collection centre and the cooperative.

Interviewer 1

I wanted to hear about some of the lessons that you can speak about that can inform other women's economic empowerment initiatives. You know lessons that you feel could be helpful for such initiatives.

Hellen Nkaissery

I learned that when the larger population is illiterate and coming from hardship areas, just handing them money without a clear reason or purpose may not produce real results. Because when you get a woman from a village and say, we are giving Ksh. 200,000 from the affirmative action, she has never learned how to open a shop, so she doesn't know what to do with the money or how to utilize it. What do you expect from that woman? I see this as an aspect that requires a proper tool. Maybe, and you know the way now, I suggest using milk in such a way that it becomes a means for her to get support. This way, she can continue producing more. Even if it is funding, it should aim to improve her livestock or the few cows she is milking. She could also preserve hay to reduce the gap when there is no milk or help with transportation costs. Connect it to something practical. Because an illiterate person will not be able to develop a strategy by saying that now I have this money, what strategy can I use to ensure it adds value? She might just spend it to buy food from the market, and that's it.

Interviewer 1

That's it.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yeah.

Interviewer

You're right. So the whole aspect of women's self-mobilization. You know the way they organize themselves. How would you say it has impacted or contributed to the whole issue of economic empowerment for women? You know the coming together of women.

Hellen Nkaissery

The coming together of women has impact. It is security. These women you can't ask them for a title deed to be able to give them money, but them coming together acts as a security. So that one is very important. So like the reason the cooperatives started getting money from other partners is because they are legal entities, and that's a security. But the fear is that the local CBOs can disentegrate because, you know, they change every day. Today we are in a group, tomorrow we have dispersed and nobody will follow us. So the officers will not know what happened since people divided the money among themselves and parted ways. So you need to legalize coming together through registration, and that is why I made sure that they registered this cooperative.

Interviewer 2

You know I'm learning something very interesting. At times the perception out there has been that because of culture and so on, the Maasai woman could be very much down economically because you see we have not heard of these kinds of activities that you have initiated. In fact now see that women elsewhere. Like I come from Busia. I think those women are in a lot of trouble because such opportunities like you're talking about are not easily available. You find somebody who is really down. Totally down.

So I'm realizing a Maasai woman has a certain level of empowerment.

Hellen Nkaissery

Ooh she has?

Interviewer 2

Of which thanks to people like you now. I just want to know a little about the earlier days. How do you now compare now and those earlier days. Because you see you became active about 2003. How do you compare then and now?

Hellen Nkaissery

The woman now and the woman before?

Interviewer 2

Yes.

Hellen Nkaissery

There's a lot of difference. She has now a better home. Even if it is not stone-walled but it is plastered and there are iron sheets. She doesn't have to climb on top of the house to go and smear cow dung. She has a voice. She has respect. It has reduced conflicts in the home. Because you know it's poverty or being marginalized that brings conflicts. Because the minute you are not a contributor, then you are looked down upon. That has been resolved. It has given them respect. They are allowed to go to those women's meetings by their husbands now because they see value in them. They also contribute to the running of the home even buying salt for the cows, buying drugs from the agrovets for their cattle. Some of them have even bought dairy cows, and they manage them separately from their husbands' herd so that they have more production of milk.

Interviewer 1

And the men are okay with their cows?

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes. They're okay.

Interviewer 1

Wow.

Interviewer

Now maybe this is just my own personal interest. Because much earlier I know we used to hear leaders like Oloi tiptip, Saitoti, etc. what about women those days. Why is it that we don't have any woman that could also have stood up. Like I'm my place you know we have people like *(inaudible).*

Hellen Nkaissery

You know we've always lagged behind. When the colonialists came, we were like in a jungle. Nobody would go in. So when the rest of the country was getting education, we did not. Maasai territories went to school very late and there was no exposure to what the rest of the world was doing. So by those years, those leaders were at a different level from where we are now. In fact, they were just identified, picked without even understanding how to penetrate to their people. It was tradition that was more powerful than anything else, a woman had no voice, you just keep quiet in the home. So you needed to have leaders who felt they were able to empower their women, and I was one of them lucky to have been empowered by my own parents and my late husband. So at least you get a voice and you see you have a role and therefore you take up the responsibility.

Interviewer 2

So who are some of these very first Maasai women to start appearing at the national political level?

Hellen Nkaissery

I don't know, unless I try to find out (laughter), but we have one at least Dr. Naomi Kipuri. She's an anthropologist though, at least her father was a senator and she went to study in America. Now, which other one. Then we had those ones who are half Maasais, half Kikuyus. So they came maybe from around Ngong area. So they are not like us, who came from the interior part of the Maasai land. So you'd find them.

Interviewer 1

I think that's it from my end unless you have anything.

Interviewer 3

Maybe something from on Ushanga.

Hellen Nkaissery

Ooh ushanga. What I'm doing now.

Interviewer 3

Now that you are the chairlady. Have you been able to help women economically?

Hellen Nkaissery

The government found out that I have been doing this work with the women. So president Uhuru Kenyatta gave me a role to spearhead the program called *Ushanga* Kenya Initiative. Ushanga empowers pastoralist women using bead work, and it covers seven counties: Kajiado, Narok, Turkana, West Pokot, Baringo, Marsabit and Samburu counties.

So we use the skills, the cultural skills from the women which have been passed from mother to daughter. You know we are taught beading when we are young. So we use those skills to enhance and to improve, to guide women to produce products which are beaded and link them to markets. So that is what we are doing. We try to get them markets. I use the same idea of cooperatives because when I started this organization, I realized it's only cooperatives that can work. So now, Ushanga has a cooperative at every ward where members-the women beaders register themselves and they get together. We are able to support them to get the beads and then we train them. So the government has helped us to hire experts in beading and producing products which meet international standards. So if you check us online, , you'd see the products they knit. We sell them up to high -end stores. We are working. It's a journey.

Another aspect of it. We also try to use the same beading to address issues of culture which have been a hindrance to development in these communities. So we are using beading to address the issue of FGM. So yesterday we were launching a bracelet which is called *Johari* bead which the women will produce and they get money for producing the bead. Then it will be marketed all over the world, and we have a partnership with the UN to sell the bracelet as a tool for campaigning against FGM. The money goes to the women and it addresses these negative cultural practices.

Interviewer 1

Wow! We would have actually left out. Thanks for remembering about Ushanga *(laughs)*. So what made you move to *ushanga* now?

Hellen Nkaissery

Now you know when the government was looking for a way. How do we help these pastoralists, then somebody said Mrs. Nkaiserry. So it's a government run program. So it's called Ushanga Kenya initiative. We are under then state department of culture and heritage. But we also partner with the county governments.

Interviewer 1

Because it is a Government initiative, does it has a lot of support across Kajiado county?

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes, it's still picking up. What we've done, the county has a part in their budget. When we are training the women, they make sure that the woman have a place to stay and food. Then the National Government facilitates their transport and pays for the trainers. So that is how we partner. Once they have been trained, once they have produced the products we want them to produce for a certain market, then we as *Ushanga* now link the them to the markets and their money comes to the cooperative. So if they produce 10,000 bracelets, the money the bracelets generate gets to their cooperative and they are able to pay theirmembers the way they produced.

Interviewer 3

So Ushanga has members. How many?

Hellen Nkaissery

They are in cooperatives

Interviewer 1

When was this initiative established?

Hellen Nkaissery

In 2018.

Interviewer 1

Ooh it's fairly new.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes.

Interviewer 1

How is it being received?

Hellen Nkaissery

The excitement is overwhelming. In fact, that is the greatest worry. Because the awareness we have created, the women'sexpectation is too high.

Interviewer 2

What is your source of *Ushanga*.

Hellen Nkaissery

Actually we are very particular. We try to source for beads from the Czech Republic.

Interviewer 1

Ooh they are imported.

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes. They are imported because they come from India, China but they are not of good quality. We've tested and we get particularly from Czech Republic. But our wish is to bring the idea,the infrastructure and even just have it as an industry to produce once the program picks to a certain level.

Interviewer 2

I hope it doesn't face the danger that the Kiondo faced.

Hellen Nkaissery

We are securing it. We are in the process, and we have put the system in place. So as we produce a particular item, we secure it immediately. When we produce the next one, we also secure it, so that by the time it goes out, it is already secured.

Interviewer

Comparing the two initiatives—the one on dairies and this one on *Ushanga*. In terms of the uptake, the success, the challenges how would you compare them?

Hellen Nkaissery

This one I see now is better because I have a support system. Here I'm alone, working in a bush.

Interviewer 1

We are grateful to you, Mrs. Hellen Nkaissery. I kept checking here and noted that for one and a half hours, we were not bored by your stories. It's quite amazing to hear what you are doing. The kind of initiatives that you are having among the Maasai women. As I am telling you, I have confirmed some of the things when you talk about the content of barter in the Maasai milk because we actually would buy and we would get double what you get from the. Amazingly you are actually linked to those I didn't even know. For us, we are very grateful. Thank you so much for your time. You mentioned to us about your busy schedule, and we are so grateful that you have given us your time to have this conversation. I think the only thing that we could ask from you is, whether you have some such success stories?

Hellen Nkaissery

Yes. For success stories I can link you up with specific individual women and women gruops in Kajiado to follow up with.

Interviewer 2

As I conclude,have you been honored for the kind of work you have been doing?.

Hellen Nkaissery

The president gave me the Head of State Commendation. I have others. My work gives me joy.

Interviewer 1

That is something.

Hellen Nkaissery

When I see somebody's life transformed, that's a big medal for me.

Interviewer

It's true. But whatever you are doing is great, and as we go around like this we also hope that others may borrow a bit from you. So thank you so much for what you are doing for humanity. This is something that we will not take for granted.

Hellen Nkaissery

It is to God's glory.

"The woman now and the woman before is quite different. The woman now has a better home. Even if it is not stone-walled, it is plastered and there are iron sheets. She doesn't have to climb on top of the house to go and smear cow dung. She has a voice. She has respect."

Mrs. Nkaissery

Chapter 6: A Conversation with Lizzie Wanyoike

"I was never working to become who people think I am. I was working so that I could empower people because if I was not empowered, I could not have survived."

Lizzie Wanyoike

Biography

Lizzie Wanyoike was a renowned Kenyan businesswoman, an educator, and philanthropist. Her notable ventures include the Nairobi Institute of Business Studies (NIBS), Lizzie Preparatory Schools, and the Hotel Emory. She was the woman winner of the 2018 Social Entrepreneurship Award.

Born in Murang'a County, her early schooling started at Gathuki-ini Primary School in Murang'a County, then Kahuhia Girls Secondary School and later joined Kenyatta University, where she graduated with a Diploma in Education. After her graduation, Lizzie began her career as a professional high school teacher, teaching at State House Girls' School in Nairobi around 1972.

She initially worked in her family business for 25 years, during which she carefully saved from her salary. In 1975, she started her own business, founding the Temple College of Secretarial Studies in Nairobi, where she served as both principal and instructor. In 1999, she established the Nairobi Institute of Business Studies (NIBS), which by 2018 had opened branches in Ruiru, Ongata Rongai, Thika, and Nairobi Central Business District, serving over 5000 students. Lizzie Wanyoike has played a key role in mentoring and encouraging girls to pursue courses in engineering and business management.

The Conversation

The research team, that interviewed Lizzie Wanyoike led Prof. Wanjiku Kabira (interviewer 1) and included:
- Prof. Mary Kinoti (interviewer 2),
- Dr. Dorothy Njiraine (Interviewer 3)
- Caroline Nyakinyua (Interviewer 4)
- Rose Mureithi (interviewer 5)
- Racheal Keeru (Interviewer 6) and
- Ms. Wambui Kanyi (Interviewer 7).

The interview took place at her Emory Hotel in Nairobi.

The research team was also backed by a camera crew lead by Dr. S. P. Otieno

Interviewer 1

Good morning, everybody.

Everybody

Good morning.

Interviewer 1

Liz, we are very happy to be here today in this beautiful hotel. So, we have been planning to come and talk to you, and we are very happy that we are here today. For this particular session, we really want to record your story. This is a project we are doing with a number of very successful entrepreneurs, businesswomen. This is not my field but Professor Kinoti's, so she is here that she can talk about it later. We are doing this because we believe there are many women in this country who are actually moving the economy, but whose stories we do not know. So we only talk about mama mboga [greengrocers], about small businesswomen, and micro-entrepreneurs, yet we do not talk about the women that we know are very successful. These are stories that we want to document not only for ourselves but, you know, for the current generation. So we are really looking forward to listening to your story again. Now, this team is from the University of Nairobi, 'I'm going to invite them to introduce themselves beginning with Professor Kinoti.

Interviewer 2

Good morning. My name is Professor Mary Kinoti from the Faculty of Business and Management Science at The University of Nairobi, and I'm delighted to be here to listen to this success story. Thank you.

Interviewer 1

She is a very senior person in the school of business. She has been an Associate Dean for that faculty, and she is also in management, working on property rights and other areas.

Interviewer 3

My name is Dr. Dorothy Njiraine, and I'm a senior lecturer in the Department of Library and Communication Science. I'm also a Knowledge Management Coordinator for the Women Economic Empowerment Hub at the university. I am very delighted also to be here to listen to your story. Thank you.

Interviewer 4

My name is Caroline Nyakinywa. I am an advocate and a consultant. I have worked with the WEE Hub in the African Women's Study Center for a long time since I am passionate about women's issues. I am delighted to be here.

Interviewer 6

My name is Rachel Keeru. I am a master's student and a research fellow at the WEE Hub, and I am also glad to be working with this team of experienced people. I'm glad to be here. Thank you for the invitation.

Interviewer 7

My name is Mary Wambui Kanyi. I'm from the Women's Economic Empowerment Hub, where I'm also working at the Department of Sociology in African Women's Studies. I am delighted to be a part of the team with whom you are sharing your success story, and we thank you for giving us this opportunity.

Interviewer 1

Thank you very much, team. My name is Wanjiku Kabira, I am currently the Director of the African Women's Study Research Center and the leader at Women's Economic Empowerment Hub.

You know, a lot of work has gone into women's representation, not only in the national assembly but also in other bodies, like the commission, and so on. We know that they are doing some good work in terms of women's economic empowerment. I think we, the women's organizations and the women's leaders, have not put a lot of work into acknowledging women in business, yet we can tell that women are taking over in many spaces, including some of the current appointments, like at breweries and others. It is actually happening, and I think that we need to record it so that there is a lot of women in this country who are bringing changes, and we need to commend them so that we stop talking about how poor we are, how unrepresented we are, and begin talking about the great things that women are doing in this country. Because hope is also something we can give our generation: believing in ourselves, believing in our dreams, is something we want to give to the next generation. I think that you are one person who is very well known for your educational capacity and for becoming such a great, successful entrepreneur. We would like to listen to your story so we can also share it with other people. So if you can begin the story from the beginning, we will listen to it and we will not interrupt.

Lizzie Wanyoike

Thank you very much for the introduction. Before I start my story, I would like to elaborate more on what you have talked about regarding women's empowerment, and how women are now able to act in very high offices, very comfortably, and are delivering excellent results. But we have come a long way, My opinion has always been that we were created as women, and that a woman was created to support the man. From the beginning of the Bible, it says, God created man, and then He looked at the man and said that this man needs a helper. So, we have gone by that through generations, where women were not even given a chance, or they weren't even thinking about having a chance, because the dominance was heavy from the men by nature.

This continued until things changed, and that's when we started taking our girls to school. Taking a girl to school is some form of empowerment. Those young ladies who went to school, colleges, and universities in those days were not very many. So, we have come a long way to be accepted by society. And again, as women, the way we are created, we are mothers, you know, we have a lot of responsibilities, a lot of them. Even when you have a senior position, disregarding the modern situation now, a woman still has to leave the office, go home and organize the home, organize the children, and get to know what the children are going to eat.

So we are still there as women, doing our work, and at the same time, also, getting those jobs and doing them, especially in business.

So for me, my personal story is more or less the same. Immediately I left college, of course it was the days when it was really difficult to find a husband, I got married at an early age – not so early because I had completed school. My role was to take care of the both families, our nuclear and my own family. There was no way one could think about anything else because the husband or the father was providing everything. So you find that you don't have the motivation to do things, and that is normally what happens in most women's homes.

But as things have gone by, we have come up with a generation that is not as strong as men of those days. And this is a generation that is not able to do much tasks, especially for men. So the women, also being mothers have have taken up this task of even helping their husbands by empowering themselves and doing multiple tasks. Because no matter who you are, even here now, you have very high-level professors and doctors in high positions, you still remain a woman at home. When the husband is home, he is waiting for you to make that coffee, that tea, that meal. It created us like that. But over the years, men have found that potential in the women.

However, as you know, it has been very difficult for a woman to be able to occupy an office or even vie for an election to become an MP or an MCA or a Governor. It has been very difficult because of attitude against them, whereby they are not taken seriously. So in the village, that's how my mother was. She was doing almost everything, and so, that is what she was meant to be. Now, life is full of surprises, even when you enter into marriage, or into any business or profession, you don't know you have that opportunity. So there are some challenges that you may not be able to handle. And so it came a time when we had to separate, and that is the time a woman knows her strengths.

My encouragement to women, and those who went through the same problem is, when you know this is where you are, what's next? The only thing that will save you is the thing that you think of first, that is where your passion lies. I want to let you know that what works in most successful people is passion. So many people go wrong by picking up positions because of good pay, and you find that you hate your job. I'm a trained teacher. I had taught all my life in high schools and in colleges. So I can't say I was a very good mother, you know, you just take care of your kids, giving them advice here and there. So my teaching turned out to be empowerment—empowering the youth, the society, parents, and talking to them. We were never given any kind of advice, but I felt as if some

people were mentoring us and so I went back to teaching. Organizing how to start an institution that has grown this far is because I was not just looking for people who would excel in class and then excel in their jobs, but for me, to make them excel everywhere is to give them this other side of it, good character, because education without good character is nothing. And that is why most of our youth are not getting jobs because, even when they go to interviews, they have just gone through college or universities but did not understand the real issues of life.

So my passion drove me, and I felt so challenged. But women in general have done a very good job, and we need to be given more jobs within the government. We said most of the women who are heading our parastatals are doing very well because we think about our families. Women think about their families, and that's why very few of them will get involved in corruption. So, for me, I believe that we can do everything and get all those jobs, and still maintain our heritage, what God created us for, without neglecting our homes, seeing the husband as the head of the family, where possible. Because men, once they see empowered women, they also go down. You see, a man will just come home, no money, no school fees, but he is wearing a suit which you have bought. I'm also inwardly an entrepreneur, but everything I start, I think, "why am I doing this?" "Am I looking for money, or are am I looking to empower other people?" I don't first of all think of making the money but I think of giving the students what they require, and money becomes automatic. No struggling. Wherever you are, if you do things the right way, everything will eventully fall into place because when your heart is set on empowering others, your efforts align with that purpose. Personally, I go everywhere, even if you call me in your village and tell me there is a church whose youth needs some mentorship, I will go. I do a lot of mentorship for the youth, mothers, and also fathers wherever possible, because our men have neglected their sons. They keep saying the boy has been neglected, but neglected by whom? You are a father and yet your son is alreay taking drugs in Standard Six while you don't even notice. Later, he is counted among the 'neglected boy children,' but in truth, you are the own who neglected him. As a parent, it is your responsibility to give your child a strong foundation from the very beginning, so that in the end, you can raise a responsible and productive adult.

Interviewer 1

I think maybe one of the things we have to ask you, you are going to tell us; howdid you build your estate? I think what we are doing this morning is to reflect on what is it that has driven you, you know, what you think about marriage, what a successful business woman should do? What an administrator should do? I also love what you have said, you know, we begin complaining about the boy child. So who has neglected your child? You are the father. What have you done yourself? I think you have brought up very, very critical issues. But now, because you are also a very successful entrepreneur, if we want to give you 10 minutes to tell us that story, how you started from nothing to where you are

Lizzie Wanyoike

I want to elaborate on how I came to be an how I built my businesses from very little. Initially, I had worked for 25 years in a family business, which I had to leave behind. I used to get a salary. And as I had also mentioned, everything was being paid for – school fees e.t.c were being paid for. So, I was saving some money, because I did not have to go to the market and buy anything. I always had the card or money to go and buy whatever I neeed. So, I had some savings God was preparing me for something. And that is what I think about when I reflect on my life. It is like God had a mission for me. During the age of 25 or 26 years, around there, you know exactly how an why you got married. You don't even remember the wedding date and you cannot know exactly when you got married. You don't have a date. People ask me for our wedding photos which I do not have. During those years, I did a lot in bringing up my children and I had done a lot within the home. So I was accumulating my savings in a fixed deposit account. By the time I left the mariage, I had about ten million Kenyan Shillings in the bank, but that is after 26 years. So, it was in a fixed deposit account, and it was just rolling. This is what I used to apply for a loan at Equity Bank.

What built my initial business extremely fast was where I was coming from. By nature, I was a very interactive person with the parents of children. They used to like me and my students were performing very well although we were doing some very tough examinations from the Kenya National Examination Council. So, I had already built a good name. When I started advertising, clients came to me almost automatically. You see, you never really know, when you do something not just for yourself but for

yourself but for others, things have a way of working out. For me, with the school, everything picked up so quickly, it just took off. It grew very fast, because people had confidence in whatever I was doing.

As I had also mentioned before, I was still not working to get profit first of all. It was for me to be able to do something, to have somewhere where I could wake up in the morning and go, because then, I did not have an office anywhere. So when I did that, and it grew very fast, we broke even. You know what breaking even is? The money that I had borrowed started now paying for everything. After the students paid fees, I could break even: paying rent, paying all the salaries, buying the materials such that I did not have to go back to the bank. But mainly it's because of how I started, the goodwill I had made. Whatever something good you do where you are, one day it will follow you. And that is what happened to me. So after that, the quality kept on growing. That time I was not even borrowing much, because the money was building itself. And I had bought some shares. I didn't have any problems, and then making it into expansion of the main campus, which is sitting on 15 acres in Ruiru.

So I can say that building a business comes from within you. You can't go there looking for money. For me, the children we had were all grown ups. So what was I looking for? I was looking for money to sustain myself and a place to go to. And so, within that process, the college grew because I was okay. I did not have to struggle. So from there, when the college grew, I decided, that I should move on. And I have also gone through challenges. I'm talking to you as if things have been moving nicely. I have had many challenges. Challenges are even more, and especially when there's a breakup. You can't even know where your enemies are coming from, yeah. Mara (sometimes) you're in the gutter press, mara you have been blackmailed, mara you are doing this because nobody wants you to move on. People want you to remain down there. And that is what people were expecting. So I went through all the problems. But if you remember, there's nothing good that comes out of good, you have to sweat for what you get, and sometimes, it doesn't come. And again, like I say, I was always thinking about empowering these people. I was imagining some of these girls in my class, or the girls I knew, they could be going through the same thing I did, and so I needed to empower them and also the men. I also I discovered that there were also very many men who had issues. It's not only the women who go through abuse because even men have and some of them have been kicked out of their homes. It's only that they don't want to talk about it. They keep quiet and cry within themselves. I felt that every young person needed to be empowered equally, and women had to be told about their responsibilities. So my businesses grew because I was doing things right.

I was in the right books with: the ministry, the government, the parents and the students. You know, the love I have for them, they know and that is what makes NIBS college what it is today. It is not because we are working so hard. No, it's because of the diversity of our actions within that institution.

So now, the other thing that has taught me a lot is when we are dealing with students who are young, after 18 years. In colleges and universities, I have noted so many problems, you know, lack of parental guidance, fighting at home, parents fighting in front of the kids, the mother telling the father he cannot pay school fees and many more. Some of them are so depressed and they come to me and tell me. God told me, whatever it is, you have to do something, at least save one or two. How are you going to do it? And that's when I thought about this preparatory school. I thought, I want to work with these young mothers and their mothers. I want to work with them and openly discuss these things with them. So, when my institution started, within six months to around seven months, we had 400 students—a breaking record to start a school that is not even one year yet. Already, there are so many people who are coming. Why? That can only be because, like I told you, people see what you do. People are watching. So I feel that if I can work with these young mothers and fathers, then we will be able to help one or two. Today, I talked to the Standard Six and Seven and I was telling them, "you know, I have come to know that you know about drugs." They know about all that. And so what I'm trying to say is when you do things right, everything comes automatically. I don't have to make an effort; all I have to do is do things right. I keep on saying that if you do something right, it will spread because that's what I have done myself. That is what has made me grow. And that is the reward from God, that you have worked this hard, we are going to give you as many students as possible, as you can train, not to provide the college for nothing, not to provide the preparatory for nothing! But of course, I concentrate more on the well-being or welfare of other women, because I know when you have kids, two boys and a girl like I do, you'll realise that the girl keeps coming to see you, "Oh ma'am. How are you?" You know, although she is married, she will still come to you but for the boys, as usual, now the strength comes from the wife, you know, the other side as she keeps telling him, "Let's go to my mother." Then he will respond, "No, we have to get to my mother first." So the boys will come to you because they are pushed to see come to you so that they can go and see their mother on the other side. So these are small things that can improve people's lives, loving education, being responsible and by doing things openly because shortcuts will not take you anywhere. Shortcuts are very short-lived. I know that through

through experiences because I've watched my friends trying to copy things and seeing them fail because it's not premised on a passion. What you come up with as a copy, it will not work. What works is what comes from your heart . Thank you very much. Did I answer your question?

Interviewer 1

How did you build NIBS? Thinking about you having more than 5,000 students in the college. Yeah? So, we were just wondering how you came from nothing, having left, you know, this school you were teaching after 25 years, then you started your own business now, not family business, but your own business at the time. So, we wanted to see what you had to do to succeed. But we just wanted some practical examples of what you did, for instance, to build it from zero to now, currently 5,000 students and to branch from there to build a hotel like this one and really become a very successful Kenyan businesswoman.

Lizzie Wanyoike

The college worked, first and foremost because I am professionally trained as a teacher. I can see what other people can't; I can tell when the teachers are teaching properly and when they are trying to pretend they are teaching because I can enter a classroom and sit in the back to observe. So, for success in business, when you build a successful business, you must understand it, understand it deeply, and truly grasp it. And again, you have to realize that this is not a business like selling cabbages or sukuma wiki (collard greens); you're playing with people's futures and the minds of young people. You know, there are many factors you must consider to realize how important education is. When you're dealing with education, you're handling a very sensitive commodity.It can either break you or build you.

So what I can say about my businesses is that everything was well thought out. Being an entrepreneur by nature, I look around and I see what can work. I know how to identify, as an entrepreneur, I know how to identify the need, what is needed there more than anything else. When I started this hotel, I knew that there are many colleges training hospitality. Now, NIBS college has become one of the biggest hospitality colleges. Why don't I be part of that? So whenever you think about what you want to do, don't think about calculating the money, I start thinking about the people I am am going to empower because my basic principle is to

empower, since I was empowered by my parents, and I got my certificates. If I had not gone to school, if I had just dropped out and not gone to school, where would I be now? So, education is the key. Because if you were those who had to drop out of school after Form Four, let's say, they even get married, but are they sad? Many of them Yes. What do they contribute to the family? Some, of course, do because they are passionate about business; they can do that. But basically, think about what education can do to you.

So, in fact, the 5,000 is in one campus, because we have other branches. Before COVID-19 pandemic, our college had over 8,000 students, which is very rare, you know, gorgeous. And again, we are not renting space, except in town, because we have our own compound, except in town. So I'm trying to answer your question that when you're an entrepreneur, first of all you study the market. What is needed? Even when we are developing courses, programs in private colleges, you look at what is trending. Because engineering is now the thing, we can empower even dropouts and give them skills. So we are into it. We offer both low and high diplomas. But we want to expand and offer higher diplomas in fields such as architectural engineering, building and construction and electrical engineering, since we are a technical-related college. We offer those diploma programs, but also cater to students who may have dropped out after Form Four with as low as a D– grade. We give them opportunities. Some parents come and say to us, "my child is hopeless" and we ask them, "What did he get in KCSE?" and they say, "D minus?" So I tell them to bring them with their D minus grade, and you will make it a D plus in the courses he is going to do, or even a C, because some of the students fail because they're not serious in school. But when they get serious, when they get the reality, they can open up to learn the problem. So you asked me a question, I gone on and on. *[laughs]*

Interviewer 1

So these courses you are teaching, are they in the college in town or Thika road?

Lizzie Wanyoike

In Thika Road, we have the main campus there. That's where there is everything. We have one town campus. We moved into a smaller space because most people are operating on Thika Road-one because it has an immense capacity. Then we also have another one in Rongai.

Interviewer 1

What is the percentage of girls that are doing these non-traditional courses?

Lizzie Wanyoike

We have maybe 45% boys and the rest are girls.

Interviewer 1

Doing engineering?

Lizzie Wanyoike

Doing engineering, hospitality, journalism, all those courses in Business Management and tourism. But the girls are majoring into all those, even engineering. We have several girls who are doing engineering and I am very happy. But the girls, you know, when you go to the villages, if those people who have an opportunity to go to your home and you go into shopping centers, how many girls do we see there? Sometimes, I stop and talk to them and ask, "Did you go to school?" and they respond and say, "Yes." And I ask them, "What did you get?" And they respond, "I got a C minus." I ask further, "And you're driving a boda boda [motorcycle taxi]? Unajua sasa mimi nimefika, nilikuwa nataka ku make money kwanza [You know, now I am done, I wanted to make money first]." Now, for how long are you going to drive this boda boda? At age 50, 45? Yeah, and that's the time you need money more than any other time, not now. Right now, you people don't need alot of money like the one you need when you get to my age. That's why, you see, money is supposed to take care of your old age, because right here, we are not invested like countries that have very good pension schemes.

In Kenya, you can only operate a college if it is fully accredited. We do external exams that are accredited by the government. So we don't do internal exams, like universities, we do external.

Interviewer

So I was just wondering what is the rate of passing, and we put it that way, what percentage passes this external exams?

Lizzie Wanyoike

We have some weak students. So we normally give every member of staff a 80% passing target which they have to beat. So sometimes we get 75% to around 78%. Before COVID, we used to get about 80%.

Interviewer 1

Why are the schools so famous?

Lizzie Wanyoike

Because we do things right. We don't lie; we give the truth, and I also don't allow my people to go there and lie. In fact, everywhere I go, for example, last night, we were in a prayer meeting in preparation of a burial. Among the people in attendance, was a pastor from my school, and somebody commented, "How come everybody we meet from NIBS is so confident, and always good?" Of course there are still some bad ones, you know and we fight with some of them till they drop out. Some of them are abusin drugs. We are always trying to fight the bad behaviour, but you see, we mostly deal with parents. We can call the parents especially when we realise their children are engaged in cases of indiscipline like missing classes. Whether the parent is coming from Mombasa or Meru, they have to come so that we can work together.

Interviewer

Tell us your experiences with a family business, and how you intend to sustain this dream, even when you are 90 and 95, but you're not able to...

Lizzie Wanyoike

For me, like I said, I don't know whether it's a favor from God or what. Personally, what I did was to prioritize my children. They completed their courses in the US, started working there, and had good jobs. My daughter was a structural engineer in the US, working on buildings and my son was a banker. After finishing his course, the youngest came back, and he was the one watching over things. So, I went there, all of them were married.

I wanted my daughter's family to come and work because, when I saw NIBS was stable, I went there and we sat down and discussed. I talked to my son-in-law first. He told me, "You may not be able to pay us," and I explained how much was being paid. I told him, 'When you calculate in dollars, it's a lot of money. Here in the US, when you buy a Coke, it costs about one dollar (about 120 shillings), but in Kenya, it's Ksh 25 which makes it equivalent." I explained to him that I would be able pay an amount that will make them afford the same. I persuaded him, and he said, "I think I can join you." I thought he would put it in writing. Then I asked him, 'Are you coming alone? You have to come with your wife." And that is how I got them. My son, who always wanted to come, is a very interesting character. He didn't want to go to fancy schools like Hillcrest but chose to go to a local and a very poor high school called Highway Secondary after he did his KCSE. I asked him why because we were worried, and he told me he never wanted that. He used to walk there in the morning. I gave him a lift twice and he said, "No, nobody else is dropped off and I don't want to be dropped." That's just his personality. When he heard the others would come, I had not gone to him yet, but I told him that I had arranged a job for him at Equity bank because it is a bank that has been friendly to me. He said, "No, why should I work for Equity if you paid for my school fees? I want to work for NIBS," which, at the time wasn't that big as it is. So I brought the three of them and their wives to work for me. So, what do I have to worry about? Now I'm here, just sitting and chatting, while the work is going on out there. These ones here—she's now working on what's happening upstairs at the hotel. Now I'm retired, though I don't want them to hear that I've retired, otherwise, they'll notice my presence. My main work is to empower people.

Interviewer 1

Sorry, I've taken some time, but I'm going to hand it over to Professor Kinoti. She can ask whatever questions she has and then facilitate a few other questions.

Interviewer 2

Thank you. Thank you for that very inspiring and empowering story. What I like is that you've talked about your passion making you succeed. It's something I take very seriously because, as you said, a lot of our

generation, or the younger generation, do things they aren't passionate about. So, I think that is a very powerful and inspiring, as well as an empowering statement. I've also picked that. that you don't have to do something that tortures you to get money because you need to do something that you are passionate about and do it very well, and money will follow you. So, thank you very much, If we do everything right, money will follow you. I think the generation we're nurturing today—the generation of young entrepreneurs, the youth that you are very passionate about—that is what they need to hear. That is the story they need to reinforce from time to time so that they know they don't have to take shortcuts. Because we talk about them here; we call them the "microwave generation." I mean, microwave, as far as work and success, it does not work and it does not last. So, for me, I want to say I'm very inspired by your story, and it is a story that will empower a lot of us and also empower the coming generation. Having said that, I would now open the floor for questions for the interactive session so that the team here can also ask any other question that they would probably like to know. I would probably start with Doctor Njiraini.

Interviewer 3

Thank you very much. I've been putting down some points. Maybe what I'd like to hear from you is, we are in a peculiar environment, especially when it comes to issues of corruption. I don't know how you have managed to navigate that landscape, the environment of corruption. How have you managed to evade that challenge? Let's look at it from that perspective.

Lizzie Wanyoike

This issue of corruption is something that has been very difficult and disturbing. In most cases, when you want something fast, you have to bribe your way out. I'll give you a very good example of those people who have gone to Thika, to the railway bridge where NIBS Technical College is. You would find a huge building there that we wanted to put up for workshops. We talked about those high diploma courses that need a lot of practicals. We had everything planned—the architect completed the drawings, and we submitted them to the County Council. That's when they asked for seven million shillings under the table. My team questioned it, saying, 'The official fee is Ksh 1.7 million, but what is this extra seven million for?' They were told it was money 'to be paid with no

receipt.' I pushed them to negotiate, but the officials insisted, 'It's that or no approval.' People often assume that because I talk a lot, I must have a lot of money, but that's not true. So, I made the decision: I wouldn't pay a bribe. I chose to wait a year rather than build. As it turned out, even after we completed the project, Covid-19 came, and the opening was delayed. The building was supposed to be ready one and a half years earlier, but I refused to compromise my principles.

At some point I asked, "Maybe if I can see the governor?" I actually managed to meet him in person. He suggested we meet at a coffee shop along Kiambu Road. When he arrived, with about fourteen cars in convoy, while I was there with my small car [laughs], I had already ordered tea. He sat down and he asked why I wanted to see him. I explained that we needed his help because I did not have the seven million I was being asked for. He looked at me surprised and asked, "Who is asking for seven million? Nobody is asking you for that. You've already paid the 1.2 million official fee?" I said yes. He shook his head and told me 'Then they are lying.' He paid for my tea and left. I thought the issue was sorted and so, I sent my people back with the governor's word. But the officers insisted that the governor had not told them anything. At that point, I gave up and waited one year until elections were held and another governor came in.

When the new governor was campaigning, he happened to be at Equity Bank one day withdrawing money. The branch manager called me and told me, "Lizzie, I'm with the upcoming governor here." I knew him, though not very well. We spoke briefly, and later, after he won, I went to see him. Within two days, he helped me secure the approval for the building.

That experience showed me how deep corruption runs—it is real. Even people like us go through it. Sometimes, even when everything is done properly, someone will still invent an excuse: 'You know, they never give us bus fare, so we need some bus fare.' If I'm not there, my staff end up paying. The reality is, in this country, to get something done you often have to bribe your way in. That's the example being set for our young people. They watch, and when their turn comes, they continue in the same system. Corruption will remain a serious problem until the example is stopped from the top. Right now, those who are caught stealing are rarely taken to court, and that only encourages others. What can we do? This is our country, and we love it. We'll continue to do our best where we can, but sometimes it's very difficult.

Interviewer 3

Maybe another question I can ask you have the passion and, of course, those virtues. How do you mentor those below you because, you see, with the success of your business, it means those people look up to you. How do you make sure they follow your values?

Lizzie Wanyoike

Well, like any other college or university, we have a way of identifying the serious cases. If you see somebody missing classes, you know there's something. If nobody who visited us today had a report that you're seeing a doctor, that's one thing that makes us follow up: "Why are you missing classes?" Some of them are in our hostels; you go find them there. So, we've identified that. We also have some students who assist us, the good ones, although they do it undercover.

So what we do, before we call the parents – because we don't want to stress the parents so much – we discuss with them. If they are on drugs, how are they going to stop? How long have they been taking the drugs? Can they stop? We struggle with them. We try to make them come to class. We advise the lecturers on how to handle them. But when they repeat a third time, that's when we invite the parents. It gets to be very upsetting because most parents don't know. Some of them know, you know, some of them make fun. They say, "My child is on drugs, and I want to take him to college," and then they would say, "Just take him to Madam Liz Wanyoike to deal with them." So, you kind of deal with these students when they are deep into drugs. So, we have a department that is actually involved in discipline issues. We've changed many, and some of them have gone into self-destruction. Some of them have gone into drinking and drowned out there. Fortunately, we don't have a swimming pool.

As we get into the 2000s, things are getting worse. The ones you people are bringing up, the young mothers here, you don't know them. But something very interesting about my school: when I call them for graduation from baby class to PP1, do you know they all came in pairs? All of them were two. What I don't know is if you paid to get there, you know, the father. But only one girl (a single mother) came with her mom and her two kids and I was shocked. The ones in college are always telling me, "I'm from a single mother." And this is a preparatory [class], 99% are

couples. So I don't know what to make of it, but I was very happy because they know when you come alone, later on, you will be asked if you need help. So, you people don't know your kids. It's good for young mothers here to get very close to their kids, and it's very easy. When you come from work, have dinner together. Tell the house girl to wait until you have dinner together. Ask them about their day. Bringing up kids these days is not simple; it's hard work, very hard work, and you have to be 90% involved. So, if you don't do that, they are definitely going to get lost. Some of them will change after 10 or 5 years. Is that what you want? Those are five or ten years wasted, going to rehab, repeating, going to the university where they should have left five years ago. Let's try and utilize the time these kids have the way it is supposed to be—the season. Let's not mess up with the season: the high school season, the college season, university, and then work. Let's not wait until they go back a season, repeating high school. It is very frustrating. If I were the kid, life is seasonal, and nothing gets repeated unless you go wrong. And I tell them life is very personal. When you take drugs in a group, maybe you will be the one to be affected because our bodies are not the same. You will die alone; you will leave your friends just floating. So, be personal as a parent and also be personal with your kid. And this is a serious business. This is a time when you people have to wake up. I am telling you from a point of knowledge, not reading books. I know because people have come from universities for me to talk to them, especially in KU. They say, "We have a group of at least 50 students doing business. Can you come mentor us?" And I would go there and talk to them. So, let's help each other. If you have something you know can help somebody, the government will not take care of our children if we don't. It starts with us. Hang that timetable and make it effective. Give that house girl or housekeeper powers when you are not there to ensure that children are doing what is required. Your housekeeper should be your best friend. You have to respect each other; you have to know that for each one of us, we are pulling together.

Interviewer 4

Maybe I should take this time to say that I am a young mother. My daughter is 19 and another one is 14. I have appreciated, and I'm also humbled to know that parenting is not easy. I also feel that it's good to be mentored by people like you. It's encouraging because I think, for some reason, I have also set a kind of good example. My former school, where I took my children, they are still calling me to give talks during parents' meetings, the church, and friends. They want me to talk to their children

and nurture them. So, I loved what you talked about, Lizzie, and I relate well. That is a story for another day. My question is, what would you like to say to women on balancing the stigma that comes with divorce, self-awareness, empowerment, and the desire to impact the society without being judged? Because that is what I was able to get from your introduction: that you valued the family, and for some reason, it did not work. And you are still fighting for the family, and still, inside you, there was an empowered woman, but still a woman who wants to be part of society. And you see, when the family breaks, society looks at the woman in a judgmental way. Not many cases do we have women who can relate to that. So, what would you say to women, maybe who have not heard of such stories?

Now, there goes the woman. The mother has taken care of the children. So, you are still an empowered woman. You still want to impact society, an entrepreneur. You have started a school. I still want to get how do you manage to balance this because you see even in grassroots women, when they try to be empowered, there are some men that have ego that, 'you cannot introduce anything in this house.' So, anytime you can do something, even silently, they do not want you to control things. So, how do you advise women, even if things don't work out, don't give up on the purpose you had in life of starting a college, being a successful advocate, and successful doctor? That stage, not many women are strong to go through that stage of balancing the stigma, getting to where you are. Maybe say something to women.

Lizzie Wanyoike

I'm telling you, women are not the weaker sex. The weaker sex here is the men. Men are insecure. Men lose self-esteem very easily. And there were those days when I remember when my classmates went through A levels and all that, there were those men who left Form Four and went to work in banks and all that. But when they got married to these high-end women who had gone upto university, you know, everything the women woul do, the man has his eyes wearing magnifying glass. "This one is doing this because she is a graduate." Men are very insecure, and the minute you try to do something which they think renders them inferior, there are some who would listen, but there are about 65% who would not take it easily. They would want to bring you down. It's their nature because they think everybody else will know they are the weaker sex. There was another time we had gone to talk to women in a bank—actually, it was Equity. We asked, 'Why is it that ladies only rise up to operations manager, but rarely beyond that?' We noticed that when women are being considered for promotion, they are often still at the stage of raising

teenagers, juggling both work and family. But for men, it seems different. When a man becomes a manager, even with four children, no one questions it. Yet for women, the moment you reach a managerial level—say managing an entire Equity Bank branch—some men start to feel insecure. There are men who don't mind, but for others, it becomes a problem. So, what many women do now is avoid applying for senior managerial positions. Some have already tried, but the pressure and lack of support at home discourage them. In fact, in some cases, even separation has resulted, simply because the husband feels the woman is earning more or growing 'too big.' It's a very real challenge. So what I would advise is, sit down with people in their lives and talk about it, and be open. Tell them, "Now, I'm being offered this job. It is demanding, but I know I can do it, and our family time will not be interfered with. I'm asking for your permission." The reasonable ones will listen. So, most of the women, they know their husbands, and so, they will not apply. They just make very good operations managers. So, we are still there.

Let me tell you what God created initially. He created us as their helpers. There is nothing we are going to do about it. We'd better say that is God's plan. So, what we admit is that men are very insecure. I wish I got married now, not at my age. When I was a girl and got married, with what I know, I would have been very successful *[laughs].* But that time, we had never dated. I had not gone out to see what was happening out there. It can be very difficult. But God also has His way of organizing people. I have done so much for the community and helped many poor people start businesses, paid university fees, paid everything. That is what God wanted me to do. God had a vision for me.

Interviewer 5

One of the things I've admired about you is that you began your business from your savings from when you were working, and that taught me a lot about the culture of saving. From the savings, now you also had to top up from a loan and start a business. Another thing is you are giving back to society. So business is not only a matter of making money but also about helping other people and being able to solve problems using the opportunities that gave you money. And then the most important thing that I admire is how you have been able to bring your children into the family business. My question is, had they not been interested in what you are doing, how would you make them interested? It could be you want to bring your children into business, but they are not interested in what you

are doing. As an entrepreneur, what can you do? And lastly, with the two businesses, you must be having a lot of employees. How do you motivate them to stay on course and especially to mirror you? How do they mirror your vision, your mission, your values? I could ask those two because of the time.

Lizzie Wanyoike

The first one was what would have happened if my kids did not want to join the business. One, we were very good friends with my children; up to now, we are very close, and we were like friends when they were growing up. The main reason why most of children refuse to come to work with their parents is because they went through problems with their parents like issues of disciplinaries and all that. But for me, we are very close with them. So, I used to visit them every year when they were out of the country. Every point in my life, I had involved them. We would talk, so we were bonding. And again, of course, they know their rights. So, I asked my daughter when we made that decision, we were talking. So, I convinced her, "Engineering is engineering. What is done in the Nairobi University is what is done in New York University. So, if that is your passion, that is the work I'll give you." I did not mention any other administrative work.

Now, for my son, he was a banker. He told me he could only work in the finance department. So, I made him the director of finance, but at the same time, he has land. I can say I was lucky when he came, he was very observant. He is like the father. Sometimes when we are fighting, he is like, "Do not bring the father back to me," because he behaves like him. He is a serious CEO, a serious one who would say no to me. Then I tell him, "You were not even born when I started this!" So, we are very free. So, he knew there was one weakness in this school. Do you know he learned academics from A to Z? He knew everything I know. I don't know whether he did it online, but within a very short time, he started challenging the head of academics, who is a very senior teacher by profession. So, one reason as to why he developed that interest is because he could see I'm allowing him to take charge. So, when you show your kid you have confidence in him, they cannot turn you down. Erick is a stubborn guy, very stubborn. He would not want to be supervised because I used to tell them, "I want you in the office." I can say I was lucky because some people may try that, but it won't work. And when I count my blessings one by one, I found out that is why God has made me who I am.

Now, for the members of staff, I don't know whether I'm lucky or not lucky, especially the support group. I've always had members of staff who are

very loyal. Some have stayed with me for 17 years. The other day, when there was a party, I had to reward the ones who have been there for six years and above because this is a private college and not a government institution with social benefits. So, we create our own benefits by working together. I'm a friend to them. Anybody who is in that office, whether you are a driver or what, you are free to come to my office. If you want to see me, I am not "up there"; they can walk into my office and give me their personal problems. So, we interact like that. And there are many, actually, combined with now the preparatory school. Even my students, I give them my number. So, I can say I am easy with staff. Of course, you may have had some of the senior ones trying to frustrate the lower ones but before I know, they have already left. Then I call them; they tell me their issues. I have never had problem with staff, who are over 400.

Interviewer 5

First of all, you talked about giving back to society, you have talked about money and about the children. You have answered very well. I'd say generally as an entrepreneur who has been able to grow from one business and now diversify, now the institution and the hotel.

Lizzie Wanyoike

In fact, the EY trophy I got was the *Women Winner 2018 of Social Entrepreneurship.* The EY one, I got. Sometimes, you know, when you are doing something out of passion, you don't realize what you are doing. But I always ask my PA there, "Kwani, Truphena, what have I done? I mean, why?" The other day, I was rated one of the 100 most influential Kenyans, and I asked Truphena, "What is this? I see women there, you know, one friend of mine who is inNaivasha, and they are building things, you know, they are billionaires." And then when they started saying that I'm a billionaire, I used to wonder, "What is a billion?" Now, what I did, I told Truphena, "Let's count. You look at the new building, it is worth over Ksh 500 million. I looked at the one I started with, it's over Ksh. 500, almost 600, plus the equipment. Then we came to the hotel; it's about a billion Kenya Shillings. I'm a billionaire!" [laughs] "With a lot of loans. I have 300 loans in the bank." But, you know, some of these things you do them because you need space to employ more. But I don't always have money all the time. The money is not there. So, I realized they don't count the money you have in your pocket; it is the value of the property.

And that is not what I wanted. I was never working to become who people think I am. I was working so that I could empower people because if I had not been empowered, I could not have survived. Suppose I got pregnant when I was in college and then I was a housewife. He would have kept me there even if we are not doing well, I am still there, and then he goes out to get other educated ones. So, what I'm saying is, it is very good to empower even the men themselves because we would have continued talking to them not to take a backseat in their homes, to try and to feel and to support the women when the women are doing better. If your woman is doing better, don't lose your self-esteem. Women work for families. We think from the heart, 98% of them. So, what they need is support, no matter whether she is doing better than you. Sometimes, there are some funny ones, some bad women who can throw you out. So, when you are choosing, choose right.

Interviewer 2

So, now I'll allow just short questions so that we give the Inooro journalist a chance to ask.

Interviewer 6

Thank you. I just wanted you to tell us, maybe one of the challenges that women entrepreneurs face is really lack of support. So, if you could highlight to us, as you were coming up, who are some of the people who have supported you? Be it financially, spiritually, or in any other way.

Lizzie Wanyoike

There is nothing that you can do alone. You need people, and you need genuine people. You have to be very careful with the people you start with. Initially, I was not a bad person, so I had some real, genuine friends who prayed with me, especially when I was homeless. And they were willing to walk with me. And again, we all need each other. In my group, I had two men who were very instrumental. One was an engineer, and the other one was a banker. He's the one who sent me to South Africa, sent me to his nephew to buy computers and typewriters. So, you can never do anything alone, and if you are very much alone, then you have no

friends. Why don't you have friends? Because maybe you were not welcoming friends in your life. And then you have to know people who are there genuinely, and then they can be there during the bad times and the good times, and they are there. So, of course, I was not even the chairperson of the committee when we started. So, I was not alone. And those people I always remember who worked with me. And also, God has also worked with me. So, if you are genuine and you know there is God, and you are doing this not to glorify yourself, then God comes through. I remember one time when my husband was sick in the hospital, and I went to see him, and we talked because we used to meet in the US and sometimes here when we were talking. And he noticed I was putting up a building in Ruiru, he complimented me. So, God has always brought people to walk with me. Up to today, there is no time with nobody walking with me, and working with my children now as a team. My children grew up in those Lavington areas, they were not street smart. They did not understand the real Kenya because they went out a long time ago. So, when they come here, I told them, "Now, this is Kenya; you have to open up your eyes," and they couldn't understand.

Interviewer 7

Thank you very much for the very inspiring entrepreneurial journey. I want to ask a short one because I think she has covered part of the things. You said that for you to succeed from the start, everything was very well thought out. If you were to advise any new entrepreneur, what advice would you give?

Lizzie Wanyoike

You have to do a bit of research. Like when I was putting up a school, I had to ask, "who am I competing with? Which other school is already doing better?" And once you think about that, then you think about what is trending. When we started in 2000, business management, business administration, and computers were "the thing. of the day" That has changed drastically. So, we select the courses we think will pick up. So, when we started, we started with those popular courses. Right now, they have very low intakes because what is trending now is technical programs.

When you think about what is trending, you sit down and you think. You

look at the government, it has been talking a lot about the direction of education. Now you look at that. Sometimes back, I entered into a venture of turning the college into a University until the last minute when they told me, that I was not even qualified to become a Vice-Chancellor. Imagine the years, I have run the college. I had also spent a lot of money. I employed a Vice-Chancellor for one full year from another university. She spend a full year here at NIBS and I was keenly observing her. During that period, she never went to a single class to see what the students were doing, not a single day. She would sit in that office and write documents, bring in people, then bring me a bill of Ksh. 350,000 and all that. Then I wondered, "What is happening here?" And then, during the process of making the University board (council) and the senate, I realized that I was nowhere. I remembered that this was something I had started with tears, and then now, I am here giving it to people who are always in offices. I am telling you the truth about what I thought they did. They were always in offices and making documents and all that, which I felt, "This isn't my style." So, I turned it down. I was almost there. It's was only that I refused to transfer the title of NIBS to become a University. I said no because I knew I had gone through a lot of problems. Although I'm a diploma holder, I have a lot of experience. I can do better, and that's why I am here. So, always talk about "what's next," "what is good for me," and "what's good for the young people."

Interviewer 2

Let's appreciate Liz for being here for us and for being here the whole day responding to your questions. Liz, your story is very inspiring. Sasa, tumpigie makofi ya kilo *(So, let us give her a big clap)* [team claps]. Let's start again, we do like five claps [team claps]. Asante sana. We will come again. So, thank you very much. Professor Wanjiku Kabira, do you want to say something?

Interviewer 1

I was wondering just whether you (Lizzie) are too tired because Wangari is here from Inooro FM and she would like just a few minutes of your time to talk to people through Inooro in Kikuyu. So, if you are not too tired, or if you would like to relax a little, then you can talk to Inooro.

"We've seen generations where women weren't given a chance, dominated by men by nature. But things changed when we started sending our girls to school; it was a form of empowerment."

Lizzie Wanyoike

Chapter 7: A Conversation with Terry Kantai

Terry Kantai embodies the spirit that a single determined individual can ignite significant positive change. Her unwavering commitment to improving circumstances, driven by profound dedication, has propelled her to achieve remarkable feats in women's economic empowerment

Terry Kantai

Biography

Terry Kantai was born on December 21, 1942, and grew up in Embu County. She developed an interest in women's economic empowerment while still in primary school. In 1959, she worked closely with a catholic nun named Jack Bauer, who brought her to Nairobi, alongside other women to register the Women's Union for Social Action (WUSA). Terry became the Secretary General, overseeing operations that spanned Embu, Meru and parts of the former Central Province. They began mobilizing and caring for disadvantaged women and girls, ensuring they received support and were empowered with information and knowledge needed to lead productive lives in society. With hundreds of women and girls identified, WUSA acquired a piece of land in Embu, where they built a girls' training center for home craft. With the support of Italian donors, charity, volunteers, and the Catholic church leadership, they raised funds to complete the structure and run the institution. In 1968, Terry was employed as a Social Development Officer in the Ministry of Social Services. She would later coordinate The Maendeleo Ya Wanawake organization, founded in 1952. At the time, it operated under a European women's organization, with African women placed in the East African Women's League and exclusive Women's Clubs' for the elite, reflecting the racial segregation of the era. In 1975, Terry was appointed as the first chairperson of the Women's Bureau. Despite a limited board mandate and meager resources, she effectively mobilized grassroots' Women for Economic empowerment. With donor support, they organized women's group that initially had 25 members but grew to 64,000 by the time she left. These were the 'Mabati' self-help groups that transformed into powerful women's economic empowerment groups. By 1991, groups like Nyakinywa were purchasing land, owning property, and building shops. The Government awarded her the Order of Grand Warrior in recognition of her significant and outstanding contribution to Women's Economic Empowerment.

The Conversation

Terry Kantai was interviewed by Caroline Nyakinywa

Interviewer

My name is Caroline Nyakinywa, and on behalf of the Women Economic Empowerment hub of the University of Nairobi, it's our pleasure to have the opportunity converse with you today. We're glad that you've given us your time for an interview on a very important issue concerning women. We are humbled.

Terry Kantai

I would say thank you very much, Caroline, we have been in touch and I'm glad that you the center is is focused on the issues of women and economic empowerment. At this time and age. They think it is good to record the history of where we have come from and where we are going.

Interviewer

Okay, thank you. Could you please give us your name?

Terry Kantai

My name is Terry Kentai. Interms of my background, I was born in Narok, raised in Embu, and studied in Meru. For my graduate and postgraduate studies, I went to the Netherlands, Holland.

Interviewer

Could you tell us which year you're born so that we can know?

Terry Kantai

I was born on December 21, 1942. I will be celebrating my birthday next week, perhaps you can come and we celebrate.

Interviewer

Thank you so much. So, as you're aware, we are conducting a study on women's economic empowerment. And we've picked on you as one of the main people who are going to lead us on this. You have a lot of insights to give to our department, the University of Nairobi at large, and also to the women of Kenya. You've walked on quite a journey. We are grateful that we can gather alot directly from you. So we'd like you to take us through this journey. We'll go through a few issues; we'll pick some pointers that you will be able to expound on as you give us your story. So take us through that journey. Maybe you can start the journey form the independence, have a stopover at the the promulgation of the new constitution, and then take a journey to the present. And maybe you can also give us at least a perspective of where we are going and where you wish us to get since you started. Yeah, so let me go straight to giving us a bit of a background of where you began. You were born in 1942. Where did the dream of women's empowerment begin?

Terry Kantai

I developed the interest in women's empowerment when I was in primary school. I went to a Catholic school, and I worked very closely with a Catholic nun named Jack Bauer, now deceased. In 1959, she took afew of us to Nairobi, to register what is now well known in Meru and some parts of Central Province as WUSA (Women's Union for Social Action). I became the secretary that year, a long time ago. Before then, we had never registered anything formally, but we travelled to Nairobi to the DC's office to register something we didn't quite understand. We simply followed the nun, who had identified me and another lady to join her. As secretary, I helped mobilize women to care for the disadvantaged and ensure that girls could go to school and be empowered with the knowledge and skills to live productive lives in society.

Interviewer

What do you think made you identified?

Terry Kantai

I think it's basically because I was charitable in the school and I was generous with my ideas. If you didn't pass an exam, I didn't mind sharing my knowledge to help someone else to pass. I was also obedient and eager to learn. I guess that is why Sister Jack Bauer thought I'd be good. In fact, I used to think that I would be a nun, wanting to give more. WUSA was an evolution in Embu and Meru because we had hundreds and thousands of women and girls, and for the first time, we even had a plot in Embu, where we built a girls' training center for home craft.

Interviewer

Where were you generating this money from?

Terry Kantai

People contributed the money, but some Italian donors also came on board. We mobilised funds through *Harambees*, where some women brought their chicken or beans and we raised the money that way. WUSA is still outstanding, and some of the structures are still there and functioning. So I think that was a durable effort considering WUSA started in 1954 when I was in primary school, so that is how we did it. And we worked with older women.

Interviewer 2

So, basically, you, girls were involved in the running of the organization?

Terry Kantai

We had the management, leadership, and mobilization skills, and we had very many people. I still recall the then Catholic Bishop of Meru, Bishop Gochome, visiting several churches and telling the congregations, "People should be like Teresa Wambui." I wasn't known as Terry Kantai at that time. 'Terry' was a romantic name – my husband felt that "Teresia" was too long, so he suggested 'Terry'. I thought it sounded nice and was easy to spell. It's even on record that the bishop appreciated my work back then, before I had even chosen a specific direction in life. When you study sociology, social work, and similar fields, you naturally feel drawn to supporting minorities and the disadvantaged in society, and that

that motivation guided me. I continued supporting WUSA, and it eventually took me to Italy when I was just 15 years old. At 15, I met the Pope. I was representing the youth of Kenya. But I didn't understand much. I remember tightly tying my money inside, because I had been informed that in Italy people could also steal, and it was very difficult to untie it. So the sense of tying my money and being terrified to remove it made me not enjoy the trip wholly. Anyway, that organization trained me and gave me the background.

In 1968, I got employed as a Social Development Officer. At that time, we did not have to apply for jobs because government officials recruited from the university. After checking one's background, they would allocate them to a particular ministry based on what they had studied. We never used to struggle the way I see graduates struggling nowadays. So they came and told me, 'Maybe you can work in the Ministry of Social Services," and that is how I joined public sector. This became the foundation of my journey towards women's economic empowerment. To me, this was because people were so disadvantaged that building an economic base was extremely difficult. And in two years, we decided that we needed to decentralize these positions.

The first project assignment involved handling international casework. At the time, many Indians were returning to India, and my role was to document each case, determine how we could advocate for the disadvnataged Asian community, and retain relevant records. Another task I was given was to draft a social welfare policy – something I had absolutely no experience in. I vividly remember my time at the Institute of Social Studies, where I spent extensive periods with people like Professor Kinyanjui, trying to understand the complexities of the subject. Ultimately, our efforts culminated in the drafting of Sessional Paper Number 2, picking up from Number 1.

Interviewer How old were you?

Terry Kantai

Maybe maybe about 25 or 26 old. At that time, I was tasked with establishing the office in Central Province to oversee our work. And, as part of our roles, we were also tasked with coordinating Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, which was the primary organization dealing with women at that time.

Interviewer

When did Maendeleo start?

Terry Kantai

In 1952. It was started by people like Mrs. Sanderson – these were wazungu (European) women. It wasn't us who started it. At the time, we had the EAWL (East African Women's League), and they had the EOW (European Organization for Women). But there wasn't one for African women. Since we could not mix, the idea that we should have an organization for African women came. The wives of chiefs, educated women, and the church leaders joined these, and they were called 'Women clubs.'

Interviewer

So, these Women's Clubs eventually evolved into *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake?*

Terry Kantai

No, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake came much later. These Women's Clubs existed in many rural areas, though they weren't numerous. They were forming groups, but they were specifically called Women's Clubs. I believe this was because these clubs were primarily for the elite at that time –not for everyone, but for people who had completed Standard Two or Three. You wanted to know how this idea came about? So, when I was posted in Nyeri to take charge of the office in Central Province, we observed that education had started gaining traction, and many children were attending school. Central Province was a very interesting province, I can attest, as I worked in several others. Even before and after independence, most women were single, and there were very few men.

Interviewer

Perhaps you could tell us what you attribute this to.

Terry Kantai

The Mau Mau struggle, the fighting, the killings, and so forth. Many people, including *wazu*ngu (Europeans), came from detention to find they had no land.

So, towards the end, women were often left as sole heads of households. They were raising their children alone and were determined to take them to school. While there were still men, the number of young, middle-aged men was limited. This created a situation where if you had a shamba (farm) to plant, and I couldn't afford to pay you, you would help my family that day, and in turn, when you needed help, we would assist you. This made it very easy to mobilize and motivate the women because they were willing and keen. There was also a significant input from Community Development Officers, and then the cooperative movement also played a key role.

I was posted there in 1970, shortly after the ministry served under had undergone a name change. Before and immediately after independence, it was known as the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Community Development. The focus was then on adressing the high number of unemployed people in Nairobi by helping them return and reintergrate into rural areas. Once in the countryside, however, we found many families with small shambas felt uncertain about their future but were eager to improve their socioeconomic conditions. To engage with them, we organised gatherings, often through chief's barazas (public meetings), where we could listen to their concerns and discuss their needs.

The women were very keen to improve their homes. You know, traditionally, women would finish their houses with mud after the had men built the structure, and that was it. But as grass-thatched roofs aged, they would be infested with insects. The women expressed a desire to change their way of living; they wanted their children to go to Nairobi to study and not be forced to return to rural areas. This is how the 'Mabati' (corrugated iron sheet) concept came to be. It was meant to relieve women of the drudgery of constantly looking for grass for roofing, which was unreliable, especially when it rained.

I must not forget a Community Development Officer called Jeliot Kamau with whom I closely collaborated. I proposed our objectives, and she readily agreed. Together, we set simple yet transformative goals: To build improved houses, keep a grade cow, and install tanks for harvesting rain water. These ideas were practical, achievable and specific and so widely embraced that they sparked a quiet revolution. In Murang'a and Kirinyaga, countless groups took them up. I was commended for the progress and encouraged to take the initiative to the Coast Province to replicate the success. However, at the Coast, the task proved far more challenging. I counted different culture and attitude. Women there had suffered but they didn't always express it openly. Still, I found ways to

adapt. For example, cultural sensitivities required a different approach, like I could not dress as I usually did. I wore a a bui bui (a traditional garment worn by Muslim women) and even painted my nails, making a effort to blen in an understand how best to mobilize the women. Gradually, through chief's barazas, the women began to organise themselves, finding a voice and a platform to act collectively.

Around 1975, the idea of the United Nations International Women's Year and subsequent resolutions emerged. In this regard, the ministry was given the mandate to set up a women's desk, which we eventually called the Women's Bureau. I was appointed to initiate it. It had a very broad mandate but lacked a significant status or many resources. However, donors were very keen to help us.

Interviewer

Was this Women's Bureau at the national level?

Terry Kantai

Yes, it was at the national level. A cabinet Memorandum established it as a women's desk but not specifically as the Women's Bureau. They didn't want the word "Bureau," but we protested and it was retained. So, the mandate was to mobilize women. The Cabinet didn't want us to do more than organize women's groups and focus on policy issues, but we pursued other initiatives anyway. Because of this, we went to every province, mobilizing women, and our funding made us very attractive.

In fact, for the groups we organized, we wrote policy guidelines. I remember the requirement then was that a group should have 25 members, they should be literate, organized, meet once a month, contribute whatever they do, and have a clear purpose. These general objectives have held on to date, though there have been many positive changes and improvements. When we started, we had 521 groups, and by the time I left, 10 years later, we had 64,000 women's groups. They mushroomed, and this was also the time politicians began to claim ownership of these groups.

Interviewer

Were these groups, different from the *mabati* groups?

Terry Kantai

These were primarily the mabati groups, but remember, the mabati concept was mainly prevalent in Central Province. In other areas, we simply called them "women's groups." They were motivated through chief's barazas and other means, but they were also fundamentally self-help initiatives. The ministry was heavily promoting and encouraging self-help initiatives. At the time, people, not just women, were builing cattle dips, daycare centers, and schools through self-help. However, women were exceptionally good at organizing themselves.

Unlike now, the Ministry of Local Government had its own Community Development Assistants whose sole job was to help people organize for self-help initiatives. So, the government had a major input, not necessarily in terms of money, but through its personnel. I think we cannot say women just woke up and did it; we had a foundation, and we believed in it and carried it out.

Interviewer

You mentioned your transition from Nyeri, where women were very enthusiastic and driven by the need for change and empowerment, and then you spoke about the move to the Coast. You said that was a new experience.

Terry Kantai

It was a new experience. While there was a lot of good, polite talk, there was limited action. You know, sometimes you feel some people aren't gifted in implementation, but they can analyze and agree with you. So, the speed of doing things was slightly slower. Perhaps it was the weather.

Interviewer

And what would you say was the primary need of women at the Coast?

Terry Kantai

Their need. I believe, was confidence-building and changing the culture so that women were not too dependent on men.

Swahili men, for instance, would typically do the shopping, which might seem comfortable for many of us, providing food. Kikuyu women would go out to seek opportunities, and Nyanza women would do the same, but it was slightly different there. Nevertheless, we established our groups, and they organized themselves.

A key initiative I remember was a water project started by a certain woman in Kilifi. She got divorced for mobilizing women! She had gathered all these women to establish a center. Economic empowerment didn't just start like that. The word "empowerment" itself only began to be used by academics like Professor Wanjiku Kabira in the 1980s. We couldn't even use the word "empowerment of women" in government then. People would ask, "You are empowering a woman? Who is she? To do what?" Those concepts weren't common even at UN. If you look at the history, you'll realise the vocabulary kept changing as people became more aware.

Originally, we were very sensitive about what to say and how others would perceive it. I remember one time, a man told us that by empowering women, we were disregarding men and showing them no respect, even though we were governement officers. We decided to meet as staff and let the women decide whether we were doing right. They affirmed we were doing right, and so we decided we would adjust our methods to ensure we weren't destroying families. We also conveyed our message through songs. We would compose a song, and ask, "Is that song okay?" So, when we had meetings, these songs would be sung. Men would be present, and the songs would be sung and praised. But we still conveyed our agenda.

Maendeleo Ya Wanawake was a socially effective mobilizer. However, some of its groups were "women's clubs," which we later changed to "women's groups" because we had to write a policy on it. We decided there would be no more "clubs," and there would be no discrimination against any woman who wanted to join a group. Maendeleo was always present, and its influence depended heavily on the personality of its leader. If you were able to speak, go to meetings, articulate issues on behalf of women, and advocate with the government, you could make a big impact. I believe Jane Kiano brought a revolution in that regard.

Interviewer

So, when you started mobilizing the women, you said you went to Coast Province, and it was not the same as in central.

Terry Kantai

I wouldn't say it was only in central. In Kamba land and in Nyanza, for example, they also supported each other. There was a greater socio-organizational support across the board. However, when it came to establishing a structured framework, particularly in forming women's groups, and creating systems to train members as secretaries, treasurers, and other officials to strengthen the entire organisation, I believe the government made a remarkable contribution.

Interviewer

Okay, so you're saying that there were traditional groups, that would always support each other in different areas, but it was the government that structured them. And then, did they introduce registration?

Terry Kantai

Yes, the governent had to introduce registration. A group had to be registered. It required 25 members because at that time, donor funding was coming from USAID, Germany, and other sources. We had significant funds, and therefore, a structure for accountability was needed. I remember at one time in Nyeri, the bank manager told me that the only people keeping money in bank accounts those days were women's groups. The women would save their money and keep it there, and they started learning how to use money, how to make money, and they advanced.

I believe that before 1976, for example, in Central Province, what we called "thema" in Kikuyu and Meru – buying companies – started being formed at that time. Nyakinywa in Naivasha, for instance, went for cultural events or other gatherings and presented their case to Mzee Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya's first president) and got land because most of these widowed women did not have land or means of livelihood. And they indeed got the land. They knew that one particular land was a mzungu (European) settlement, and they acquired it. Women began contributing and purchasing land, particularly in the Central region. In regions such as Nyanza, however, land was plentiful, so the dynamics were different. In Kakamega and Vihiga, women often formed groups, though in Vihiga, the land parcels were generally very small. In North Eastern, the situation was

almost entirely different, if a meeting happened to fall on a rainy day and a decision was made to take action, the first challenge was to find money before anything could move forward.

Interviewer

You have told that in Central, like Nyeri, the initial need was the houses?

Terry Kantai

They were worried about where their children would go; they weren't coming home now.

Interviewer

You said Coast was a bit of a challenge?

Terry Kantai

It wasn't just a challenge but they were were challenges, especially for non Muslims, it was not easy. The social structures were different, and the freedom for women to do certain things was culturally limited. It wasn't that they were unable or couldn't; it was simply the way it was set up. For example, a woman had to wait for her husband to bring food home–very few women in other regions in Kenya do that.

Then there was also the question of Arab slavery. The very light-skinned, like you *[addressing the interviewer]*, were very important in Coast; you could fit in because the Arabs had taken control. The issue of land ownership in Coast was very critical because there were so many absentee landlords. In Nairobi, that problem has been solved. The Arabs owned the Coast. *[background conversation]*.

Interviewer

Tell us about KWAHO

Terry Kantai

KWAHO started as a project under Maendeleo ya Wanawake, but the Ministry of Culture and Social Services advised that it should be registered as a separate organization. At that time, Maendeleo had offices in the KCB building, provided by the government, and the

movement was growing very fast. The demand for clean water was also immense. UNICEF supported the idea through Regain Hazard, who was then working with Maendeleo. With this support, UNICEF agreed to fund the project, and it was officially registered as the Kenya Water for Health Organization (KWAHO). Mrs. Mwangola was nominated to lead the organization, and she did it very well. The project began in Taita, Kitui, Baringo, Migori, and South Nyanza, and quickly gained recognition. Although Mrs. Mwangola has since passed on, KWAHO still exists today, continuing its mission of bringing safe water and better health to communities.

Interviewer Which year was this?

Terry Kantai

KWAHO was started in 1976 and was later registered. It operated much like other international NGOs at the time, and occasionally the government would provide support in the form of small tokens. UNICEF also funded the National Council of Women at one point, and the organization often sought additional support from other international NGOs. For a time, KWAHO was linked with *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* through the National Council of Women, until politics began to creep in and the government got more involved.

The National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) itself had been established in 1956, with Mary Gichuru serving as the national chair. One of its greatest strengths was its ability to lobby on behalf of women, which gave many women exposure and influence. *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* was also affiliated with the International Council of Women, and at one point Kenya even hosted an international women's conference that brought in significant foreign exchange.

Unfortunately, the decline—or what felt like the loss of unity and influence—was a big blow to women's organizations. It was as if all the years of work had been erased. The weakening of national women's organizations left women fatigued, and leadership gaps emerged. Many of those who had been in positions of authority seemed to let these institutions fade, even though they could have continued to provide vital support.

Today, one of the biggest challenges is the absence of a strong national women's organization that can stand up on issues like economic

empowerment. NGOs matter because they enable government-to-government dialogue. Back then, in the Bureaus, we would organize Maendeleo ya Wanawake activities, collaborate with the National Council of Women, and work alongside the East African Women's League. Although the League was led by Europeans (mzungus), it was very strong and influential.

When we needed to present a memorandum to the President, these were the organizations that stood with us. If we told President Kenyatta that women were suffering, or that they were not being employed, we had solid backing. But now, there is a noticeable gap—no single organization seems able to carry that national mandate for women.

Interviewer

Where do you think the women are going wrong?

Terry Kantai

I think it is the leadership, which lacks exposure, and I think people wanting to control too much when they get positions of leadership, and yet, they don't know much. I think most women leaders don't know what they are doing. They don't understood the history and they don't want to allow people who know better get closer.

Interviewer

So you have taken us up to the Women's Bureau, and it seems like the Women's Bureau was supporting most of the women.

Terry Kantai

The Women's Bureau was a key factor in developing international relations and also in mobilizing the women because we were denied the policy role, and then we decided to go to grassroots. There were very few women in leadership, and we could count them. So we went to the district and to the villages and mobilized the women, and they were in hundreds. We had a criteria for an economic empowerment project where we could receive funding. Since 1976, one could keep chickens, and we sometimes provided them.

Interviewer

Who set these rules?

Terry Kantai

I am afraid that I did. It was like a garden which was not cultivated, so I did something I believed in.

Interviewer

What about Julia?

Terry Kantai

Julia Ojiambo? She finally became an assistant minister in our ministry. But as an assistant minister those days was just a position. Indeed, one had an office and a secretary, and they did their own things because there wasn't much they could do. However, we sent her for conferences and other forums to represent us as a politician and she benefited alot from the Bureau. We wanted to have an economic project which was unique. For example, we got two fiberglass boats, you know, for fishing, and that was classic because everybody talked about it. Even women could now fish without the risk of drowning, and they even had a motto! I learned a lot from this journey because I did not know anyone who could make a boat in Kenya. And then we had started dairy farming. We had done a research with Dr. Marilyn Khan. She had come to help us identify the appropriate technology for women, and we found that we could get projects that were income-generating and capacity-building. So that's how we provided ploughs and bulls to the women, and women from Nyanzaan Western regions did very well. They were doing the ploughing themselves.

Interviewer

How was the relationship between the Bureau and the government?

Terry Kantai

I remember a lady called Millicent Odhiambo in Kisumu who was with the government but towards the end, she was working for the church . I have a list of them in my notes and if I met them, I would also know them, mainly from government and Maendeleo. Jael Mbogo was also brought in Maendeleo , she was a role model and she made very important news. So, I have a lot of respect towards her because she did a lot of work. There is another lady, Ruth Habwe ,she was a chairperson for Maendeleo ya Wanawake for a long time before Jane Kiano.

Interviewer

When and how often was the position refilled?

Terry Kantai

Annually, but it was politicized during Jane Kiano's time. Before, it was an ordinary organization; women met and decided who to choose. But when Jane Kiano and Nyiva Mwendwa contested the position, it was something else. I had never thought that women could do that, but now that I remember it, because River Road hotels were full of women who were being put there for their votes to be bought. And I had never seen that. I remember at a time I went to a certain office to see a certain lady, and someone said, 'This one belongs to Jane Kiano!' or 'This one belongs to Nyiva Mwendwa!' These people had been bought. Jane Kiano was a Local Government Minister, around 1972 and did a good job. It is the only time I could say that the women started being aware of their political power. She did some good work in bringing women together, and international connection, and raising issues. She articulated issues with the government. For what we could not do in the Women's Bureau, we used her because she had the numbers on her side. We would write a memorandum, go to her house, and say, "I think we need to go to the President for a certain issue, let us say issue 1, 2, 3, 4 and we would all get what we wanted. If we asked for maternity leave, we got it. I remember when I got my first child, I had only two weeks and had to go back to work, otherwise you would pay. And then we also got a major breakthrough in the army through Njeri Ikuwa. She had gone to Makerere. We were able to stop the expulsion of women in the army when they got pregnant. I think we got a few things from Kenyatta, and we were happy.

On economic empowerment, it was not the role of the white person. Because I remember people like Eddah Gachukia were very personal about education. These empowerment initiatives were important for education, health, and social well-being. And you have different organizations addressing these issues, so if you planted the seed for the Women's Bureau, it was easier. They came up with the idea of the Village Polytechnic so that they could stop the youth from migrating from rural to urban areas. But now the government is supporting them, but it has been a sustainable initiative.

Interviewer

Talking about National Council of Women of Kenya, who started it?

Terry Kantai

(unsure) I don't know whether it is Mrs. Anderson. I think the first Kenyan to be the chair is Mary Gichuru. But from there I can't give out more information.

Interviewer

You said at one point the National Council of Women Kenya became political?

Terry Kantai

No. I said Maendeleo ya Wanawake was politicized during that election, and since then it became very competitive because of the power, influence, and votes.

Interviewer

I think the National Council was accused by President Daniel Moi for being political during the the time of Wangari Maathai.

Terry Kantai

And we believe somebody burnt their officers at the university.

Interviewer

How did Wangari make it politically?

Terry Kantai

It is because she had a different opinion, and it differed with Moi because she was too articulate, and there were so many struggles at family levels. But once you get into the media, although she did have the grasp of the grassroots, she had what women wanted.

Interviewer

What was her approach? Did she help other organizations with mobilization or did she go to the grassroots?

Terry Kantai

She went to the grassroots, which I thought was good, but she also ignored other organizations. So the women's organizations affiliated to the National Council felt that she had abandoned them, and there was no need even to be a member. I remember Maendeleo getting out. I remember women getting out. The strategy was not bad, except that one needs to work with what they have.

Interviewer

I remember her saying that she lead it for twelve years, and she said she wanted to hand it over to somebody who had grassroots support, and that is how she handed it over to Jane Kiano.

Terry Kantai

I don't know her impact on grassroots, apart from Kiambu, I don't know what else. And she went legal. She was so much on what is right and what is wrong. Helena Kibicha and I told her, "Let us help you structure this organization because it is not going well." Helena was a management teacher at KIA, and she was good with planning. So we decided to volunteer at good will, and we worked there for three days. But she was too busy with other things, so we never managed to help her.

But we helped her get an office at the Nyayo Stadium from the government. It depends on who benefited and who didn't. I would say it did not function well between that time and now. Now, it is dead because it lacked transparent meetings a proper consultations.

Interviewer

Talk about the Greenbelt Movement.

Terry Kantai

I think that has been sustained. It was born in the National Council of Women by Adoyo, who used to be the minister for tourism. She is from South Nyanza, and she was the chair of the National Council of Women then. And people like Eddah Gachukia and Wangari. And Wangari was coming because of that environmental committee, and they gave it to Wangari, and she ran away with it, and it did very well. She used some women's groups to plant trees and even to sell trees. And that was good because women benefited. But I can say nationally and internationally she had a lot of impact because of the way she articulated issues, and it was like a personal mission.

Interviewer

And some people believed that it was commercialized, that some people were given Ksh 1000 shillings fo them to share and take photographs in front of trees. I think there were more trees back then than now, something happened.

Terry Kantai

You can go to the country side and tell the difference. And also, President Moi started planting trees.

Interviewer

They say women issues are political issues, was President Moi threatened by Wangari?

Terry Kantai

Yes. Politicians were threatened by women groups. And then there were the donors. I don't know what happened, but the donors were very keen when we were in the Bureau. People were fighting for the women's projects , and I want to say there are some success stories about those projects. But I hear there was corruption even in my time; some officers did not use the money well. But I can say there were very many projects, and it was a good concept, and the donors funded them. The Women's Bureau was also in charge of coordinating the women's organizations. I had to work with all the women's organizations regardless.

Interviewer

How were you coordinating them when you were independent?

Terry Kantai

Because if we needed matters in the government or policy issues directed to the government, then we worked together. The Women's Bureau is what they call the Gender Department now. It is a similar idea, but we had wanted a ministry and not a department. We were fighting for the Ministry of Women and Development at that time. We didn't use "empowerment." I think the government decided to set up a State Department, and it looked like people got satisfied.

Interviewer

Do you think it served the purpose?

Terry Kantai

No. President Moi had established a Ministry for women's affairs. I think it was given to major General Mohammed who declined.

Interviewer

What about Grace Ogot?

Terry Kantai

I used to called her Mama Mnyenyekevu [Humble Mother] because she always talked to President Moi.

Interviewer

She was the Minister for culture.

Terry Kantai

Yes, But I didn't see her impact in terms of visibility. However, there was a time we were asked if we knew any woman engineer, and the fact that she was there, it gave some visibility to women. There was no one who wasn't visible, even people like Julia Ojiambo, Nyiva Mwendwa, Grace Onyango the mayor of Kisumu, and Phoebe Asiyo, even Eddah Gachukia at sometime was appointed. All those women, were key in encouraging us to know that it is possible. So, you know, it would be wrong to dismiss anybody because anybody can make an impact.

Interviewer

There is another area, women's self-mobilization. I'm thinking of Central Province and the independent church and how the women helped build the churches.

Terry Kantai

It's true. I can only speak about my mother. She was involved even before the Bureau was established. As a pastor's wife, I remember when my father was killed during Mau Mau, my mother was the one who held the church together and found a pastor to continue. I recall there were some structures to be built, and the women decided to do them by themselves. So, what you're saying is accurate. I can say it has been inspiring, though

it hasn't always been a transformative role for women; in some ways, it helped maintain the status quo. However, the NCWK was an agent of change. I remember we wanted to establish a village polytechnic where girls could take courses typically for preserved for men, like carpentry and mechanics, and the church supported that initiative.

Interviewer

So the church has been one of the supportive structures to women's movement?

Terry Kantai

It has been both positive and negative. Even these women leaders we might sometimes disqualify had their impact.

Interviewer

Did we have women organization from North Eastern during your time?

Terry Kantai

Yes, I remember Fatima, but I can't recall the specific organizations now. I do remember she was divorced because of these women's meetings. In the Coast region, there was also a woman who started a health center. It was something untraditional, and even the women themselves didn't know how to deal with community or social empowerment changes. The idea that women should remain home, or that their involvement outside the home was grounds for divorce, was considered biologically natural by society and was reinforced. When we were born, we found it already established.

Interviewer

What triggered the women to feel they needed to be empowered?

Terry Kantai

Initially, it wasn't received kindly. Women had to use a psychosocial approach in their meetings so as not to destroy their families. I remember in Central, we told women, "You have songs. When we have the barazas and you're called to sing, you sing, and we approve." So, the songs would convey messages like, "This harambee is for both men and women," because the men were very uncomfortable.

But when they heard it was for the family, when they saw their houses being built and a cow, and it was for the family yet they had contributed nothing, they would say, "Akina mama wamefanya kazi mzuri sana" (The women have done a very good job). So, people had to think about the to approach to these things because change is not always easy to bring.

Interviewer

Do you remember Kenya Professional Business Women's Club?

Terry Kantai

I remember them all. We were members that time:I think I joined in 1969. There were figures like Rose, Beth Mugo, Mrs. Muchiri, and a few others. There was a woman called Akinyi Odhiambo, I think from Kisumu, whom I am informed passed on, and who used to be a member of that club. Its main aim was to encourage women to do business and help those in business to grow, and to tap the on the resources the government was providing, including the Commonwealth. It was affiliated with a community theme towards the end, but it started as a club for women in business.

Interviewer

Would you know which woman came up with this idea?

Terry Kantai

I think the idea came from another country just like the way we imported the idea of League of Kenya Women Voters from U.S.A

Interviewer

So, none of these organizations were indigenous? Because I think from the nineties, nothing had to do with the West; they were local.

Terry Kantai

Yes, when we have to talk about the Nyakinywa women's group, it would be a good to see women's mobilization transforming into a land buying company, which was very important because it gave the women the

freedom to own property. Before then, women would use the land, but could not own it. We had also mobilized the Ministry of Local Government to allocate women plots. I remember by the time we left, there were 600 women's groups with plots in different towns to build shops. I had gone there in 1975 and I left in 1991.

Interviewer

You came on board in 1975-1976 with the Women's Bureau. Women were still organized in their groups. I remember they registered, but not in big numbers, but in special categories.

Terry Kantai

That is the only history I have because the women who were organized were the ones who were a bit enlightened. Generally if a woman had gone to school up to standard two or three, that was special.

Interviewer

My mother's group attended harambee schools, some of which acquired land companies in Rift Valley and Central. This started long before the Bureau; even the groups were not started by the Bureau.

Terry Kantai

To be able to meet, you know, one had to get a government permission. What I'm saying is, although they were not in big numbers, there was a class issue—that was the history I have of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. That was eliminated. But groups of women forming their informal groups, I think we cannot deny that, because they existed. To what extent? I do not know. But how many? I also do not know. But I do know there were many who secretly joined together to buy things as a women groups of five or ten women.

Interviewer

We learnt that this mabati (iron sheets) thing started from Mathira.

Terry Kantai

It could be Murang'a, Kiambu, but also Nyeri, because it spread like wildfire, so I don't know.

Interviewer

It was during independence, and the women negotiated for the building of the Kiriri, a boarding school for girls. So, a lot of schools even started with the kirere.

It was not euphoria. I think we forget about the Mau Mau struggle. What if we listen to Muthoni, the General, on how the women themselves organized around independence? when we are in a situation of war, it is a different story. It is also a question of survival.

Terry Kantai

I don't know whether it is Mathira or Murang'a or Nyeri, but I what I know is in your profession meeting, nothing will happen without directives. So, you tell the officers, "we want you to mobilize the women , support them to support themselves." You give them that task. Whether we did not have history before the women were organized, I do not know. But all I know is that even in my mother's time, the informal groups existed. Structured groups came much later. Maendeleo Ya Wanawake was formalized much later because there was supposed to be the chair, the secretary, and the treasurer, that's how the *mzungu* (white people) had set it up.

Interviewer

The rebuilding of churches to *mabati* (iron sheets) was before independence, is it?

Terry Kantai

: I doubt. Who would have afforded mabati before independence? Life was difficult then. There were very few people with mabati houses and we lived in thatched houses. Mabatis were new structured, and everybody celebrated to have them. Right now, they are not even important. You can say the beginning was in the 70s.

Most us in Central lived in Mau Mau villages. How would you travel to buy mabatis? Even transport then was an issue. I don't remember of any houses with mabatis, and if you had houses with mabati and stone you were unique. At least, we are now gettingthat distinction from Kiambu. And there was that challenge of the Home Guard against the Mau Mau men. You were able to tell who was the Home Guard.

Interviewer

And if you were a Home Guard, you lived in the Maendeleo village, and the others lived in the Mau Mau village.

Terry Kantai

There were those structures of concentration camps where people were taken, the whole community. We used to call the *daki*.

Interviewer

It was a big difference. My parents had a whole different experience; My dad was in the village due to the age difference so...

Terry Kantai

Maybe because you were in town. In the rural area, people started understanding and having the freedom, You know, the freedom to move to do business and to move from one place to another. People were very limited.

Interviewer

So, what were these obstacles?

Terry Kantai

I think it was for the elite, and also it was personal. For example, if you had a business, we could only know whether it had an impact on you because it was not something that was being shared broadly. You went there because you did business, so you were a member.

Interviewer

Let's go back a little bit to the Kenya business Women, which you said you have been part of, an international group. What was its impact?

Interviewer

So, this was not reaching the grassroots; it was an elite kind.

Terry Kantai

We had chapters, and we also registered with KUMESA. The organization was registered with KUMESA. We had a Kenyan group for gender—I had forgotten her name from Kenya. But you can say, whatever the case, even the idea, we cannot say it had no impact because somebody learned something. I think all these organizations were very important because it is what brought the total revolution, everybody bringing whatever they had, and they came to the meeting when we had a national meeting; we invited them.

Interviewer

I think it is very very important there, us adapting

Terry Kantai

And it is a matter of exposure. We went to a conference, and we came up with an idea for every Kenyan in the League of Women who were given purpose, and we said, "Let us add others."

Interviewer

Until actually around 80s, before the international women's conference was held in Nairobi, So, probably we want to think about how it helped us in getting strong in indigenous women's organizations.

Terry Kantai

Indigenous in such that we have adapted, fractured, and started.

Interviewer

I am talking about organizations such as the CBOs, national organizations. I talked about Caucus groups and some political organizations. Women's Political Alliance came later, but between 1985 and 1990s, there was even FIDA.

Terry Kantai

Even FIDA is a borrowed idea. 1985 is when we had a conference here.

Interviewer

And the preparatory activities for that conference had given birth to new organizations where there were structures where women were organized at their local levels. For example, FEMNET is an African organization started by Eddah Gachukia, Njoki Wainana and Norah Olembo. Even FAWE is an African organization started by Eddah, some Cabinet minister, Aida Gidi of Egypt. The first chair was Faichum, who was a minister of education in Zimbabwe. That is an interesting direction. And there is also Women in Agriculture, which has been chaired for a long time by Professor Mwangombe.

Terry Kantai

I saw it being documented one time.

Interviewer

Then we have a lot of others like CREAW. Maybe that is another period that one can look at the organizations that grew out of the women's movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Terry Kantai

And which have helped in economic empowerment. You know, everything matters when it comes to women's advsncement, even the breastfeeding support organizations that emerged. Perharps those ideas were even borrowed from elsewhere but took root here.

Interviewer

So, the local national women's organizations we are referring to include groups such as the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO), and later networks like FEMNET (African Women's Development and Communication Network) and CREAW (Centre for Rights Education and Awareness) provided both national and regional platforms for women's advocacy, rights awareness, and economic empowerment.

Terry Kantai

Now,on the question of impact of these economic activities. First of all, it was not possible to access women's economic contribution without entering into government policy development plans. Because if you were not included there, it wouldn't really matter. If the cake is being shared, it was a struggle by the Women's Bureau. We always wrote many pages after a lot of research, submitted them to the Treasury, and they dismissed them. They would refer to women's groups as merely welfare groups. But for the first time, we had at least two or three paragraphs, and they approved them because it had never happened before. They had always referred to us as welfare, even Maendeleo Ya Wanawake was considered as a welfare group. There were so many welfare groups, but nobody said they were contributing to the economy. So, I think it is important that there is that acknowledgment, and I haven't read their development plan to see.

Interviewer

That also takes us to that obstacle we talked about; naming. Is it a welfare or government thing?

Terry Kantai

We didn't even understand this empowerment concept. You always learn new vocabulary as you go. I can't pretend that I had an empowerment background as a word. But even when you go to the UN General Assembly between 1975 and 1985, nobody would touch "empowerment" globally. The concept of empowerment came later. Then we talked about

"gender", before, it was "women in development." Then it was "women in this." It was never those specific words. It's when people became more aware that women started talking. Words are very powerful. You don't talk in a family and then start seeing the women as "empowered." Now, even men are using "empowerment," and they are even saying "capacity building," etc. I see people, and I laugh because these are words we couldn't use. When we started using them, we were all careful. We would use the word "enable," to "enable women to achieve."

Interviewer

At a personal level, as you keep on remembering as we go, what are some of the obstacles you faced as you walked through this?

Terry Kantai

I think the first thing was resources, and also the placement of women's positions in government. We were supposed to do so much, but in a quiet position because we were never supposed to say anything. I remember if I ever went to the Treasury to argue during budget discussions, they would say, "Sasa mama, usizungumze juu ya akina mama wenzako" (Now, madam, don't talk about your fellow women). And I wondered when they became "mine" and not "theirs." Even with the donors, if there was somebody to talk about women, I would wonder. I would tell the director, "I think you are in the best place to talk about the women because you are budgeting for all of us." But what I'm saying is that the resources are limited, and also there is the issue about changing the attitude of our structure. That was a big challenge, and you had to use different approaches and be very smart because you were not allowed to. We even went all the way to the president, but we didn't appear before him. At that time, I was a civil servant, but I drafted their memorandum. We have to use different approaches and also be very smart in articulating the the issues of concern. We used different opportunities that emerged. It was also a challenge, and you had to mask some fear. For example, if you were told to write a speech for the president, which I did many times, and you quoted something that would benefit women, like making President Moi say, "From now on, women can be doctors, chiefs and can be District Commissioners." Although I could have been the one who had written it, I would pretend not to know anything about it. So we went to Kibaki, and it was not easy to reach him. Our agenda was to push for women women civil servants to become pensionable. At the

time, women did not have pension rights, yet their husband were entitled to everything, including a house allowance. When we finally managed to meet Kibaki, we presented the issue. He listene an then said, "Mr. Njeru, Mr. Dave, weka hiyo ipite kwa sababu..." (put that through because...). From my position, I ordinarily did not qualify to go directly to Kibaki. I had to know whom to approach and use as an entry point. That, to me, was a big challenge. You have to check who has seen you, who has not, and how to get past the gatekeepers. I had to use my own ways to communicate and push the agenda forward. The other major challenge was dealing with staff, who sometimes slowed down or complicated the process.

Interviewer

You are making the obstacles more of achievements.

Terry Kantai

Yes. But to get there, I spent sleepless nights strategizing, writing, and making sure that this information did not go beyond, and nobody misuses the community. It was a lot of work, and I found it a big challenge. It gave me constant headaches because I always had to ask myself: *"If I go to her, am I really allowed to do so in my position?"* By right, I should not have asked directly. There were strict protocol issues, and it felt like I was bypassing the system all the time. We didn't have enough resources to reach out, but we knew what to do. Then there was a time when money was stolen in the Women's Bureau. We had subdivided the money and had called all the provinces to come so that we could share the money from the groups, and then there was no money, Ksh. 16 million, and we didn't know what to do. The women's groups are waiting. I had a big headache, and it cost me a transfer. So the capacity to hold the Women's Bureau was a challenge because we created more projects than we could handle with the staff we had. So that was a challenge, but we managed slowly by slowly. And there was also a problem of coordinating with women's NGOs. Some of them didn't want to work closely with us. Some of them felt like we had taken their role. We weren't even controlling because we didn't even know what they did, but if they had a policy question, we had to sort it out because that was a ministry with that mandate. So there was no conflict there. We didn't get involved in their programs, but still, because of the limelight, sometimes people want to be seen doing better than others, but we managed.

Interviewer

Do you even know the groups right now?

Terry Kantai

Not really, but many of them are not even are no longer in existence. But we have a group of 29 members we started in 2014. We are 28 women and one man. It is an investment women's group, a company where we have invested in land, We took a loan of Ksh 9 Million and bought a 50 acre piece of land in Maasai . We just finished paying the loan.

Interviewer

By the way, majority of women's group now have men.

Terry Kantai

It should be more than 30%.

Interviewer

What do they have in common?

Terry Kantai

They were interested in investment. For us but we went along because we were looking forward to doing something together, like even buying something that could bring an income. The interest was to be in a where it's not just social but also to invest something that will help generate income.

Interviewer

Are these women professionals?

Terry Kantai

They are professionals. They have businesses. Some have been teachers some are retired, some are not tired; they are still active employment.

Interviewer

Are you the one who came up with the idea of starting the group?

Terry Kantai

Yes, but I wanted to buy something else and not the land especially in Maasailand, where land doesn't appreciate. But we will recover through other means because we will find another way to address it. It is Bisil, on your way to Namanga.

Interviewer

So the group is still intact. What name did you give the group?

Terry Kantai

Amani Githima, because it was supposed to be a fountain of ideas and hope and all sorts of development. The group members are mainly Kikuyus, and of different age groups. I think my friend and I and another lady, we should be of the same age; we are seniors. They were making a contribution Ksh 10,000 to pay the loan, which was an increase from Ksh 4,000 they were contributing before. I think I even have arrears. Then I belong to another group, where we do merry-go-round. We contribute Ksh 1,000 a month, then we share the money, and then we do table banking.

Interviewer

So you are still doing this thing of women coming together?

Terry Kantai

And sharing what they have, and they can, and building it up. I believe in makingmoney, and I think it is very important. The second group was called PAA Chama. Its membership was quite diverse–we had journalists, high school teachers, business people, and even somebody works in Higher Education Loans Board (HELB). Others like me are retired, three or four, and we now have younger people. We even have two members in the diaspora, who even send their contributions on time. And I have also

been helping them in training; I train them on how to plan for the project, business projects. So, apart from that, we bought two plots in Nanyuki a piece of land, and we think we can benefit from the 'affordable houses' the government has been constructing. We could invest there, and we get money from the Women Enterprise Fund, who have rated us among the best groups because we pay in time. PAA Chama—because I know you are there, you can join. We only bought two plots in Nanyuki, and that one we have finished, and we are also intending to get a loan from the Women Enterprise Fund which we will invest there.

Interviewer

You know, in Lari for instance, or even in Murang'a, women have contributed and bought plots and built, so they are renting the flats.

Terry Kantai

I do not understand why perhaps we were not mature and women were not ready. We got them so many plots, that time they were a lot, and there was a lot of development, and women were allocated the plots, and some of them did not agree, and we helped them to start. But then, when we didn't help and I left, the project didn't seem to stay afloat, and that was very sad.

Interviewer

Women were hoping that Maendeleo House would use their resources there to build provisional houses, and they got land.

Terry Kantai

That was the same thing. Women used to write to Maendeleo to be able to be given plots by the Ministry. By the way, now that you have talked about Maendeleo building, it was a big initiative. I think that is something that could create credibility for Kenyan women. If you went abroad at that time, people would tell you, "We want to meet the women who have built us a strong house," and it is income-generating; it was supposed to be, and these houses were supposed to be shared. There are many things I can't talk on their behalf.

Interviewer

Was it a big investment?

Terry Kantai

It was a big investment, and it is very sad these days; the impunity is so rampant. I don't know what to say

Interviewer

Can you remember the women in Maendeleo who were aggressively involved in the building?

Terry Kantai

There was a lady from the Coast, the wife of a PS, through her name slips my mind. I also remember Damaris Ayodo, Phoebe Asiyo, and Monica Kabederi, who was the treasurer. The chair then was Jane Kiano. There was also a woman from Western Kenya and another from Taita Taveta, although she was more active in Nairobi chapter. Of course, there were several others, but their names don't come to me right now.

Interviewer

By the way, in these two organizations that you are in, are you in any leadership position?

Terry Kantai

Yeah, I have been the chair, but I have been wanting to retire since it started, but they always refuse.

Interviewer

What do you find is most important about, let's say, the second group? Let's talk about the second group because you said that with the first one, you were not happy with their investment idea?

Terry Kantai

The group is okay with the idea of buying land. But at that time, they could have bought a building, and it would have brought money because the idea was investment.

Towards the end, they realized that there is no need to spend money on land that is not generating income. I think it is because it will not refund the money we have spent right now.

Interviewer

What are the challenges? First of all, how do you see these vehicles as the course of women's economic empowerment? Are they viable?

Terry Kantai

They are viable, but people need a proper foundation, so you need to know why you are investing, why you are generating income, and why you are not?. This is because if you don't know, then you waste your energy. And I have found that preparation in terms of training is very important so that people know what to expect, how to move on, how to accept change and how to change things. Right now, in the second group, we are thinking of buying a building. If it is located in a good place, it will bring us rental income. But you know, with COVID-19 we think that this is a big investment. It is a challenge to raise the money, but people are willing, and I know that it can happen. Some people do not attend the meeting, and I find that cumbersome. And then we have very few people who are able to work, but the rest are there to criticize only. For me, I tell them that that is a challenge they can deal with on at a personal level because they have to budget for their time well and know what they are aiming at.

Interviewer

When do you have your meetings?

Terry Kantai

We do our meetings twice a month.

Interviewer

And how many are you?

Terry Kantai

We are about 15, although our records show that we have more members, including younger people of your age *(referring to a young interviewer)*. I am the only one who walks slowly.

Interviewer

These actually happen within these Nyakinywa women's groups who actually passed on.

Terry Kantai

We had one. We had bought land in Kiserian in Maasai. I know that because my friend wanted to buy a share from the Nyakinywa. Many of these women have passed on, and you know, without a written will, it has always been cumbersome, with other people wanting to take advantage of what they left. So that is a problem. I have been telling the women's groups,"Make sure you have things that are written, have them in point form and be clear and say that if something happens and there is money, it can go there." So, you have to structure things.

Interviewer

Before my mother passed away, she was in one of the Nyakinywa groups, the group sold an incomplete building they had bought, and divided the money. So my brother went to collect the money, and the secretary asked him, "Who sent you to get the money?" And he said he went because he knew that they were dividing the money. And they told him, "We can't give you the money. Tell Wangari—we know your sister—because when your mother couldn't come herself, she was the one who used to come in her place. So let Wanhari come for the money, and she will take it to your mother. She's not dead yet, she is only old."

So the question of transition, have they always handed over the property they have earned to their sons and daughters?

Terry Kantai

I think we never took care of that until they named the next of kin, but it was not something written so there was no data. But it is becoming very critical these days that it should be put down, sometimes with the help of a lawyer. And these days, we have lawyers who can help on pro bono, especially after they have been trained. But I hope people are getting more and more aware. In the two groups I am in, we have a provision for that, and we've made sure we have details including the picture and the telephone number of the next of kin—two of them. I think it is very important. One lady gave us her title deed so that we could secure the room in Masaka, which allowed us to have a place to stay. So the lawyer of that woman said the husband had no say in the land because it was a small plot, which he didn't even know about. So, how do you start to introduce the matter this time when it is not in his name?

Interviewer

I wanted to get a loan from the bank, my spouse came and he wanted to be part of it. So my daughter brought me the papers, and I firmly said, *"This is my piece of land."*

Terry Kantai

But I think we need consent because it is the law.

Interviewer

About spousal consent, you cannot get a loan or sell property without the consent of your spouse. There was a lot of conflict when it was being practiced.

Terry Kantai

But I think women organization like FIDA, there is a girl here who came to me, she has been to FIDA. Her husband had abandoned her with three children, and they are doing nothing for four years.

Interviewer 3

There is some problem today. I was with some PhD students in law, and today it is 50/50, even when the woman doesn't work.

Interviewer 1

On sharing of property and responsibility.

Interviewer 2

But there are many areas where the average is different.

Terry Kantai

To tell you the truth, we have a lot of work in this project of yours. I can tell you one thing: the journey has just begun. We have so many issues to deal with, because even when you make money, you have no control. I remember in Karatina, a chair of a women's group arrived very late, and we weren't happy because we had agreed on time. She came and told me she had to follow her husband because it was coffee pay day for the farmers, and if he went alone, she wouldn't get anything. She followed him to the coffee Union and then to the bank, and she received very little money. I think we should activate or have new women's organizations that will fill in the gap where the government isn't performing, even where they can leave cheques and balance with the government, because it would allow for free articulation.

Interviewer 2

I think the NGOs are being swallowed by the government.

Terry Kantai

And even the donors aren't happy. I had even gone to see the PS who was there, and I told her we should revive the National Council. So I gave her a write-up. I told her, "It doesn't make sense to have several government bodies which aren't supporting you,' and she agreed. Then she got transferred.

Interviewer

Through this journey, what would you say has been the government's contribution?

Terry Kantai

I think both NGOs and the government have made a major contribution by changing attitudes and providing solutions to people. Before, women were somewhat isolated, now there's more integration, people are working together. I think it's important that even men appreciate women's role much more than when we started.

Interviewer 2

At the family level, even the attitude has changed. I think that's important. There has been admittance that women can contribute to the economic empowerment of the family as a whole. It's not like before, where they were just seen as house workers. So right now, there's more freedom, and it has come.

Interviewer 3

Since you've worked with women's organizations in groups and are also a member, what would you say is the importance of women's groups in promoting women's economic empowerment?

Terry Kantai

I think that role is indispensable. First of all, individually, women aren't ready to stand out at the family level and fight for their rights, but in a group, it's much easier. And there aren't as many social challenges when you want property, because it's group property. When it's just you, it looks like you're competing with other factors, or that you're doing what your husband is doing—that's the attitude people have.

Interviewer 1

From childhood, you've been in groups, so you've worked with women. What do you think holds women together?

Terry Kantai

I think it's the commonality and the belief that there's something to gain—the objective, the factors, and the fact that they want to realize common programs and achieve them. So they pull their resources together. Women's groups are very complex because people come with their ideologies, but there, you learn tolerance, ideas of leadership, and you learn to listen. We meet and talk about our objectives and goals. So, a common purpose, a common goal, a common problem you want to solve, and you know you're inadequate yourself. For example, I don't have a pension, but for me, it's very important to be in these groups because that's the only way I can generate income. And I look forward to my "merry-go-round" day because if I receive Ksh 20,000, that's good money. So it meets my needs, and I'm not alone in this, there are many other women who don't have pensions. But even if I have a pension of Ksh 5,000, it's not adequate. So that holds us together. And I also think we have a common area of understanding , and we want to support our families. We want to raise the standards of the family, and it's good when you have than when you are begging.

Interviewer

You've been in women's groups, and you said the main focus is economic empowerment. Have you seen women's groups deviate from their main purpose?

Terry Kantai

I believe in diplomacy. It was a gift to me because I was never formally trained, but I could understand it. When I attended a meeting, I knew which person I should talk to. Then I needed to understand their position: Would they be useful or not? Things like that. That approach worked well. But also, having knowledge of the subject and ready access to statistics was crucial. At that time, I could speak with statistics, even on national TV, and people would think I was knowledgeable. So, get your information right, control the flow of information, and also manage the process. I found this very important. For example, if I wanted to communicate something to the PS, I made sure it was kept in a confidential note because anything can be manipulated; it might reach them before I do. So, you need to be clever and think ahead. I also believed that working

with men was very beneficial. It's good to have someone on your side because they are there, they know the system, and they hold power.

Interviewer 1

What would you say did not work well?

Terry Kantai

The speed of doing things did not work well with me. I wanted things to happen faster. For example, this ministry idea, I was frustrated because we wrote Cabinet Memorandums and gave them to the ministry, and then it's dislodged. And that's after several months of research and documentation. I also found that the men did not want to empower the Women's Bureau; they were not comfortable with us. I think they just didn't understand gender relations, and I think people enjoy certain position of control. All of us women were are trying to get to where they were, eating at the right table. People are not generous; they wanted to hold and possess, so the men also feel the same.

Interviewer

What can you say are the major challenges that you faced, that faced the women as they self-mobilized and got economically empowered?

Terry Kantai

We talked about that, and I think knowledge and resources are essential. There's an idea that everyone talks about, and very few people understand what it is and how to navigate gender issues, because when we talk about these equality issues, we have to walk together. So I think information is critical, and we have to have steps that we can use that cannot destroy what we already have. So we can build on what we already have. We need resources, we need legal instruments where the law is not in favor of women, we should fight. Then we need to get into government books, like the development plans and statistics, and so forth, so that we are accounted for properly. Because before, our energy and economic input were not recognized; we were just housewives.

Interviewer 1

Lessons learnt must have been a lot.

Terry Kantai

Now, I've learned to be humble because I was patient and strategic. I normally don't do things unless I think I'll succeed. I always think before I do them. So I think that I learned because of working with women. So I think being strategic and having information is important. I learned to plan, to budget my time, and I'm conscious about it. I also learned to debate and to articulate issues in international forums, like the Women's General Assembly and international conferences, where I went to represent the government. Before, I did not have that pleasure.

Interviewer 1

What advice would you give to the women so that they also learn this?

Terry Kantai

I think they should have the information and they should know what they want, to be strategic, so that they can be able to solve problems. Even if they want to deal with politics, you have to know who you are contesting with. If you want to do projects for economic empowerment, you have to have control of that information because you don't want to sell tomatoes and another one is selling tomatoes. And also, think critically about the empowerment business they would want to do so that it does not become consuming, so that they can generate income.

Interviewer 1

And what about the government?

Terry Kantai

There is always pressure, and you find that the women's organizations aren't there. I think we have a very accommodating government, in my opinion, better than any, because I worked for presidents Kenyatta,

Moi and Kibaki. But I think you have to know the government's soft spot. Right now, we're only talking about the two-thirds gender rule. The law by itself isn't understood by everybody, so people aren't even going to fight for that as much. So you need to know how to approach the government to do what you want. That is what I found to be very easy.

Interviewer 1

There were many changes happening after independence. What were the triggers that made women join in mobilization?

Terry Kantai

There was the question of poverty. People had to eat, live, and bring up their children, so they worked together because individually, they couldn't. Some of them were landless, others were single mothers. So they had to join hands as groups to be able to get whatever they wanted done. The other thing was the realization that people were free. The fact that there was that freedom—they were totally able to find houses and get basic needs. And they also wanted to build schools. For example, Central region had so many harambee houses, in fact, they were taken over by the government. So many daycare centers were started on self-help, cattle dips, and village polytechnics—were also started by self-help groups, and the women were part of that self-help because they didn't want their children to have nothing. If you didn't pass to go to secondary, then it was better to go to a village polytechnic. So those were the triggers: the basic needs that were around that time, and the fact that there was freedom, that you were able to use your energy and be where you wanted, because we had gained independence. And for those who had suffered so much during the emergency, there was a need to rejuvenate and come back.

Interviewer 2

How did Yusuf Haji support the women's groups?

Terry Kantai

He was in Tana River, he didn't stay too long, but he did not oppose. He was a good District Commissioner. If you went there, you would find what you wanted. Personally, I never noted anything special.

Interviewer 2

I only heard that there were some women in the 80s who said Yusuf Haji was the best Provisional Commissioner in the Rift Valley when they were buying land.

Terry Kantai

Yeah, because he is very accommodating. He is a diplomat, and he is a person who talks, and once he says something, he would do it. I think that it is important because his office was always open for them. So he was a good diplomat and an administrator. He wasn't shouting even in meetings, but whatever he said, you could listen because he seemed to mean what he said. Also, because of that, I don't know of cases where they went but I do know that our officers used to place him as a person who supports them.

Interviewer 1

Through your office, were you able to receive some funding where you were able to mobilize women. Do you know any other ways where the government over the years has been channeling money that can help women?

Terry Kantai

The women helped themselves. The share we gave them, they also had to contribute. If we were building something, they had to bring labor, and it was quantified. That's how we wrote our project: how many days are these women going to work on this construction? And we decided it's 100,000, and we write it there. So we contrast it with the donor. If it was a school, and there were some poles which people needed to bring, we told them to bring the pole charged the coast at the market value, and put it in our budget proposal.

Interviewer 1

So the money you were spending on the ground was from the donor and the government?

Terry Kantai

We were giving them from the donor, but a lot of the contribution was from the donor.

Interviewer 1

What helped in the self-mobilization of women?

Terry Kantai

I think in most African countries, women had nurtured the spirit of helping one another, so organizing was not difficult. I think even before we were born, they were there, but they were not structured the way they are right now. But they were there, and you knew where to go when you needed help.

Interviewer 2

What drove you as an individual to commit yourself to mobilizing these women?

Terry Kantai

It's because we were not given the policy role. I decided that now that many women benefit, and we start from the bottom, we could even have leaders at the grassroots. I told them that I started when I was in primary school, and we started WUSA (Women's Union for Social Action) in 1960s, and it's still active. In fact, I want to write something about it because it is historical, and there was such a good concept that we needed to help women live better and their children to go to school. So, it was amazing, and it spread like fire. The Catholic Church mobilized the women that way. So now, I was young—was I in Standard 7? The sister brought us to Nairobi to register it. So I was the secretary general, but I didn't understand much, but I knew how important charity was. That motivated me to keep jiggers from the women and the elderly. So I grew up in that, and I can say this sister was the one who made me start that early. I told them I went to Rome and met the Pope when I was 15 to represent the youth. But you know what's interesting is this project was so important that Cardinal Njue decided that it should belong to the church, and the lady who was the treasurer decided to go to court. It was a matter of court, the court decided the church should have it, so it is run by the church.

Interviewer 2

Why did you decide to go to court?

Terry Kantai

Because Cardinal Njue decided that the priest should now run the women's center

Interviewer 2

Just like Moi.

Terry Kantai

Yes, so we said no because this was a social welfare organization, how is the church now coming? So we resisted, and I have always wanted to go to the Cardinal and talk about this. I remember there is a big training center which generates income, but I don't know where it goes and who does what.

Interviewer 2

But you know WUSA and the Catholic Church is like the way Moi government did with Maendeleo movement?

Terry Kantai

Cardinal Njue is the one who di that, and he made them a center. I almost hate religion now. Kamau Kuria was the lawyer representing the women but he lost to the Cardinal. Sometimes I look at myself and feel disappointed.*[women talking over each other]* I know the projects that were there because even the Embu center was very expensively done, and the Women's Bureau gave it Ksh 150,000 at that time, so it was a project we supported.

Interviewer 2

By the way, Bishop Gatimu did something similar in Nyeri because the sisters were never supposed to be independent or to evenget educated. They were supposed to be taking care of the priests' houses.

Terry Kantai

I was frightened by people in Nairobi. I wondered whether they knew where they were going. I didn't understand, and I didnt have shoes those days.

Interviewer 1

Now, give us the reflection of that journey. How has it changed over the years? How do you see the women's mobilization and women's empowerment from those days?

Terry Kantai

We have said we see women having more confidence and becoming more daring, not like before, and they have more freedom to say and do things. They can use their capacities more. And I think they have more information than they used to have at that time; they can access more information.

Interviewer 2

You said some very important news about what you did with government to help move the women's agenda. What do you think now we should tell the women in government?

Terry Kantai

I think they should help build self-initiative. They should have several NGOs which also work on different issues that we can call upon to censure the government. We said here the government cannot check on itself, and I find that to be a big big gap—that there is no women's organization that can go to the government as petition on 1, 2, 3 issues. There isn't any because the National Council is gone, Maendeleo is waiting, and what else?

Interviewer 2

But I was asking something different. When you were in government, you saw the opportunities in government that can help the women, and then you got to the likes of Jane Kiano, and you shared the same information. I am asking how can that help in strategy work in contemporary Kenyan society to promote women's economic empowerment?

Terry Kantai

I think it can work at the center because we need a structure. As an individual, to see a Cabinet Secretary (CS), it would take almost a month or two years. You may not even access them; these leaders are not as accessible as before. Like this center can do something, because we can say, through the research we have done, we understand this certain issue, So, this is what can be done and this how this can help us do this. Because you have to walk with the knowledge and also show them that there is a gap, because they don't know. They are too busy.

Interviewer 2 How come you were not too busy?

Terry Kantai

No, it's because I was committed. I was totally committed and almost married my work. I used to work day and night,and I did not think of investment.

Interviewer 2 What has changed?

Terry Kantai

I think people are ambitious since the exit of Moi government. To me, I think the culture of the civil service totally changed because I saw people more interested in what they can get out of the situation than what they can give.

During our time, to tell you the truth, there were still civil servants who were smarter, and they worked harder and got something. You know, me now, I am too old to change. I am saying we were naive in a manner that we had never acquired material things that mattered that much. But I am saying since Moi's time, I witnessed a change even with the officers I worked with. They were more focused on what they could get out of the job. They looked for ministries where there were resources. We in social services, we were fine with that. I used to call it "people's ministry"—that's where power is.

Interviewer 1

She was just committed to her course.

Terry Kantai

And I was not alone: there were several others. I think I was committed because, from childhood, I saw what my mother did. My mother was also organizing women in the church and getting things done. And then you go to school where you meet sister Nyambura, and she shows you the way. I think I told you I was charitable: I liked to care for people who were not in a strong position. It is just a gift; it has nothing to do with being good or not.

Interviewer 1

Can we ask Dr. Otieno *(heading the camera crew)* what he is understanding by this?

Dr. Otieno

No, I am enjoying the whole history.

Interviewer 1

We are trying to understand, during your time, were you trying to be charitable and were the systems working for you?

Terry Kantai

Not at all. I think the sixth sense helped me to know I can go to Professor Kabira, and I know she can do a particular thing for me. How am I going to go?, Am I going to go like a cat or a lion, or how do I behave? So I used that type of phycology to get the people on my side to achieve what I wanted to achieve, and it worked.

Interviewer

Do you think we don't have a Terry today, and why are they not achieving their dreams?

Terry Kantai

No, they are there. Because of the environment. If you see, the empowerment has been ruined, because to me, I saw theft during Moi's time. During our time, Standard 8 people went and got degrees and got in power. Yes, they got free education from certain areas. What I'm saying is that corruption is the one that has ruled the mentality of many Kenyans, the many young people. It is another generation, and it is not a question of somebody not being good, but I think it is how you respond to the environment you are working in.

Interviewer 2 So what are we going to do?

Terry Kantai

But if there is one person that is good, there will be something good. And in any case, if you are interested in this cause, you want to perfect the situation, so you're determined. And that determination can propel you to do something bigger. For example, this center structure is very viable because it is sustainable, and it has a structure, and it has a home. And with you, you can even go to the office, and we listen to you. Even Presient Uhuru, if he sees you, the problem is to get him. But if you ever found him, he would listen to you.

Interviewer 1

Do you meet Zainabu?

Terry Kantai

We've had several meetings. I told her that she needed to strengthen the institutions that existed, because it's not good to let institutions die like that- with no conclusions, nothing. We need to know why and what we can do better. I said there's no country that doesn't have a national women's NGO. I can only see Kenya now – you know, an NGO that goes internationally to a meeting. I told them *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* was associated with Women of the World, and we brought the conference here with many women. The National Council was also an international organization; we used to pay, I think, 5,000 a year. That contact is lost; you can't access that information in the world anymore. So, for me, I think you can talk to the PS and all these other ladies and tell them maybe we need to have a session. But we can also find out where we have gone wrong because there is a problem here, women leaders don't talk, even *Maendeleo* is just there by magic.

Interviewer 2

The organizations that are actually challenging the government now are Crawn Trust and National Women Coordinating Committee. There are a number of organizations that aren't as strong as they were. Wambui also belongs to it.

Terry Kantai

Now we want to help you before we go. I'm thinking of how we can initiate this to find out on what went wrong and how we can rectify this situation so that women's voices can get stronger. Because, like I was telling you, the two-thirds gender rule was just a few people fighting.

Interviewer 2

We are meeting in January because we were talking about women alliance-building for economic empowerment. It will be a very good forum where we will also be sharing some of this information. For instance, what drove you? Because whether they are inside or outside government, they can work together. I wanted to know, for instance, about this Embu story, about this lady...

Terry Kantai

She died, But I want to find out who is the leader now in the current administration for that project and also who is the chair of WUSA?

Interviewer 2

It would be good to talk about the origin and what it achieved before it was taken over by the church.

Interviewer 1

We have highlighted some of the things that we wanted to hear from you. What is your response to this? We want the woman's story not to end. Who are these women we can move to and ask questions so that we can learn more?

Terry Kantai

I think the women are very many, and I may not remember them off hand, but I can think about them and I can come back to you. But people like Eddah Gachukia, Phoebe Asiyo, Francesca Otete—she was the first Deputy PS, Catherine Kuria, she acted in tourism, and she had an impact there, Jeriot Kamau, she was a provisional director; have a history in this country.

Foreigners, like some of the donors I would talk to, like Merlin Khan, I would tell her what I intended to do and I would ask her whether it was important. She was British, and I knew she wouldn't go to the PS to report, because it was a secretive movement, just like the Mau Mau operation. Jane Kiano, was very close to Mama Ngina Kenyatta, and through her, appointments to see President Kenyatta were not that difficult because she would make the appointments. I even had some men who were good officers. [Speakers talk amongst themselves]. You know that time we couldn't use the term 'Women Empowerment' in the government. People would ask, 'You are empowering a woman? Who is she? Empowerment to do what?' Those concepts were not there, even in the UN. You can look at the history and see the vocabulary keeps on changing, because people are getting more and more aware.

END

Chapter 8: A Conversation with Rukia Subow

" women themselves who must decide, not to be swayed by political parties. It is a women's issue; let us all have one voice."

Rukia Subow

Biography

Rukia Subow was born in Lang'ata in Nairobi County, where her father served in the Kenyan military. She spent her childhood in Nyeri and Nanyuki as her father moved to serve in different millitary camps. Rukia has served as both a member and Chairperson of Finance at the Women's Enterprise Fund, helping women's groups access loans and achieve economic empowerement. She undertook Labour Studies in Israel, majoring in Violence Reduction Program, and has worked with the UN and UNDP. She has served as Kenya's ambassador to Iran and as the Chairperson of *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake,* which has been involved in the mobilization of women countrywide. She is a recipient the Order of Grand Warrior of Kenya (OGW) Award, in recognition of the outstanding service she has rendered to the country and the organizations she has worked in. She was elected as the Vice Chairperson of *Maendeleo* organization in 1995 and served as Chair between 2008 and 2013. Together with other women, they transformed the organization from its colonial roots. Initially, in 1952, it was branded as an organisation for colonial governors' wives, solely focused on teaching women etiquette and home care. Rukia, among other women shifted Maendeleo's purpose to an organisation that united women, helping them form and register cooperatives and engage in small-scale vegetable businesses. Her mother joined the MYWO organization in 1964 and introduced Rukia to it while she was still in high school. They were notably the first Somali women to gain its membership. Through the organization, and in partnership with the Ministry of Trade and the Chamber of Commerce, she has been instrumental in initiating economic empowering programs for women. These include international exhibitions for products like kiondos in China, Japan and the Middle East. Together with members of the organization, she has initiated a tree planting project, through the Ministry of Energy, designed to ensure sufficient water supply. This has resulted in business growth of women in the Rift Valley and Kisii, who embarked on commercial sale of trees.

The Conversation

The converstion is Rukia Subow and two interviewers, and camera crew and Rukia Subow as the respondent.

The interview was conducted by Beatrice Kamau (Confirm the others)

Interviewer

Rukia we are very grateful for your acceptance to take part in our study. We are from the African Women Study Research Centre. We are currently conducting a study on women's economic empowerment, specifically interested in the roles women's organizations and groups have played in this area. We are therefore very grateful you've agreed to participate. I have some questions for you to respond to and you can share any other information. To continue, please share with us a little about yourself and your journey towardswomen's economic empowerment.

Rukia Subow

Thank you very much. My name is Ambassador Rukia Subow. I was born here in Nairobi, at Lang'ata. My father was in the Military, and due to his transfers between stations like Nairobi and Nanyuki, I moved frequently with my parents. My mother joined *Maendeleo* in 1964, and she introduced me to it when I was in high school because Maendeleo Ya Wanawake constitution allows high school girls to join. My mum and the late Jane Kiano were good friends.This is how she learnt about the organization, and she became the first Somali woman to join. That's how I eventually joined the organization. I have also been involved with many organizations. After I finished school, I got married, and had children. I went to Israel for three years to study labor studies. When I returned, I worked with the UN and UNDP on a violence reduction program, which was my main major. From there I joined *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*. When I joined Maendeleo, it only had three programs: women in leadership, another on HIV, and if I can remeber well, cookery. We had a very large hall in Maendeleo house where we taught women how to bake cakes and similar things. However, given my background in peace, I introduced many peace programs. We also expanded to include economic empowerment, HIV/AIDS awareness, FGM, and reproductive health programs. In total, we had almost eighteen programs.

I was elected as Vice chair of Maendeleo ya Wanawake in 1995, a position I held until December 2006. Maendeleo ya Wanawake is one of the oldest women organizations not just in Kenya, but also in the larger Africa. It predates our statehood, having started in 1952 – older than all of us here. MYWO was formed by British colonial administrators' and soldiers' wives to bring women together as their husbands were out in the bushes

fighting in the Mau Mau war. It was aimed at preventing African women from aiding their men in the activities of war. Although that was the British colonial government's concept, the women were very clever, especially in Kabete, Kikuyu and Kiambu areas because they participated in theorganization's activities during the daytime, but at night, they would cook and take food to their husbands in the bushes. During the day, when the British women organized the activities, they taught them 'high tales' – how to wash their babies, how to cook, how to hold glasses among others. Over the years, the concept of the organisation changed, eventually evolving into women's groups.. It started like a co-operative, but not a formally registered entity. Women would come together to sell their handfull vegetables, and when they earned their money, they used it to overhaul their grass-thatched houses to mabati (iron sheets) roofs. So, it became known as the Mabati Women Group, which started from Kabete.

Interviewer

So the Mabati concept was part of the Maendeleo?

Rukia Subow

Yes, that was in 1952. If you go back to history of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, from that point,women began forming groups. For example, if they bought ten mabati sheets for a woman called Rukia, the next round, they would buy ten for a woman called Wambui and now rotating in turns. This system continued, with new concepts emerging roughly in every ten years period. After independence, the entire concept shifted, such that women would engage in business and trade among themselves. We have seen women from other countries like South Africa, fight for independence despite the apartheid, and other women in Congo and Angola were doing very well compared to those in Kenya. This history, which we learnt from our mothers, Inspired them to take similar actions. President Jomo Kenyatta, who was in power when I was in school, gave them land. He gave Mama Jane Kiano the land where *Maendeleo house* stands.

Interviewer

Oh, the one in town?

Rukia Subow

Yes, the one in town. Jane Kiano was given the land but requested to donate it to the people of this country. Mzee (the President) then told her, 'I am giving you six months to build a house for the women.' This was because women were living in mabati (iron sheets) houses near where Central Police station is. It used to be mabati houses for women organization. So they began building their houses for the women's organization.

Interviewer

They used it for women organizations?

Rukia Subow

Yes, especially *Maendeleo*. I don't remember another one, because even Wangari Mathai was involved with *Maendeleo* at that time. They were given six months to construct the building. He told them 'I gave you the plot, but if you want to give it to Kenyan women, you must guarantee that you will build the house within six months.' That's where our mothers started paying two shillings per member. This initiative spread across the whole country, and that's how Maendeleo house came to be.

Interviewer

So, the money *Maendeleo* members paid, was used to construct the house?

Rukia Subow

Yes. They also secured a loan from the Central Bank. Kiraine was there at that time, and as I understood from my mum, they were loaned millions of shillings to complete the house, which they were to repay within ten years. Remember, Maendeleo was the umbrella organization for all women's groups in the country. When the constitution-making process was underway, it truly gave us significant space for women to unite and speak with one voice. That's what we achieved.

Interviewer

Regarding women's economic empowerment, as that's one of the programs that you introduced, What did *Maendeleo* do specifically?

Rukia Subow

Maendeleo ya Wanawake's women empowerment program differed from other women's organizations at that time, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, because we held international exhibitions. *Maendeleo* organized many international exhibitions through the Ministry of Trade and the Chamber of Commerce, reaching countries like Japan, China, and even the Middle East. Women took their kiondos *(Sisal-woven baskets)* to China and Japan, which truly empowered them. We also had a tree-planting program, an initiative with the Ministry of Energy, to plant trees in areas with sufficient water like Kisii and some parts of Rift valley. After some time (about five years), they were able to earn substantial money and, that made Maendeleo unique.

Interviewer

Regarding women's economic empowerment, was *Maendeleo* involved in working with government or even parliament- since parliament is also part of government – in developing programs or legislation related to women's economic empowerment?

Rukia Subow

Well, *Maendeleo* was advocating for women's economic empowerment. For example, the formation of Uwezo Fund and Women Enterprise Fund, followed by the Youth Enterprise and Development Fund are all because of *Maendeleo's* advocacy. When we say 'Youth' we mean both women and men. I became a memeber of the Women Enterprise Fund, serving as the Chair of Finance. Every month, we distributed funds to almost four thousand women, mostly in rural areas not just in the cities.

Interviewer

From WEF or from Uwezo or both?

Rukia Subow

From both Uwezo and the Women Enterprise funds. There were initial issues but we addressed them. Women faced problems with capital, accessing funds, or finding guarantors. We ensured women were given loans without difficulties, as the program was decentralized to the lower levels: district, province, and now county and Subcounty levels, making it easier for them to access. We had an issue with Islamic women because interest is not permitted in Islam. After discussions, we simply told them, "You only pay back what you borrowed; the loan has no interest," and they complied, and I recall women we lent money back then are now richer than some men working in the city. With a small amount of money, they achieved great success.

Interviewer

When you consider the programs that have contributed to women's economic empowerment, beyond *Maendeleo's* negotiations with the government for these programs, how did *Maendeleo* directly assist women in accessing the funds?

Rukia Subow

Not all women were members of *Maendeleo*, but *Maendeleo* had a strong presence on the ground. We would call women together and provide them with skills to empower others. When trained, you gain skills that enable you to empower other women. I believe learning these skills has driven women into business, such as agri-business and various small enterprises. However, this took some years because many women operated in the 'open air' or 'otside' often sitting under trees in the market.

Interviewer

Okay, when you say 'outside' you mean they didn't have permanent premises or stalls?

Rukia Subow

Yes, they were not in permanent housing structures; they might have been in markets or selling merchandise from outside. But after some years, they formed groups (chamas) and jointly built premises or established businesses together, sometimes with as many as twenty women. In my region, we have something called a Yutto. A Yutto works not only for women, but for everyone.

Interviewer

What is the English equivalent for Yutto?

Rukia Subow

It's like a savings scheme. It's not money you put in a bank, because you might lose it in the bank. What happens is that, for example, if ten of us each contribute one thousand shillings a month, you would receive ten thousand shillings in ten months.

Interviewer

Is it an equivalent of table banking?

Rukia Subow

Almost the same, but with *Yutto*, there is no formal agreement. In Table Banking, you typically need a signed agreement, but this is based on willingness, what do you call it?

Interviewer

Turst?

Rukia Subow

Trust and honesty among the women and even males. That's why in Eastleigh, you see a large Somali business community. Don't think the businesses belong to just one person but they belong to many people, sometimes between fifty to hundred. Some people in the diaspora even invest in businesses there especially in building those high-rise buildings. The wealthy might contribute fifty million per month, while others contribute five thousand, one thousand, or even a hundred. This is how women hawking in the streets empower themselves. If you go to a rural setup, especially within Maendeleo's reach, say in Turkana, one of the remotest areas, you'll find women, not men, making and selling baskets. Maendeleo would buy those baskets from the women and take them to international markets like Japan and China. In North-Eastern region, women are skilled at making mats. There's also significant livestock marketing, where women sell goats. Goats belong to women, and not men. A woman can sell her goat for small expenses like school fees or children's clothing, but men are in charge of larger animals like cows and camels which cannot be sold as easily.

Interviewer

What about milk? When we go to the Maasai, for instance, we find that milk is a product traditionally managed by women. But unfortunately, when milk gains economic value, men often step in to take control.

Rukia Subow

Every community has its own culture. Somali men, for example, cannot interfear with what they consider as women's things. (*Speaking in Kiswahili)* Hata jikoni hawezi kuingia. (He cannot even enter the kitchen). That is their cultural behavior. The *mbuzi* (goat) belongs to you, the *maziwa ni yako* (the milk is yours), and you can do anything with it.

Interviewer

Let me ask you a question, though it's not directly related to this. I went to Somalia and observed that women are the ones who slaughter the goats and even sell the meat in butcheries. So, in the Kenyan Somali community, if a goat belongs to a woman, is she responsible for everything: slaughtering, selling the meat, and so on?

Rukia Subow

Slaughtering is different. Men slaughter, but skinning and dividing the meat into different parts is women's duty.

Interviewer

What about selling the meat in the butchery?

Rukia Subow

The woman will sell it.

Interviewer

The woman?

Rukia Subow

Yes, because these women empower themselves; they won't let their money go. I have lived in the Central region, and I know many skilled women in the villages who work in tea farms but are not paid directly. The money belongs to the husband, who might be in Nairobi. At the end of the month, the cheque goes to the husband, not the wife.

Interviewer

Okay. One question regarding these funds: you mentioned earlier that Muslim women had a problem with the money because of the interest, and their religion does not permit paying interest. When you said you were able to resolve that with those women, and they paid the amount, what did you do?

Rukia Subow

The woman will sell it.

Interviewer

Yes. Did *Maendeleo* negotiate with the government to remove the interest payments, or how did you approach it?

Rukia Subow

I was a member of the commission or directorate within Women Enterprise Fund. We realised that many women were going to be excluded and so, we devised a solution within the Enterprise Fund's policy framework, which didn't require changing anything or going to Parliament. It was an internal decision within Women Enterprise Fund. We focused on finding a way to provide this fund to the women who would otherwise be left out.

Interviewer

So, you were able to review the governing regulations?

Rukia Subow

Yes, we reviewed the governing regulations.

Interviewer

That is,within the community managing the fund. So, it was an advantage to have women who understood the interests of women, which allowed them to influence the change?

Rukia Subow

We were distributing this money not only in small towns but also to women in the villages. That's where women needed education regarding Islamic principles, because when they were told this was *haram* (forbidden), they would not come to borrow. I had to go to the religious sheikhs and explain to them, "With this money, nobody is paying back any extra money. If someone receives fifty thousand, they pay back fifty thousand, and there will be no interest.

Interviewer

You see, that is what we have been discussing about women's leadership. If women leaders aren't present, decisions might negatively affect them. Now, you mentioned that Maendeleo started long ago, before independence in 1952. You became a leader in *Maendeleo*. What would you say has held the women together in *Maendeleo*, even up to the time you were heading the organization?

Rukia Subow

I think one important aspect was women coming together, even though there were different organizations. Maendeleo has given birth to so many organizations. But what held *Maendeleo* together was its foundation, which encompassed everything from political empowerment to leadership and entrepreneurship. Maendeleo had a membership of more than four million women—a true grassroots membership. In every village you visit, you'll find a *Maendeleo* member. The process of electing a Maendeleo leader involves eight rounds of elections, a process even politicians don't typically go through. So, the women know that when they are elected at the grassroots level, they are recognized by the District Commissioner (DC), the Chief, and everyone. That was the primary power they had in those days. They learnt a lot from the workshops we constantly held. We empowered them by training women on empowerment and skills. I believe that when you empower women and give them the right skills, they will contribute significantly to the nation and society. So, women were always striving to gain a position in Maendeleo Ya Wanawake; that's what enabled us to endure for many years. Although the British women started it in 1952, our own organization as a country was officially registered in 1958.

Interviewer

You mentioned that one of Maendeleo's pillars has been enterpreneurship. You've told us women in the grassroots are involved in making different items and you have talked about the mats in Turkana for example. You also said Maendeleo buys these products from them at the grassroots and exports them. How does this program work, as I imagine it would be very important in promoting women and bringing them together to pool their products for export?

Rukia Subow

The main exhibition for *Maendeleo* was always at the Nairobi International Trade Fair held every October at Jamhuri Grounds.At the show, we had a very large *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* stand where we displayed everything. People interested in materials, bags, kiondos and other items would come, and from there, we would connect them with the women to enable them buy in bulk. So, we'd encourage women, especially in Kariokor and Ukambani, to bring their kiondos. That's how women were empowering themselves.

Interviewer

So, it has mostly been selling here locally? Have there been efforts, perhaps, to take those women's products under Maendeleo and seek international markets for export? Since we've been discussing about exporting, has Maendeleo ever pursued such an idea?

Rukia Subow

Yes, we did. That's why I mentioned international exhibitions. Women were travelling to Japan, China and the USA. It wasn't just *Maendeleo* at the higher level; we were taking women from rural areas with their products to those exhibitions. *Maendeleo* helped obtain visas for those exhibitions. The women would return from, say, America after a month, feeling empowered by visiting other countries. They felt motivated to pursue more such opportunities, but exhibitions could sometimes be challenging; for instance, the tickets were very expensive. Some of them resorted to *harambees* (fundraisers) to afford the tickets.

Interviewer

Have women been able to penetrate that market?

Rukia Subow

They did, some time back. However, an organization's vibrancy depends on funding and having active projects. For some years, Maendeleo wasn't receiving funding from the UN and other donors due to political interference.

As soon as donor organizations, such as the UN, perceive you as leaning towards one political party, they withdraw their support.

Interviewer

Okay. Let's delve into that. You've discussed funding issues and political interference. Let me ask a question related to the latter: we were discussing what has held the Maendeleo organization together, and you also brought up political interference as a challenge that can cause people to disintegrate. What other factors interfered with the organization's cohesion, potentially derailing it from reaching its goals?

Rukia Subow

I think if you recall, when Moi was in power, Maendeleo was once called KANU Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. Because it was a one-party political system, it heavily favored women who supported KANU; if you didn't support the government, you were looked down upon, and your business would not thrive. Women divided themselves along political party lines, and the leadership was swayed towards the government. Later, when discussions about changing Section 2A allowed for the formation of different political parties, women naturally joined various parties. When this influence entered the organization, women began speaking as if through their political parties, which was one of our greatest challenges. Because women were divided into different political parties, maintaining cohesion was difficult especially during a one party period. It even became even more disintegrated when there were many political parties because of divulgent affiliations.

Interviewer

So, were there any other factors that threatened the organization's unity, apart from political interference?

Rukia Subow

Yes, such as lack of funding. You can't separate leadership from economic issues because the two are interlinked. When women are seeking seats, both local and parliamentary, they have to weigh deeply before contesting due to internal political interference. They have to ponder extensively by asking themselves, "Should I go for this seat?" They have to weigh in their options. Women fear violence; they must first get approval from their family. But with men, one can wake up one morning, declare his candidacy, and nobody questions him. Women are frequently abused in large political rallies, being called prostitutes, unmarried, or divorcees. This is what they endure; this is what most upcoming young women fear—to be abused. Those who are truly strong enough have to work harder, because one can't sell her house when all her children are in university. They'd rather secure money for her children than enter politics. These are some of the challenges we face as women.

Interviewer

Okay. Perhaps looking at *Maendeleo's* achievements, particularly regarding its support for women economically, as we're focusing heavily on economic empowerment. What would you say has significantly helped *Maendeleo* achieve or promote women's economic empowerment?

Rukia Subow

Leadership. Because right now, if you look at women parliamentarians, you will realise that most of them have been *Maendeleo* leaders at some point, especially in the last Parliament, not the current one. This current Parliament, I believe, has only five women who truly understand women's economic empowerment, but the last one had many. That was a key factor. Additionally, at one period, the Chair of *Maendeleo* was nominated as a Member of Parliament.

Interviewer And who was nominated?

Rukia Subow

Zipporah Kitonyi. She was nominated as a Member of Parliament while she was still Chair of *Maendeleo*. That really encouraged many women.

Interviewer

Was it also during her time that regulations and programs like WEF went through?

Rukia Subow

That was when I came in. I became a Chair in 2006. The process of making the constirtution had started long before, but when we went to Bomas, she wasn't present. She was there as a member, advocating for women. There were many other senior women including Professor Nzomo, Mama Kiano, Martha Karua, Mama Asiyo among others. These women were truly our role models. I can't forget them.

Interviewer

Do you mean Wanjiku Kabira, Beatrice Kamau, yourself, and many other strong women were there.

Rukia Subow

They even encouraged me to enter politics, even at the rural level as a counselor. Currently, at the county level, it's very important that 30% of contracts are allocated to women and youth. Contractors are aware of this, which helps women secure funds.

Interviewer Is it implemented?

Rukia Subow

Yes, it is enshrined in the constitution. However, implementation depends on the governor. Some governors might fear strong individuals, but youth and women are allocated almost 30% in majority of the counties. They aren't given large-scale projects but rather smaller tasks like school repairs, painting, and dam construction. In some areas, women are specifically tasked with digging dams.

Interviewer

You have discussed Maendeleo's extensive nationwide membership. If I may ask, regarding mobilization, particularly during the KANU era, Maendeleo was so intertwined with the government that it almost became synonymous with KANU, and many believed you had to be a KANU member to receive support. My question is: Has *Maendeleo* ever received government support in mobilizing women to join its membership?

Rukia Subow

It is an open-ended organization where anyone over fourteen years old can join at any time. Many political candidates seek the support of *Maendeleo* women at the grassroots. While we can't say they are directly given money—it depends on the contesting individual and their political party—women play a significant role in the organization because they are widely distributed. If a candidate is supported by *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*, the women typically rally behind that candidate.

Interviewer

Regarding membership of Maendeleo, did the government ever play a role in mobilizing women to join?

Rukia Subow

Yes, The government has an influence. For instance, when we organized events in the field, we used to invite the Provincial Commissioner (PC) or District Commissioner (DC) to our workshops. During their speeches, they could encourage people to join the organization, though it wasn't their direct mandate. However, if they spoke convincingly, some would mention, "my mother was also a member of Maeneleo," which would further encourage women to join.

Interviewer

Okay, so women became interested in Maendeleo after seeing their mothers and older women involved?

Rukia Subow

Yes.

Interviewer

My next question, reflecting on your experiences: now that we have various funds like the WEF and Uwezo, do you see any differences in the women's economic empowerment approaches by women's organizations? For example, Maendeleo existed before independence and continues today. Have there been changes in how women's economic empowerment is promoted, from before independence to the present?.

Rukia Subow

I believe we've come a very long way, though we haven't reached our full potential. It has done us a lot of good. Many organizations are now providing credit. Beyond Uwezo, Women Enterprise Fund, or county governments, numerous other organizations have given women money to start or develop their businesses in various ways. This has encouraged many women to pursue their own ventures; even selling mangoes on the streets. Women now feel more encouraged, and that has truly helped. The days when our organization primarily taught women how to bake

cakes are long gone. Now, every woman knows, and technology has significantly empowered women. Training women on technology, for instance, putting their businesses online, has been beneficial. For example, if I buy flowers from a lady online and she delivers them to my house every week, that's incredibly helpful. Technology has assisted in countless ways. If women truly want to change their circumstances, they have the skills. What women need is empowerment through skills. You can sell your mangoes for shillingi mbili, tatu (two, three shillings), but if you don't have that savings mindset for a bigger future, it won't help you. However, if they are trained on how to save their money, how to run a business, that will be great. The business language is different from what we learn at home. Women who used to sell food in kiosks, serving people lunch, are now packing food and taking it directly to offices because many office workers don't go out for lunch. That kind of business is thriving. Today, I need anything, I get it delivered.

Interviewer

So, you're saying there's a significant shift between past and present approaches to women's economic empowerment, indicating that women need to adopt new methods like technology and innovative ways to reach their clients?

Rukia Subow

As I was mentioning, some traditional disparities between male and female are no longer as prevalent. I don't think you'd tell your daughter not to go to school while your son does, or that your son shouldn't wash dishes. I believe that's another change we see now.

Interviewer

My next question is, when you look back, now having been in Maendeleo and having led the organization for quite some time, are there any lessons that you can share regarding women's economic empowerment initiatives? Specifically, what can women learn about self-mobilization and its impact on their economic empowerment?

Rukia Subow

As I told you, *Maendeleo's* has large numbers. When you have a significant membership, you can spread the word very quickly in rural areas and everywhere else. So, you can learn a lot from the organization. We have documented Maendeleo's work; there are many books and records of their projects in their library. Specifically, the peace program is crucial, as we cannot achieve economic empowerment without peace. So, we implemented peace programs across the country, focusing heavily on conflict management and training women on conflict management and early warning systems. This ensured they understood early warnings. You'll recall that in conflict-affected pastoral communities, women would traditionally cook for men who had gone to war or raided other villages. But now, because of that training, women no longer cook for raiders. They will sit with the men and refuse to allow raids, arguing that, "if you go and kill their sons today, tomorrow they will come and kill my son, my husband, and my brother." We trained over 40,000 women on the peace program and early warning systems through Maendeleo, creating a network of grassroots monitors during times of peace. Unfortunately, post-election violence occurred, especially in the Rift Valley, and we were there on the ground. We had to be innovative in resettling Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Kenya during that period. President Kibaki appointed me and four other team members to resettle people in 260 camps. It was easier to settle people in areas where communities from different tribes lived, like Kipkelion, which had a history of internal conflict between Kikuyu, Kisii, and Kalenjins. But when we were resettling and building homes, we gave them jobs to sit together and build houses across the three communities. While they built, they talked to each other, and we settled people in that area faster than any other. These are examples of what the women were doing on the ground. As soon as you engage women in this way, they are also empowered; they return to their farms and establish kitchen gardens, because during the conflict, you cannot go outside. These are valuable lessons we can learn from *Maendeleo*.

Interviewer

What about now the women coming together to empower themselves economically?

Rukia Subow

Women are already empowering themselves, but they are not always formally organized.

Interviewer

So, within *Maendeleo*, women who make items like mats or bags don't necessarily do so as a group?

Rukia Subow

They still make them as a group, but the core issue is leadership. I'm sorry to say that unless you have a leader who is truly willing to go to the grassroots, engage with and empower the women, if you remain quiet at the top, those at the bottom will also be quiet. There needs to be an active chair at the county or divisional level.

Interviewer

So, we need what I call targeted leadership for them to achieve their economic empowerment.

Rukia Subow

Yes, and we can also leverage the county level. There are women in the County Mca's office, at the level where you're discussing leadership. These same women can translate their political leadership to the women on the ground. However, as you mentioned, most of these women are simply brought in by men; they don't understand the rural women experience. They haven't suffered the way women at the grassroots have. Most of them reside in urban areas, even outside the county and only appear at the times when they are seeking for positions.

Interviewer

And the question is, can Maendeleo fill in that gap?

Rukia Subow

It can fill that gap through its leadership communicating with the women. Maendeleo is a donor-based organization, so as soon as sufficient funding is secured, new programs can be initiated.

Interviewer

I was just wondering, building on what you told us earlier about Maendeleo's initial exhibitions: *Maendeleo* used to help women travel to other countries to exhibit their products. My thought is, does *Maendeleo* still have the capacity to mobilize women with products and even facilitate their export? I believe that would foster very formidable economic empowerment among women.

Rukia Subow

In my opinion, the ten years of devolution have significantly impacted women's organizations. Women's organizations were very vibrant when we were advocating for this constitution, but as soon as devolution was implemented, women became less vocal

Interviewer

And also, when we look at the constitution, specifically Article 43 on socio-economic rights, women made significant economic gains. So, perhaps we need to re-strategize so women can truly benefit from these provisions.

Rukia Subow

I believe we shouldn't solely rely on the organization itself. Now, with the county level, we should start there, as rural women are all at the county level. If we have good, active women leaders at the county level, they can translate everything, especially regarding business, to the women at the lower MCA level. Because when you empower women from rural areas, they won't stay put; they will progress.

Interviewer

I believe I've exhausted my questions. Do you have anything further you'd like to share with us, particularly regarding women's economic empowerment and the power of women coming together, perhaps on women's self-mobilization for economic self-empowerment?

Rukia Subow

As I mentioned, devolution has brought women to the lower levels, not just the top. That's where we need to mobilize women, at the county level, especially with the support of good governors, to effect change for women on the ground. This includes assisting them with sales of their wares or any other business they pursue. However, we need stronger leadership at the county level. That's why we see very few elected women governors or senators. Nominated women senators aren't given any funds, but when one is elected as an MP, they receive CDF (Constituency Development Fund), which can make a significant difference. Women senators, however, receive no funding. The position of Woman Representative, created during our fight for women's inclusion, was almost a placating measure, "Just give them this to keep them quiet." They receive very little—seven million shillings per sub-county. Some counties have almost nineteen or twenty divisions, and while seven million sounds like a good sum, population-wise, it's very little. In contrast, elected MPs receive over 140 million shillings in CDF money per year. They can build schools, and even halls where women can meet. But right now, women are told to go and hire hotels, how will they afford that? They contribute, bringing their own tea, biscuits, or maandazi (fried dough). That's how difficult it is at the grassroots. So, we hope that if all women embrace leadership, we can change this country.

Interviewer

So, through elections.

Rukia Subow

Yes.

Interviewer

Maybe if I rephrase the question related to economic empowerment: we constantly hear about the large number of women and the need for more women in positions of power. Yet, as women, we still face the challenge that after years, we haven't been able to elect women to these positions. I was conducting some research and found that in Kirinyaga, for instance, there isn't a single elected woman MCA. So, where do we begin, and where do we end?

Rukia Subow

Even in Wajir, as you have seen, we don't have any elected woman, they are all nominated.

Interviewer

I was actuallyin Wajir during the last county assembly session and I noted that. So, how do we we achieve these numbers? We keep saying we need more women elected, yet we aren't electing them. The BBI (Building Bridges Initiative) even proposed limiting affirmative action to ten years. I asked women, 'We're already ten years in it, so what magic are we going to perform? Some sub-counties don't even have a single elected woman, yet we're supposed to achieve full representation through elections in another ten years?

Rukia Subow

I believe there are many reasons why women are not elected. Cultural issues are one factor. Even if you're educated, people often don't consider that. As I mentioned, when you want to contest, if you're married, you first start with your husband, then his family, then your own family—your father or brothers. You call them, sit with them, and if they agree, then you approach the broader community. But a man just wakes up in the morning, gets dressed, and goes out to vie for a seat. You see, that's a significant gap between women and men. I remember when I contested in 1999; I was the first woman in northern Kenya to contest as a Member of Parliament. Everyone was laughing at me. Men weren't coming to the

barazas (public meetings) to listen to a woman. They asked, 'What is she looking for? Is she sick? Does she have a weak husband? Is he so weak he cannot control his wife?' That's what women endure.

Interviewer

And that was more than 20 years ago.

Rukia Subow

But I think since then, some women have been elected. However, as I mentioned before, very few of those elected truly care about other women or have engaged with organizations focusing on gender issues. Some, I'm sorry to say, gained their positions through legal battles with men, as women sometimes cannot. That is one cultural aspect holding us back; it will stop at some point, but not yet. The second issue is funding. Kenyan elections are expensive, which women have that kind of money? Your options might include selling your house, but then your children won't go to university. It's up to you to weigh that. These are the challenges women face. However, there will be a time, perhaps after educating people about this cultural issue like FGM, which is more rampant now than it was a year ago.

Interviewer

More rampant?

Rukia Subow

Yes.

Interviewer

I thought it ended.

Rukia Subow

No. What's happening is that communities practicing FGM have adopted a new form: they perform FGM on very young girls, from ages of five to six years old—like the Maasai are doing now—so that the girls can continue going to school, and it remains undetected. This is happening among Somalis, Meru, and other educated populations. Yet, in places like Kisii, if you talk about FGM in your baraza (public meeting), you might lose your seat. So, this is a form of backwardness that we need to stop, and that will require a lot of time.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. We've come to the end of the interview, and we highly appreciate the information you've given us, your time, and your warm welcome to your beautiful home.

Yes, Madam Rukia thank you so much as my colleague has said, we appreciate your time and everything. In a nutshell, it's an honor that we finally get to meet a *Maendeleo* leader from the national perspective.

Rukia Subow Former.

Interviewer

Former is still okay. *Maendeleo* is *Maendeleo*. We may have met *Maendeleo* representatives at the rural level, and it's truly an honor. We've learnt that *Maendeleo's* inception did come from local women, if we understand correctly. It was started by the wives of British soldiers. So, what would you say about the journey from its origins to its development during independence, to your time leading it, and where we are now, especially considering your point that FGM is retrogressive? Is *Maendeleo* achieving its goals? In a nutshell, what would you say about *Maendeleo* and women economic empowerment?

Rukia Subow

I believe I've already answered that question. Maendeleo has achieved a great deal. First, there's its sheer size. I was talking about the number of Maendeleo members. When I left, it was 4.5 million members, both male and female, though females were, of course, more. Since its inception by British women, up to today, I believe it has empowered women economically and politically, especially through leadership. When women learn about their rights—that women's rights are human rights—Maendeleo, as an organization, has attended many international conferences. When we returned, we had to implement what we learnt, although some UN conventions haven't been fully implemented by Kenya. For example, regarding the 2022 issues about women's inclusion in conflict resolution, women are still not invited to the table in this

country; only men represent them. Men discuss these matters, but women are not invited during redistribution or resettlement, only verbally, and it's not formally documented. Kenya has administrative structures, but this particular convention has not yet been implemented. When an organization like Maendeleo is powerful and its leadership is genuinely strong—by 'strong,' I mean women who understand women's rights—you can connect with the government and county levels and assert, 'This is what our convention says. This is what our policy and our constitution say." They cannot evade that. I believe we've come a long way. We used to have constitutions that never mentioned women. Our ten-year devolution, or new governance structure—it's not new now, it's been more than ten years—has changed a lot. But we still need further changes. I supported the BBI (Building Bridges Initiative) but ultimately withdrew my support due to one issue: women were all lumped into the Senate, not the National Assembly. The National Assembly is where legislative work is done, where bills are passe. In the Senate, senators are merely 'like pictures.' I recall a scenario in Uganda. We had a meeting at Kampala University, and President Museveni told us, 'You Kenyan women, you wanted women in Parliament; here they are—seventy women. But we Kenyans didn't feel bad about it, because Kenyan women are fighters. We don't need to be given things; we don't know how to receive things freely. We fight for it. So, we wanted to fight to have women in Parliament. They are there now, and unfortunately, they are just like the males. When a bill comes in, because of political party loyalties, it slips through their fingers. The women there are keen to supporting their political party interests, not women's issues. That's an unfortunate reality in our country, but women have changed. And I want to say I am proud of our women.

Interviewer

You've really emphasized the role of leadership. Regarding the leader we choose as the Maendeleo Woman Representative, from its inception to your time, and up to now, do you feel we're getting it right? And how is it impacting Maendeleo's role?

Rukia Subow

I think we are not getting it right because most of the women in Maendeleo leadership are imposed. Let me say that frankly. They are imposed by political parties or influential figures to occupy those seats.

I know of women who were previously elected, but now their positions have been taken over by women who were not elected. This signifies political interference within the organization. If that stops, women will emerge with rightful leadership.

Interviewer

In your opinion, do you see a way out for us as women, as a country, given that we don't fully utilize these formidable organizations? How do we regain a leadership where leaders are chosen independently and are able to achieve their goals?

Rukia Subow

I think it is the women themselves who must decide, not to be swayed by political parties. It is a women's issue; let us all have one voice. When I was with *Maendeleo*, I believe Wambui knows about this. All other women's organizations used to meet at *Maendeleo*, and we would come up with a single agenda and speak with one voice. That truly helped us. Right now, I can say devolution has really diluted women's organizations. Women now gravitate towards the county level, and those who remain in central positions are quiet; no one seems to want to discuss women's issues. Perhaps they believe we've achieved enough, but we haven't reached our desired destination.

Interviewer

Thank you. Thank you

Rukia Subow

Karibu.

Interviewer

I think that basically says it. Thank you so much.

"I remember when I contested in 1999. I was the first woman in northern Kenya to contest as a Member of Parliament. Everybody was laughing at me. They were not coming to the barazas… men were not coming.

They said, 'That woman, what is she looking for? She is sick! She has a weak husband! So weak he cannot control his wife!' That is what women go through".

Rukia Subow

Chapter 9: A Conversation with Esther Mwaura

"Connect the dots. Let's not fragment development, because it works. Every agenda of development is connected[Ma1] ."
[Ma1]Is this attributed to Esther Mwaura?

Esther Mwaura

Biography

Esther Mwaura Mwiru was born in Limuru, Kiambu, on the outskirts of Nairobi City County. She attended a District Education Board (DEB) school, a community government school in Rironi. She later gained admission to the prestigious Loreto High School and then attended Chania High School for her A Level studies. An alumna of the University of Nairobi, Esther was initially admitted to study double mathematics. However, she felt it would not help her address her community's needs and shifted to sociology and economics instead.

As a social planner, she has worked with underprivileged people in Nairobi's informal settlements. Her early life was largely influenced by missionaries and colonial rule in Kenya, particularly their efforts to help locals consolidate land for better agricultural production. With the establishment of British settlements, land structuring began, leading to most of the fertile land being allocated to white settlers for tea and pyrethrum farming, while less fertile land was left for local communities. Esther has been at the forefront of advancing women's economic empowerment. A pioneer of the women's movement in Kenya, she is an enthusiastic and outspoken gender advocate for women's rights. Throughout her life, she has worked with women living in poverty, having seen firsthand the impact of settlement schemes, manual labor, and farm work on her people. These experiences heightened her awareness of social inequalities and the need to address them. Esther has worked at the Dutch Embassy as a community development officer and urban planner. She also served as an expert on community development in the Ministry of Local Government, focusing on integrating gender into development initiatives.

The Conversation

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Interviewer

I'd love to hear about the efforts you've made to advance Women's Economic Empowerment. Could you take us through your journey in the women's movement and share the impact of your work?

Esther Mwaura

Thank you, thank you very much and I appreciate your work. It's a great honour to have the opportunity to discuss this important issue, the agenda of women's economic empowerment. You asked about my personal journey, but I believe my personal journey is deeply intertwined with the broader story of the women's movement in Kenya. Rather than separating the two, I see my journey as a contribution to this collective journey. Over the past 25 years, I have dedicated most of my professional work to advancing women's empowerment. I would like to position my story within this context as I am part of that movement and I have grown within it. I consider myself as an avid gender advocate, and I am unapologetic when speaking about women's rights. My time and efforts have been dedicated to improving the welfare of women living in poverty. This has been my lifelong work, supporting women are marginalized and living on the fringes of development. That's where my passion lies and that's what I have devoted myself to. Perhaps my journey began with my personal upbringing. I grew up near Nairobi, in Limuru specifically. Many people who know the history of Kenya will recall that this region was among the first places where colonialists, settlers and missionaries first settled upon their arrival in inland Kenya. When they arrived, among the first things they did was to help the locals consolidate land and develop a land-planning agenda. They designated the most fertile land for agriculture, while the less fertile land was left for communities to settle on. This history explains why Kiambu and Limuru became central to Kenya's agricultural development, producing tea, pyrethrum, and what is commonly referred to as Kikuyu grass. Limuri was particularly key in the establishment of zero grazing farming in Kenya because British settlers saw rich land for agriculture. This influence shaped the way land was used, ensuring that the most productive areas were dedicated to farming, while peripheral areas served other purposes. As Limuru developed, its settlements began to look like Britain, with vast agriculture lands interspersed with residential areas. Those travelling from Gilgil to Tigoni would witness this pattern, large stretches of farm

land followed by pockets of settlement. As these land arrangements were taking shape, Kenya became a British colony and the entire land was taken over by the colonial administration. The local communities were displaced, losing their ancestral lands. As a result, many of us grew in these four major villages - places that often sparked curiosity. People would ask, "How is it that, in the middle of these flourishing tea and coffee farms, and cattle ranches, there are three significant slums settlements? These settlements included Rironi village, Commodore (not Kamirithu as known today), and Gararіga village. They became designated areas for people who lost their land to British settlers. We lived in extreme poverty, surviving through hard manual labor. Our livelihoods depended on working in the homes of wealthy landowners, cultivating their farms, picking tea, and clearing bushes for their cattle. Some of the affluent homes and farms were owned by rich local families such as Kainyotus. We were extremely poor, working tirelessly just to survive. Most of us worked either as house helps or farmhands and that was the reality of our lives. However, I was always deeply aware of the inequalities around me. I could see that the reason those rich families lived that well was because we were working for them. Understanding my history helped me to make sense of these disparities. It wasn't that my father lacked ambition or a strong work ethic, he was one of the most progressive and hardworking people I knew. My mother, too wasn't lazy, yet we lived in poverty. The inequality around us dictated her struggles. Within our household, I witnessed another layer of hardship – my mother suffered more. My father was often violent, and whenever things went wrong in our family, my mother became the punching bag and scapegoat. I grew up in a home marked with violence. Despite these difficulties, the five of us siblings were very close, supporting each other through hard times. Working in the farms together, we pooled our earnings, dividing the money carefully each week. If we worked on Saturdays, we ensured that what we earned would last us until the next opportunity. We could gather around the table and do a budget, prioritizing food and other basic necessities. So, from an early age, I learned how to manage finances, ensuring that whatever little we had would last until the next job. Education became my saving grace. I was fortunate to excel in school, and I have always believed that one of the most effective ways to lift women and girls out of poverty is access to quality education. At the time, I attended a public school, which was part of District Education Board Schools (DEB) – these were government-run community primary schools. Many today may be familiar with DEBs, but mine, which was in Rironi, remains a beautiful school institution in the village. I performed well and earned a place at o Loreto High School. At At the time, the government prioritized education and made schooling relatively

affordable. My journey continued through Form Four. I went through Chania High School for my Form Five, and Six before securing admission to the University of Nairobi to study double Mathematics course.

I did not want to pursue double maths because I knew it would not allow me to work directly with people living in poverty – I feared it would push me towards a career in banking, as I had heard that mathematics leads prepares one to banking. So, I made the decison to switch paths. I left Chiromo and moved to the humanities, where studied sociology and economics. That choice led me to my true calling as a social planner – something I have never regretted. I am a social planner. My first formal job after University was to work with a dual society, where had the privilege of working with underprivileged communities in the slums of Kinyago, near Pumwani. Through this experience, I came to understand poverty on a much deeper level – beyond what I had lived it myself. Meanwhile, my boss appreciated my work and was helping me to secure a job at the Dutch Embassy. At a very young age - just one year after university - I became a community development officer and an expert in community development, in the Ministry of Local government. At that time, we were involved in urban development planning for the country and supporting local authorities in integrating gender into development initiatives.So, that's my journey in this work - shaped by purpose and a deep commintment to social change.

Interviewer

From your history, we can see that you have madesignificant contributions to women'seconomic empowerment. Kindly take us through your journey towards economic empowerment, starting from the time when you joined the Dutch Embassy.

Esther Mwaura

What happened is that, having grown up deeply connected to my own village, I could understood inequality first hand. At 24, I waspassionate about every debate happening in the country related to social and economic disparities. In 1995, women in Kenya were preparing to attend the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. At the time, I was working for the Dutch government, and I had access to televisions used for field training. I would bring them to the University of Nairobi to

support women as they prepared for the conference. As a result, I became deeply engaged with Women's Movement, and ultimately, I was identified as one of the delegates selected to travel to Beijing to attend the conference. The most striking realization, one that remains true even today, was that most of the people attending the conference had not experienced poverty firsthand. The discussions in Beijing centered on poverty and advancing women's rights, yet I looked back and I didn't see any one from my village. There was no representation of women like my mother – those who truely understand the struggles we were in Beijing to address. During the conference, I had the opportunity of interacting with wonderful women, including Professor Wangari Maathai, whom I had known before, and I was given the privilege to anchor her interviews and take notes during her discussions. I compiledmy notes as part of the collective output of Kenyan women at the conference. Much of my work at the time involved organzing meetings, writing reports, and facilitating discussions. One day, I decided to walk to attend a meeting NGOs we convening about 100 kilometers from the main venue of the conference. In the meeting, I discovered a remarkable group of women – a global network of grassroots leaders who had set up a tent to share their experiences. Among them were women who reminded me of my mother – rural and indigenous women, struggling yet resilient. They called themselves, Groots International. I was deeply inspired by their stories. Whenever I had free time, I would go to their tent to listen, absorbing the wisdom and strength of these grassroots women from all over the world. Their discussion, made me reflect on the gaps in representation- women like mother deserved to be part of such global conversations. , By the time I left Beijing, I hasd made a committment to myself: I would go back home and build s something like that.and that is how I founded Groots Kenya, inspired by my experience at the Beijing Conference.

When I reflect on the oganization's roots, I recall that Professor Wangari Maathai had actually been one of the founders of Groots International in Kenya in 1985.However, her focus at the time was on developing the Greenbelt Movement.When I approached her, she told, "I am busy working on the Green Belt Movement, but I give you my blessing - if you want to grow the Groots Kenya, please do it." With her encouragement, she became my first anchor in developing Groots Kenya. Today Groots Kenya is supporting over 3500 grassroots women acroos the country,.many of these women are part of women groups that we stared working with after they had already been formed, but the essence of this movement goes beyond,, simply connecting with existing networks. To this day, I am yet to see another movement of this scale that collectively empowers women to rise out of poverty. The mission of Groots Kenya is

to empower grassroots women to speak for themselves. The core idea is to invest in women so that they can first recognize and undeerstand the challenges they face, assess why they are in their current situation, and ultimately take responsibility to drive their own solutions.

Interviewer

How were you able to accomplish it?

Esther Mwaura

The key is to equip the group with the right tools, enabling them to take charge of their own journeys and drive their own agendas. Once they recognize their challenges, they begin to identify external factors that must be addressed. After all, an individual does not exist in isolation, they live within an ecosystem that influences their opportunities and limitations. So, the real question becomes: What must be done with the ecosystem to create desirable change? What are the government's obligations? What role should development partners play? The process involves designing strategies, shaping advocacy efforts, and fostering conversations that encourage stakeholders to take responsibility. When the right environment is created, women can then advance their own economic empowerment. That is how Groots Kenya operates. I can name more than 100 women, I have met who once lived in the slums but have now transfromed their lives. They own businesses, drive their own cars, operate big transport businesses, delivering food and other goods from Molo to Nairobi,and farm hundreds of acres of land. In 2017, after being at the helm for many years, Istepped down and handed over the leadership to younger voices because I believed the movement had grown beyond my imagination. I saw it as an opportunity to test the strength of the organization. If it could thrive without my direct involvement, it meant we had built a solid foundation. And now I believe that has been confirmed, as I recently read that Groots Kenya continues to grow and is focusing on internal development. They are working with hundreds of women within their communities, where land remains communal and predominantly controlled by men. As is common across many regions of Africa, particularly in pastoral areas- land is adjudicated through customary practices, with men making most of the decisions. Despite this, these women have each been granted approximately 100 acres of land, and together, they are farming, producing high-quality food, and lifting themselves out of poverty. In doing so, they are not only accessing land

but also taking ownership—making decisions on how it is utilized. For me, securing land for women is crucial because land is at the heart of women's economic empowerment. Unfortunately, discussions around land often frame it as a purely technical issue, overlooking its profound impact on women's livelihoods and economic independence.

Interviewer

I wanted to take you back to Beijing. You had mentioned that the women who attended the conference did not truly represent poor women. It was only after arriving in Beijing that you discovered a village where women from the grassroots were gathered. Why was this the case, and what was the composition of the Kenyan delegation?

Esther Mwaura

The grassroots women were present in Beijing, but they were not in plenary sessions. They were not on the official delegates or listed as speakers in the main discussions. Well, if we look beyond Kenya, (globally) the trend was the same. The Kenyan delegation was made up of leaders of NGOs, government officials, and high-profile women. And honestly, that dynamic hasn't changed much today. If you attend the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York now, you'll still see that the majority of attendees are individuals speaking on behalf of women from grassroots, alongside wives of members of parliament, governors, and senior government officials. There may be women from grassroots in attendance, but the few who make it there are rarely included in the main discussions. During the Beijing Conference, some Kenyan women were present, but they were positioned outside, in a tent, sitting on plastic chairs on the grass—while key conversations unfolded 100 kilometers away in Beijing city. Even within NGO discussions, it was not women from grassroots taking the podium.

This is exactly what Groots Kenya has transformed. I remember walking in the streets of New York during the CSW in 1988, and some women approached me and asked me, "Esther, so you're the girl who thinks she is going to show us how to work with grassroots?" Instead of recognizing that there was room for everyone to contribute, the sector often felt competitive. For many years, I held firm to the principle: if donors funded my participation in a global event, they would also have

to fund at least one woman from grassroots alongside me. Organizations like UNIFEM (now UN Women) knew this about Groots Kenya- that we insisted on amplifying grassroot voices. I remember one specific incident when preparing to attend an HIV and AIDs conferences in Toronto. We had secured funding to send five women leaders from grassroots, and myself. However, apart from me, they were all denied visas by the Canadian Embassy. I went to the Canadian Embassy and said, "take away my visa. I am not interested to go to Toronto. The poor women and ones living with HIV are the ones who need to be there in Toronto for I was just accompanying them, and speaking on their behalf." The following day, they all got their visas. We faced a similar scenario with the U.S.A government, when Hillary Clinton was in office. We wrote to her, explaining that women from grassroots were denied visas because they lacked formal assets or requirements that the consular officrs deemed necessary. These women had dedicated their lives to care for bed-ridden community members, and had dropped out of school early, how could they provide the required documentation? The system needed to be overhauled. In 1999, when we were preparing to attend an event in the U.S.A, we directly appealed to Hillary Clinton, urging her to speakto President Bill Clinton. We told her, "We have women from grassrots who need to advocate for themselves, but they have been denied visas." The following day, I was contacted by officials from the U.S.A Embassy, who asked me to take their passports the Embassy and they all received their visas.

Interviewer

You've talked about women from grassroots who gathered in tents at the Beijing conference, were the issues they discussed ever forwarded to the main plenary or the did those conversations remain in the tent?

Esther Mwaura

Yes absolutely. If there was a moment in my life where I learnt how to influence a document, it was in Beijing. I remember these women staying up until midnight, refining their messages. When you are talking to twenty women, each sharing her story of abuse and struggle, you can imagine how many narratives must be condensed into one sentence that captures it all. One issue that stood out was human settlement. The women in the tent managed to influence 22 clauses, ensuring that their

voices shaped key aspects of the agenda. We still use their approach and the way they did it, of forging partnerships with people in positions of power. We had people like Professor Wangari Maathai, who had both visibility and a platform. She would taketime to come to the ten, listen to what the women from grassroots were saying, and then bring those discussions into the larger forums. This connection was crucial because women from the grassroots often struggle on their own, to gain access to spaces whwere decisions are made. However, when they work alongside professionals and influential allies, their voices is simplified and easily heard. Unfortunately, what tends to happen over time is that they are sidelined, and those in more privileged positions find it easier to speak on their behalf rather than ensuring they speak for themselves. The challenge remains to create spaces where these women can directly represent their realities without being overshadowed.

Interviewer

Now, could you tell us some of the obstacles you experienced, both at personal and collective levels alongside other women?

Esther Mwaura

In the early 90s, One of the biggest challenges was that people didn't fully understand the term "grassroots." I was often criticised for using it. Some people would say, "Who is not grassroots? Who said that they are not part of it?" Many believed that simply coming from a rural community automatically made them earn the title "woman from grassroots." But the truth is in diversity is our strength. How we define and identify ourselves, where we come from, and the environments that shape us all play a big role. For me, "grassroots" defines a woman living in poverty within her community or someone who is marginalised in development.
In the early 90s, One of the biggest challenges was that people didn't fully understand the term "grassroots." I was often criticised for using it. Some people would say, "Who is not grassroots? Who said that they are not part of it?" Many believed that simply coming from a rural community automatically made them earn the title "woman from grassroots." But the truth is in diversity is our strength. How we define and identify ourselves, where we come from, and the environments that shape us all play a big role. For me, "grassroots" defines a woman living in poverty within her community or someone who is marginalised in development.

While many of these women live in rural areas, they always get out these circumstances and begin advocating for change within their communities. Some of us, like myself, eventually transition from being women in the grassroots to becoming champions for change. I don't consider myself a 'grassroots woman' anymore, but in the early 1990s, I would have. Today, I am an advocate for women from grassroots. Beyond this terminology, another major obstacle is lack of recognition for the contribution of women from grassroots. Their efforts are often undervalued simply because they lack documentation or platforms to tell their own stories. Instead, new projects are introduced into their communities as if they are fresh solutions, without first understanding what these women are already doing and what support they truly need. If we took time to ask, "How are these women conducting their business? What gaps exist in their knowledge? What kind of skills would help them grow?" They would tell you themselves. They don't need outsiders dictating solutions, but real engagement takes time. And one critical effort we undertook was drafting a proposal to establish the Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Hub in Kenya. It was a challenging task that took us about six months of collaboration with the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, ICRW, and Oxfam, among others. I remember leaving as early as 5:00am to go and meet Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation representatives in K.U for three days, trying to convince them on the need for funding, spending days trying to convince stakeholders on the need for a hub in Kenya to systematize knowledge and accelerate the advancement of women's rights, particularly in the area of economic empowerment.

One of our principles was ensuring that researchers will not treat communities as passive subjects. Instead, we aimed to emppower grassroots women, to collect, evaluate, and utilize their own data and give them platforms to narrate their own stories, and that the data should be put in the hands of women so they can use it daily to influence decison-makers at the local and country levels.

Of course, professionals can organize the data to make it accessible to donors and governments, but the real power lies in women being able to analyze their own journeys. If they hold the data, they can use it to advocate for the investments that truly matter to their communities.

Another common misconception is the idea that grassroots economic empowerment should only focus on microfinance.

That's why we see much emphasis on micro-credit schemes. When discussions center on women living in poverty, small-scale agriculture, andrural economic initiatives, funding tends to limit micro-scale interventions-assuming that women are not able to do large-scale financial investments. This mindset must change. The funding for women's empowerment—especially for lifting them out of poverty—has historically been inadequate. Thankfully, today, there are greater resources available. I hope that this funding will be used effectively to drive real gender equality. The journey to advocate for this change has been long, but it is necessary.

Interviewer

As a grassroots women's organization, has the government or any other agency ever supported you in realizing your vision of uplifting rural woman?

Esther Mwaura

Before decentralization, Kenya's administrative structure was organized under provinces, with some government officers supporting women's initiatives. However, this support was often dependent on personal whim rather than institutionalized frameworks. If a district officer was committed to grassroots women's empowerment, they could offer assistance; however, there was no structured system to ensure this. One of the aspects, I'm very proud of in Kenya's 2010 constitutional framework and evolving governance structures – including the previous and current governments, is the allocation of financial resources to women. Significant economic resources have been placed directly in the hands of women through initiatives such as the Women Enterprise Fund, with county governments also playing a role in supporting women's economic empowerment. However, corruption has sometimes hindered the effectiveness of these programs. I recall some women speaking about applying for a loan of KES 100,000, only to be asked for a kickback of Ksh. 20,000 or Ksh. 30,000, while still being required to repay the full loan amount of Ksh 100,000. Corruption and unethical practices like this have eroded the benefits of the funding, and I truly hope such practices have been highlighted before.

Another problem is that while financial resources are directed toward communities, they are not always accompanied by transformative

Often, short-term interventions – such as a five day training followed by financial support – are expected to result in lasting change within two years. However,based on my experience working with women in the grassroots, meaningful empowerment takes time. For a woman who did not complete primary or secondary education, or who has spent years outside development circles, transitioning into a position she can confidently engage with leaders and demand accountability can take a long time. True transformation must be sustained and strategic, ensuring financial support is coupled with the right skills, mentorship, and long-term engagement.

One of the areas where Groots Kenya has made significant impact is addressing the deeply rooted patriarchy within society. While gender inequality persists, we also recognize that men play a crucial role in advancing women's empowerment. My husband has been a great supporter of women's rights, and many men have shown willingness to champion the cause. Groots Kenya has developed a model called "Men Champions for Women's Leadership," which engages men in learning about the cultural norms that must change and how they can actively contribute to development that does not sideline women but places them at the center of leadership. After orientation, these men become powerful allies in creating inclusive progress. Therefore, working with men and boys is just as essential as empowering women—but it must go beyond rhetoric. It requires deep engagement, education, and cultural shifts that ensure men understand that advancing women's rights strengthens communities and creates a more equitable society.

Interviewer

That addresses family and community-level efforts, but what about the government's role?

Esther Mwaura

When it comes to government, one of the things we realized was the inefficiency of constantly lobbying politicians from outside. The realization is what led me to run for a parliamentary seat. As activists, we often spend a great deal of time knocking on the doors of politicians and policymakers. So I asked myself, "why not step into those rooms ourselves?"

Entering those spaces, would mean we no longer have to use donor funds lobbying members of Parliament just to convince them why gender equality matters. Instead, by putting people who already understand these issues, we can use resources more effectively and direct our efforts toward real change. If we fill those spaces with individuals who are already aligned with the cause, we can channel funds into impactful work, not persuasion. That is why we said, "let's change the politics in this country." This conviction was deeply informed by my personal experience of running for Parliament. It became clear to me that transformative change demands representation in policy-making spaces. That experience shaped my decision, and our collective decision, to work toward shifting the political landscape of this country. My decision to run for Parliament was largely shaped by that experience and the realization that transformative change requires representation in policy-making spaces. What if, instead of allowing just anyone to step forward and campaign, communities deeply engaged in the selection of their leaders? What if we asked communities to identify someone they trust, someone with the capacity to lead politically, and then collectively supported that person to step into leadership? A leader who understands their community, and who already has the community's trust. Then, we can protect and ring fence them, not just politically, but socially and economically, so that they are not forced to compete in a chaotic space where every Tom, Dick and Harry arrives from outside, offering empty promises. Instead of outsiders selling promises, we back one of our own, someone grounded in the community's needs and realities.

Interviewer

What if, instead of allowing just anyone to step forward and campaign, communities deeply engaged in the selection of their leaders? What if we asked people to identify someone within their community whom they trust, someone with the capacity to lead politically, and then collectively supported them?

Esther Mwaura

Rather than having individuals leave their comfort zones and try to sell a vision of what they would do if elected, we could flip the process. Imagine a scenario where a community approaches a trusted individual and says, could flip the process.

Imagine a scenario where a community approaches a trusted individual and says, "We want you to run for Member of Parliament because we have seen your work, we trust you, and we believe in your leadership." That way, the candidate wouldn't have to campaign alone because the community would campaign for them, ensuring their success.

In 2013, this approach allowed us to elect five Members of Parliament and 10 MCAs. The model worked very well. Once the elected leaders assumed their positions, they understood that their responsibility was not just personal but a collective mandate. They knew they were not holding those posts for themselves but as representatives of their communities. As a result, when decisions needed to be made, they ensured grassroots voices were included. As an organization, we have really benefited greatly from leaders, including governors and women's representatives, who understand the importance of participatory governance. Many have done exceptional work, and honestly, when it comes to development policies, Kenya has some of the best.

Interviewer

Now that women's representation is growing, how would we have advanced if the two-thirds gender rule was never passed? How was it when the two-thirds gender principle was not there?

Esther Mwaura

We must do more and hold the government accountable. I feel that we are losing momentum – we push for change, achieve one major victory, and then step back instead of sustaining the fight. Even within Parliament, I believe women leaders are falling short. The struggle is not being sustained. When unacceptable justifications are given for why the two-thirds gender rule cannot be implemented, we let it go and wait for them to dictate how development should unfold-when in reality, leadership in this country needs a major shift. Yet, those in power have had the opportunity to change it, but didn't. So in many ways, we must also take responsibility for where we are today. The other problem is the way Kenyans articulate the two-thirds gender principle. Too often, discussions focus solely on political participation, yet civil leadership extends beyond electoral politics. I am currently working in land

governance because I believe that unless we secure land tenure for women, we wouldn't achieve sustainable empowerment. Land sits at the nexus of peace and security, climate change and environmental resilience, economic empowerment, and women's ability to advocate for themselves. A woman who owns land and property cannot easily be displaced- she has stability. However, if she has no place to return to. She may also hesitate to invest economically, even after being given financial support. Imagine a woman owning two acres of land but unsure whether she will still have it in five years—she is unlikely to invest meaningfully in that land. On the other hand, if she knows the land is hers permanently, she will develop it sustainably. If we assess how the gender agenda has been implemented, land governance offers clear insights. If we want to assess how the gender agenda has been implemented, land governance offers clear insights. Those of us working in this space have ensured that —even without Parliament's approval—the two-thirds gender principle is fully adhered to within land governance structures. There is not a single land committee in this country that does not comply with this requirement.

Interviewer

You have spoken about the support you've received from the community, family, and the government, what support have you received from other greater networks?

Esther Mwaura

When I speak of the women movement in Kenya, many people think it is dead. Sometimes people have a misunderstanding of the Women's movement in Kenya. You'll hear some disturbing statements people say about the women's movement. Over the past 15 years, the women's movement has shifted its focus from boardroom discussions, becoming more grassroots-driven and action-oriented. As a result, you no longer see the large conferences that used to dominate the space. Instead, the focus has moved toward direct engagement and practical implementation at the community level. The current focus of the women's movement is deeply rooted in grassroots organizations. If you look back at villages, you'll notice how many women's groups regularly meet to discuss and make decisions—about local infrastructure, such as roads, or broader community initiatives. Women are now actively

participating in school management boards, a significant shift from the past, and they are not doing this as individuals but as part of a larger, and an organized movement. Without women's movement, Kenya would not have made the strides it has made in addressing issues like HIV & AIDS. The movement has returned to the grassroots, and in fact, many professionals are now working closely with grassroots women to amplify their efforts. Today, every funding proposal that goes to donors almost always highlights community participation and the transformative impact it aims to achive. The women's movement is active and making progress, but there is still a need to consolidate efforts and come together more strategically. This is an area where Groots Kenya has particularly benefited – by partnering with various women's movements. We have also partnered with the local universities. While weemphasize the importance of collecting their own data, we recognize the role of institutions like the Kenya Bureau of Statistics. Researchers providegood guidance on restructuring data, ensuring it meets national and internationals standards.

Interviewer

It is great. Now, what do you think is the glue that holds women's groups and associations together, keeping them aligned to their original goals? Towards the original goal, like what you set out to do? Since you stepped down from the leadership of Groots, what do you think is the glue that continues to sustain the movement?

Esther Mwaura

When I first joined the women's movement, one of the biggest discussions was about succession. And at the time, there was concern that many organizations lacked structured planning on succession, and people worried that NGOs would collapse once their founding leaders stepped aside. While I won't name specific organizations, I can point out examples like Annie Njogu, who founded CREW and ensured its continued growth. Similarly, leaders like Lilian Mwaura, who played a major role in the establishment of FIDA, stepped down, and the organization still remains strong to this day. Mentorship has been a key factor in sustaining the movement. At Groots Kenya, we emphasized on trans-generational leadership- bringing in young people to continue the work while senior leaders moved into other roles. There is sometimes a

misconception that opportunities in this movement are limited, but the reality is that there is more work than available hands. The need for passionate and capable individuals remains vast. So I think that has helped. I see a lot of young organizations, even Akili Dada, which was founded by Dr.Wanjiru-Kamau Rutenberg, and is still going on. It's growing strong.

Another significant factor that strengthened the movement was navigating periods of financial hardship. There was a time when organizations had no donor funding, we learned how to continue work without relying on donor funds. That experience helped us understand how to organize effectively without relying solely on financial support. Additionally, there has been a shift in how people engage with this work. Advocacy is no longer viewed as just a career path that provides financial stability—it is about passion and commitment. Identifying those truly dedicated to the cause and providing them opportunities to grow has been instrumental.

Another challenge has been the lack of documentation about women in the movement. However, in recent years, more women have begun writing their own books and sharing their journeys. These stories have been incredibly inspiring, helping others see themselves as part of a larger movement. Encouraging women to document their experiences is crucial—it fosters connection and provides motivation for future generations. Of course, I haven't written my own book yet—perhaps that's something I should consider! But seeing others share their narratives is inspiring in itself.

Interviewer

Have there been instances when women faced setbacks in economic or regional empowerment?

Esther Mwaura

Yes, I think the biggest setback I saw was when the HIV&AIDS struck in this country,. I truly thought women who had built their own economic base had lost everuthing. You saw countless women bedridden, many burying their their spouses, and other struggling to afford the basic food. For me, that was one of the most heartbreaking times of my life- it felt like all the work we had done was being undone. It was a critical moment when HIV

and AIDS became a pandemic in this country and it was devastating. Another difficult period was in 2007, when Kenya experienced confliect, and we lost everything. I remember seeing women work worked tirelessly, growing and selling tomatoes, to build houses and wealth, only to have their investments tragically get burnt down. In Kendu Bay, I met women who had fled from Naivasha. They once had thriving businesses in Nakuru, but when they escaped to Kendu Bay, they had nothing. These were my friends, and witnessing their struggles was heartbreaking. Then of course, came COVID-19. Though I may not be central to the organizing women in Kenya, I remanined connected to many individual women. And I have witnessed the devastating effect that the economic empowerment, or the lack of it, has had on women. One significant turning point was in 1998, when interest rates in this country skyrocked unexpectedly. Women who had taken credit from microfinance banks began to lose their houses to these institutions. That was the times small chamas faced disruption, as they decided that enough is enough. They chose to stop borrowing from microfinance banks and instead build their own financial support systems. If there is a group that deserves recognition for adavancing wopmen's economic independenence beyond conventional women's organizations, it is the women who established chamas at the community level. Our standout example is Groots Kenya, which has developed a robust sacco. Unlike other saccos, this one operates at the national level rather than being restricted to a specific county. Through negotiations with the government, Groots Kenya created a Sacco that serves grassroots women across the country, laying the foundation for what I believe will become a major financial institution for them. .This movement has enabled women to pool their resources beyond just local community groups—women in Kakamega, Kitui, Nanyuki, Kiambu, and Tana River are now connected through this national financial network. Just as professionals have the ability to form national saccos, grassroots women now have access to a similar structure. Previously, restrictive policies prevented them from scaling their financial independence. However, thanks to the government's support of this model, they are now monitoring how it functions. Ultimately, women, especially those in poverty, have demonstrated remarkable resilience during times of crisis. This initiative reflects their unwavering determination to overcome economic barriers and build sustainable solutions.

Interviewer

What are some of these innovations which they may have developed?

Esther Mwaura

I believe women have gained strength through chamas. Women have started accounting for and measuring their contributions in home care, tracking orphans in their communities, and identifying those who have been disinherited. Overtime, this practice has evolved into government programs. NGOs soon realized they could no longer claim there were 200 orphans in Chinyaru when women's groups knew the actual number was 100. Organizations like Action Aid and Grrots Kenya could no longer state they were supporting 200 orphans when records showed otherwise. The issue of double counting became evident. Womentook the initiative to keep records and started calling NGOs into meetings, demanding the names of the individuals they were supporting. Through this, they exposed discrepancies, realizing that some organizations were misreporting numbers while benefiting financially. Furthermore, women grew tired of being the sole caregivers while funds from global organizations were flowing in. They began collecting their own statistics to advocate for better policies and resources—a powerful innovation that women in this country have mastered. As researchers, I believe it is essential to build capacity in this area, using this model to expand research efforts to new levels. This data-driven approach has also been applied to climate change initiatives. If you look at Governor Ngilu's work, you will see she has intergrated cooking energy into climate change programs, even allocating resources for it. Women in Kitui realized that discussions on climate change often focused only on water issues, while they were suffering due to poor-quality wood for cooking and inadequate housing to accommodate alternative energy sources. Kitui is now leading efforts in climate-resilient cooking energy solutions. Similarly, Kiambu and Nakuru have witnessed groundbreaking innovations that help communities build resilience against climate change—whether in agriculture or other areas. These solutions were not introduced by professionals alone; much of the work has been driven by women doing what is necessary for their communities.

Interviewer

What do you think has not worked well in these scenarios you mentioned, such as HIV and AIDS, climate change, conflict, and other issues? All that?

Esther Mwaura

Yes, I didn't quite get... It's always good to start from the beggining. You see, you are mentioning many interconnected threads. Unfortunately, in development, when we talk about a development agenda, we find that some organizations focus only on specific sectors. One may say, "oh, as we don't talk about cooking energy, we focus on water." Another might say, "we don't address agriculture; we talk and focus on health," Or " we only work on gender issues." But a grassroots woman doesn't have the luxury and privilege of tackling one issue at a time because today, it is a about the issue of water, tomorrow health; the next day, the impact of climate change. She addresses all these challenges together. Communities inherently understand holistic development, yet we have fragmented it into isolated sectors, which has been a major problem. This disjointed approach has hindered progress because we are not connecting the dots. For example, people working on HIV&AIDS may later realize that community participation is crucial due to decentralization. However, they fail to recognize that decentralization can also support efforts to address HIV & AIDS, and that tackling HIV & AIDS can help improve access to water and other essentials. And as someone who looks within the lands sector movement, I see first hand how disconnected the land sector is from other areas, despite its critical links to water, climate change, and many other aspects of development. So, I think one major issue is the way development has been fragmented. Another issue is that we have failed to truly believe in the ability of grassroots communities to drive change. We have not recognized their essential role in development. I hope we can start embracing the principle of the 2030 Agenda of "leaving no one behind" because that principle was designed precisely for this purpose. It emphasizes prioritizing the furthest left behind. We need to move beyond business as usual and ensure that the people who have been excluded from economic benefits are placed at the center and in the driver's seat of development. Unfortunately, this perspective has not yet resonated widely. You can see it in the politics, where people continue to speak on behalf of communities instead of empowering them to lead the conversation.

Interviewer

What do you think are the main challenges as you participate in women's self -mobilization for economic empowerment?

Esther Mwaura

For me, one of the major challenges is the fact that resources have not been available. Every time we try to secure funding, we are told to seek micro-financing. Even when we apply for grants, we are told we lack institutional capacity. For a long time, I had to find room, and came across a two-roomed office. Even when we got huge grants from the World Bank, I insisted that we would not rent a new office because an office space does not do the actual work. Many donors pushed us to hire permanent staff at the community level. However, Groots Kenya does not have a single staff in any of the counties. Instead, we have offices run by women, built on community land, not the borrowed or rented spaces. Why should an NGO have an office with desks, computers and seats while expecting the women it serves to hold meetings under the trees? That contradiction has always troubled me. Resources come with many challenges; they are not sufficient, and are often understood. I wish more funding will be directed to community infrastructure, the very spaces that transforming lives. Another challenge we face is the changing the political landscape. I feel that in previous regimes, we were more successful in influencing change. In contrast, this current regime feels disconnected from the people. And unfortunately, it seems like it will remain that way. Our hope now lies in county governments, as they may be better positioned to bridge the gap.

Interviewer

Are there any lessons learned that can inform women economic empowerment initiatives women today?

Esther Mwaura

Yes, I think one of the lessons learnt again, and I hope I'm not repeating myself - is the importance of connecting the dots. We should not fragment development, because every aspect of it is interconnected. Another key lesson is that people know their own issues. They know what is happening them, and they have solutions. While they may have technical skills, they also possess valuable lived experiences. Building on what communities have done well and ensuringthey take the lead in driving their own development is crucial. For me, that is the biggest trend

in Kenya, and I truly believe it will transform the lives. Additionally, data plays a vital role. We need to work from an informed point of view. However, data should not be managed by women in the communities themselves. If we do this, they will be able to track their progress and monitor their initiatives effectively. Of course, ensuring that economic empowerment remains properly linked is also essential. I always say that if we isolate it, we will just be going in circles without making any real progress.

Interviewer

Now, how about the urban woman, those in the informal settlements?

Esther Mwaura

It is the same challenge. If a woman is selling tomatoes where she could be evicted, she won't have the confidence to invest in her kiosk. However, if her human settlement is secured, if even low -cost houses do have enough space for businesses, and if land occupied by people in the informal settlements protected-then she will feel secure in her home. When people feel secure, they improve their living conditions. A woman will replace polythene papers with proper walls, upgrade from poor-quality roofing to better *mabati* sheets. It's not that they lack money or inspiration to earn, but rather that they know their land is not secured for them. As a result, they won't invest in better houses, schools, or businesses. That is why securing settlements is critical. Another important aspect—and what I appreciate about SDG 11, is its emphasis on rural-urban linkages. SDG 1 and SDG 2 are equally vital, but one of the biggest inefficiencies of SDG 11 was the failure to truly implement these connections. Everyone living in an urban slum has some rural ties. Most of the food sold in Nairobi comes from rural areas. Imagine how impactful it would be if we mapped and developed infrastructure that allowed women to transport their produce from rural areas to urban markets in a cost-effective way. If they had better systems in place, they could easily return to their farms, grow more food, and sustain their businesses. That, I believe, is very important.

Interviewer

Okay, now, looking at the peiod between 1960 and 1975 - you must have been young. Major changes were happening immediately after independence. Were there specific factors that triggered your initiative to mobilize women at that time?

Esther Mwaura

Well, no, that's what I initially thought was a DPI? We live as it, but I have read history. So I would say that understanding comes from history, particularly from whatI've just mentioned – the colonial misdoings. We found ourselves in villages surrounded by vast farms, and through that experience, I came to understandinequality. I believe we emerged from that period facing, significant inequality-deep systematic inequality. That was when it thrived the most, and one of the key issues was the concept of a "willing buyer, willing seller" regarding land that had already been taken away from the communities.

Interviewer

Did you ever experience anything common between your mother's era and the women you work with today? Do you have an idea of whether women in her time ever worked in groups similar to those you are mobilizing now? Was there a way your mother and her fellow women supported each other in their efforts toward economic empowerment?

Esther Mwaura

Oh, not in my village. I think most of the community groups, the social groups, were fcoused on social gatherings, such as funeral and weddings. They were more about social support rather than economic empowerment. At least, that was my observation –it wasn't as prominent. I don't think the adults organized such initiatives, but we did it ourselves. At the age of 12, we would organize ourselves for farm work. Since we had very small shambas, we would help each other – finishing work onone person's land before moving to the next. That way, we could complete

our farming quickly and have time on Saturdays to go out and earn money from other work. We would seek casual labor (*kibarua*), and this helped us to work together. Otherwise, if I finished my farm work but left you to complete yours alone, perhaps by Saturday, you wouldn't be able to go out and find work. That solidarity was something I saw, even among our parents in their own groups. Later, women started buying cups and plates for each other to furnish their homes. Groots Kenya built on that idea and encouraged women to turn these items into commercial enterprises. We told them, *"Why do you have 200 cups sitting in a drawer while your neighbor also has 200? Bring them together, rent them out for events, and generate income from them! How often do you even host 200 guests in your home?"* By pooling their resources and starting businesses around these household items, they created new economic opportunities. That's how we built on the idea of plates and cups. Women startedpurchasing sufurias, and soon after started investing in tents. Today, in Nanyuki, some of these women own cafeterias and hotels. I haven't been there for the last three years due to COVID-19, but I know they emerged from the early effort- starting with organizing plates and cups together that had been sitting unused in the drawers. They began renting them out, and from there, they built their businesses, eventually leading to the establishment of a hotel.

Interviewer

So did they receive any support from other sources?

Esther Mwaura

Yes, I would say there were many NGOs, especially the faith-based organizations, that had been working in the community for a long time. These organizations were deeply rooted in the community, and truly complemented the work we were doing. Even big organizations like Oxford and Oxfam complemented the work we did. Actually, it's just that we do different things, Groots Kenya is about organizing and developing these social groups for a long time. When we come to a community we never leave. For example, since we entered Laikipia in 1995, we are still doing work, whether funding is there or not, because we are a movement. In many NGOs once the grant is over, they fold, and they say, "we were there in Nanyuki we did this work and left," But for us, we are a movement. So so as they afford then we still in the community and they are able to build on what we do. However, our approach was different. Groots Kenya focuses on organizing and developing social groups, and we commit to

long-term engagement. When we enter a community, we never leave. For instance, since we started working in Laikipia in 1995, we have continued our efforts there, whether or not there is funding. We are a movement, unlike many NGOs that fold once their grants end. They often say, *"We worked in Nanyuki, did our part, and left."* But we remain active in the community, allowing people to build upon what we have initiated.

Interviewer

We wouldlike to revisit your studies. What made you shift from studying double mathematics to sociology? What influenced your decsions?

Esther Mwaura

When I was at Loreto, I was heading the Vincent Movement. If you follow the Catholic faith may know about the Vincent Movement – it is dedicated to acts of mercy. In our boarding school, members of the Vincent Movement had the opportunity to go out every Saturday and serve communities. The Irish government would send us supplies - foodstuffs like maize flour, disinfectants, sugar,and other essentials, which we could distribute to poorpeople around our school. Kiambu may be known for wealth from teas and coffee, but behind that prosperity lies great hardship. If you scratch beneath the surface, you just see jiggers- that is the reality. So on Saturdays, we spent time removing jiggers from people, washing children, and distributing food. That experience made me realize that this was the kind of work I wanted to dedicate my life to. When I later pursued double mathematics at university, I was still young and unaware of what it would entail. Coming from the village, I was the first in my family to ever go to university, so there was no one to mentor me on how to navigate. I had never even been to Nairobi, just 30 kilometers away from our village. That speaks to how marginalized we were. During orientation at the university, I realized that studying mathematics meant working in a bank dealing with numbers- not poverty. That is when I felt the pull to return to the kind of service I had done through the Vincent Movement. Many of my friends at university were involved in social studies programs, led by professors at the University of Nairobi, that focused on rescuing children and supporting marginalized communities. Some of them would say, "Tonight, we are rescuing children," and I realized that this was the kind of work I wanted to be part of. So, in the end, it wasn't a rejection of STEM, but rather a

realization that my passion lay elsewhere else. Mathematics had a narrow focus for me, and I wanted something broader—something that addressed real societal issues.

Interviewer

Reflecting on your experiences do you see any differences in the economic empowerment approaches, by women's associations in the post-independence and those of today?

Esther Mwaura

I think things have changed, based on the way things have become different while some have remained the same. We need to acknowledge that contexts have changed, and so have the approaches. Unfortunately, I would say that there are very few women movements that want to engage on land rights. And I don't know anyone who will sit down and negotiate about the role. I think things have changed based on the way things have changed, let me, say thecontexts and approaches have changed. Some things have remained the same. UnfortunatelyI would say there are very few women associations that want to engage on land rights. And I don't know anyone who will sit down and negotiate about the role. Land rights organisations play an important role in women's economic empowerment, but NGOs which can help women's organisations deal with women's land rights are very few, if at all they are there. So, things have remained the same in as much as they have changed. A lot of the organizations we started working on economic empowerment oftentold us that we were invisibilizing the women's human rights. Their argument was that by encouraging women to focus on income-generating activities, we were actually increasing their burden of labour rather addressing systematic inequalities.I don't know if we've encountered these kinds of theories, but there was a strong belief that promoting women's economic empowerment, meant failing to understand women's human rights and you're reinforcing traditional gender roles. It was a deeply problematic perspective. In fact, some of us had to clarify the identity of our organizations— if we were advocating for women's human rights, or we were focusing on economic empowerment? That distinction became critical, and it was reflected in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). When drafting the MDGs,

we acknowledged that some organizations would focus on women's empowerment, while others would concentrate on women's human rights. We recognized that the women we worked with—the most marginalized—could never fully claim their human rights unless they were first economically empowered. That made the prevailing theory at the time incredibly difficult to navigate. However, I see a major shift today. Even the large organizations that once opposed economic empowerment initiatives have come to recognize that economic empowerment is a crucial pathway to achieving gender equality and securing women's human rights. For me, that represents a significant progress.

And I'm very pleased that some donors, including those that initially refused to fund us because they believed that we were reinforcing marginalization of women, helped us to re-assess and strengthen our strategies. When working on women's economic empowerment, it is important to anticipate and address potential backlash and be aware that when a woman becomes economically empowered, challenges can arise. Many people focus only on the negatives—because they do exist. I have seen cases where women were divorced or thrown out of their homes simply because they began earning more than their husbands through their businesses. These backlashes must be dealt with, and I believe that concern was one of the reasons people were initially hesitant to support such initiatives. A key shift I have observed is that people now recognize the immense value of data. However, I still don't believe data is being properly placed in the hands of women. Looking forward to the next five years, as we approach the conclusion of the 2030 agenda and accelerate progress, I am hopeful that data will play a central role in driving change. This acceleration is part of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funding, which is directly linked to the gender equality process—the Generational Equality initiative. The initial plan was to implement action steps from 2020 to 2025, but due to COVID, the timeline was adjusted to 2021-2026. The goal remains to fulfill all commitments outlined in the framework. I believe your questions stem from this broader movement, which aims to meet all targets and indicators within the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). That is why Generation Equality donors, including the Gates Foundation and other gender equality funders, are investing in this work for five years—to ensure the commitments made at the Paris Forum last year are successfully implemented. Looking ahead, I hope data continues to be recognized as one of the most crucial areas for progress. As an institution or initiative based in the university, I hope we will play a key role in ensuring data is used effectively. Our priority should be to have data that informs actions,

shapes government priorities, and truly helps us monitor progress and advocate for their needs. That must be our focus.

Interviewer

What are your last thoughts on women's economic empowerment?

Esther Mwaura

My last thoughts on women's economic empowerment are that we remain hopeful that we will achieve major transformations that will bring meaningful change to women's lives, This initiative, and others will truly impact positively the lives of the poor, and marginalized women, including those living with disabilities, the caregivers doing unpaid care, not only within households, but also orphans and other vulnerable groups. These women remain largely invisible in mainstream discussions. I hope that, with significant funding coming from donors, we ensure that these resources are used effectively to empower the right people—those who need them most.

Interviewer

What is your take on how the government can step in to ensure that we achieve these goals?

Esther Mwaura

When it comes to government, the truth is, we have enough policies, institutions, and legal framework - we do not need more. What we need is effective implementation. I think we also need accountability to the people, development partners, and ourselves. This should be at the heart of governance and public institutions should not be used to settle scores, or serve personal ambitions, yet that is what often happens. Honestly, I do not have much faith in the current political campaigns. If what I'm seeing today is the path that will lead us to a new government next year, I struggle to feel hopeful. But that doesn't mean I am giving up. The key to change lies in organizing communities to demand accountability.

Interviewer

Thank you very much, Esther, for your time. It has been truly inspiring listening to you. You embody the essence of Groots and grassroots leadership, having lived it first hand in Limuru. You've witnessed the realities—men leaving for town, women staying behind, young children coming together for community work, supporting one another on farms. That foundation shaped you, and I can see how it has informed your thinking and dedication all along. We deeply appreciate your insights and the invaluable work you've done. Thank you again for your time.

END

Chapter 10: A Conversation with Grace Wanjiku King'atua

"Women deserve to be helped so that they can help each other. Because the woman does not serve at her place only, she will leave from her home and extend the service outside her home."

Wanjiku King'atua

Biography

Grace Wanjiku Kingatua was born in 1944. She is among the women who spearheaded women's Economic Empowerment in Kenya. She started her early schooling in the Rift Valley. Between 1964 and 1965, she attended Copjoy Training Institute and later worked as a teacher. She holds a Diploma in Community Development from KIIA in Uganda. She has worked as an employee of the local County Government of Kajiado. Grace is a trained social worker who provides social services and collaborates with people with disabilities.

In 1968, she provided training to community development officers to persuade women to come together in groups. She was instrumental in the formation and leadership of women groups such as Nyakinywa, Wezesha and Muungano. Through her teaching, she has been instrumental in persuading and forming small communal groups for people in Kajiado, Ngong and Loitoktok. Through her guidance, the groups have engaged in activities such as farming, charcoal trade, construction of classrooms, teaching of knitting skills, and beadwork, emphasising the importance of education for Maasai boys and girls. She has underscored how working in groups enhances access to government resources. Her influence on Masaai women's education and entrepreneurship since 1976 has been profound. It saw many groups getting registered, getting involved in pig and cattle rearing, opening bank accounts and purchasing land. Her resilience has seen her navigate political interests to pursue women's economic empowerment.

The Conversation

Grace King'atua was Interviewed by Terry Kantai (interviewer 1) Prof. Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira (Interviewer 2),

Interviewer 1

When Professor wanjiku Kabira told me she is writing about women who were instrumental in spearheading women's economic empowerment in Kenya, I thought about the journey you have made, when there was nothing until this time, when we can look back and say there is something you have done for women. So I thought you had a good story to tell, and as you can remember, when we were writing a book for the Ministry, we had interviewed you. But that is a different story altogether. Hellen Nkaissery has made significant contributions in the field of social services, particualrly organizing women to join women groups, youths initiatives, and self-help groups. She and her colleagues have worked together for a long time on women's issues, shaping progress in their communities. Both of yYou have a compelling story to tell- reflecting on where Kajiado was in 1960s and where it stands today. They You can share the journey they you have taken, the paths they you have followed, and the steps they you took to achieve the progress we see today. Their Your work has paved the way for women to participate in markets, attend church, and access education. There was a time when women did not go to school, and even a time when they had virtually nothing. Their Your journey represents resilience, empowerment, and the ongoing fight for gender equality. Grace Wanjiku Kingatua,today, I have called her by her full name, which feels unfamiliar because our journey together has been long. We have worked with her side by side, facing the country's problems together. I know much about her journeys, and she has a story to share. Since she is elderly,she may not remember everything, but I can help in recounting some of the experiences. In 1984, when we issued a circular encouraging women to form groups and approach the local government for land allocation, some of the first ones to embrace this were from Kajiado. They established 41 women's groups under the name Muungano. As a result, they were given a large plot in Kajiado town for economic development. And that's just one part of their journey—there is much more she can share with you.

I also want to highlight that Professor Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira is well known for her contributions to women's empowerment, both economically and in leadership. She was among the commissioners involved in constitutional development and played a key role in establishing the African Women's Studiesy Centre at the University of Nairobi. Through her research, this center helps identify and analyze critical issues affecting women, providing valuable insights into their realities..

She has also authored many books, and if I were to document her story, it would be difficult to determine where to start from and where to end because she has accomplished so much. However, I am confident that her story will be written, even if it means gathering both men and women to contribute to it.

When she mentioned that they were documenting women, I told her that grassroots women must be included in the narrative. Too often, interviews focus on women in Nairobi, yet contributions of rural women have significantly shaped the country's progress in women's empowerment. That's why I urged her to visit villages and hear directly from the women whose efforts have strengthened this movement.

Another remarkable figure is Hellen Nkaissey, who was a dedicated social worker. I worked with her in the same office alongside the social development officer, performing similar duties. Most of her work focused on assisting the needy, the destitute, the elderly and those affected by jiggers. I truly believe that when people work together over time, they build strong friendships and, in many ways, become a family.

I also want to highlight that Professor Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira is well known for her contributions to women's empowerment, both economically and in leadership. She was among the commissioners involved in constitutional development and played a key role in establishing the African Women's Studiesy Centre at the University of Nairobi. Through her research, this center helps identify and analyze critical issues affecting women, providing valuable insights into their realities..

Interviewer 2

Kindly tell us about your life history - when and where you were born and the work you have been doing.

Grace King'atua

I am grateful to here, and with your assurance, I am comfortable and ready for the interview. I am Grace Wanjiku , wife to Reverend John Kingatua, and I am saved. I got saved when I was a young school girl. I was born in 1944. I went to a primary school in Rift Valley and that is where I met my husband – we were classmates. After completing Standard 8, I did notproceed to secondary school. Instead, I joined Copjoy Training Institute in 1964-1965. We were trained on social work.

At the time, community development was not a recognized field. Our studies focused on supporting people with disabilities. For two years, I was on attachment in Eldoret where I worked in areas around Baringo. I then got employed by the local government of Kajiado. After some time, the local government facilitated me for further training at the Kenya Institute of Administration (KIIA), where I did a course in community development. Around the same period, I had the opportunity to settle down and get married. My husband pleaded with me to marry to him, which interrupted my studies. We got married in April 1968, and our honeymoon truned out to be in Baringo, as I was deployed there in May of the same year. Despite the abrupt transition, we sat down and agreed; he would dedicate himself to serving the church, while I would serve the community.

Interviewer What kind of work were you doing?

Grace King'atua

I was tasked with engaging men and women through social services, specifically community development. We empowered the women to form groups, and children, both boys and girls, to go to school. At the time, the Maasai relied on their children to look after cattle, but there was an urgent need for children to receive formal education. At the time, there were very few educated people, and there were no schools and cattle dips. So, we worked under very difficulty conditions. I was also a young, and it was uncommon for a girl to stand in front of Maasai elders and tell them anything. Despite the challenges, the community welcomed me. The women would sit together knitting and invite me warmly saying, *"Come, sit here, mum."* I would join them, and in time, I acquired a pair of knitting sticks and began knitting as well. As I knitted, I introduced them to what the government was advocating for, forming groups so they could sell their knitted items collectively. For the men, I addressed the issue of cattle dying, emphasizing the need to build cattle dips. When I submitted the report, funding was approved quickly. I even asked my colleague whether there were any gangsters back then—because at the social services offices, we brought in sand and cement and elected a committee to oversee its use, ensuring no one stole it. Some communities built classrooms, while others took up to five years before using the iron sheets, fearing their cattle might die. We were

actively pushing development forward, and while some were resistant, many embraced the initiatives and benefited from them. In fact, there is a young man currently vying for office who approached us recently. He said, *"I still remember the day you came to our school and encouraged us to read!"* Today, those same children have grown into educated and accomplished individuals.

Interviewer

What kind of work were you doing in Baringo?

Grace King'atua

I was engaging men and women in discussions about education, because at the time, most communities had not embraced it. Women were expected to form groups, but their engagement in group activities was limited to communal farm work, and collecting firewood. So, our role was to encourage women to form groups so that the government could provide them with support and services.

We were basically trained by community development officers to persuade women to unite and organize themselves. This was a government idea and the development officer whom we were working with was Naftali Mang'au. Naftali Mangau was from Kirinyaga and worked inEldoret. The school where I studied had become a boarding and my father and Naftali were boardmembers. That is how I eventually got a job in Kajiado. Naftali Mang'au had brought his sons to study at that school. He told my father that he wouldn't transfer them but would leave them in his care. Whenever they were sent home or had holidays, my father would take them in and look after them. Later, Naftali saw an opportunity and promised to secure a job for me after I finished college. When Naftali arrived at Kajiado, he found that the community officers there were all drunkards and he sacked them , and then employed five of us, including Waruinge and another man from Loitoktok, I can't recall his name. I remember visiting Rongai quarry, where people told me, *"You cannot talk to us unless you drink."* I firmly responded, *"I will not drink."*

Interviewer

So, was it thenational government?

Grace King'atua

The national government. When someone was employed, they had assistants at the grassroots level. I remember, Hon. Ronald Ngara was the Minister for Local Government at the time I was employed. He was on the side of national government. However, we also had a county clerk, whose name was Ole Kwantai.

Interviewer

Were there women among sacked the people sacked?

Grace King'atua

They were both men and women. Among those employed with me, three were men, and two of us were women.

Interviewer

Was gender balance employed at the time?

Grace King'atua

Yes, because two other women were empoyed shortly afterwards. If you want to understand how empowerment developed, you must first understand the government's structure, especially the local government. At that time Kajiado was administratively divided into three divisions: Ngong division, Central division, and Loitoktok. I was stationed in Ngong, while the others were posted to different divisions. Our main task was persuading people to come together to form groups, particularly women so that if a woman gave birth, all the women in the village would help her to cook among other duties.

Interviewer

When you ask women to come together, what was their response? How?

Grace King'atua

I wouldn't say their response was entirely negative, though they did not embrace the idea right away. Some had to ask for permissions from their husbands.To persuade them, they explained that the women were supposed to come together so that they could get funding and the men were required to build schools and take both boys and girls to school, none of them refused. We worked with them, and they were very supportive, which ultimately contributed to the development we achieved. I remember sitting on a stone while speaking to them, and sometimes they would say, "Young girl, stand up!" So I would stand before them and address them. By God's grace, I was given the confidence to speak in front of men.

Interviewer

Why do you think they respected you even though you were young?

Grace King'atua

Yes, I was a young girl. I believe I was respected because of my humility, and I was contributing to their development. I truly thank God because they listened to me attentively.

Interviewer

Can you recall the names of the groups you helped form?

Grace King'atua

There are many groups in Ngong, but I cannot remeber all their names. However, in Rongai, we had a significant number of women's groups that were allocated plots.

Interviewer

What were the groups doing?

Grace King'atua

Some women were engaged in beading, others focused on farming, while others formed self-help support groups. However, to streamline these efforts into a one united project, we established a rule for qualifying to join *Muungano*.

Each group had to contribute Ksh 9,000 to be eligible for membership in *Muungano*. Only groups that paid membership fees were registered under *Muungano*. Some of these groups received chicken and pigs while others were given cows by the late Hon. Saitoti, who believed that the Maasai could adopt the Kikuyu tradition of farming. Instead, they preferred livestock, ensuring that once a cow gave birth, the calf was passed on to another.

Interviewer

Was this a national initiative?

Grace King'atua

It was working at the national level, but was based in Ngong. There was a time I knew all the groups – even in Turkana. But now, I can't recall all the details. What I want to emphasize is that the groups came together and donors arrived. We explained that each group needed atleast twenty-five members and they had to focus on three to four key objectives. Based on this, the local government allocated plots to the groups. The management approach trasformed significantly-woman gained economic empowerment. Some establishment shops, others set up posho mills and others-built flats. Some were engaged in business. The local government provided them with support, and even individual groups received plots.

Interviewer

Tell us about *Muungano*, and also share how Kikuyu and Maasai women came together. Describe the journey hightlighting how they supported each other along the way.

Grace King'atua

Let me say we were told the women groups were given plots, but they had to unite. Initially, they belonged to smaller groups, each focused on their own activities- some engaged in beading, others farming, while others made charcoal. But we were told to bring them together under *Muungano*. This happened during Honourable Saitoti's tenure, and strongly supported the idea of women getting plots.

Interviewer

Sorry, did those groups selling charcoal and engaging in other activities form their own, or were they organized by someone else?

Grace King'atua

Let me clarify, we still played a role in their formation. By the time we were employed, these groups did not yet exist. The government was very strict about gatherings; no group could take place without the chief's knowledge of the meeting's agenda, and government's permission. The government did not encorage people to meet without the chief's knowledge of the meeting's agenda. That's why, at that time, women only met when engaging in communal work. For instance, if I had a *shamba* and you had yours, today we would work on yours, and tomorrow on another's, and the day after, we work on another person's. That was how they collaborated before formal groups were established.

Interviewer

So, by the time they started Muungano, had they already organized themselves in terms of leadership?

Grace King'atua

Yes, they were structured groups - with a chairperson, a secretary and a treasurer. By the time we were forming *Muungano*, they already had a leadership structure in place and had been participating in community development. Their participation in Muungano was a natural progression because they were already established, and we had been working with them. When they formally came together to create this larger group, we emphasized that *Muungano* would provide them with the necessary support. We held meetings with their chairpersons, secretaries, and treasurers where we discussed and planned their activities. That's why each group had to contribute a certain amount before joining. Do you know that these groups had to be properly organized before becoming part of Muungano? They needed to have financial records and a bank account. Some members even struggled with literacy, but it's remarkable to see how far people have come. Despite these challenges, they learned how to negotiate with banks, and the Community Development Officers (C.D.O.s) would write to the bank managers to confirm the authenticity of the groups.

Interviewer

So, were the groups that you brought into *Muungano* already registered?

Grace King'atua

Yes. Before bringing them together under Muungano, we ensured that each group was registered first. Some groups had approached the local government requesting for allocation of plots, but there were too many applicants—including individual women claiming to be chairladies of nonexistent groups. Some had plots, while others did not. But when women realized that support was forthcoming, competition intensified. Some individuals even falsely presented themselves as part of organized groups to access benefits. *(Turning to her colleague) Have I ever cheated?* There was donor funding available, and people were waiting for it. Eventually, the county council recognized that individuals were creating confusion. To streamline the process, they required women to form formal groups since there weren't enough properly structured ones at the time.

Interviewer Tell us about Muungano.

Grace King'atua

I told the women that if they became united, they would receive support, including access to plots. We established a qualification process, requiring the women groups to contribute a minimum amount to become shareholders. As a result, 41 groups were formed. We established a qualification proedure for the groups. Some women couldn't meet the contribution requirement and remained in their existing groups. That's how the process unfolded, and eventually, plots were allocated.

If she is still the chair at the age of 98, that is truly remarkable—it speaks to her strong leadership and dedication. My own mother passed away at 92, and she was also a chairperson, leading the Nyakinyua group, which was formed immediately after independence. There were things she didn't fully understand, and at one point, the secretary and others sold one of their buildings and brought her Ksh 60,000. Since she was aging and unaware of certain details, she asked the person she usually sends to the group meetings about the money. When she learned it was her daughter, she entrusted her to bring the funds to her. If someone can still lead at 98, doesn't that show the depth of her wisdom and strength?

In fact, she will soon turn 99. Just two weeks ago, she expressed her frustration, saying she was angry because the developers were working too slowly and a caveat had been placed on the property. She told me she would call their lawyer because they still assume that women are ignorant and didn't understand legal matters like caveats. But she knows exactly what's happening—these are people who are trying to take the plot away from them.

Interviewer

What happened when you conducted civic education and encouraged people to vote?

Grace King'atua

Yes. You know I was working and at the same time I was a leader. I even mentioned this before-I dont know why you are forgetting. We worked as MCAs, much like how she is now. I still remember one day when I was addressing people and the microphone was snatched from me. And I didn't leave, I just sat down. I can't recall the person who was given the microphone afterward. The District Officer (D.O) had started opposing me because of a particular women's in Magadi. The group had been allocated a plot and received funding to help develop it. At the time, we were under Rift Valley province and we attended meetings in Nakuru. The women had been granted three hundred thousand Kenya shillings along with a plot of land for constructing a shop. This happened during the tenure of a respected councillor, who facilitated the allocation of plots to these women. The District Development Committee (DDC) had approved the funding, and they had already started receiving building materials worth three hundred thousand Kenya shillings. Later, the D.O. summoned me to his office, and requested me to provide the group's registration certificate and another document I can't quite recall—they had been registered under community development. For the meeting, I invited the area councillor and the assistant chief, and we all attended together. It's important to know how things unfolded. Since I had been asked to bring their certificate, the intention was to deregister them, even though the building materials were already being delivered at the site of construction. I am grateful to God as I recount this, for even my husband, who is here, experienced it firsthand when the official slapped him. At the time, multipartysm had just began, and it seemed as if I was perceived as part of the opposition- abandoning KANU. When we went to court, we discovered that the women's group was being deregistered simply because their chairlady- the very woman who regularly came to our office seeking support for her group—had quit KANU and joined another political party. That was the reason I was being asked to produce the certificate. When I spoke to the women, they told me, *"We are being victimized just because our chairlady left KANU and joined another political party. We sat down and agreed that she should step aside, but we would remain and continue our work. Once she is done with politics, she can return, and we shall keep working together. She left on her own, but she has never sought our support in her political pursuits."* Now, had these women made the wrong decision? Since only their leader had left, why were they being forced to disband? When I went to the District Officer (D.O.) with their chief and councilor, I explained our findings. I told the D.O., *"These women are still together. Only one of them left, and they*

have agreed that if she chooses to return, they will welcome her back because she has always been a pillar of their group." The D.O. looked at me and said, *"King'atua! I am giving you work, and you are refusing to do it!"*

I went home and told my husband what was happening, though I wasn't even sure if he fully understood the situation. I could authorize funds for women, but when they arrived at the D.O's office, he would refuse to sign them. One of the most painful moments came when I went to the council to resign. I had realized that the person I was working for was being punished because of me. When I announced my resignation, they were shocked. They told me, *"We have no reason to dismiss you." One official told me, "Since 1996, no one who has worked with you has ever had a problem with you. Just go to the office, and if he chases you away, then work from home."* I waited for a long time—I kept receiving my salary even as I remained in limbo. Later, my husband went to that office to request a permit so we could hold a pre-wedding party for our daughter, Elizabeth. When the official saw him, driven by his dislike for me, he asked, *"By the way, Pastor King'atua, where did you reside before relocating to Kajiado?" My husband replied, "Uasin Gishu."* The official coldly told him, *"Then go to Uasin Gishu and get the permit from there!" Just imagine. When I heard this, I cried, wondering why he was punishing us. My husband left his office, but word had spread. A man named Kaptit, who worked at the training center for doctors, and was a member of our church, went to the D.O.'s office and confronted him. He told the D.O., "You cannot treat our pastor this way." The* D.O. responded, *"Fine, come and give him the permit—I'm leaving."* So, Kaptit and my husband left together. When they reached the chief, he informed them that he was aware of what had happened. He told my husband, *"Go home and continue with the party. We, the chiefs, are the ones who issue permits—just make sure everything is wrapped up by six, and no one remains in the compound."*

Interviewer How about the house? Was it build?

Grace King'atua

They must have built it. Challenges like these, though difficult, helped me grow in many ways. As we are taught—to give thanks in all circumstances—I now understand that some things happen for the good of those who trust in God. When the time for me to resign came, I didn't recognize it. At the community level, I later went to the council since I had already submitted a request to be released. It became clear that I needed to leave when I realized I might fall ill due to the bitterness I was carrying. Let me share this story—even if I mention someone, Terry, may God bless her! May God sustain her because she worked within the community, and I don't even know how she came to know me—but she was the one who truly helped me. When the council agreed to release me, my husband went to the post office and found the letter. He asked me to open it so we could see what it contained. When we read it, we realized that I had officially been relieved of my duties, and the council would arrange the details of my exit. It didn't take a week. I don't know how Terry found out what I was going through, but they were in the process of forming the League of Women Voters party and needed educators.

Interviewer

I got very upset when I heard that Saitoti was involved in the case. The District Officer (D.O.) working on the matter had previously worked for him. Later, a CID officer, a Kamba, informed me that there was an issue—the woman in charge had refused to release the group's funds, even though other women wanted the project to end. She was even encouraging women to vote for whoever they wanted, despite there being only one party, which Saitoti did not support. I kept quiet because, at that point, these were only rumors. I learned that she had either been dismissed or had resigned due to tension—I'm not sure who informed me. At the League of Women Voters, we applied for a project under the UN Volunteers Service, which required extension officers—individuals familiar with the community and its needs. I immediately thought of Grace. So, I asked my sister Anne to visit her and tell her to come the following day. When I asked Anne if she knew where Grace lived, she confirmed that she did. I told her, *"Even if she doesn't have fare, give her money and tell her to come tomorrow."* I believe she even met her husband, and I assured her that I would refund everything she spent to get Grace to us.

Interviewer

Who were there?

Grace King'atua

It was her, Martha Karua, Ida Odinga and Martha Koome are the ones who formed this party. I do not know the rest. I posted at Kajiado district not Ngong as before.I went to Namanga with *the UN badge and met with our chief and he held my hand and told me, "Now Mama, how deep are your roots?"* I asked him, *"why dad ?", "We are trying to uproot you and you cannot be uprooted! (Laughs loudly).* Do you know how I am surprised, for the other day I went to Nakuru and I met you there, now today you are in Namanga, whereare your roots?

Interviewer

Which year was that?

Grace King'atua

1994.

Grace King'atua

My roots were not deep rooted. They were shallow—the way Moi used to say. God gave me a job through that. I did the work for five years, got an extension of two years, and so in total, I worked for seven years. Within that particular time, God expanded my work in a mighty way. God had also given me a vision about children and I used to tell my husband about it. We bought this piece of land and while we had cultivated and planted carrots on it, one night I could see children eating courgettes; when I told my husband, he told me, *"I will stand with you regarding that vision because that is work."* He expressed his desire to see the vision accomplished, for he kept asking me, when will it be done? Now, there is a time we were called for a seminar and booked in one of the hotels I can't recall the name, and it was near your home.

Interviewer

(reminding her). It was called Milimani.

Grace King'atua

Yes. While we were having a discussion at the hotel, there were two people, a white man conversing with a lady and suprisingly, they kept staring at us in unison. God gave me favour, because the woman seemed to like me. She called me aside and introduced herself as Mary Stainer. I told the rest of our team that she wanted to speak with me, and they encouraged me to go and hear what she had to say. When I went over, she told me her name again and mentioned the organisation she was working with. I cannot recall the name now- but she explained that she had project in Uganda and Kisumu, and that she was travelling there.

She invited the other ladies I was with to join her in her room, saying she had a small gift for us and was also interested in speaking with me further. She asked where I came from, and I told her I was from Kajiado, where I had previously worked, and that I was currently working with the *League of Kenya Women Voters,* which also had a presence in Kisumu. After our converstaion, she gave branded *"Givers Wings"* T-shirts and promised that, after returning from Uganda, she would like to visit my home – if I was comfortable with the idea. When I discussed it with my husband, he welcomed the proposal. True to her word, after her return from Uganda, she came to my home and explained that she had special interests in the Maasai area. She asked me to take her around, and I agreed, telling her we could work together. That meeting opened another door – she asked me to think about how we might collaborate and share ideas, when she came back to the country. The children you see here today are part of that journey. At the time, we already had three children we had taken in from Kiserian after their mother – who had once worked in our home – passed away. That is how I began caring for children, including those with disabilities such as hearing or speech impairements. This one here *(pointing to her husband)* has done so much – at one point, even repairing a broken fridge with several thousand shillings so that the children could have a place to store food. We have also taken in children from the community, including one we relocated to another place in kajiado. You may rememember being with us in Kajiado when the father of one such child was rolling on the ground, unwilling to part with her.

Interviewer

Who was that rolling himself and where were you taking the child?

Grace King'atua

Her father. We were taking the girl for treatment because her legs were knocked and had problems. After treatment we took her to school in Kajiado. God helped the child for she was able to go through the primary education and later came to secondary school in Matasia and completed.

Interviewer

What was her name?

Grace King'atua

Janet the Woman Rep. You even know her.

Interviewer

Kingatua, you have left out something.

Grace King'atua

What?

Interviewer

The legs were straightened and she was able to walk.

Grace King'atua

Yes. They were straightened and that is why we were taking her to Kajiado because we have a Centre for persons living with disability there. Even after form four we wanted to take her to Kijabe Hospital because they had a section for these people they call "cure". But she said she wanted to educate their own and she started with adults especially girls who had not gone to school. We built a house for her at their home where we were given space by their father and that is where she has been teaching from. The lady we met at the hotel is the one who was helping in paying her after I told her about her story. I have been seeing records here which reveeal that she was paying her four thousand Kenyan shillings, it increased to four thousands, five hundred and up to six thousands. Even now there is still a big adult class that has both men and women at their home. From that, you can see God has uplifted her. I remember when her father heard that she had joined parliament, he called me and asked me whether what he was hearing was true. I told him, "yes. She will now be sitting in parliament and she will not even be

staying in that house unless she stays in Nairobi or at Ngong." He told me he would want me to go there one day we pray with her because she is our child.

Interviewer Did you pray?

Grace King'atua

Yes. We prayed and even when Hon. Janet was going for training. Weren't they going to Naivasha? We hired a car, like the one you came with together with this man. I took her to the salon and he bought her a sweater.

Interviewer

Do you remember the father had given us a piece of land so that we could expand the Centre?

Grace King'atua

But he passed away. Sometimes, even after receiving so much help, people still turn away from those who stood by them – and I pray that history not repeat itself. We always wished to visit her home, but she told us it was too far, so we never managed to go. Still, whenever she wants to come here, she does. Did you know we were the ones who hired a vehicle for her when she was going to Parliament? They were even travelling to Naivasha, and I took her to Sakuda's place in Kangemi. When Sakuda saw us he was surprised, and asked what what was happening. We told him, " this is our child." Even when the government gave her a vehicle she brought it here for us to pray for it. She still visits occasionally, but we have never been to her place. Even when you told me you were with her, she had said we should inform her whenever we wanted to visit. There was a time we went there,and found that she had built a wall around her home, and we could not enter.

Interviewer

Where is it ?

Grace King'atua

It is just here. It is not near, you will travel a bit.

Interviewer

About how many Kilometers?

Grace King'atua

About 33kms.

Interviewer

33kms is abit far.

Grace King'atua

She has built a very big home.

Interviewer

Hadn't you taken her to Kijabe?

Grace King'atua

She did not go. It was the time she said she wanted to teach their people. She had taught so many people before she was nominated. There were six men and thirteen women. Because she had built a very nice class, we told her to look for a teacher so that the people she was teaching could continue learning. She looked for the teacher but what happened later I don't know. Because even a time when Mary Stainer was coming, I informed her. The three of us went there but to our disappointment, we found that there was no learning taking place and the class was full of building materials. That is where she went wrong because Mary Stainer really wanted to see the community educated.

Interviewer

She does not even need help. I also know that class. We have ever gone there with you and planted a tree.

Now that you have served women for a long time, what can you tell us about that service?

Grace King'atua

I would say this, that women deserve to be empowered so that they can empower other women. An empowered woman does not serve at her place only. She will always get out of her way and benefit others, even outside her space. For instance, Terry here left her home to come and bring you here to us; when a woman is empowered, she becomes an aid to many others including men. Even the larger community and men benefit because of their women being empowered. They support their children's education including empowering people with special needs. However, these days I do not encourage sponsorships or donations like the ones we used to give people until they became completely dependant. We offered too much assistance, we gave them too much food until they were unable to do farming on their own.

Interviewer Who?

Grace King'atua

The people we were helping in Maasai land. When development started, they looked very poor but to be very honest, they were very rich, because they had land and livestock. Let me tell you, when we were helping the Woman Representative, God gave us another young girl in the same village, a nonverbal, she was using sign language and God helped us and we took her to a special school. *(speaking in Kikuyu) "tondu mena ng'ombe na mena migunda. Ta riu reke ngwire tugiteithia mheshimiwa ri."* I think now she has finished form four.

Interviewer Is it where you got Mureithi?

Grace King'atua

No. we got Mureithi from Marurui. Let me say Janet has made so many children to benefit because even the nonverbal one has completed form four. We took her to school at Ole Tipis and God helped. When we saw thesponsors who were helping her were straining, we went to the father and we told him, "Have you

seen we have helped Janet and right now she is an M.P, even with your daughter you never know, maybe she will become an M.P. We did not take her because her father was poor, we took her because she requires special attention. Now, sell some cows, and take the child to school. That one has finished school. We also came across two girls who were nonverbal at a place whose name I cannot recall. One of them is now almost completing school, along with others who have disabilities. Among them is a boy named Mureithi and another girl from this village who had always been locked in the house so her mother could go to the farm or the river. Today, Mary is in school – either in Mathare or Umoja. In Kibera, there are groups working with youths and women. one group that works with men is helping Mureithi. Mureithi was born with a disability and spent all his time in bed. He is now 40 years old. His mother left him with his grandmother immediately after his birth. When he got sponsors, I was overjoyed. Even when his grandmother passed away, her daughter cried during the burial, saying she never imagined we could help him to such an extent. She said that without that support, he might have died in the house, as their husbands would not have allowed them to take him in with them. He is now in Kibera and doing well.

Interviewer

I would like you to talk about Alice because you have a case study. You rescued her from early marriage and that is also part of women economic empowerment.

Grace King'atua

Alice is a girl from this village. At the time, we were still living in Ngong, but our son was staying here. He saw a girl at a neighbour's home and told me about her. I went there, called her aside, and asked her to share with me her story. She told me that her father wanted her to marry the chief, but she wished to go to school instead.

Interviewer How old was she?

Grace King'atua

I wont know because they marry the girls off when they are too young. There was even another one whom we met at Kajiado and she was to be married off to the chief as she was joining class five! That is the time I had joined you (Terry) and I was going to the D.O's office to ask for permission to do civic education. I met with a girl and two teachers at the D.O's office. They wanted to pass me in the waiting line and I asked them why they were passing me. The teacher told me, "mum, if you can know the problems that we am having, you could even help us. We are with a girl who was scheduled to be married off and she escaped and came to us. If we are discovered, we will be in problems. We even want you to take her and go to see the D.O with her." I asked them, only that? And we entered the D.O's office with the girl. I even forgot what had brought me to the D.O's office. I told the D.O that I was working with U.N, attached to the League of Women Voters and that I was working closely with community organisations. I told him that I had that girl who wanted my help because she was being married off to a chief although she wanted to be in school.

Interviewer

What was the name of the D.O?

Grace King'atua

I do not remember his name. He told me, "Let this girl go," but I stood on my ground. I told him, "No! president Moi said that if a girl wants to learn, she should be allowed to go to school!" That is when he asked me what I wanted and I told him that I wanted him to give us a vehicle which he said he did not have, but he would give us a police officer to escort us to the police station where we should file a report because of the security since the teachers were afraid. We went to the police who also said they did not have a vehicle, but would give us a police officer to escort us to the stadium. We went up to the stadium and boarded a matatu to Kiserian, Ngugi's mother's place. That is where I was given a sweater and a bed sheet to tie the girl so that we could conceal her face.

Interviewer

Won't you not be accused of stealing a child?

Grace King'atua

(Looking surprised) Aaa! What is that! I took the child to Kajiado! Within no time, we boarded a vehicle to Isinya and then another one from Isinya to Kajiado. I took the child to Kajiado. Please frgive me for narrating to you another child's story other than Alice's,this one was called Nancy Ole Seleyani.

Interviewer

In Kajiado, who did you take her to ?

Grace King'atua

I took her to Kajiado because I was known to A.I.C Primary school. There I found Olenguruyani and he really helped me. Because that was during the holiday and this girl's first term had ended before she joined form one and she had been admitted. So I went and left her there and then came and talked with women from our place. They were very useful because when I told them, they donated a mattress, blankets, money and whatever each one of them was able to give. So we did not have any support to educate her but through Nancy, she was able to complete school. Nancy is here at Sakuda's village. The Alice I had mentioned, I hid her in my house for two months.

Interviewer

Nancy got married?

Grace King'atua

Yes. She is now a woman who is self-sufficient.

Interviewer

What does she do?

Grace King'atua

Let me say she is doing her own business. It was just facilitating her empowerment and once one gets empowered, they are free to do what they wish. When we came here, we registered a group that we called Wezesha by Grace, Not Grace Kingatua, but by the grace of God.

Interviewer

Ooh!

Grace King'atua

And the way we were able to support many children *(speaking in Kikuyu) 'naniguo'*

Interviewer

Tell us about Wezesha.

Grace King'atua

We took Alice to Kijabe. That is why you were saying we had gone to Kijabe for *(speaking in Kikuyu) 'Nikio Ukugaga'* Elizabeth's graduation. The one we had hidden in the house for about two months and she got a job and I was so surprised when she narrated her life history.

Interviewer

Why were you hiding her?

Grace King'atua

Because she had ran away from being married off to the chief and she wanted to continue with her education. Is it not a good to help?

Interviewer

What was hersecond name?

Grace King'atua

She is called Ngonyo.

Interviewer

You have done well to remember because during her grandmother time when we were being given oil, I remember her saying "give those ones oil they are the ones who helped Alice". She even got married to a doctor.

Interviewer

Medical doctor?

Grace King'atua

Yes. A medical doctor. She had even come here recently and she told me she wanted to cook for us that day

Interviewer

Where does she stay?

Grace King'atua

They are in Nairobi. I had even heard as if they have started their own hospital because we had taken her to school to study dentistry. She was even told by the director, even if you are given work to sweep, sweep because in the meantime, we don't have a job. But remain here and that is what happened. Now Alice comes here with a vehicle and we get very happy.

Interviewer

Now let me ask you, all this work, when did you do it?

Grace King'atua

We have done it with this man and we have done much

Interviewer

Is there any other work you have done without him like the community work you were doing to protect women because you were not with him, what was motivating you to do this work?

Grace King'atua

Let me tell you, it is God who had given me this gift and I do thank him. Sometimes I always wish my father was alive for he really wanted to see me educated and then secure a job, because he used to say their village had only one educated girl and she was a teacher. So he really wanted to see his children get educated. Even the two year's course on social work was his idea. He told me, "Wanjiku you must go and do it." And after that may I say I have seen God. God has given me a talent to attend to community work because when I was trained for community work I have done it since then even when we came together with him, that is what I have always done while he has been working for the church. I told him we shall do all of it and we have been serving.

Interviewer

How about the women you were saying were being deregistered, what would say they were doing that you would want other women to learn from them?

Grace King'atua

Those women who were being deregistered were Maasai's. And mind you, their certificate was being withdrawn while materials worth Ksh 300,000 were already on site, because by then they had been given a shop and they wanted to build. *(Some interruptions from a guest who visited the interviewee)*. What was I saying?

Interviewer

You were saying, these women whose certificate was being withdrawn, when you went to them, they told you they had released their chairperson to go wherever she wanted, did they continue with the work?

Grace King'atua

Have you heard now that I was being disturbed at the work place, because even me the documents they wanted to withdraw from me when I resigned, I did not look back. But I normally ask and I am told they continuedand that was good because it is an individual who had joined another party. Why would she not go alone! Why disband the group because of one person, let her join her politics and once she is done, she will come back.

Interviewer

I am asking, would you say it is these women's solidarity ? Mention one word to describe these women.

Grace King'atua

I would say that for lack of a better English word. I would say that they knew what they wanted to do, and they knew their work and they loved their peer. Because even when she joined another party, she did not hate them, she always came to the office to look for their aid. I praise God because during our time, if they applied for any project, chances for refusal were very rare. It was only one time I went to Kajiado and found that materials that had been given to a certain group, because that time, there has started bad behaviour in the office and it was with our leader. I don't know whether he is still there? I remember he sent me to Maasai stores; when I went, the Indian got bored and told me, "You have been sent by your boss to get money, go and ask him where the money is !" When I went to the C.D.O, and I have remembered he was called Muchai or what was his name, he told me "Grace,don't you have a family?" I told himyes. He told me to go home and watch my back!"

Interviewer

Wambui Otieno was a fighter.

Grace King'atua

My boss. This showed that something was not clear. Because the contract to distribute the materials had been given to Maasai storesand that is why my boss was sending me to the Indian

Interviewer

This story you have narrated to us, you told us when you resigned from work, you did it because of political interference. Which other obstacles orchallenges would you say you came across from the C.D.A even when you were helping the children and others?Which obstacles would you say you have met in this journey?

Grace King'atua

I did not met any obstacle because in all the years of my work, there were no problems. We did a very good joband what we recommended about funding a project, that is how it was done and there were no issuess. Unless they fail to use the materials and we would sit down with the committee and recommend they be given to another group and they are given, we had no problems. Problems came during the politics, otherwise most of the time I really enjoyed my work.

Interviewer

I also wanted to ask one question; if I may take you back, what would say to celebrate women economic empowerment? Being a group or an individual, something that you did to help a group and is still going on? Although someone of your age may forget about some of the things but try to remember.

Grace King'atua

What I would say is that most of the projects that we funded then and if you can remember there were no vehicles we used to walk on foot, We used to go from Ngong to Olesosis; we were walking and now I can't even reach there.

But I am happy because all the groups we helped by giving funds or materials, they were very happy and they are still continuing. When I meet them since I still visit those places like the other day I went for a funeral and the women were very happy when they saw me. They told me, "You helped us and we are able to develop because of your work." Because when you meet such a person in a problem and you rescue them, when she gets educated, you have helped her and she will be able to rescue another one from poverty. That is a blessing you cannot call it a challenge. Because the challenge is only one and it been brought about by one person. And the challenge comes about because a person has become jealous and they start to disturb you. Blessings are more and the challenges make me happy because they help us to call upon God, and it is true because we used to cry to God. Some of the children we have helped are now grown ups, even one of the young men called Odhiambo got married from Wakaba's family. The girls are also married. Won't you count that one as a blessing? But when you hear how your husband went to look for a pre-wedding permit and he was denied, you feel so bad.

Another challenge I come across and God has taught me to forgive is when we came here. We started keeping cows so that we can be drinking milk, but now some Masai morans come to get our cows. The same people you have helped their parents to come out of poverty and to develop, they come and take your cows shamelessly. If they know, they cannot repeat it because the Morans came here with a lot of hooliganism they threw stones at our house and ended up going with our cow. This happened three times but Maasai elders returned it. Since my husband was sick, he told me it was not viable to continue keeping the the cows. We had been warned that if the morans came, we should not step outside, as they sought nothing but the cows. They harassed us until we were forced to dispose of the cows. Even the tea you've just taken came from milk brought by this lady, who bought one of them and has kindly continued to share with us.This one was one of my greatest challenges and it made me cry deeply. I had walked long distances to convince Maasai parents to send their children to school so they could escape poverty. Yet, when some of those children grew up as morans, they returned and took the very cows we depended on. My children used to get happy when they came here, they would drink milk and then carry some home. My grandchildren in Nairobi have been telling their parents, "Let's go to Grandma's place, we drink milk. If it were before, each one of you would have carried some milk from here. We even sold milk to the Chinese who were constructing this road. After we disposed of the cows, there is a calf thatremained and we are in the process of disposing it too.

So, if you hear someone who needs a cow, we have one we are selling. We said we will be buying milk because there is a proverb that goes, 'better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.' We chose to live in peace.

Interviewer

You were telling us about being unable to reach the woman M.P when you need her.

Grace King'atua

Janet! we take her like our own children. There is always that one child who doesn't like people and there is one who does so very much. Even when you talk to her over the phone, she sounds peaceful. Only one time when I went to see her because she was unwell and had gone to India for treatment. I went toNairobi hospital to see and when she saw me, she asked me, "Now who told you that I am here and I even told the nurses not to tell you so that you won't strain yourself". I asked her, " Is coming to see you straining?" I told her how sorry I was for her sickness and we prayed. When I came back and told my husband, that one let's be praying for her from here because she doesn't want people.

Interviewer

I had also tried her because I have known her since she was young and when she was appointed, I wanted the civic education project to continue and I also wanted us to have stadiums so that we could continue with economic empowerment but when I called her, she did not pick my phones.

I called her and the phone rang until it started singing a song that said, 'I have decided to keep queit.' So when I got hold of her niece, whom we educated, and serves as her assistant, she told me, "Shosh, we have been saying we are coming to visit you, please forgive us". I told her that Hon. Janet's phone had a good ringtone saying that I have decided to keep queit! she laughed. When she came one over on a Sunday, I was attending another group that we have been meeting every end month and we always leave very late. When I left the church after the meeting, I was told she had come but she did not stay. She does not stay. I don't know if it is her health issues that makes her not able to talk much.

Interviewer

What problem did she develop?

Grace King'atua

She had a brain tumor.

Interviewer

We are talking about the period before she got sick. Is she well now?

Grace King'atua

She got well and resumed her duties. I am telling you she is speaking now because I was told they were planning to come. They use this route, where you came from is their way to their home. But I think she is the kind of people who don't like too many issues. What I learnt is that a child despite helping her, is not a must they came to thank you. We have experienced such because this man is a carpenter and we have a girl who completed her education at Moi University and she is working at Kibiko.

Interviewer

Yours?

Grace King'atua

No, these these children from the community. Do you know she did psychology? I hear she works at an hospital at Kibiko. Her name is Silvia. She neither comes nor calls me. In fact, I don't know the last time I saw her! Let her not come to me, even checking on her grandmother, she cannot! So understand that children are different.

Interviewer

What do we do to them?

Grace King'atua

We talk to them.

Interviewer

Laughing....I am laughing because when we were coming, there was a file I wanted returned to the office, these ones came with a girl they work with in the office. She came and took the file, I asked them who had taken the file and they pointed at lady walking along the road. I asked them if she the one I employed? They told me yes, she is the one.We have never set an eye on each other! She came up to here, took the file and she could not even greet me.

Grace King'atua

These are the ones with the answer on what we should do to them. Like now this Silvia, she takes long before she comes and when she comes depending on how you have trained her, thinking that she will take initiative even of taking away such cups from the table, she will tell me, "Grandma , I only have one hand so that I don't tell her to do this and that! I normally tell her, you will be overwhelmed by your issues; you will find the two hands doing this and that. *(Speaking in Kikuyu) Tondu riria ukonio ni maku ugeka uu na wike uu na.* She could take even an year while at the university before she visits her grandmother.

Interviewer

Yes and were it not for her grandmother, we wouldn't have known each other. She was coming here every morning to tell me, now these children who were left behind by your househelp, what are we going to do with them, because I am unable to take care of them? We took them, and we have educated four of them. I tell you God can give you a ministry because that is a ministry. I told you I was seeing children. God has given us because they have passed here all of them until we registered an organization for bringing up children, and once they are through with education, they go back to their homes.

Is the one you are calling Wezesha?

Grace King'atua

Yes. Wezesha by Grace.

Interviewer

How about the boy and the sister from Kiserian?

Grace King'atua

Odhiambo is now at Jubilee insurance. He is the one I was telling you he married a Kikuyu girl. He was working at ICEA insurance but he left and now he works with Jubilee Insurance. An educated young man who was at Kenyatta University.

Interviewer

And the one who was using a wheel chair?

Grace King'atua

Joseph?

Interviewer

The one we were taking to Thika?

Joseph, when were going to Janet's place, we saw a child with a wound on his leg and she told me she would like me to see that child. We were with the white lady that we had met. The work this lady has done! We have stayed with him for a very long time because he was five years old at the that time. He is now working at Ngong where they have built a big toilet; isn't he the person who charges the toilet service before you are given the keys? He is working there. They have been given a kiosk for those living with disability so that they could do business there. We had taken him to Thika to train on shoe making, he will now be making shoes from there when he is not on duty. Isn't he the one we had gone for a celebration at Ngong, and he was crying, saying the mother would have thrown him away was it not for you?

Grace King'atua

He is the one.

Interviewer

Tell us the lesson you would us like to learn from your work. The work you have done to help women, what would you like the young generation to learn through your experience so that we can listen to Hellen?

Grace King'atua

You know now I told you I left that work long time ago.

Interviewer

How about the time you worked because you have told us you have worked a lot with women, how easy are they to work with? How do they respond and what would you want us to learn so that we get the energy to work for them? So that they gain economic empowerment?

Grace King'atua

I learnt that, when you show women something, if they like and embrace it, they will take it forward. Because when they realized that when they come together they can do much than when they are doing it individually, even Gikuyu said, *"kamuingi koyaga ndiri".* So it is very good to bring women together so that they can be able to lift the mortar. Women embrace something until they succeed unlike men. Even the men I worked with, I realized that they succeeded when they worked with women. So let me say it is very good to bring women together so that they can work together and when they come together, they will be able to support their families.

Interviewer

That is very powerful! We now want to give you one minute, you address the current president and tell him what he is supposed to do so that women can benefit.

Grace King'atua

I would tell him, your excellency president, Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta, that I would like to say, Let me tell you in Kikuyu, you are very important and very dear. If you truly wish to help, please support the women, because your father supported them before his death, and they have been able to support their homes. Since the resources to assist them are available and can bring them together to work in unity, we have seen their fruits! May God bless you!

Interviewer Then tell him in Kiswahili.

Grace King'atua

Mtukufu Rais, nakushukuru kwa sababu ya kazi yako njema ya kusaidia watu wako wa Kenya. Kwa kweli tumeona ukisaidia wananchi wako, hata kina mama kwa vikundi. Kulingana na vile nimeona wakipewa msaada wa Pamoja hata hapo mbeleni, wataendelea. Hata kama ni kipande cha shamba au misaada ya ujenzi, wape kwa sababu ukimsaidia mama, familia na jamii wote watasaidika. Ahsante! (Your excellency President, I thank you because of you good work of helping your Kenyan people. For sure we have seen you helping your people especially women in their groups.According to the way I have seen them getting collective support even before, they will develop. Even if it is plots they will benefit, building support, give them because when you support women, their family and the community will benefit. Thank you!)

Interviewer

Thank you.

"When you show women something, if they like it and embrace it they will take it forward. Because they realize that when they come together, they can do much more than when they are doing it individually."

Grace King'atua

Chapter 11: A Conversation with Hellen Seidon

"What drew the women was the exposure to the outside world. Back in our days, the only time a woman could go out was on a Sunday or a market day. So whenever there was a meeting, it was a chance for them to go outside."

Hellen Seidon

Biography

Hellen Saidon was born in 1944 in Oloolua, Ngong in Kajiado County. Her father's thirst and value for education saw her attend Kajiado DEB Primary School, now Maasai Intermediate School. Between 1962 and 1963, Hellen, a Masaai by birth, took the initiative to learn the Gikuyu language. During the same period, she was sponsored by a group of women leaders to undertake certificate courses in civic education, nursing, and home science courses at the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). This opportunity came at a time when Masaai girls were being encouraged to pursue higher education. Upon completing college, Mrs. Tameno, who had played a key role in securing her college admission and was now in charge of Kajiado County Schools, facilitated her employment asa home science teacher at Isinya Primary school in 1964. Hellen initially taught home science, sewing, and housekeeping , later expanding her teaching to classes four and five. Nine years later, she was transfered to Ngong Township which opened new opportunities, particularly through the establishment of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) in Ololosios Centre. She was selected by the church council to serve as a translator for the white missionaries who provided maternal and child health care services, including immunisation, and nutrition programs. In 1970, Hellen began workingas a social worker at a community office in Ololosios, specialising in social services. As a committed member of the Women's Guild, she played a key role in educating women on family planning methods, despite strong opposition from some religious leaders. Beyond her work in health and education, she actively supported orphaned children and those with disabilities at the Dagoretti Children's Centre. She also played a leading role in Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, leading efforts to mobilize women to enroll in adult classes, enabling them to acquire literacy and life skills.

Interviewer

We could love to know more about you.

Hellen Seidon

I was born in 1944, like my sister, in Oloolua, Ngong. I attended local schools in Oloolua untill class four. Later, I joined DEB Kajiado, now known as Maasai Intermediate School, a boarding school, because my father strongly valued education. I continued my studies there until class eight . Between 1962 and 1963, I joined YWCA College in Nairobi through sponsorship by a group of women leaders who had been encouraging Maasai girls to pursue higher education. I studied civic education, nursing and home science. It was an intensive two-year course, covering demanding subjects such as housekeeping and laundry, which we did both manually and using laundry machines. Upon completion, I graduated with a certificate. At that time, the schools were under Kajiado County Council, and the woman who facilitated my college admission was a council leader, the later Mrs Tameno, heard that that I had completed my studies and they needed a teacher to teach home science at Isinya Primary School. That's how I got employed by Kajiado County Council in 1964.

Interviewer

What were you teaching?

Hellen Seidon

I initially taught home science, focusing on sewing, housekeeping, and life skills for girls. Later, I expanded my teaching to include classes four and five, where I became acquainted with the other teachers. After nine years at Isinya, I was transferred to Ngong Township, where I moved with my family. Around that time, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) was establishing Ololosios Centre. During this period, white missionaries arrived, dedicated to improving the well-being of women and children. Seeing the need for communication, Reverend Moses Waweru and the church council selected me as a translator, bridging the gap between the missionaries and the local Maasai community by translating Maasai into English. Since this role required me to relocate from Ngong to Ololosios, they had discussions with my husband to facilitate the relocation.

Interviewer

What was your husband's name?

Hellen Seidon

My husband's name is Leeyio Kareio. He agreed, and I moved out with my two children into a self-contained house provided by the church. I often accompanied the missionaries to various places, including Rodaria, where they operated a mobile clinic. My role was to translate for both Maasai women and the white doctors. These doctors travelled extensively to deliver medical services, as many women were unaware that such healthcare option even existed. In many cases, when a woman gave birth at home, she never took her child for immunization. Thanks to the missionaries, children were now being immunized.

Beyond immunization, the doctors donated foodstuffs and taught mothers how to prepare nutritious foods for their babies. Later, the church took a significant step and built a maternity ward at Ololosios , ensuring that expectant mothers had better access to maternal healthcare. Martha Karua and Wangari Maathai played a significant role in the fundraiser, which raised most of the funds used in the construction of the maternity ward. At that time, I was working at the ward, translating doctors' instructions for women arriving to give birth. I remained at the center for a while until I learned about an opening for a social worker position at the community office, specifically in the social services section. I was encouraged to apply, and after doing so, I was appointed for the role. As a result, I left my position at the maternity ward and transitioned into social services, where I joined my sister in 1970.When I joined social services, I quickly realized that the workload was immense. For instance, on one occasion, I had to mobilize women on a short notice, to fill four buses to go and sing for President Kenyatta in Nakuru. Over time, coordinating women to perform for the president became a key aspect of my role. My efforts were highly valued by the Provincial Commissioners (PCs), who managed the logistics and ensured our accommodations and other arrangements were well taken care of. He loved all of the traditional songs and dances from different cultures.

Interviewer

How often did your perform for the President, and what impact did this have on your work?

Hellen Seidon

henever he visited Nakuru, Gatundu, Mombasa or any other place, traditional dancers were invited to entertain him daily. He had a deep liking for traditional songs and dance, embracing performances from all cultures without preference or distinction. I remember one time I was breastfeeding my son during a dance, and it made the headlines. The reality was that I couldn't spend enough time with my son because of work demands. At one point, I had to decide between caring for my son and committing to my work. One of the major responsibilities I was given was civic education on family planning methods. A decision was made that women in Kajiado needed to be informed about various family planning methods, and I became actively involved in the meetings that shaped how this initiative would be implemented. At that time, we took multiple roles—we were nurses, nutritionists, dancers, MCs, and so much more. In short, we handled everything necessary to support and empower the community.

Interviewer

Did they first teach you first about family planning?

Hellen Seidon

First, we formed a committe, and I was selected as the Chair for Kajiado District. Most of the meetings were held within the communities, while those involving people from all regions took place in Kajiado and Nakuru, where we and the mothers were taught various things about family planning.

Interviewer

Did you involve the men in family planning?

Hellen Seidon

Some men were already aware of family planning, while others did not want to hear about it. Some women took family planning seriously and discussed it openly with their husbands, while others embraced family planning methods in secret, without informing their spouses, because their spouses and the Catholic Church opposed it. Some men opposed family planning because they feared that it would lead women to engage in promiscuity and eventually leave their marriages. Driven by these concerns, they often expressed hostility and actively discouraged them from seeking family planning services.

Interviewer

Did you teach them about the natural methods?

Hellen Seidon

No, we were teaching what we had been taught, mostly about the pills and the coil methods. The main focus was on spacing children, to ensure a manageable interval between births. There was no family planning clinic in Ngong, however, the first and only clinic at the time was located at the entrance of Kenyatta National Hospital. The work was challenging, as many people were resistant to discussions about family planning matters, largely due to ignorance and apathy. It was rewarding, however, when individuals accepted the information and saw its benefits. Some feared that their parents would disapprove, leading them to seek family planning methods in secret. Meanwhile, others rejected the idea altogether, as they actively desired large families and saw no need for intervention.

Interviewer

What else did you do apart from working in the social services and family planning?

Hellen Seidon

When I transitioned into social work alongside my sister, my focus shifted from family planning to supporting children with disabilities. Our work involved visiting various homes, identifying the underlying causes of disabilities in children, and guiding parents on how best to support their children. For those who were bedridden for life, we facilitated their transfer to Dagoretti Children's Home, where they could receive specialised care and support. The centre caters for orphans and children with disabilities. Some of the children living with disabilities childen at the centre were taught some of the children vocational skills like tailoring, particularly those who could learn and practice it.

Since the 1970s, when I became part of social services, we dedicated ourselves to tirelessly advancing children's education. One such case was a young man named Mucheru. He was quite short, and we arranged for him to attend a tailoring course in Eldoret. He completed his training, graduated, and was provided with essential tools, including a sewing machine and fabric materials, to start his career. Today, Mucheru has built a wonderful life. He is married with four children—three of whom are in the university. He produces and sells school uniforms in his local community, achieving significant progress both personally and professionally. His success continues to grow. One of the most inspiring moments was when Mucheru, having started with just one sewing machine, returned to seek my assistance in applying for a loan to purchase another. I wrote a recommendation letter, and he successfully secured a loan from Barclays, which helped him expand his business.

Interviewer

Were these tools provided by the government?

Hellen Seidon

Yes, it was a government initiative. After completing their training, the graduates were given tools to help them establish their businesses. Additionally, they were encouraged to build families. We also witnessed the power of divine intervention. There was someone who donated crutches for individuals with disabilities who were unable to walk. We would collect these crutches from the Nairobi Fire Station, where an Indian-run hospital operated. Along with crutches, we also received

wheelchairs. Furthermore, we actively worked with Maendeleo ya Wanawake, an organization that empowered women. I was honored to serve as a chairlady representing Kajiado.

Yes, during Mrs. King'atwa's tenure, we were informed about the contributions and registration process, and eventually, many women became members of the group. The officers were in Kencom house. Our focus was on women who had not received formal education. We set up adult classes and mobilized women to join the program. We established many adult learning classes and a significant number of women attended those classes. As workers, we understood this club as one designed for the wives of chiefs. It also included the wives of government officers and even those who had only completed up to class two. It was structured around social class, which is why they were referred to as clubs. If you recall, it included the wives of government officers and even those who had dropped out of school in class two. Through a cabinet memorandum, I abolished the title "Women to Women." The concept behind Maendeleo at the time was that it attracted women who dressed distinctively and had some exposure to Western culture. It was entirely separate from rural communities. It had no connection to rural communities. All of these women had at least some level of education and could collaborate with white women. White women did not want African women joining the East African wing, as that was exclusively for whites. Instead, they decided to create a separate wing for Africans. That is the historical background. Due to segregation, they did not want us, African women, to be members of the East African women's organisation. Mrs. Anderson and some other women established Maendeleo and sought someone to take the lead. Phoebe was not even elected, it was simply a matter of holding on while the group organised itself. Women at the time were not able to organize themselves; rather, they were organized by the Wazungus. The wives of the Wazungu District Officers and District Commissioners ran the clubs. Not Jane or the others, we joined much later. The club already had its owners. However, when the Ministry of Social Services enacted the Women's Bill, in 1976, we convened in Mombasa and collectively agreed that the club should be inclusive and not based on discrimination.

Interviewer

Can you tell us more about Maendeleo Ya Wanawake.

Hellen Seidon

Joe, the CEO of East African Industries, helped to establish a kitchen within the Maendeleo building. I remember the extension officer regularly received free supplies of soap and Kimbo cooking fat as a token for supporting the training sessions. With support from the Ministry, we would bring women together and organise different training programs under Maendeleo ya Wanawake, where they learned essential skills, including baking, cooking mandazi, and cakes. We even had a dedicated kitchen exclusively designed for baking cakes.

In Kajiado, we initially contributed small amounts of money, starting with Ksh.2, but over time, this amount increased to Ksh.100. Through adult classes, we began witnessing remarkable progress. Women who had never attended school learned how to read and write, enabling them to move beyond using fingerprints to sign bank documents. They also received expert training in good housekeeping practices. However, social advancement for women was largely discouraged. The prevailing belief was that women were confined to marriage and motherhood—an expectation imposed by societal norms. Despite this, women were trained by agricultural experts on effective farming methods. At the time, there was little focus on income-generating opportunities for women. They primarily harvested crops for household use and sold surplus at the market. In Maasai land, milk was considered as property of women, but cattle remained under the sole ownership of their husbands.

Interviewer

Did *Maendeleo's* efforts fade away because women were never taught about leadership and economic empowerment?

Hellen Seidon

There reached a point when now women were being sensitized about income-generating projects. We used to call them 'income-generating', and not Economic Empowerment. There was nothing like empowering a woman at that time, those are very powerful words we use today. The women started engaging in small initiatives like pig farming. They learned where they could obtain space for the pigs and how to construct pigsty sites, as instructed by the agricultural extension officers. And it was

a free extension. There was also poultry farming and bee-keeping with extension offered. They continued with the income -generating projects until some bought land here. They came together and bought the land in places such as along Magadi road, Kisaju, and around Isinya, since land was cheaper in those areas.

Interviewer

Were you organizing the purchase of these pieces of land or did they do it by themselves?

Hellen Seidon

It was them, as a group, but they would also consult our offices. There was no progress without giving some information to the chief, since that was the way the government helped to map them. The groups had to inform the government about their activities so that it would know what the groups were engaged in. That was the reality back then, today it's not as it was since the inauguration of Kenya's constitution in 2010.

Interviewer

I just want to know, since this woman wants to badmouth the constitution, *(Laughter)*

Did things fall apart during President Uhuru's regime?

Hellen Seidon

It was during President Kĩbakĩ an President Uhuru's regime. The constitution amendment was in 2010, those are 11 years and President Uhuru has been in office for considerable period, so it has to be Kibaki, Uhuru, Raila and Ruto who messed things up.

At some point, women began receiving awareness on income-generating projects. Back then, such initiatives were not referred to as "economic empowerment." Those terms carry far more significance today than they did back then. Women gradually ventured into small-scale projects such as pig farming, where they learned how to identify suitable spaces for rearing pigs and construct proper enclosures, guided

by agricultural extension officers. These extension services were provided free of charge by the government. Beyond pig farming, women also engaged in poultry farming and beekeeping, receiving additional support and expertise through extension programs. The income earned from these activities allowed women to invest in land purchases. By pooling their resources, they also acquired property in areas such as Magadi Road, Kisaju, and Isinya, where land was relatively affordable at the time. Although the initiative was driven by the women themselves, they often sought guidance from our offices. The groups needed to report to the chief what they were doing, as it allowed the government to monitor and oversee their activities. Groups were required to report their undertakings, allowing authorities to monitor their efforts and recognise their contributions. That was the reality at the time. Today, things have changed, especially after the introduction of the 2010 constitution. Decisions now seem to be influenced more by individual preferences rather than structured policies.

Interviewer

What contributed to the changes?

Hellen Seidon

One of the contributing factors was policy changes, which created a significant amount of confusion. Whenever I visit a government office, I feel completely lost, and this issue is even more pronounced in rural areas, where government offices are in disarray. In the past, staffing was adequate, and responsibilities were clearly defined. If someone needed information on cooperative societies or agriculture, there was a designated officer to assist. Additionally, personnel would visit homes to provide customized extension services tailored to individual needs. Back then, different sectors, agriculture, veterinary services, social services, and administration, worked together seamlessly. We operated as a unified team, sometimes even travelling in a single vehicle to attend a chief's baraza. These barazas (gatherings) were crucial for identifying project needs, determining where to source necessary resources, and later, drafting recommendations.

Interviewer

What happened to that sector of social services?

Hellen Seidon

There are still widespread complaints about the lack of social services. One of our most impactful contributions was ensuring that children, especially orphans, had access to education. Many students at Starehe Boys' School benefited from our efforts, as Maendeleo ya Wanawake played a crucial role in supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, Maendeleo was just one part of the broader social services sector. We worked to help children from needy families enroll in school. At the time, there was no Starehe Girls' School, so we placed girls in A.I.C. institutions instead. For many women, joining these groups provided a rare opportunity to experience life beyond their homes. In those days, a woman could only step out on Sundays or market days, so attending group meetings became a valuable chance to socialize and interact with each other. Beyond this, the women had an eager desire to learn, which kept them deeply committed to their groups. Every year, we would write a report on the groups and a proposal recommending something a certain group required. If it were mabatis or cement they would get those since the government gave them for free. And back then, nursery schools were under the parents' watch, so when they requested for help from social services they would receive it, in building the classes.

Interviewer

So apart from the *Muungano* group, do you belong to another group?

Hellen Seidon

No. I don't have any other group.

Interviewer

How can you tell other to join and you don't?

Hellen Seidon

(laughter) Because I am there as a founder. I am a founder member. I am the one who brought the members together.

Interviewer

Muungano?

Hellen Seidon

Yes, *Muungano*.

Interviewer

Oh, so you are still there. You said you are the secretary or the treasurer?

Hellen Seidon

I am the secretary and the treasurer. Both positions.

Interviewer

How can you take the two?

Hellen Seidon

Because the members are not well-versed in writing.

Interviewer

Officially, you are the treasurer?

Hellen Seidon

Yes.

Interviewer

Is the team that started it still there?

Hellen Seidon

The group that started is still there.

Interviewer

Both the leaders and the members?

Hellen Seidon

The leaders, most of them have gone, they have passed away. It is just I, and five other members. We are six but the others rarely come because they're elderly.

Interviewer

So when you make a deciding on issues about money, how do you do it?

Hellen Seidon

We normaly call the rest and inform them about the balance in our account then write minutes stating, 'We have such and such money there and there is this or that which needs to be done. Then we'd call all the 41 groups. Mostly only the chairlady, the secretary and treasurer only would come.

Interviewer

Are they still 41 groups?

Hellen Seidon

Yes.

Interviewer

What strategies did you use to ensure the groups remained intact and thrived?

Hellen Seidon

Our main focus was encouraging them in their efforts—showing them that their goals were achievable.

Interviewer

A life long plan to do that is, in a case a member has passed away, their kin can replace them. This can ensure continuity of the group.

What the reverend has said is very important but I would suggest that you first meet and discuss what really ails you as a group then bring this point up and implement it. And another thing is you have to convince your members that that is the right direction for the group.

During our trips to Ukambani, Nakuru and Baringo, we also encountered this issue of next of kin. Most 'well to do' groups in Ukambani practiced the handing over of positions to their kin, no outsiders were allowed. If a group was formed in the 1970s, it was likely to find three of its two founding members, the rest were daughters and daughters-in -law of the deseased

members.

That is a very nice idea.

In fact we were shocked, that we have received the same information.

The reason also they didn't bring in new members is because those groups had big investments that a newcomer would certainly not meet at the onset of them joining the group.

That has been the trend from 1970s and 80s, where you don't include the membership, you retain the membership and you write the next of kin. And in fact it is a legacy it only that we no longer have them trained as in the latter years but we use to tell them always to submit their next of kin, ID and telephone number.

They also did so, so as to maintain the philosophy of their mothers and grandmothers by not bringing in foreign disturbances.

I am aware that their group has the records of next of kin but the challenge is in locating those records and their structuring. The lawyer here must also sensitize the members on the importance of such records and the secretary should see that she has all the information of the members, photos, next of kin, contacts, etc.

The complexity of it is that they never joined as individuals but as groups.

It is an umbrella group with many groups in it.

Their issue is a bit difficult, but it can be handled.

Let me ask you this, since you have interacted with women for a long time, what are some of the lessons you have learnt from them?

Hellen Seidon

Over years of working with women, I've learned this: their desire to learn is unstoppable, they wanted education and they got it. They taught us obedience and hard work. They laboured and many now own substantial property, all so their children would have a better life than they did while growing up. They opposed early marriage and insisted that both boys and girls be given an equal chance to education."

Interviewer

And what have you learnt from the women you taught about women's economic empowerment?

Hellen Seidon I learnt a lot.

Interviewer And what would you tell young women recently married about women's economic empowerment?

Hellen Seidon

That today there are many things they can get into and be economically well off. Also they should learn new things and eventually be able to earn a living all by themselves

Interviewer

Thank you everyone. What I have learnt is that women have brought about a lot of change not only in their families but also in the society and the nation; and it is also known that when you empower one woman you empower a whole nation.

Thank you everyone. What I have learnt is that women have brought about a lot of change not only in their families but also in the society and the nation; and it is also known that when you empower one woman you empower a whole nation.

END

Chapter 12: A Conversation with Winfred Mujesia

"You know, long time ago, when we didn't have these phones, women would wait for their husbands. If the husband is working in Nairobi, for example, and the child has been sent away from school, she would wait for the husband to come or write a letter while the child stayed at home waiting for money for an exercise book or a pencil. That is why Maendeleo Ya Wanawake said, 'No! This is now too much. We have to find our own income-generating activities so that we can take care of the small, everyday things."

Winfred Mujesia

Biography

Winnie Mujesia is the Chairlady, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake in Kakamega County. She is a social worker, a professional counselor, and holds a certificate in Kikoi weaving and beadwork, which has enabled her to train youths. She is a widow with four adult children. As a leader, she has been involved in mobilizing women's groups who engage in Table Banking, empowering them to manage their household activities, oversee projects, and care for their children. Through her initiative, she has encouraged women to practice horticulture and establish kitchen gardens, thereby reducing their reliance on market purchases. Winnie has also been actively involved in dairy farming and poultry rearing for both domestic use and income generation. These entrepreneurial activities have empowered women to participate in table banking, which has, in turn, enabled them to initiate individual projects and self-sustaining businesses. She has been able to link women to microfinance organizations and help them access loans to boost their table banking ventures. Her leadership position at Maendeleo Ya Wanawake allowed her to reach women in over 60 Wards and 12 Sub-Counties. Despite Maendeleo Ya Wanawake being a non-governmental organization that does not provide funding, she liaised with the County Government of Kakamega to reach as many women as possible, securing transport and lunch allowances for them to ensure their inclusion and participation in women's meetings. Winnie has courageously faced the hurdles within the organization and remained steadfast in leading and empowering women. She has been instrumental in partnering with the Ministry of Health to train women on reproductive health, especially family planning, rape, and gender-based violence. Where children are not able to attend school due to limited Constituency Development Fund (CDF) bursaries, she has helped provide some support to the mothers.

The Conversation

The interview takes place after the researcher pays a visit to the interviewee at her premises in Kakamega. The interviewee introduces herself as Winifred Mujesia and gives a brief of her role in Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. The researchers introduce themself and explains the reason for her selection to be be interviewed and the objectives of the interview.

The interview was conducted by:

Winfred Mujesia

My name is Winfred Mujesia. I am a County Chair lady *Maendeleo ya Wanawake,* Kakamega County. I am a social worker by profession and also a professional counselor.

Interviewer

That is okay, you know that I must also allow you to say what you are comfortable saying.

Winfred Mujesia

I am a widow, I have four kids- sons and daughters, all adults.

Interviewer

Okay, all right. So you have been identified as a leader in women's economic empowerment, and you've made a lot of contributions towards economic empowerment. So maybe, can you tell us your journey towards women's economic empowerment ? What you have been doing, how you have been mobilizing. Your role, because you are a leader, because you are a chairlady. So maybe you can tell us about that?

Winfred Mujesia

Yes, economic empowerment, through women's groups, we have started Table Banking to enable women to get loans easily. This allows them to carry out their activities at home, manage their projects, and also take care of their children. I have also encouraged women to practice horticulture, have kitchen gardens so that they don't buy beans from the market, poultry for their own use and for generating money, and also dairy farming. Through table banking, they have managed to start their own individual projects. Others who own piggeries while there are some managing their own businesses. Yes.

Interviewer

Okay, have you faced any obstacle or challenge during this whole process?

Winfred Mujesia

Yes, the challenges have been there especially lack of cooperation from women groups doing collective group projects. It used to be a challenge where some members couldn't cooperate with the rest especially in making contributions. But when they just started engaging in table banking to have loans for their own individual projects, that's when the problem was solved. Otherwise, carrying out a group project has never been easy. There is a challenge of money because for table banking, they don't have enough money. What they have is not enough because they contribute from their pockets; raise the little that they have. A woman can be hurt when we want more money, when they don't have enough money, because they only get through contributions. I have also linked them to other organizations and microfinances who give them loans to boost their table banking. I have linked them to Ministry of Social Services, where they get loans without interest and Women Enterprise Fund, Uwezo Funds, and other funds like Youth Enterprise and Development fund.

Interviewer

And as a leader of this very prestigious organization, do you face challenges as a leader?

Winfred Mujesia

Yes, as a leader of Maendeleo. Maendeleo Ya Wanawake is a non-political, non-profit making organization, and it is also a voluntary organization. Everything we do is on a voluntary basis because we don't get paid. So we use our own resources to reach the women. And ensure we as many women as we wish to meet. Another challenge is when county governments were introduced through devolution, Kakamega County is now very large, with 60 wards and 12 sub-counties. One may want to reach many women but you just can't everybody due to lack of funds. When they call these women, they give them transport and lunch. But when I call them, I don't have lunch nor transport for them. That has also affected our meetings because at times, the turnout has been so low.

Interviewer

Okay, and in terms of leadership, have you faced any leadership challenges, like if there is any conflict within the organization?

Winfred Mujesia

In fact, when I was elected in Maendeleo in 2014—a major challenge I encounted was that I found that the organization's plot had been sold by my predecessors. So this took a lot of my time. I had to call the head office, the trustees, who then sued the former office, plus the buyer of the plot. And you know how the court system goes – it takes a lot of time. So from 2014 untill last year, December 15th, 2020, is when the judgment was made. Luckily enough, we won the case, so we are now looking for means and ways of developing the plot. So that is the major challenge that I faced. It took a lot of my time, going to court, mobilizing women, because when you are not there, they start construction on the plot, and I took all the women from all over the county to come and demonstrate to stop the construction.

And you know, when you are a leader and you are ten —at all levels, we are elected ten leaders: six office bearers plus four delegates. Not all of them are active. Like in this case, we are only a few who are doing the work. The others, when they find that they are not paid, they sit back. So I remained with a few, whom we walked up with until the last minute. Okay, there are others who are not cooperative, others who are just there; they don't want to do anything. But when there is a seminar, when there is a meeting in Nairobi, they will come very fast.

Interviewer

And apart from finances, are you facing any other challenges and are you able to deal with them, like now this court case who was dealing with it?

Winfred Mujesia

Contributions from these women. I also received a small donation from our Women Representative, although we spent a lot of money and still have debts. We used a significant amount of money to hire around five lawyers, at different times, to represent us. You start off well but they get compromised, abandon the case, and start making your lifes difficult. They wanted us to drop the case, but we didn't give up. We'd find another lawyer until the last one we got from Kisumu.

Interviewer

So, as women in an organization, you also faced challenges within the legal system – legal justice challenges.

Winfred Mujesia

Yes, yes. Using five lawyers was not easy because we spent so much money. And starting fresh with a new lawyer each time, we were almost giving up, but we didn't.

Interviewer

Do you think the process would have been easier if it involved men, or was it simply the legal system being slow? The court system, given those many years?

Winfred Mujesia

It took many years because at one point, everything came to a standstill. They told us the magistrate for land cases was no longer assigned to Kakamega court. We waited for a long time, and then our case was transferred to Mumias, then Bungoma, then eventually Kisumu. We kept moving like that because we didn't have a dedicated magistrate. That was always the excuse they gave for the delay.

Interviewer

So this meant more money, because of transport, time, and trying to keep the women's spirit.

Winfred Mujesia

Yes. That's why I am saying very many just left. So the ones we continued with were just very few.

Interviewer

Okay, so has the government been supportive in any way towards the organization?

Winfred Mujesia

Yes, the department of Social Services has been supportive to us. For example, when we wanted to have meetings, like I was telling you, the plot was sold, so we didn't have any venue to hold our meetings. Our offices were demolished, all furniture destroyed and so we didn't have anywhere to meet. However, sometimes we needed a boardroom from the national government, sometimes the county government's Social Services offices, and when I request them, they also sometimes provide lunch and tea for the women, but they don't give the women transport unless it is a meeting the government has asked us to hold.

Interviewer

Is there any other way the government has been supporting you?

Winfred Mujesia

Since I joined Maendeleo ya Wanawake, I have not seen the government financially supporting us. I have not seen anything, it's always women looking for money, like loans from Women Enterprise Funds. That is the only support I can say we get from the government. And maybe technical issues. We get technical support from them, like when we have

women who want to start a project and they need technical advice from, say, the Ministry of Agriculture, they want to do livestock, they need technical advice.

Interviewer

Just advice, not any support?

Winfred Mujesia

Only advices and trainings.

Interviewer

They also train?

Winfred Mujesia

Yes they train.

Interviewer

And for example, in agriculture or such projects, do they give you seeds or farm inputs like fertilizers?

Winfred Mujesia

In agriculture, sometimes they give seeds. Yes, the government has given seeds through these groups and even individuals. They have been given seeds by County Governments.

There is a lady who is coming to give us her success story. She has succeeded; she has even been supported by the county government. She has been given a dairy cow by the county government through *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*. She has succeeded through the county government. I had written a proposal for them to do capacity-building training for *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* leaders, and then it reached somewhere, and we were not given the training.

Interviewer

Okay, and donors?

Winfred Mujesia

Donors? We had a problem at the headquarters. I don't know if you heard anything there. There have been having wrangles there for many years. We would go to Nairobi as board members, we'd sign MOUs that we had secured a donor, but some opponents would oppose everything. They would write letters to the donors, asking them to hold things up if there was a donor.

Interviewer

And what about at the community level? What support have you received from the community level?

Winfred Mujesia

The community level, at the county?

Interviewer

Yes.

Winfred Mujesia

No, we haven't gotten any support.

Interviewer

Or other players in the community, maybe the church, other organizations, have you gotten any?

Winfred Mujesia

The financing?

Interviewer

Not financing, it can be any support.

Winfred Mujesia

We have had trainings through other organizations, we have had trainings even through other small CBOs.

Winfred Mujesia

We have also had Ministry of Health trainers, the Ministry of Health trained women on reproductive health, especially family planning. They have been trained on Gender-Based Violence (GBV), where Maendeleo Ya Wanawake are champions of GBV trainings.

Interviewer

Ah, that is wonderful. And at family level? Do you receive support at the family level?

Winfred Mujesia

We only got CDF bursaries where you see a child is moving to school, as a Maendeleo leader, you have to step in. There is another case where there was a lady who was working for me on the farm. When I found that her son was not going to school, I got concerned, so I had to assist. The mother told me the father died, and she was not given the death certificate by the predecessor, the one we took office from. Yes.

So the mother told me she was not able to provide for this boy's education. She said that when she went to the assistant chief, the assistant chief chased her from the office. So I connected her to one of my leaders, who is my vice treasurer, to take her to that assistant chief. If he declines, they go to the chief and if the chief declines, tell him that I am the one who sent them. So when the chief heard that the lady was sent by the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake county chair, she was given the letter immediately, and the father's death certificate was processed immediately. She got it. The child is here at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology; he is doing education. I also struggled to look for the CDF bursary. He has applied for HELB, and for small needs, he comes over during the weekend, helps me with work, and I give him money.

Interviewer

That is wonderful.

Winfred Mujesia

So at family levels, we connect them. We even follow up for the needy cases to get their bursaries.

Where we have cases like when a child is violated, like raped, we go with their report to the police station and even take her to the hospital and continue to even file a case in the court.

Interviewer

Okay, and what do you think has kept the women organizations together and focused, because the organization has been there for so long?

Winfred Mujesia

Seventy years now.

Interviewer

Seventy years!

Winfred Mujesia

Seventy! In fact, we launched our celebrations on the 29th of October. The celebrations will go on at the regionals until early next year. We are seventy years old.

It is because of unity. You know, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake is non-political, though some people are confusing it; they think it is a political organization. But Maendeleo supports the government of the day, and we always support the government of the day. So, because Maendeleo Ya Wanawake has members, they are very humble. We have got many trainings. Like me, when I joined Maendeleo, I underwent trainings that have helped me even as a person and have helped me to help the community.

Interviewer

Wow! So, if I heard you, it is the unity that has kept you together and helped the organization?

Winfred Mujesia

Yes, we are united by love. I mean, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, there is love, especially when we meet. And also education. You know, we sit together; we educate ourselves, even in those small groups: how one can cook, how you can look after your children, how you can look after your husband, how you can hustle, not just waiting for your husband to provide. So someone feels, "Ah, let me go and get something. At least if I am interested and meet these women, my stress will go through their advice."

Interviewer

Okay, and are there times where there have been challenges that threaten to break the organization?

Winfred Mujesia

There are challenges, just as I have told you. For example, at the head office, yes, that is the time we had met as board members or the NEC members. And you know that building, the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake building. The Maendeleo Ya Wanawake building is under the names of the trustees, and the names of the trustees are written there. So we decided, "No! It should be written Maendeleo Ya Wanawake." And you know, the former chairlady, Jane Kiano—sorry to talk about her when she is dead—she had a group. She just formed a group because she was not in support. They were refusing that the building remains under their names. So that started a conflict. That is why now the national office was divided. Five joined Kiano, so they were fighting. Now, the remaining ones in the office who were working until 2019, when we had our AGM, and we said, "No! We are just fed up, and we have not done anything for the women, and the years are going, and we need to do something." So we decided to replace them, and since we replaced them, work is going on; now there is peace. When we have the meetings, there is no problem. We have started a water tank project, and it is going on.

Interviewer

So the biggest problem so far has been leadership wrangles at the top?

Winfred Mujesia

Yes, at the top.

Interviewer

And here in the countryside?

Winfred Mujesia

In the countryside, we cooperate, we only experience financial problems {laughs}. But the way we love Maendeleo Ya Wanawake.

Interviewer

So if there isn't any, because you have been there for long, are there lessons to make it better or advice you can give to make the organization better for the government or the women themselves?

Winfred Mujesia

I think for Maendeleo Ya Wanawake to make it better, I believe leaders need to be focused. And if you are in Maendeleo, though we are encouraging women to go for political seats, when you are in Maendeleo, remain in Maendeleo. Do developments. Don't mix here and there; don't mix Maendeleo and politics. Because when we mix, maybe I am supporting so-and-so, and if I show that I am supporting somebody to be the governor, as a chairperson, next time, the governor who will come, whom I had not supported will not support the organization because of one person. We need to be neutral.

Interviewer

Do you think it is possible?

Winfred Mujesia

Yeah, you know you cannot run away from politics, but you don't need to know that I am supporting so-and-so. You be neutral. When somebody comes and says he wants to meet women, let her meet those women. The other one comes, let her meet the women.

Let the women decide on their own, not telling them that you support so-and-so, you vote for so-and-so. It brings problems after elections. That is what I have experienced. Also, if we can have our own office, because the headquarters, and even us, are planning to develop our plot so that we may be self-reliant. At least to have a project for the county, the sub-counties, and the ward for sustainability. Because if we don't have something to sustain us, the organization will not move, like when the donors pulled out.

You remember in 1992, when we joined KANU, that was a big mistake at the head office. That time, I was working at Maendeleo Ya Wanawake as a district coordinator. So it became that the halls were now turned into politics, so all the donors pulled out. There were no funds to pay the staff. You know, some of us had trained because of that. So politics are good, but when we show that we have interest there, donors will not have interest in funding the organization. But if we keep away from politics, we will get donors; we will be having many donors. Even these women entering politics, they would atleast be getting allowances. But because we joined, you know, that thing is still there. In fact, when I was a district coordinator, the DCs were telling me, "You women belong to KANU." No! We divorced from KANU. Nobody could understand that we divorced from KANU; they always feel that we are still in.

Interviewer

Because that was the highlight of Moi.

Winfred Mujesia

Yes, because when we went to Nairobi, he would organize for anything. DCs were running up and down when we went to Nairobi, they're the ones who were organizing everything including, transport, accomodation, and food. So he convinced the national office, by multipartyism to join KANU," which was very wrong. So when the multiparty system came, and Maendeleo Ya Wanawake being for every woman, regardless of the party, we had to divorce our parties and remain in Maendeleo so that it could accommodates every woman.

Interviewer

So you think that being into a political system or being in to KANU affected you?

Winfred Mujesia

Yes, it affected us. It affected the the organization very much.

Interviewer

Is that why you recommend that a person should remain neutral?

Winfred Mujesia

They should remain neutral, If I am supporting so-and-so, let it just be known to me that I am supporting so-and-so. Let it not be public that I am supporting so-and-so, convincing someone to support so-and-so. No! Let them decide on their own because we have been training these women in civic education. They therefore know how to make decisions, how to choose a leader. We have had several trainings on civic education.

Interviewer

All right, unless there is something that you would want to add, I am very happy or any question you would like to ask me?

Winfred Mujesia

So my question is, I heard that the University of Nairobi is assisting women in empowerment. How do you assist women in Kenya, not Maendeleo ya Wanawake?

Interviewer

First of all, there is a WEE Hub, and that is what we have come to do. We are conducting research that is supposed to inform policy and other stakeholders on how women can be economically empowered. And you can only know how women can be empowered economically if you talk to the women. That is why we are here on the ground to talk to you. But it is for educational purposes and influencing policy, because if you change the laws of any nation to be friendly to the women. We want to make sure

that we can bring out women's voices, document their experiences. You see, the way there is always a history; we want our story to be heard because women are very resilient, and they have done a lot, but no one documents their experiences.

Winfred Mujesia

It is true.I was forgetting something that has empowered me financially, that even enables these women to raise money. I was trained by Maendeleo Ya Wanawake when I was a district coordinator in hand weaving. Do you know hand weaving?

Interviewer No.

Winfred Mujesia

Hand weaving, where I can make Kikois and I also do beadwork. That certificate I earned enabled me to apply for KEWOP jobs, which focus on youth empowerement. I had applied to train young people, and just like others have been trained, I also got the opportunity to go to Migori for training with the trainers. The youths I have trained now assist me whenever I receive orders to make these products. This not only supports me but but also helps them, as they are able to earn some income from the work. Another point I would like to emphasize is to our national and county governments. Whenever they have projects, such as identifying needy cases, supporting orphans, or building oshelters for the elderly, they should consider working with Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. This is because Maendeleo is rooted at the grassroots and has an extensive network. In every village, you will find a Maendeleo leader who knows the households and their situations, and she can provide accurate information on who needs support.

Interviewer

At least, they should be involved.

Winfred Mujesia

In programs and projects that the government supports.

Interviewer

More participation of women leaders.

Winfred Mujesia

Yes.

Interviewer

Do you have Nyumba Kumi leaders here?

Winfred Mujesia

Nyumba kumi leaders wako (Nyumba Kumi leaders are there).

Interviewer

Okay, okay, all right. Is there anything else? I don't want to leave you out.

Winfred Mujesia

I cannot recall them. I pray that the collaboration with the government agencies should continue. These organizations also come and go; they should come, and if they want to partner with us, they come. But I want that collaboration to be strengthened. You can't be able to empower Maendeleo Ya Wanawake if that woman is still at a low level. At least, if there is something she is doing through Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, those women are empowered. They can do their things; they can start their IGAs *(Income Generating Activities)*.

You know, a long time ago, when we didn't have these phones, women would wait for their husbands working in Nairobi. For example, when the child had been sent away from school, she would wait for the husband to come; write a letter. The child would stay at home, waiting for money, for a book, for an exercise book, a pencil. That is why *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* said, "No! This is now too much! We have to find our own IGAs so that these small things can be taken care of." You can see that women have done so many things; they have even built houses.

Interviewer

You have said IGAs, what does that stands for?

Winfred Mujesia

Income Generating Activities. Through *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, through education, women can now stand on their own. When she becomes a widow, and now that the husband is not there, life continues. She has a problem, and she joins other women; they assist, and women sometimes contribute to assist, and that child goes to school. So we need support from the government.

Let the government support us. We are not political, and if they support the community through *Maendeleo*, they will be sure that I will lead the community. If you observe the issues of COVID-19, you know, a likuru [assistant chief] would choose his family members to benefit from that fund. When I researched, because I participated in the COVID-19 campaign on inua Jamii (empowerment kitty), the assistant chief (likuru) takes the family members. They are the ones who were getting that money from that family. Or somebody somewhere who is needy, a very old man, did not benefit from that. But if they use *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake,* we are very transparent, and we feel for that old person who does not have godfathers to benefit from government's social security programs. You won't see women, children suffering somewhere; that is why we bring them food. *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* identifies the weak people who can benefit from the COVID funds. So those who benefited from the COVID-19 funds were able people. Some had a pension; at least they were getting pension. But you will see a retired teacher getting that money, yet there is a woman somewhere who sleeps hungry together with her children, but they have not gotten that money. That is why I am very much concerned that if there is anything, any grant for people, any project, any program, let the government use *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*. They will get the right people to benefit.

Interviewer

I am so happy for your time and valuable information. I have learned many things that I didn't know. So thank you very much.

Winfred Mujesia

Welcome.

"You can't be able to empower Maendeleo Ya Wanawake if the woman is still at the low level. At least, if there is something she is doing through Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, those women are empowered."

Winfred Mujesia

Conclusion

From conversations with women leaders, we can see that pathfinders have mobilized women's action at multiple levels—group, community, county, and national—to achieve various goals, including economic empowerment. Women have worked to build collective agency and solidarity, responding to challenges like loss of control over their income, breaking dependence on men, and the need to amplify their voices against shared obstacles. A review of these oral stories shows that feminist organizing goes beyond issues, regions, and needs. Over time, women's self-mobilization has grown from small informal groups into larger collectives, driven by broader cross-cutting concerns, regional engagement, and national movements. The long-term history of women's mobilization—from the 1950s to today—reflects many aspects, including income generation, livelihood improvement, welfare, challenging gender norms, pooling school fees for children, cross-border trading, and peer support groups. Together, these efforts show a lasting pursuit of survival.

Conversations with the trailblazers also highlight the remarkable endurance of the women's movement, which has persisted despite little or no external funding. It has been largely internally driven. Sustained by members' contributions, flexible resources, and support from various sources, including training programs and government funds. Given the geographical reach of the pathfinders and their mobilization efforts, the women's movement has survived by spreading its wings across regions, forming a resilient network that continues to thrive.

The Women Economic Empowerment Pathfinders reveal that feminist organizing has remained consistent across different time clusters, with no distinct differences in priorities between the periods 1963-75, 1976-97, and 1997- to present.While the trajectory and approaches have evolved slightly – shaped by the skills-set of the group members – the core issues remain largely the same. In the earliest time cluster, collective agency was more inward-looking, with groups primarily seeking resources internally. In subsequent time clusters, there was a growing recognition of women's rights, opportunities, and spaces that group members actively sought to occupy. After 1997, as women's groups became more educated and gained greater exposure, they maintained their foundational focus on economic empowerment, welfare, and livelihoods while expanding their solidarity beyond feminist movements. They began to advocate non-feminist issues such as constitutional reform, political inclusion, and

access to financing – demonstrating the adaptability and interconnected nature of their organizing efforts. The oral narratives documented in this book highlight the diverse and dyanamic nature of women's economic empowerment movement. Rather than being a homogenous entity, it consists of multiple strands each forming a visible force of women advocating for their distinct interests. Leaders of the various groups and strands connect with other leaders in similar movements at higher levels, making the movement multi-pronged, multi-faceted, sometimes informal - yet clearly visible, present, and impactful. Further, the stories of the WEE pathfinders reveal that feminist mobilization for constitutional reform cannot be separated from efforts for women's economic empowerment. The movements are deeply intertwined, shaped by a complex web of intersecting issues that affect different strands of organizing. Through this interconnectedness, women have continued to push boundaries, expand opportunities, and sustain a resilient movevement.

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"Solidarity between women can be a powerful force of change, and can influence future development in ways favourable not only to women but also to men."

Nawal El Saadawi, 2007

UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

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