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Promoting the rights and position of Kenyan women in decision making

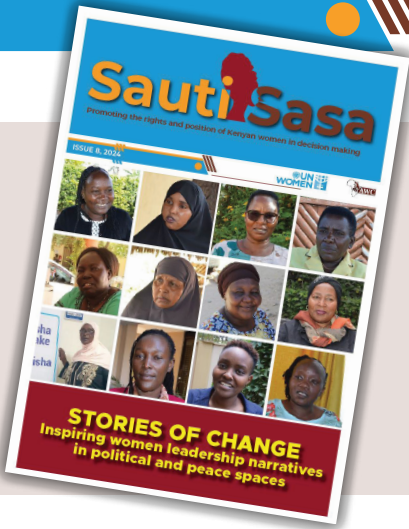
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STORIES OF CHANGE

Inspiring women leadership narratives
in political and peace spaces





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How negotiated democracy is frustrating women ascendancy to political leadership

How Susan Wairimu Nyagah won with a landslide to become the first elected woman MCA for Kagaari South Ward seat, Runyenjes Constituency, Embu County

We talk about Rose Njeru's unrelenting struggle to gain political leadership

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How election violence changed one woman's perspective to women leadership, peace and development





From lowly beginnings, Caroline Muriithi now shines as the only elected female MCA



Caroline Muriithi.

BY AWC CORRESPONDENT

In 2006, a casual labourer's life was radically transformed when she met one of Kenya's finest female politicians.

"I was just a casual labourer doing menial jobs in the farms and earning KSh25 a day when I mobilised a group of women and we started rearing goats. On one occasion, while I was serving as the chairperson of the group, we invited Martha Karua to address us."

Meet Caroline Muriithi Muriithi, who despite her situation at the time, her leadership qualities were being noticed. Karua, who was the then Minister for Constitutional

Affairs, noticed them too.

"She saw a lot of potential in me and decided to introduce me to politics through the Kenya Women Parliamentary Association (KEWOPA). That served as a turning point and I have never looked back.

I was hired by KEWOPA to do civic education ahead of the referendum to usher in the new constitution. I was also involved in women's empowerment programmes and educating them on how to support women into leadership."

In 2007, Muriithi served as one of Karua's campaign coordinators and helped her to reclaim the Gichugu parliamentary seat. "This

role paid off when I was nominated by Narc Kenya party to serve as a councillor in the defunct Kirinyaga County Council."

It was during her time as councillor when the Constitution of Kenya was enacted in 2010, creating devolved units. By 2013, when the General Election was held, Member of County Assembly (MCA) was one of the units of representation created by the Constitution. Muriithi vied for the Karumandi Ward seat but lost.

In 2017, she decided to run for the same seat again, but lost in the primaries. The loss made her change strategy. She supported the candidate who defeated her in the primaries. She also joined the Jubilee Party presidential campaigns headed by Purity Ndiriri. Again, her contribution to the party saw her being nominated for the second time, now as MCA to the Kirinyaga County Assembly.

That was her second turning point. She used this nomination to lay a firm political foundation that paid off in the 2022 general elections. Although in this election she ran against 12 opponents, she went ahead to win the Karumandi Ward seat.

With this win, Muriithi made history becoming the first elected woman MCA in Kirinyaga County in 2022 and

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the third elected female ward representative since 2013.

Strategies that worked for her

Muriithi's simple philosophy of touching lives, one at a time, worked for her with the understanding that she may not be able to transform a thousand lives at once. "If we are able to touch one life at a time, then we will be able to transform communities."

It is this touching lives and her development track record that became her major areas of strength that made people to vote for her.

"My strategy was to initiate projects that touched the people. I donated water tanks to primary schools. The water tanks benefitted both the schools and neighbouring communities and this worked for me."

Muriithi identified and supported very needy students to complete their education. In addition, she organised women into groups and introduced them to goat rearing, helping them to become self-reliant.

She is constantly with her constituents in times of happiness and sadness. "I maintain a heavy presence in the community and through several initiatives, I am able to reach many people and establish a strong backing at the grassroot level."

Her position as a deaconess and a women's leader at the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) helped mobilise immense support for her candidature. It is this support combined by that of her family that helped shield Muriithi from opponents' unwarranted attacks.

Erecting obstacles

Still, her opponents erected many obstacles to prevent her from winning. Her lowest moment during the campaigns came when hired goons ejected her from a United Democratic Alliance (UDA) party economic forum at Kimiigua Youth Polytechnic in Kirinyaga County.

"The attackers violently frog-marched me out of the forum as if I was an outsider. I already had the UDA certificate and I was rightfully in the meeting. I was roughed up and kicked out of the meeting. The goons also attempted to strip me naked before the police came to my rescue."

Before this incident, the opponents had tried to prevent Muriithi from being given the party ticket after she won the primaries.

"The party certificate almost went to my opponent but I strongly fought this and the party's dispute resolution committee ordered us to do a repeat poll, which I won

"My main opponent continued protesting and took me to the political party dispute tribunal again but this time he lost and I retained the certificate."

When Muriithi was cleared by IEBC, the same opponent expressed his dissatisfaction with the decision, and sued IEBC for clearing her. She won the case and the opponent was ordered to pay costs of the suit. Her attitude to remain steadfast in such circumstances helped her to overcome many challenges.

Useful lessons

On this political journey, Muriithi has learnt to never take people for granted. "I have learnt to listen to anybody who walks into my office or even the ones I meet on the streets or at the village level. The person you do not rate very highly might have very useful information to help you move to the next level."

Muriithi advises women leaders to calculate their political moves very carefully. "I recall that in 2017 when I lost during the party primaries, I supported the winner. The electorate remembered this in 2022 and voted for me."

Muriithi is of the thinking that nominations of women to County Assembly should be based on merit. "Political parties must be compelled to nominate the women who vied and lost. This will empower women politically."

There is also the need to mentor young women for there to be a critical mass of women participating in politics.

"This mentorship can copy from the Rwanda model that empowers girls from high school where they are educated on their rights, how to vie, and why to vie for political seats. This is why Rwanda leads in women's political representation globally. The mentorship should be augmented with supporting women to gain visibility at the community and county levels.

"You cannot just come and tell people to elect you when you have nothing to show on the ground. They also need to support women who are already elected to increase their chances of being re-elected."

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The pain of negotiated democracy for women seeking political leadership

BY FAITH MUIRURI

Jamila Farah did not know what awaited her when she offered to vie for the Jarajara Ward seat in Balambala Constituency, Garissa County during the 2022 General Elections. She had prepared well for the grueling electioneering period and had even won a political party ticket to contest, when the worst happened.

“I had already acquired Ford Kenya Ticket and was rearing to go to the ballot when I approached the elders for their blessings.”

The elders delivered the most unexpected and the hurting news to her: They already had endorsed another candidate and that was final.

Her political ambitions were complicated by a system of endorsing political candidates that the community uses. According to Farah, there are three major clans in her community namely Abdalla, Abduwaq, Auwalayan that endorse those vying for political seats for any given political election.

“I began by approaching my



Jamila Farah.

sub-clan which did not have any problem with my candidature. However, I still needed the approval of Abduwaq clan. Here, my dreams were shattered after the elders told me that they already had their own candidate and that I was wasting my time.”

They went ahead and said that she was unfit to hold any leadership position because she was not married “I was told I was a bad example to girls in the community because I was divorced.”

Farah, who is renowned for her advocacy work at the community level, decided to soldier on and not give up her political ambitions based on the elders' advice.

“I refused to allow the verdict by the elders to stop my desire to alleviate poverty and empower women and youth economically. I wanted to see their fortunes change for the better.”

This did not go down well with elders, who felt her actions were a major challenge to their

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supremacy, and would incite other people to defy them. To counter her, the elders started organizing people to heckle her whenever she addressed public gatherings. “It was very disappointing to see people hurl insults and stones at me while on my campaign trail.”

She could not take it anymore. “This dealt a heavy blow on my campaigns and I had to drop out of the race two months to the elections.”

But even as she took this decision, it was not all in vain. She had made a mark and benefited from capacity building initiatives that are and will inform her future engagements in politics.

During the campaigns, for instance, her capacity on political engagements was built by the Kenya Women Parliamentary Association (KEWOPA) who helped her craft some of the strategies she used during the campaigns.

What also worked to her advantage was her work in the community. Long before getting into politics, Farah, who works as a program officer at Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM), Garissa County, had initiated projects in the community that sold her as a viable leader. One such initiative was a mentorship programme for the youth and women.

Through her outfit Ushindi for Women, a



community based organization in Ijara Sub County, Farah had traversed all sub counties in Garissa County namely Ijara, Fafi, Lagdera, Daadab, Bambala distributing dignity kits with support from the Kenya Red Cross Society.

She was also on the forefront pushing for justice for children who had been defiled and survivors of rape.

“I pushed for the jailing of a chief from Wajir County who had defiled a ten year old girl. The chief was jailed for 35 years. I was able to fast track other such cases and people have been jailed including a school director who had defiled a form two student.”

This push for justice for survivors of sexual violence endeared her to many people. At the county level, she participated in the development of the gender policy that seeks to actualize gender equity and implementation of the two thirds gender rule in the county.

Meanwhile, within the organization she worked for, she managed to prove that she was a viable leader. This

explains why SUPKEM officials conducted door-to-door campaigns to popularize her candidature and urged the electorate to give her chance to serve them.

She also worked closely with the elders, who are very influential in determining who wins a political seat.

“Although this did not work in 2022, I plan to approach them early for the 2027 General Elections. I want to approach them as early as now, to get an early endorsement. During the 2022 General Elections, they said I did not involve them early enough.”

Although the elders failed to endorse her, she succeeded in getting the endorsement of young people. Using her Facebook page, she reached out to many young people who urged her to continue with the race.

Farah believes that negotiated democracy remains a big challenge for women seeking elective positions in the Northern region. “In Garissa County for instance, there are no women who participate in forums that negotiate who is endorsed to vie for elective seats. Until this is challenged, women will remain sidelined in the political arena.”

The situation is worse for young women who do not have resources and are single. “Those who are divorced like me face double stigmatization.

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I remember the elders telling me if you were not able to manage your husband, how will you manage the community?"

Negotiated democracy remains a major stumbling block. Farah laments that: "Men who seat in the forums do not want women to contest for political positions. To them, women should sit at home, wash dishes and cook for their families; but not at the decision making table. They have a perception that we are competing with religion. To the contrary, our religion has instead elevated women as leaders in our generation."

It is this patriarchal thinking and the definitions of the roles of women in society that saw some people encourage her to "vie for Women Representative position arguing that the MCA seat is a preserve for men.

Despite these painful encounters, Farah learnt useful lessons that will inform her future pollical engagements.

She has learnt that to win an election, one must have the necessary resources and engage in early campaigning. "The culture of handouts is deeply entrenched, with our people and majority of those who attend campaign rallies expecting that they will receive money.

But one important thing she has learnt is that women from marginalized communities have to be at the negotiating



"We need women to be part of the negotiated democracy, where they will be able to say we have this number of women vying for different seats and we want you [the elders] to support their candidature."

JAMILA FARAH



table if negotiated democracy is to work for them. This will help them push to have women endorsed by the same elders who endorse male candidates and give them leeway to run for respective elective seats.

"We need women to be part of the negotiated democracy processes where they will be able to say we have this number of women vying for different seats and we want you [the elders] to support their candidature."

Farah believes that if women are included in negotiated democracy, then they can influence decisions made by the elders and push for the implementation of the two thirds gender rule within such structures.

Already, the women in the county have started a process to ensure their inclusion is a reality. They have formed Garissa professional women

group with representation from the three major clans - Abdalla, Abduwaq, Auwalayan.

"We have initiated this forum to push for our inclusion on the negotiating table. We want to focus on ensuring that women who contest for different seats during the 2027 General Elections are treated equally as their male counterparts.

In addition to this initiative, Farah proposes the introduction of an exchange programme that helps women from her region to learn from other regions and countries in which women are doing well in political representation. "We want to learn different approaches used by other regions including Tanzania and Uganda that have worked to guarantee women representation."

She also feels organizations that support women leadership need to start providing this support early enough to enable women prepare well for elections.

When such support comes early, she notes, women leaders participate effectively than when it happens near the election time.

"You need to start engaging those who want to vie as early as now. Building their capacities at the last minute will not help because majorities have a busy schedule looking for votes and funds to support their campaigns."

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Susan Wairimu, Member of County Assembly (MCA) set for Kagaari South Ward seat, Runyenjes Constituency, Embu County.

Politics is about strategy and determination, says Nyagah

BY FAITH MUIRURI

Susan Wairimu Nyagah was already a household name when she won the Member of County Assembly (MCA) set for Kagaari South Ward seat, Runyenjes Constituency, Embu County.

Nyagah who is the first woman to be elected to the position, won with a landslide in a bruising battle that had attracted eleven male contestants including the incumbent.

“My development track record gave me an edge over my

opponents. I focused on the strength of my vision which was premised on what I had done at the community level and how much more I intended to achieve once elected.”

Her political journey started shaping up in 2015 when she quit her job as a revenue enforcement officer at the Embu County Government.

“I had worked for 25 years both as an employee and a unionist in the county. I rose through the ranks from a messenger to a clerical officer in the defunct Embu Municipal Council and later

as a revenue enforcement officer in the devolved unit. I also served as the national assistant treasurer at the County Government Workers Union before I resigned and joined politics.”

This was in 2017, when she vied for the MCA seat but lost by 50 votes. “My fierce determination to make a difference in the community inspired me to remain with the people even after I had lost.”

She used the period between 2017 and the next general election to brand herself and increase her visibility in the community. Come

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2022 general elections, she had built a formidable support base. She says that her service to the community would yield hefty returns when she went for the seat in that year. “My affinity to community work helped me to break the glass ceiling and bag the seat on a UDA ticket.”

Her ability to connect with the people and embrace challenges, were key assets to her political advancement.

So was her track record especially among women and the youth. “I initiated many development projects in the community as well as made sure that students from disadvantaged families completed their studies. This endeared me to the women and young people who endorsed my candidature.”

Nyagah takes credit for re-carpeting roads within the Ward using resources she helped mobilize. “I was also instrumental to the establishment of a school feeding programme targeting children in Early Childhood Development facilities in the Ward. I also roped in pupils in junior secondary schools and made sure all the pupils including class eight pupils had enough food when sitting for their national examinations.”

She also distributed food to the elderly especially old men and women aged 75-80 years old. In addition, she not only gave personal donations towards weddings and funerals but donated her personal cars to carry people to attend the same functions. These actions cemented her relationship with the electorate.

Her other strategy was door-to-door campaign that helped her to reach so many voters

“I did everything including making sure that all people with Identity Cards within the ward voted during the General elections. I wanted to make sure that all the registered voters were able to exercise their democratic rights.”

Effective use of online platform was her another strategy. She used her Facebook page to increase her visibility and made sure all her development projects in the community were reflected on this page.

Come the polling day, she employed people to guard her votes. “I made sure I had capable people in every polling station as agents. This ensured that I beat my closest opponent by 2,400 votes after I garnered 6,770 votes.”

This huge win arising from her popularity had rubbed many people the wrong way. Some turned to violence to intimidate her before the vote was taken.

Nyagah says she encountered a lot of verbal abuse during the campaigns. “My opponents spread propaganda about my personal life, which was very discouraging.”

However, the legislator chose to keep her head high and focus on her campaigns. She notes that while financial constraints deny women political power, electoral violence is still a big challenge that discourages women from elective politics.

She managed to overcome

such challenges by focusing on important issues. In fact, one of her lessons learnt from these experiences is that women aspiring for political seats should not focus on obstacles but on their goals. “Women should start by working with the people on the ground and be consistent with their goals and implementation of programmes.”

Nyagah further points out that most women candidates do not have enough resources to mount a successful campaign. She however urges them to take risks and join politics as it is the only way to achieve gender parity. “Women need to claim their spaces in leadership in all spheres and should not allow men to pull them down.”

She feels that women need to fight for their spaces in the political arena because the probability of having more women elected depends on how many have contested.

“The more we contest, the higher the chances that a good number of us will be elected. Challenges are there but it is doable. Just come out, develop your strategy, ask for votes and get elected. If you lose once, don’t give up, keep the fire burning. Contest again and again as long as you have a drive.”

Her advice to young women seeking elective positions is that they should not shy away from elective politics. “We must strive to attain equality by ensuring that we don’t leave anyone behind. We must support each other when campaigning.”

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Njeru: Never give up on your pursuit for political leadership



Rose Njeru.

BY FAITH MUIRURI

Rose Njeru traces her entry into the political arena to 2007 when she unsuccessfully vied as a councilor for the Ngaiama seat in the defunct Kirinyaga County Council.

Njeru who had vied on a KANU ticket, came second in the hotly contested race. Upon the promulgation of the Constitution, she shifted

her attention to the Women Representative position. Again, she lost during the 2013 general elections while vying on The National Alliance ticket.

The good news is that such efforts in the political arena started being noticed by key political players. In 2017, she was appointed the treasurer for the Jubilee party in Kirinyaga County, a feat that earned her a nomination at the Kirinyaga County Assembly as a Member

of County Assembly (MCA).

With this strong grounding, Njeru set her eyes on the 2022 General Elections, eyeing the Ngaiama North ward once again. She vied for the seat as an independent candidate but lost.

Despite the loss, she says the political strategies she has employed over the years have improved her position in the political space.

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During the 2022 elections, one such strategy was conducting door-to-door campaign that enabled her to endear herself to many voters and counter the many challenges she was facing. "I faced great opposition during the last election. Most leaders ganged up with my opponents to make sure I lost the seat."

She deflected such opposition by working closely with the church and her political base: Women and youth who were her bedrock of supporters. Njeru says she organized a series of meetings to sensitize the youth and the women on the need to exploit opportunities at their disposal and cited the cash transfer programmes introduced by the government as one of them.

This empowerment won her the support of women and young people. Her support to vulnerable children both in secondary and university by paying their school fees too bolstered her ratings.

Hersongs and an unassuming character endeared her to many people. "I composed songs to popularize my candidature. Key messages included: what a man can do a woman can do better and the only woman in North Ngariama is Rose Njeru, vote for her."

Her biggest challenge has been convincing voters that women are great leaders. She



I did my campaigns in a very hostile environment. I was called all sorts of unprintable words, all in an attempt to distract me. During the 2022 elections, my opponents ganged up against my bid but I still managed to get the second position as an independent candidate."

ROSE NJERU



says when she first vied as a Councilor, not many women were running for political office; and hence convincing voters to vote for her was an enormous task.

"I did my campaigns in a very hostile environment. I was called all sorts of unprintable words, all in an attempt to distract me. During the 2022 elections, my opponents ganged up against my bid but I still managed to get the second position as an independent candidate."

Njeru says one of the major drawbacks for women vying for leadership positions are night meetings that are used to strategize on how to win an election.

"Those who attend the meetings are regarded as lacking in family values and therefore not fit to serve as leaders.

During her political journey, Njeru has learnt that "When you set your target, you don't

let small obstacles keep you down. You have to be upfront and do not listen to what opponents are saying, just pursue your dream and meet your target."

To enhance success of women in leadership, the former MCA underscores the need to expose them to more leadership forums, where they will learn how to conduct issue-based campaigns, among other things.

Further, she calls for change of tact to increase the numbers of women in elective seats. "We must start cooperating and working with the men to realize the gender threshold."

She advises women aspiring for political seats to get involved with the grassroots women and youth many months before they think of contesting for elective seats. This will help increase their visibility and their chances of a victory.

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Paulina AKhai

Driving the peace agenda in Turkana Central Sub County

BY PAULINE TOO

The 57-year-old Paulina Akhai is a force to reckon with in Turkana. Her name and work is highly respected in this community that has had its share of conflicts.

She credits her rise and position in public spaces partly to her peace work that she has been doing for many years. Now the community is appreciating and recognizing her contribution to peace.

One such recognition is being elected as a member of the

County Peace Committee in which she has served for 10 years. She is also the current Chairlady of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation (MYWO) in Turkana Central Sub-County.

Khai says these platforms have not only earned her respect among her people as a leader and peace builder, but also given her exposure and knowledge on how to address the conflict in her region.

Her peace work has also enabled her to benefit from many trainings on conflict management and travelled widely within the East

African Region to learn and share experiences on conflict mitigation with other women peace actors.

For her, peace is so central and close to her heart because the rights and freedoms of the communities she represents; especially women and children, can only be realised in a peaceful environment.

Khai's interest in peace building was triggered by conflicts she witnessed back in her rural home in Lokitang, about 200 kilometers from Lodwar town. Lokitang was one of the settlement towns that received survivors of conflict from

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other parts of Turkana and the neighbouring countries such as Sudan.

“It is here that I saw the dilapidated state of our county and desperation of women and children who had walked for long distances to search for safety, food and shelter.”

She recalls how their horrifying stories of what happened reinforced the need to have peace.

Akhai adds that even at the resettlement camps in Lokitang, the situation of women and girls worsened. They were violated and manipulated by men who took advantage of their desperate situation.

Disturbed with what was happening, she used her position as Chairlady of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, to promote girl child education and linked some of these girls to donors for support.

Besides the girls, she assists women survivors of conflict to engage in income generating activities and accessing loans for businesses from banks and even donor agencies.

Her peace work would later be felt even more during the 2022 elections. Khai recalls how as the leader of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, the organization played an instrumental role in enhancing peace in the county.

Messages of peace were channelled through the Maendeleo ya Wanawake structures reaching many people at the village levels.

This was done through the five chairladies of the five wards representing Turkana Central

Sub County. Each of the five chairladies then cascaded the messages downwards to the other chairladies representing their villages. Each ward has 50 women leaders who represent various villages.

“As leaders of MYWO, we are respected by the communities and therefore given opportunities to speak during community functions such as barazas, church functions and funerals. We utilised these opportunities to effectively to channel peace messages during the electioneering period,” says Khai.

Besides the MYWO structures, another platform they used to convey peace messages was the radio. She went to radio stations several times to preach peace and encourage communities to participate in elections but to vote peacefully.

Being an oral community and the high illiteracy levels, Khai says radio and other forms of interpersonal communication became key in transmitting peace messages at the community level.

These strategies that they adopted paid-off. Like other parts of the country, Turkana enjoyed one of the most peaceful elections in decades years.

The only challenge that remains even after the elections is the conflict along the borders between Turkana and neighbouring communities.

She says that peace is constantly disturbed by conflicts when communities in Turkana County are attacked by other communities from Pokots and Samburu or neighbouring

countries such as Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia.

For her, these are some of the most difficult conflicts situations she has to undertake in her peace work. To her, the role of a peace builder in a county such as Turkana requires passion and commitment.

But this comes with one major challenge. Peace work being based on volunteerism, she has had, most of the time, to use her own resources to undertake peace initiatives in the county or respond to conflict situations.

Another challenge is the vastness of Turkana county coupled by poor road network. This makes it impossible to reach many people with peace messages.

These challenges have however taught her many useful lessons. One of them is that for sustainable peace to be realised and internalised by communities, there has to be continuous investment in peace building.

“The greatest need for us is to empower the communities through education, especially young people who need to be encouraged to move away from retrogressive cultures such as cattle rustling that drive conflicts.”

It is also important, she adds, to invest in women involved in peace work. She notes that women are excellent peace builders because they understand the challenges of their communities and have very confidential information before even conflicts happens.

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Khadija: My alternative leadership to peacebuilding in Garissa County

BY JACINTA MUTORO

When Khadija Ibrahim joined peace building work in 1999, very little was heard about women participation in peace process in her county of Garissa. The level of women's engagement in peace matters was at best, silent observers.

"I was the only woman at the time, serving as a treasurer at the Ijara Peace and Development Committee, a peace structure. I did not have a voice in the committee, which was largely a male affair."

"My role was to purely safeguard money for the group and was hardly involved in peace work. I watched helplessly as women issues were relegated to the periphery."

On one occasion, she was irked when resources meant to benefit women were used for other purposes. Fed up with what was happening, she quit her position and formed the Ijara Women for Peace in 2003.

"This initiative was a game changer and I was able to design programmes to

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strengthen the role of women in peacebuilding. Scores of women in Ijara joined the organisation as peace builders.”

By 2005, women’s role in peace building was becoming more visible and recognised. “With support from PACT-Kenya, we were for the first time involved in cross-border peace building initiatives. We were charged with the responsibility of bringing together the warring factions along the border with Somali.”

“The project had a peace dividend where women from both IJara and Somalia would come together to identify priority programmes that would be implemented to foster peace.

Some wanted boreholes; others proposed maternity wings [in hospitals] and schools. These would later be built, which helped to foster peace along the border.”

Ibrahim, who is also a member of the County Security Committee, says that she and other gender equality advocates have ensured that women are integrated into peace structures.

These include community policing and the Nyumba Kumi [10 households] initiative, a formation that address security and peace issues,



We mobilised women to be members of every existing structure in the community, and now we have women representation in the water users’ committee, health, and schools’ committees.

KHADIIJA IBRAHIM



among others.

“We mobilised women to be members of every existing structure in the community, and now we have women representation in the water users’ committee, health, and schools’ committees.”

Ibrahim is happy that women in the sub-county peace committees have demonstrated their capacity to mitigate violence through early warnings on radicalism, small arms, light weapons, and organised gangs.

For her to be more effective in peace work, Ibrahim is focusing on building the capacity of Ijara Women for Peace members.

“We are now equipping them with knowledge and skills about how to engage

in dialogue. The organisation is currently spearheading dialogue to build trust between border police unit and the community that has accused the police of harassing them.”

In 2019, the Ijara Women for Peace started the programme, Jamii bila Balaa [Community without chaos]. “This is what has helped to amplify the voices of women peace builders in the community.”

During the 2022 elections, Khadija would again use similar initiatives to advocate for peaceful elections. This was under the clarion call titled: Uchanguzi bila balaa, which ran before, during and after the elections.

“We were therefore involved in monitoring the elections and were able to highlight anomalies noted at the polling centres.

Currently, her organization is implementing a programme called kwa pamoja tuzuie balaa that is aimed at sustaining peace beyond the 2022 elections.

But success of a peaceful election in the county did not come easily. Khadija and Ijara Women for Peace had to design various strategies that promoted peace. This included training mediators and monitors who then actively participated in ensuring

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peace prevailed during the electioneering period.

“We also deployed both the mediators and monitors in all polling stations from where we relayed to the police any incidents of conflict registered at the polling stations. This helped to avoid a scenario where such conflicts escalated to violence.” The group also used local FM stations such as Kulmiye FM to spread peace messages.

Another strategy that worked well for the group was the convening of town hall meetings before the elections. These forums brought together the security agencies and stakeholders to discuss peace matters.

Ijara Women for peace also organized sisterhood sessions that roped in more women into peace campaigns. “We realized that most women did not attend the peace barazas or town hall meetings. We would visit them in their manyattas and as we cooked together, we would share peace messages among them kura yako ni haki yako which underscores their rights as voters.”

Where men were very controlling of their wives, the organization worked with elders to promote dialogue especially in cases where the men were keeping their wives identity cards to make sure

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Recently, we lost two young men from Ijara and one from Tana River over the same conflict. To avoid conflict, we had agreed that the farms be properly fenced and the corridor for watering the cows be demarcated properly.

KHADIJA IBRAHIM

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they voted for the candidates preferred by their husbands.

Ibrahim says that although women have participated in crafting of peace deals, they are hardly implemented, with the result that women do not enjoy the fruits of their work.

She cites the Ijara and Tana River Peace declaration of 2009, which is yet to be implemented. The peace deal was meant to address resource-based conflicts between the two communities, which usually escalate whenever there is drought.

“Recently, we lost two young men from Ijara and one from Tana River over the same conflict. To avoid conflict, we had agreed that the farms be properly fenced and the corridor for watering the cows

be demarcated properly. We received support from a London-based organisation, which helped us to demarcate one of the corridors.”

“Unfortunately, we have many corridors along the river and during drought, the two communities always clash.”

Low literacy levels, poverty and cultural norms are some of the other factors that adversely affect women’s participation in peace processes. It limits their ability to take up leadership roles within the committees as well. “Men still hold women in low regard as far as in peace work is concerned and think a woman’s place is in the kitchen.”

Nevertheless, she has learnt useful lessons that will help her to advance her peace work. Women are very good in peace building and hence there is need to continuously build their capacity to resolve conflicts. If women are trained on fundamental principles of arbitration and monitoring of peace activities, the chances for sustainable peace in communities will rise significantly.

“This should be strengthened by sensitising the public and other local actors on the role women play in peace and security matters.”

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Woman of many firsts wields power by championing women leadership in Turkana County

BY RUTH OMKHANGO

A woman chief is a rarity among the Turkana, the pastoralist and still deeply patriarchal community occupying the north-western horn of Kenya. Yet, this is where Margaret Lomosingo rose from assistant chief of Lodwar Town to chief after only three years

She made history as the first woman to be appointed chief of Lodwar Township, the most populous administrative unit in Turkana County. She has served in the position for the past 21 years. Lomosingo's ability to ensure communities live in harmony explains why she is the longest serving chief in the county.

Lomosingo's position as an influential administrator and peace maker is also challenging gender stereotypes that continue to make it difficult for women in the county to ascend to leadership and decision-making positions in governance and peace structures. She serves as a role model and an inspiration to young women eyeing leadership positions.

"Our people don't believe that women possess the capability to make fundamental decisions, and that is why women sit on dusty ground during community forums while men sit on ekicholong, the traditional stools," says Lomosingo.

Her leadership has proven that



Margaret Lomosingo

women can deliver in unified and cohesive communities even in contexts where conflicts are rife. Lomosingo says that while Turkana County has experienced several conflicts along its borders, Lodwar town has remained a safe haven for many communities living and working there.

The mention of Chief Margaret Lomosingo's name evokes great pride and admiration among residents of Lodwar Township because of her efforts to campaign for peace and cohesion in the community. Her work includes administering justice using peaceful means.

"I have been at the forefront of championing peace in this town because without it, there cannot be any development. It is this peace that has seen us make great strides."

Lomosingo says that her greatest pride is the fact that Lodwar Township, which she administers, is the only one among the 30 wards in Turkana that was able to elect a female Member of County Assembly.

Lomosingo's journey towards peace building and the pursuit for cohesive societies was informed by her past experience and fuelled by her passion to make a change.

She and her family flee their home in Loima Sub County, which borders Uganda, to Lodwar in 1997, leaving behind everything they owned because of this conflict.

"We did not have time to collect anything but left with my family in desperation for safety. Our first priority was to remain alive and safe. Many people lost

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their property as houses were burnt down, with women and children bearing the brunt of the conflict.”

They were fortunate to arrive in Lodwar safely, but had to rebuild their lives from scratch. She applauds the support she received from Maendeleo ya Wanawake, Turkana Branch, that enabled her to volunteer to support women and girls and sensitise them on their rights.

The most challenging time in Lomosingo’s peace work is during elections when individuals and parties compete for political positions. Maintaining peace during elections is tricky and stressful because some people take advantage of the political environment to commit crimes and fan conflict.

In the 2022 elections, she worked tirelessly with Nyumba Kumi and County Peace Actors to sensitise the community on the importance of keeping peace.

One message she and her team continued broadcasting was that elections would come and go but communities would to continue living together in harmony for sustainable development.

Platforms such as barazas, churches, women’s gathering, youth rallies, and Whatsapp groups were very useful to her when it comes to advocating for peace in the 2022 elections.

“[Because of my job as a chief], I am not authorised to speak on radio. But because of my relationship with various radio stations operating in

Lodwar Town, I was able to share peace messages that were aired extensively during the electioneering period,” she says.

On many other occasions, including during the electioneering period, Lomosingo uses mediation and other alternative dispute resolution mechanisms to forestall conflict and settle cases.

“I have been trained on Alternative Justice Systems and usually use this knowledge to settle domestic cases and resettle families and victims of election-related conflicts.”

In addition to her peace work, she also tackles sexual violence, which she says is a key focus of Kenya National Action Plan II on implementation of United Security Council Resolution 1325, 1820, and other related resolutions.

During her tenure as chief, cases of sexual violence have been on the downward trend.

“Since I took over, we work very hard to ensure perpetrators of sexual abuse and defilement get as many as 20 years in jail.” She adds light-heartedly, “We call the tough sentence ‘bamba 20’ and the police have given me a lot of support in this regard.”

For Chief Lomosingo, education is another area that requires keen attention. She believes that education is key to addressing the many challenges facing her people -- especially the high poverty levels that nurture conflict and violence against women and girls.

“I have put a lot of effort in

discouraging early marriages, which have negatively affected the education of girls in our county. I am proud to say that more girls are today completing school in my location as opposed to the case in the past.”

Even with these successes, Lomosingo’s peace journey has not been pain-free. One of the biggest challenges is patriarchy, which stands in her way to get more women peace actors into decision making positions.

” There are many women peace actors doing excellent work within the community. But due to patriarchy, they have not been recognised and given opportunities to get into leadership positions.”

She calls on the government to get more quality women representation in County Peace Forums using the help of existing structures such as Maendeleo ya Wanawake to nominate them.

The lack of resources to do peace work presents another challenge. Many peace actors like her have to use their own resources or rely on wellwishers, whose giving is rare and far between to carry out their work.

The challenges notwithstanding, Chief Lomosingo remarks: “There is need to continuously create awareness on the value of peace among key stakeholders and existing groups such as elders, boda boda riders, and women groups to guarantee such sustainability.”

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How one woman is redefining peace in Kajiado County

BY AWC FEATURE SERVICE

Edna Ouma never switches off her mobile phone. “You might think I am a Member of the County Assembly by the way people seek my help,” says the lady who has become the face of women in peacebuilding in Kajiado County for the past 26 years.

She is reachable for anyone needing her help. She is an elected as a member of the County Peace Committee and is also the deputy chairperson of Isinya Sub-County Peace Committee.

“At the height of 2007/2008 conflict, all sorts of people called me throughout the day and night to assist the victims, most of whom were lactating mothers.

“Since then, I always sleep with my phone on to help them,” says Ouma.

Ouma is known for reaching out to conflicting parties in the pursuit of peace -- even in situations where some government authorities are afraid to intervene.

Her journey in peace building began back to 1997 when there were major conflicts in the county over land. Disputes over land have remained emotive over time but flare up every electioneering period when



Edna Ouma

politicians whip up emotions and evoke historic grievances over land loss to incite supporters to attack voters from other communities whom they think are likely not to vote for them.

“Kajiado County was very peaceful until conflict erupted in 1997 when many cash-strapped Maasai became landless after subdividing and selling their ancestral land to [people from other ethnic groups. This conflict recurred during the in 2002 and 2007 General Elections, with some members of the Maasai community demanding the eviction of non-Maasai residents from the county.”

Ouma was concerned about the destruction of property

and deaths, and sought to do something to help end the trend of conflicts.

Since then, she has been working closely with the County Commissioner, and they have been able to resolve many conflicts, with the result that communities now live together harmoniously. Her peace work has been bolstered by her position as a village elder, which offers her an opportunity to promote peace and undertake conflict management.

One of Ouma’s key strengths is her ability to work with all Kenyans from different ethnic backgrounds. “I am also able to associate and mix freely with men, women, youth and the

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disabled. We talk one language and respect each other's views," she explains.

The 2022 General Election was a high point in Ouma's peace work. One of the reasons Kajiado did not experience related conflicts in 2022, she explains, was because peace actors introduced a county multi-sectoral engagement and coordination forum on election preparedness. This helped to ensure peace. The forum's activities are still running in the post-election period to address any emerging issues that could trigger conflict.

Similar interventions were replicated at the sub-county level with the multi-sectoral engagement and coordination forum having a strong presence in Kajiado Central, Kajiado North, Kajiado East, Kajiado West and Kajiado South.

Ouma also led her committee in organising peace walks to encourage residents to uphold peace during the elections.

"We had peace caravans traversing the county, during which politicians committed in writing to uphold peace during and after the elections.

"As peace committee members, we were encouraged to be proactive and to use the early warning systems as effectively as possible to promote peace during the electioneering period.

"I communicated effectively with the local administration and the police whenever there was a sign of a breach of peace,"

she adds.

Ouma is able to record success in her peace work due to her position as the chairperson of the Millimani Nyumba Kumi Security Committee.

On representation of women in peace committees, she cites cases where women have opted to take a back seat during peace meetings because they lack the knowledge and skills around peace work. She feels there is need to design programmes aimed at building leadership skills of these women.

One of the great learning moments in Ouma's peace work was in 2010 when she took part in a weeklong exchange programme organised by the National Security Council. Women peace actors from Kajiado had an exchange visit with those from Mandera and Wajir counties in the North-Eastern part of the country, which has been wracked by many insecurity incidents.

While in the two counties, the women on the programme held several meetings with elders, religious leaders, different special groups, the youth and women leaders, with whom they held dialogue on how best to address peace and conflict issues in their counties.

But her only low point is lack of funds whenever she receives a distress call, and she is unable to respond. She hopes the Government will streamline operations peace committees, and start paying them an allowance as a token of

appreciation. Despite that hitch, she is happy to volunteer her time and little resources.

Low literacy levels, poverty, religious and cultural norms are some of the factors that have adversely affected the level of women's participation in peace processes, and limited their growth in taking up leadership roles within the committees.

Procedures used to elect and nominate peace actors to peace committees also work against women's participation in peace processes and structures.

Ouma is concerned that most officials who hold senior positions in peace committees are appointed by the county commissioners, who serve as patrons to the committees. In most cases, she notes, the commissioners prefer to work with men because most peace meetings are held during odd hours when women are not available due to family demands and concerns over their personal safety.

"Elections are called to hoodwink the public that proper procedures were followed, but in reality, nominees who have official backing of the administration carry the day," she adds.

She wants mechanisms that guarantee physical security and safety for women in peace committees put in place to increase the interest and effective participation of women in peace building.

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Peacebuilder earns Head of State Commendation

BY AWC CORRESPONDENT

Hannah Chelangat Tarus is among a few women in Mombasa County who have for many years scarified their lives to bring sustainable peace in the communities they live in.

It is her interest in peace matter that saw her come up with innovative initiatives that included mobilizing state and non-state actors to champion peace; and address other ills in the society that affected peaceful coexistence in families and communities.

One such sterling initiative was the establishment of PONDCCAN; a peace outfit who objectives is to address peace and other issues affecting communities in Mombasa county.

The group brings together representatives from the Police, County Commissioner's office, peace committees, village elders, community policing and Nyumba Kumi to ensure there is easy flow of information and stability in the communities they serve.

According to Tarus, PONDCCAN has not only ensured seamless coordination of security services, but also helped to bring on board women and youth who have



Hannah Chelangat Tarus

always been left out in peace and security processes and structures.

It is the success and visibility of this initiative that has propelled her to national status and recognition. She was awarded Head of State Commendation for her contribution to community safety and addressing many ills affecting Mombasa County.

Her passion and success in peace work also earned her a position as the chair of Nyali Sub County peace committee. When she took over as the chair of this committee, the community was experiencing high numbers of criminal gangs, chang'aa dens, cases of sexual and gender based violence.

But few years down the line, the situation is changing for the better with the trust between the community and security agencies having improved greatly. This has resulted in joint efforts to share information and tackle crime.

One of the strategies Tarus has used is sensitizing the youth on the negative effects of crime; the need to reform and engage in income generating activities; and be part of the solution to problems affecting their communities.

"Apart from engaging them in income generating activities, we have also coopted the reformed youth in community policing committees."

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These youth now help Tarus and her team in spreading peace messages at the grassroots level and urging their peers to stop engaging in acts of lawlessness. They have managed to get other young people to join them in community policing.”

“My efforts have finally bore fruit and we now have some reformed criminals who are engaged in meaningful livelihoods,” says Tarus

Other areas she is tackling as part of her peace work are countering violent extremism, gender-based violence, and radicalization.

Fondly known as Mama peace, Tarus peace journey started over twenty years ago when she was disturbed by the high numbers of young people who were being killed for engaging in violent robbery. She decided to get these young people to see value of peace in their lives and the need to avoid crime

During the 2022 General Elections, for instance, she educated young people on the value of peace and managed to recruit them to engage in spreading peace messages.

“Due to this intervention, majority of the young people refused to be used by politicians to cause chaos and joined our peace caravans across the county,” says Tarus, who is also a village elder and a member of the Mombasa County Women Caucus,

But it was not easy. Tarus had

to use mothers, as a strategy, to speak to their children not to engage in acts of lawlessness. She then involved the young people in developing and disseminating peace messages that spoke to issues such as: Kataa kutumiwa, piga kura nenda nyumbani, and piga kura usipige mtu..

In addition to young people, her team also relied on the media to propagate the peace messages to a large section of the population. This augmented through engaging police officers and chiefs who attended peace barazas and spoke about peace.

Tarus says these interventions were bolstered by the county’s 250 mediators who would mediate before escalation of violence. “We found partners to train them on electoral violence. They were later deployed in areas identified as hotspots by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC).

Her team also conducted maskani visits in areas prone to violence and identified and spoke to gang leaders who are often used by politicians to cause violence.”

These leaders and their political masters were then requested to sign peace charters which bound them to take responsibility in case of violence within their locality. But for this to succeed, they involved the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties to bind the

politicians to keep peace or risk being struck off from the IEBC register. Most politicians signed peace charters and upheld peace.

Her transformative peace building journey has not been without challenges. Tarus says she has to contend with negative perceptions from the community which still regards women as not qualified; or with no rights at all to speak on any matters that affect the community. This makes her work difficult especially in areas where such attitudes are entrenched.

Volunteering for peace work is another challenge. “Volunteering is not easy. I believe that I have survived through God’s grace. I always work closely with the police, chief and village elders to succeed.”

The lack of funds further makes it difficult for her to link people with the authorities when in distress or to take them to hospital or police stations.

“What has helped me is that we have some good policemen who return my calls or come to help whenever I send out a distress call.”

Such collaboration and effective networking with other peace actors of all ages and shades of life remain central to sustainable peace in communities.

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How border conflicts turned Chebet into a peace maker



Beatrice Chebet.

BY AWC CORRESPONDENT

Kericho's rolling green tea plantations are a picturesque sight all year round, but they can erupt into a cataclysm of violence at election time. The multi-ethnic workforce is often split down the middle in supporting the two leading candidates and political formations, which can cause flare-ups.

Even without the excuse of elections, inter-ethnic conflicts do flare up along the Kericho-Nyamira-Kisumu borders. These conflicts are what triggered Beatrice Chebet to start asking herself what she could do to help bring lasting peace on these borders from as early as when she was 20 years old.

"My family lives along the

Kericho-Nyamira-Kisumu border and I had on several occasions watched helplessly as men from a rival tribe were [being] killed during revenge missions as they pleaded with their assailants to spare their lives."

Her decision to get into full-fledged peace work came in 1992, at the height of the infamous ethnic clashes which greatly affected her, her family and the communities that had lived peaceably together for years. Chebet decided to join her community in peace building in 2010, working as a programmes officer at the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy.

Since then, she has engaged in peace work rallying women and youth to be peaceful to achieve greater voice at the

county level and to create new livelihood opportunities. Such peace, she notes, will further help them to increase public awareness on their priorities and to promote their effective participation in governance and in peace building initiatives. By 2021, Chebet peace efforts at the community and sub-county level were already visible and greatly valued.

Chebet was subsequently appointed as the Kericho County Director of Gender. In acknowledgement of her peace building skills, that during the 2022 elections she was called to help the county to maintain peace and tranquility. With her leadership, her office began by mapping hotspots, among them tea plantations which are prone to conflict

Her office also used the churches to spread messages of peace. "We roped in the Evangelical Women Peace Alliance who were doing peace work in the border areas." Her office also went around the county in peace caravans, culminating in a call to local communities to own the peace messages.

With the help of the African Woman and Child Feature Services and UN Women, the county gender office, the community crafted peace messages that were aired on

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local radio stations, including Kitwek FM.

The peace messages targeted hotspot areas, calling the residents to remember that they would remain good neighbours even after elections. They also used social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups to circulate the peace messages.

“Most of our messages were targeting the youth along the border who had previously been hired by politicians to cause mayhem and violence during the electioneering period,” Chebet says. The results were remarkable, with Kericho county remaining calm during and after the elections.

Battling challenges

Even with these remarkable successes, Chebet observes that as a woman peace builder, she continues to face unique challenges, among them structural inequalities that have weakened women’s capacity to strengthen their economic base.

High poverty levels among women have constrained their capacity to participate effectively in decision making at community and county levels, including in peace matters.

The devolved system of government, which came with its share of challenges such as boundary conflicts, has made the search for sustainable peace elusive.

“We are currently dealing with recurrent conflict along the

Sondu-Nyakach and Kericho-Kisumu borders. Even after taking the International Peace Day celebrations to Sondu area, someone was killed the night just after we left. As peace builders, we were left wondering if we are really doing sustainable peace. These incidents are very discouraging for women peace builders,” Chebet observed.

Low women’s participation in peace processes, where those involved serve in largely ceremonial roles such as praying during meetings, is one of the major challenges she and other peace builders are struggling with.

“We have a group of elders resolving conflicts along the border, widely referred to as the Kiprandich Group of Elders. These elders have equal representation from the Luo and Kalenjin communities, but no woman is represented in the resolution of conflicts along the border.

“In fact, in the Kipisgis community, women are still considered as children and are not allowed to have much say in community matters. Meeting with women on the way to battle was traditionally regarded as bad omen. If a man is going for war and he meets his mother or a woman, he cannot proceed to the battlefield because they will die [if they do].”

Women are playing an important role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, but entrenched cultural attitudes in patriarchal societies continue to hamper

efforts to involve more women in peace processes and structures. Chebet stresses the need to put in place measures that ensure women are fully involved in all peace-making matters within their communities.

At the county level, she says, women are pushing to increase their numbers in decision-making processes with regard to conflict prevention and resolution. “As a county, we have managed to integrate the gender mainstreaming policy into the County Integrated Development Plan to increase representation of women in peace processes and at other levels of leadership,” she adds.

This move has been aligned with the Kenya National Action Plan II (KNAP) on Women, Peace and Security, which outlines the values of gender equality, inclusion, and participation as enshrined in the Constitution; and which are being operationalised in its five-year plan that runs from 2020 to 2024.

“We are also pushing Kericho County to come up with an action plan to fully domesticate the United Nations Resolution 1325.”

The CIDP will inform priority areas, resource allocation, and initiatives for full participation and recognition of the role women continue to play in peacebuilding, humanitarian response, and peacekeeping efforts at the county level.

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Njagi proves youth leadership is key to sustainable peace



Claire Njagi

BY FAITH MUKAMI

Claire Njagi, 28, has a relentless zeal for peace. She is a member of a group of youth who played a pivotal role in calming political tensions by appealing to people not to engage in violence in the hotly contested the 2022 General Election especially in her home county of Embu.

They would send out appeals to candidates to conduct themselves with restraint and maintain peace during and

after the elections.

Njagi used her social media platforms to champion peace conversations among the youth and to appeal to them not to be misused by politicians to disturb peace. In public spaces, she amplified the same.

In one of the public engagements, she told the young people: "It is only through tolerance, peace dialogue and ethnic harmony that the youth in Embu County can elect credible, responsive

and transformative leaders who will run a truly functional and economically viable county that we can all be proud of."

Njagi, who believed in peaceful ways of resolving conflicts, was formally introduced to peace through the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), who took her through several trainings on peace building.

During the 2022 electioneering period, Njagi emerged as a key young person who could reach out to fellow youth, appealing to them to engage in conversations around peace.

Njagi took part in a series of public forums where she urged the youth to actively participate in peace building if the society was to remain stable and peaceful. "I was able to reach more youth at the grassroots, who were my primary audience."

The results of these initiatives were remarkable in that young people remained peaceful even after the elections. "The focus on the youth was critical in terms of establishing and sustaining peaceful relations among the communities in the county."

The county elected its first woman governor. "Over the past 10 years, Embu County did not have peace. We were the first to impeach a governor [in Kenya] and therefore spend most of our time in unending political contests at the expense of development. The county has remained calm even after the elections and we have not registered any incidents after the election of Cecily Mbarire as

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the new governor.”

Winning strategies

Njagi and other young people had devised a number of strategies to ensure peace. One of them was organising political debates where candidate discussed their manifestos and committed to uphold peace during and after elections.

“My rallying call to the youth was: ‘If we cause chaos, we are the ones who will lose more.’ When the winners were announced after the elections, people remained calm and peaceful.”

Njagialso participated in peace walks and interdenominational prayers across the county; with the clergy integrating peace messages in their sermons.

“As peace ambassadors, we were given opportunities to preach peace in public barazas organised by the County Commissioner’s office. Most of these forums brought on board other actors including matatu operators, boda boda riders, miraa traders and religious organisations, all of whom embraced our peace messages.”

Her group believes use of short video clips on different social media platforms to spread peace messages was another effective strategy they used. “For instance, I had boda boda riders and other artisans in some of my video clips affirming that they would uphold peace during and after elections.”

The same messages were then replayed in the video clips on You Tube and on Facebook pages by different artisans, including the chairman of Boda Boda Association in Embu County.

Challenges linger

Notwithstanding these inroads, challenges abounded. One of them was the low inclusion of women in peace and security processes. Njagi was troubled that despite Article 27 (6) of the Constitution stating that women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural, and social spheres, women remained underrepresented at different levels of leadership.

The integration of women in peace committees remains a cry in the wilderness as evidenced by glaring gender inequalities within the committees in the Embu County Assembly.

UN Resolution 1325 calls for the meaningful involvement of women in peace processes, but their level of participation in Embu County remains very low. “Majority of the women in peace committees mainly occupy supportive positions which relegate them into unseen roles.”

The situation in the county has been compounded by retrogressive cultural practices where some communities will not allow women to speak to them on matters related to peace or other issues unless

they have undergone Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), practised as a cultural rite of passage from girlhood to adult life.

Lessons learnt

Njagi takes the challenges in her stride, saying they were an opportunity to learn useful lessons. She says she has learnt the importance of partnerships in her peace building work. For instance, dealing with different actors during the electioneering period contributed immensely to a peaceful election at the community, sub-county, and county levels.

For women to play an even greater role in peace at these levels and to increase their representation in peace committees, Njagi wants operational mechanisms and structures developed to strengthen physical security and safety for women in peace work.

“There is also need to train women on fundamental principles of arbitration and monitoring of peace activities to build women’s leadership skills.”

Njagi strongly feels this increased participation of women will be possible if male champions take leadership in sensitizing the public and other local actors on the role of women in peace and security.

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How Atambo is using her leadership and theatre skills to enhance peace in her community



Edna Atambo

BY AWC FEATURE SERVICE

Edna Atambo's family was quietly monitoring the streaming of presidential results of the 2007 general election when the worst happened. Upon the announcement of who had won the elections, hell broke loose. Neighbours who had lived together harmoniously for many years started attacking each other.

Atambo's family was one of the victims. They picked the little they could carry and rushed to a local church where scores of families were camping after being evicted from their homes in Kericho. Her family then relocated to Kisii, which was relatively calm.

It is here she joined other young people who had volunteered to reach out to communities with peace and cohesion messages. They used

theatre to pass their peace messages.

"I began by writing scripts, mobilized young people, and did performances in the markets that focused on peace. We would bring people together and use community educative theatre to rally communities to embrace diversity and learn to live harmoniously with each other."

It is these performances that thrust her into the public

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limelight as a peace champion. By 2009, her contribution to peace had been recognized by a group known as Kisstretch, which recruited her to be part of the team to run a project supported by UNDP and Amkeni Wa Kenya. The project's objective was to sensitize communities on peace.

“Under Kisstretch, we did a lot of sensitization through theatre and performances. We also held community dialogues to promote peace in all the nine Sub-counties of Kisii County.”

Their brief was to engage the communities living in hotspot areas along the borders shared by Kisii's, Kalenjins, and Luos.

It is also during this time that she strengthened her place in peace sector. She started pursuing trainings on peace building organized by Safer World, Amkeni wa Kenya, NCIC, and Armshield International Peace Champions.

Atambo, who currently works with the Raise the Village Women Initiative, says the skills and the networks she created in peace work are now helping her assist communities solve conflicts and ensure sustainable peace. On such initiative is using Kisii traditional songs in spreading peace messages.

“To make sure the performances have an impact, we have an exit strategy where we pause the play at a



We also had security teams from the National government calling on the local leaders to uphold peace during the electioneering period. The religious leaders spoke out in one voice and integrated peace messages in their sermons.”

EDNA ATAMBO



particular point and ask people to give solutions to the specific problem being addressed in the play. Most of the solutions have thus come from the community.”

It is these skills and approaches she used during the 2022 General Elections to help the county contact peaceful elections. Atambo's role included organizing targeted community dialogues through town hall meetings where she brought together both state and non-state actors to talk about peace. This and other strategies bore fruits: No election related conflicts were registered in her community.

Useful strategies

One of the most effective strategies they used is a multi-sectoral approach that brought on board religious leaders, the

chiefs and community policing officials, to circulate peace messages in the county.

“We also had security teams from the National government calling on the local leaders to uphold peace during the electioneering period. The religious leaders spoke out in one voice and integrated peace messages in their sermons.”

In addition to this, Atambo conducted targeted community dialogues especially with the youth, boda boda riders, the business community, university students, and members of the reformed Sungu Sungu group on the importance of peace and cohesion.

“We worked with Kisii University especially the human rights club to initiate peace conversation among the young people on social media platforms. In addition, we had peace actors going to the radio stations to spread peace messages.” She also roped in women to champion peace within their local chamas.

Challenges after elections

But in the post-election phase, Atambo has had to respond to conflicts triggered by land conflicts, including land disputes.

“We have seen brothers killing each other over inheritance and old women being lynched over land.” One of the challenges in undertaking peace work to

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address these conflicts is lack of resources.

“Most the people always ask why most of the peace conversations are held just towards the elections. What they do not know is that as peace builders, on normal days and times, we depend on minimal resources to reach out to the masses.”

However, she has been able to overcome this challenge by integrating her peace messages in her work as a civic educator with Uraia.

Another challenge is the high expectations from the public who want to be facilitated with transport before they can agree to attend community dialogue forums that foster peace.

“To mitigate this, we have always made sure we meet them at locations that are near to their homes. This has inspired many of them to attend the forums.”

Like other women peace actors, Atambo is confronted with the painful reality of low inclusion and participation of women in influential peace positions and processes.

“If you look at the security team in Kisii County, you will realize that a majority of the members are men. Women are only included from a tokenism point of view to meet the gender threshold.”



Most the people always ask why most of the peace conversations are held just towards the elections. What they do not know is that as peace builders, on normal days and times, we depend on minimal resources to reach out to the masses.

EDNA ATAMBO



To buttress this, she cites a recent peace deal where the County Commissioner and senior police officers led representatives of Kisii and Masai communities in signing a peace deal to forestall conflicts over grazing area. No woman was involved in this peace process since only those who occupy influential positions in peace committees were invited to attend.

“This is because none of the women who sit in the committees occupy key positions. The women merely play ceremonial roles such as praying.”

This invisibility of women in peace committees, says Atambo, is their inability to break barriers posed by the patriarchal society.

“In conflict situations, the

community believes that such matters can only be handled by either village elders, council of elders or the chiefs who are mainly men. When you come in as a woman, they will not listen to you. The situation is worse if you are a young and unmarried woman. In such a case, you do not have a voice and you cannot even influence some of the decisions that are being made.”

Food for thought

These experiences and engagements have taught her many things. She has learnt that the issue of peace is a continuous process. “It is not something you just do once and let it go. You have to be consistent to make a lasting impact.”

As a peace maker, she has learnt to build good networks of stakeholders engaged in peace as well as understanding the heartbeat and the needs of her community.

But more importantly, she believes women like her need to be capacitated in the area of arbitration and mediation if they are to take leadership positions in peace committees.

“We need to train and build capacities of young women to nurture them in taking the lead in peace conversations so that they can take over from older women departing the scene.”

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