

The 2nd DUOS Festival, Kilifi, Kenya 3-4 September 2021

# MEKAZINE



Celebrating Women in the spirit of Kenyan heroine Mekatilili wa Menza





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# **The MekaZine presents the work of a group of students from Pwani University in Kilifi accomplished during The 2nd DUOS Festival *Women Power* dedicated to Mekatilili wa Menza, Kenyan freedom fighter and heroine.**

Focusing on a few different individuals from their community, the students created a series of articles dealing with some of the most burning issues regarding the contemporary situation of Kenyan women: sexism, menstrual stigma, female genital mutilation, teenage pregnancy, prostitution, etc. The Press & Media team then got together with the Multimedia & Street Art team in order to take apart a few of the topics in search of an underlying

linguistic foundation to the observed power dynamics. Direct quotes extracted from the original text along with the phrases formulated through joint discussion and brainstorming transformed into speech acts, a true medium of empowerment to be performed in a visual form in the streets of Kilifi. Hand-made spray paint stencils allowed for the multiplication and spreading of compact messages as part of a larger collective graffiti-manifesto.

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# Mekatilili wa Menza: The Rebirth

Author  
**Mazerah  
Fahari Safari**

**In Kenya, one of the greatest heroine stories ever told is the legend of Mekatilili wa Menza. She is an influential and dominant feminine figure from historical times. But it doesn't end there. She keeps on resurfacing. She has taken hold of the world today, serving as a mentor and a source of inspiration to many women.**

So how did she get here? How did she become such an idol to society and the feminist community. As a matter of fact, in Kilifi, there is a group of women artists who came together to make a difference in the community in honor of Mekatilili. They are called the Daughters of Mekatilili and they are living up to the name, not a brand, as they carry on Mekatilili's legacy.

It doesn't stop there, Mekatilili wa Menza, is also the inspiration of the 2nd DUOS Festival, which is taking place in September 2021 and takes as its theme Women Power.

Mekatilili's journey as a heroine was not an easy one. It's full of chaos, endurance and bravery. Mekatilili's reputation is one of a woman of mystery surrounded by mysticism and mythology. But, there are no myths, only exaggerated facts that came from those who drew courage from Mekatilili's great deeds and ambitions. Through this, it has laid a foundation for Mekatilili to be a well respected and adored heroine.

In my quest to learn how Mekatilili is inspiring my community, one legend stood out among the rest. It is the story of how her

predecessor, the seer and medicine woman called Mepoho, came to infuse Mekatilili with the power to lead her people to freedom. In it, the sun swallows the moon in the night, turning the sky fiery red as chills and panic run through the villages of Sabaki, Mekatilili's homeland.

"The ancestors are sending us a message," says the village medicine man. "The spirit of Mepoho has chosen tonight to unveil her successor. Tonight is a night to rejoice, not to panic."

In a nearby hut, a woman was in labour and about to deliver. As the sun slowly spit out the moon, the woman gave birth to a girl. Her final push occurred simultaneously with the sun at last birthing the moon. She named the child Mekatilili.

Mekatilili grew into a strong, wise and capable woman. Her tribe, the Giriama, were oppressed by their British colonial rulers. She saw the bitterness in her people; how they suffered and tolerated their oppression. They had no voice, no power or authority. The village elders turned a blind eye and welcomed foreigners without question, in fear of being executed or exiled from their own community.

Later on, Mekatilili got married to a man called Menza Mwakiringi from a clan called the Amwakiringi. Although married, she was still disturbed with how her people were being treated. This caused her unbearable pain, but she couldn't do much about it at that time. She was held back, but that was about to change.

In the following season, when half of the moon's belly was shining, Mekatili wa Menza went to trade with her brother. She witnessed her brother being taken away as a slave. She was powerless as the foreigners who were taking her brother scolded and shoved her away. This act, though horrible, made Mekatilili stronger. It was now clearer what she had to do: fight for her daughters and sons, or lose them all to an unjust course. She had to be ready.

Mekatilili became a widow after the sudden loss of her husband. But she stayed strong. The Giriama people praised her skill as a healer, leader and medicine woman. She even treated barren women with special herbs and healed their wombs. In her prime, she countered epidemics such as small pox and malaria. Indeed a woman of great deeds and power, one of her greatest deeds was about to unfold.

Her call to arms came at a time when the British were at war with other nations. World War I, they called it. Mekatilili's people were trapped in the middle. The British were conscripting African soldiers to fight their battles – King African Rifles as they were called. The colonial administrator Cambell came to Mekatilili's village to conscript soldiers. He never knew his actions would come at a great cost.

Cambell met face-to-face with Mekatilili, the Brave. Their first encounter stirred up an uprising that followed. "Grab that hen's chicken," Mekatilili allegedly told Campbell. Eager to prove himself, Cambell stretched out his hand to grab the chicken. But, the hen attacked. "I will react the same way, if you take our children to fight a war that does not concern them," Mekatilili warned. Consumed with shame and anger Cambell took out his gun and shot the hen in response.

Mekatilili, took it upon herself to stir up a rebellion. She gracefully danced to songs of war, calling men and women to take up arms against the British.

Apart from being well respected, widows hold a special place in the Giriama community. Now a female warrior, Mekatilili the Brave honed her people's skills to resist Cambell. It is said Mekatilili used a spiritual herb and treatment technique called Bundungo to build confidence in her warriors. Bundungo made the warriors invulnerable. The battle lines had been drawn, but this was not a head-on battle. It was a battle of wits.

As a military strategist, Mekatilili used guerilla warfare tactics to fend off Cambell's men. Her famous military tactic was ambushing the first and last soldier in a convoy, simultaneously. She would then command her warriors to shower down arrows in the middle of the convoy. This caused confusion, deceiving the enemy that a large army.



No one could perceive that a woman can pull this off. Cambell underestimated Mekatilili and this led to his capture. He became a prisoner of war and was kept hidden in a maize silo. He was fed three-day-old Ugali, minced with water, to sustain him. As a reminder, the name Cambell still circles around in the Giriama community with a slight twist, since the people couldn't properly say his name. The natives pronounced Cambell as, Chembe.' Mekatilili's triumph offered the Giriama people the closest thing to freedom they had tasted.

Their victory smiles soon turned to frowns as two of Mekatilili's high-ranking assistants, Wanje Wa Mwadori and Luganje Wa Ziro, betrayed her. They collaborated with Cambell's men to free him and they exposed Mekatilili's war tactics. They told Cambell's men to fire their guns in the bushes when travelling. This is where Mekatilili's fighters hid. The traitors also gave away the secrets of Bundungo to the enemy.

The betrayal was a major blow to Mekatilili's freedom campaign. She was arrested and imprisoned in Kisii. Wanje was made chief by the British administration to rule and oversee matters of the Giriama. Closely assisted by Luganje, he killed off the rebellion.

In my quest to learn more about Mekatilili, I stumbled upon different versions of her story. It is surrounded by controversy, particularly about Wanje. In one version, Wanje is arrested with Mekatilili and exiled in Kisii. He escapes prison with Mekatilili but is injured and dies on their way back to Sabaki. Another version claims Mekatilili and Wanje were lovers and they fell in love on their way home after breaking out of prison in Kisii. I was confused at first, until I further dug into her story. History is written by the victors.

As a chief, Wanje closely collaborated with the British to prevent another uprising. The Kaya elders were banished. New Kaya elders were appointed to help maintain law and order. The oppression went on. Wanje and Luganje were puppets. As time passed, the Giriama favored Wanje because of his influence. The Giriama people became educated by the British and welcomed Christianity.

The root of Christian teachings began to take hold. Christian leaders portrayed Mekatilili as evil because she cured barrenness in her role as a medicine woman and that contravened the teachings of their religion. Their doctrines taught that Jesus was the only saviour of the Giriama people. Mekatilili was their doom; not their savior.

The benefactors of this system also saw Wanje as a hero and Mekatilili's equal. They even overlooked his previous actions. Some could not bring themselves to accept that a woman led a rebellion and conjured Wanje into the story as Mekatilili's right hand man.

This skewed the Mekatilili story.

The different legends which support Wanje as Mekatilili's companion cherish patriarchy. Patriarchy was not the way of the Giriama people. This is seen as Mekatilili advised the Kaya elders of her time. It is stated that the idea of a man's superiority was a foreign concept to prevent any other woman besides Mekatili from obtaining influence and power over the Kaya elders. The men became instilled with the notion that the man should be in total control of the household and the community. The woman must submit to the man and most of what Mekatilili stood for became dismissed. This tradition is going extinct.

All is not lost for the people who closely followed and continued Mekatilili's legacy to the bitter end. They passed on to us another story. After her arrest, Mekatilili escaped by

Astral traveling in three days to Malindi. She continued with the uprising and was arrested several more times; each time escaping under mysterious circumstances. Being branded an enemy by some of her people, who now allied themselves with Wanje and Luganje, and also fighting old age, Mekatilili slowly faded into myths and legends. She died of natural causes and her body rests peacefully in Bungale.

However, her spirit lives on in principles that have persevered through the ages. Although her story stirs up numerous debates, she is still revered as a heroine – a superwoman.



Photo: Mazerah Fahari Safari

# My period is awesome

Author

**Janine Mwende**

**Menstruation is a physiological phenomenon that is common among all the women. Yet, it carries a lot of shame and disgust when mentioned. It is the purest form of blood that is not born of violence. But, it disgusts everyone the most. Menstruation is the normal vaginal bleeding that happens every month, when the ovaries release an egg in preparation of pregnancy. When there is no sperm to fertilize the egg, the egg is released in the form of blood.**

In ancient cultures, menstruation was said to be connected with lunar phases. Hence, women who were in their menses were said to be “in their moons”. The onset of menstruation is celebrated as the transition from childhood to womanhood. The lady would now be able to give life. However, in the same cultures, menstrual blood was considered polluting or dangerous and a woman in her periods was considered dirty. There are many beliefs and myths surrounding menstruation. For instance, among the Dogon people of central Mali, the onset of menstruation arose as an act of incest between mother Earth and her firstborn. The first menstrual cycle marked the introduction of death and disorder in the world. While in Hindu traditions, its origin is referred to as a sinful act. Additionally, among the Giriama people of coastal Kenya women are only allowed inside the Kayas when their cycle is finished or they are menopausal.

Another common cultural myth connects the snake with menstruation. The Walwide people of northern Australia told tales that women in their periods had been chased and penetrated by snakes. In the Bible, menstruation was punishment passed down to all women after Eve encountered the serpent (Genesis 3:1-6). Through Eve, all women thus have been “cursed.”

In the Bible, a woman who was in periods was termed “unclean” (Lev 15:9-24) and a man who touched her also was unclean for seven days. Women in their periods were excluded from participating in rituals due to their impurity. In Islamic culture, a woman in her periods is considered impure and warns every man not to touch her until she is pure again. During this time, they were not allowed to make the five prescribed prayers, touch the Quran, make tawaf around the Kaaba or fast. In some Muslim communities women were prohibited from going to prayer halls or religious centers.

These mythical beliefs could be the reason why talking about menstruation was a taboo since it was considered impure and an act of sin. Many moons later, the same beliefs are still passed down to us and we grow up knowing that it is a taboo and it is sinful and shameful for us to talk about it. Girls grow up with no menstrual education.

What society does not understand is that menstruation is more than just five to seven days of bleeding. It is accompanied by a lot of mood swings due to the high release of progesterone hormones and anxiety that could be a threat to one’s mental health. Increased acne that could result to low self-esteem and a lot of self-hate, neglected uterus diseases such as endometriosis, ovulation pain and so much more.

Every woman has a right to menstrual education and a right to safe menstruation. During this period a woman is vulnerable and needs support in order to have a safe menstrual cycle. Girls grow up with very little education about their periods and what little knowledge they get from school is about calculating their cycle. Parents ignore the subject, assuming that they will be taught about it in schools. There are no problems that come from talking

about menstruation or having one’s period. For all I know, girls need to understand and have knowledge of menstrual hygiene. But how are they to know about it when the topic about menstruation is uncomfortable to talk about?

Some things that are becoming less of a taboo subject are menstrual products. Aside from sanitary towels, new menstrual products have been developed such as the menstrual cups and the washable sanitary towels. The variety of menstrual products has made it easy for women to choose based on their preferences and comfort. Every woman deserves the right to have a safe cycle, since her periods are awesome!





Opposite Rabboni Executive Carwash, Mombasa – Malindi Road, Kilifi. Photo: Justyna Machnicka



Mazingira Park, Bofa Road, Kilifi. Photo: Natalia Szostak



# Why so many teens moms?

Author

**Janine Mwende**

**Teenage pregnancies are one of the major concerns in Kilifi county. According to the Ministry of Gender, Culture and Social Services, there has been a prevalence of 21.8% of teen pregnancies in Kilifi county making the county as one of the highest with the pregnancy rates. This means that one in five adolescents' get pregnant at a very young age. Most of these girls are between the ages 14–17, mostly affected are the standard seven students who are estimated to be about 13–15 years of age since most of the girls start school at a very old age and by the time they finish their primary education they are fully matured. These numbers have continued to increase every year and are expected to increase especially with the Covid-19 pandemic. After conducting interviews and doing research I found that some of the main causes of teenage pregnancies include:**

**POOR PARENTING.** It all starts at home with the relationship between the kids and the parents. Many parents are neglecting their duties. They cannot account for their children's presence and whereabouts. They are less concerned about the kind of people their kids are hanging out with and what they are doing. Most of these kids grow up with no parental control and with the freedom of doing whatever they want regardless of the consequences. Poor parenting narrows down to the lack of sex education to the growing kids. Parents ignore matters regarding to sex and assume that they're going to be taught in school. Parents should create time and interact with their kids, instil values, and educate them on sexual and reproductive health. Most of these parents do not know how to talk to their kids

about matters regarding sex. For most of them it's an uncomfortable topic that should not be discussed especially with the kids since it is "tabia mbaya" (bad manners) to talk about sex in the African culture. When the girls hit puberty their bodies start maturing and there is a lot of male attention. Since they do not know what to expect most of them end up pregnant because of the lack of knowledge on how to use contraceptives. Studies show that girls who have received minimal education are five times more likely to become mothers at a very young age compared to those who attained higher levels of education.

**INADEQUATE SEXUAL EDUCATION** provided to young girls and boys and unprotected sexual intercourse leads to most adolescent pregnancies. The parents, schools and the church ignore matters regarding sexual education on the uses of contraceptives as they think the kids may interpret the information as permission to engage in sexual activities. Those with knowledge about contraceptives choose to keep it a secret or choose not to use the contraceptives to avoid detection by the parents and the church members. Most of these churches condemn the use of contraceptives. Most of the teenagers do not consider the use of condoms as a pregnancy prevention method and as an infections control method because sex with a condom is not enjoyable. Lack of education is another cause of teen pregnancies. The school enrollment in the county is very low. Primary school enrollment is 84% meaning that 16% of the kids are in and out of school while the secondary school enrollment is 26% estimated to 92,030 children do not get access to secondary school education with this figure teenage pregnancies in the county is on a rise due to lack of sexual health education due to illiteracy.

High poverty levels resulting in the high numbers of teenage pregnancies in the county. According to the Kenya human development report 2013, Kilifi ranks as one of the poorest counties with a human development index of 0.47%. Compared to the national average of 0.548. Most of these young girls are from very poor families, so they have to look for means of providing for their siblings and pay their school fees while others work as sex entertainers in order to provide for the basic needs for the families and provide for their needs. Some of them drop out of school since they cannot afford to pay the school and it becomes difficult for them to study while working. Since they are desperately looking for a mode of survival, they are easily lured to unprotected sex since they are paid more. These girls take the parental role very early in order to provide for their families. It becomes difficult for them after they get pregnant and the father of the child does not want to take responsibility and their parents are not willing to support her and the unborn child.



Cultural activities such as disco matanga and nightclubs with no parental or adult supervision making them free to do what they want. While at these gatherings, they take the advantage of meeting their sexual partners and engage in sexual activities. These disco matangas act as meeting points for all the youths in the area. There is the presence of drugs such as muguka, alcohol mostly chang'aa and mnazi and bhang that is very accessible in the region leading to sexual activities among the teens. These are the same youths that have no access to sexual education. Most girls that end up pregnant are unable to continue with their education.

Eunice Adhiambo who is a human rights activist, a development actioner and a feminist. She works with Beijing Champions, a group that campaigns for gender equality. She told us that teenage pregnancies are defilement



of young girls, since these children are not old enough to be parents. Most of these girls get pregnant due to sexual violence by their peers, their so-called boyfriends, local boda boda drivers, and some by their parents. After getting pregnant, some girls are forced into early marriages and told to “enda kwa baba-ke mtoto” (go to the child’s father). In these marriages, they are prone to abuse by their partners and are denied access to basic education because they are partaking in their wifely and motherly duties.

Peer influence, social media influence and drug abuse also contributes to the increasing rates of teen pregnancies. These teenagers are quick to jump to the latest trends in order not to feel left out. Some of them cannot afford the lifestyle and up taking jobs as sex entertainers to get the extra cash. During the teenage years peer influence is very high because everyone wants to fit in and so ends up engaging in early sexual activities with no knowledge on how to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Technological advancements have also contributed to increased teen pregnancies. Whereby the teen are able to access inappropriate media such as pornography leaving them with the desire to try out what they are watching.

Prevention is better than cure so how do we curb the teenage pregnancies in the county? Parents and schools should provide sex education to the young boys and girls as early as possible so that they can grow up with the knowledge. Parents should not assume that kids are not old enough to understand some of these things. As kids are growing up, parents should equip them with sex education knowledge. Parents should make sure they account for their children’s whereabouts, regulate the programs their teens are watching and make sure that they are of no negative effects to their children. Parents should create time to interact with their kids and create a good rapport between them. They should ensure their children

can freely talk to them, instead of creating fear among them.

The community can also ban the disco matangas that provide room for increased sexual activities and drug abuse among teens. They also can establish clinics where youths can obtain contraceptives without being stigmatized. Instead of condemning sex education, religious leaders can discuss with teens the ways to prevent early pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.

These high cases of teenage pregnancies have seen the county lagging behind in terms of the economy, developments and the education system. Unmarried pregnant adolescents face stigmatization from their parents and peers and most of them end up in early marriages that are violent. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the main cause of death among youth between the ages of 15 and 19 globally. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the adolescent mothers aged 10–19 years face a huge risk of eclampsia, puerperal endometritis, systemic infections and fistula. In Kenya, where abortion is illegal, some of these girls run for unsafe abortions. Some 3.9 million unsafe abortions occur globally each year for girls between 15–19, contributing to maternal mortality, morbidity and lasting health problems. Babies born to mothers under 20 years face higher risks of low birth weight, preterm delivery and severe neonatal conditions (WHO).

The county departments of gender and education have come up with ways to curb teenage pregnancies. In early 2019, the county launched an Adolescent Sexual Reproductive and HIV Strategy that has helped in the coordination of adolescent reproductive health needs. The recently formed Kilifi Youth Advisory Council (YAC) ensures meaningful youth engagement and conducts generational activities in the county to empower men and

women, boys and girls economically. Enhancement of service delivery to adolescents also is taking place through the Melinda Gates Foundation. Various activities have been reinvented to reduce teenage pregnancies, such as Youth Open Days. The county is on the way to reviving at least four youth-friendly centers in Rabai, Matsangoni, Mtwapa and Malindi.

These efforts have yielded a reduction of teenage pregnancies in the county, from 30.2% in 2018 to 19.2% in 2019 and 16.1% through March 2020. With continued support from parents, schools, government, churches and the provision of sexual education to teens, teenage pregnancies in the county are dropping. Parents of the affected girls should continue supporting their children since they are still kids. They should continue providing them with education, since children have the right to education.

**“If we as a nation are to break the cycle of poverty, crime and the growing underclass of young people ill equipped to be productive citizens, we need to not only implement effective programs to prevent teen pregnancy, but we must also help those who have already given birth so that they can become effective, nurturing and bonding parents.”**

*Jane Fonda*



Eunice Adhiamboo (left). In the photo, Janine Mwende interviewed Eunice Adhiamboo, Kilifi (right).  
Photos: Yuda Oriema



# The roots of poetry in the Kenyan Coast

Author

**Odanga Lawrence**

**Swahili poetry is generated from Arabic poetry. Poetry is called „ushairi” in Kiswahili, from the Arabic word Shiir. It is written in the traditional manner and created to be sung rather than read. It began in the northern Kenya coastal towns of Lamu and Pate, before spreading to Tanga, Zanzibar and other parts of the coast. Traditional poetry is often published in local newspapers and used in taarab songs, weddings, birthdays, burials, sports and cultural practices.**

There are a few differences between the Swahili and Arabic poetry. With much African influence, it is difficult to compare two poems because of their uniqueness. Traditional poems can be categorized into different classes as per their form and content, such that they can be epic, lyrical or didactic, and many more.

The traditional art of oral expression in poetry has produced a number of valuable works. It is characterized by its preachy aspects, heroic songs, folklore ballads and humorous dialogues which depict Swahili life,

cultural beliefs and traditions. Because of the immediate historical aspect of Swahili literature, it is still a hard job to interpret many poems due to the lack of knowledge of the context in which the poem was written.

## INTRODUCTION

Poet Phillis Wheatley spent the majority of her life embroiled in a clash of cultures. Her poetry revealed much about colonial society in 18th-century New England and its hierarchical relationships. As a Christian, a slave, a woman, a poet and an African, Wheatley experienced discrimination on several fronts. Her poetry gave insight into marginalized groups in colonial America often silenced due to illiteracy. This only proves that women were not allowed to do any kind of artistic work, or, rather, poetry, back in the day.

## NYANYA KAZUNGU THE POET

Elizabeth Sidi Kazungu is her real name. She was born in Kilifi in 1939 to a family of five. She got married to the late David Kazungu, and they were blessed with eight children. Being the first born to her family, she always wanted to be strong and act as a role model

to children around her. As a girl in a religious family – the missionary invasion influenced them to adopt the new religion of Christianity – they were morally taught to be upright. The quest for education really enlightened her and instigated her passion towards poetry. She recited her first piece in 1952; to her, poetry was all about fun as she interacted with other children both at home and at school. In those days, women were less regarded in such activities but freedom from her parents is what made her get through it. Her passion grew fonder and she also started singing in a church choir, giving her a better chance to love music as a whole. Through this, she employed musicality in most of her poems to create rapport with her audience. From the accounts, whenever she recited her pieces, the audience could sing along and it was really amazing. One of her true reflections and a source of inspiration is that, being from a Giriama community, many times they were taught tales of the Great Mekatilili. She took those tales as vital lessons in real life and this led to her great artistic work.

Elizabeth was quite resilient and determined that she was always at the top of her class. Her courage and tolerance is what made her realize that despite the harsh treatment from the boys, she still had space and a voice in her community. This made her face fewer challenges and became fearless as she grew. Her main objectives in life were to educate others; since most of the children did not have access to learning. To enlighten others about arts as a vital thing and to bring people together. As a matter of fact, she performed most of her pieces during great ceremonies, including weddings, birthdays, burials, sports, and cultural practices, such as initiation.

In an interview, she said her favorite poems were about COVID-19. She wrote two pieces in the same year she was hospitalized. She states this was her greatest nightmare, as well as her perfect time to teach the world how to cope with the virus. She was a victim of the pandemic at 81 years, and wanted the world to be cautious and aware of how to live with COVID-19.

Besides being a great poet, she was a Nutritionist Nurse for 30 years. This helped her tackle matters related to nutrition in society, and she worked tirelessly to teach parents about the effects of deficiency diseases like marasmus, kwashiorkor, rickets, and others. As of now, she is an herbalist dealing with products like Coconut Oil, Moringa Powder, Baobab Powder and Neem soap. She is a real woman made of steel. To live longer, she advises people to eat more of the traditional foods, to avoid fast foods, to do regular exercise, and to stay together as a family to maintain a healthy relationship.





Elizabeth Sidi Kazungu. Photo: Yuda Oriema

## **Covid Covid Covid**

Covid covid covid nineteen  
Jamani niambieni Kiswahili ni nini  
kabala kuyatia akilini  
kaona nimelazwa wodini  
ikawa kutiwa oxygen angalu  
kunifikia ubongoni  
keshafika miaka themanini na moja niko miongoni  
kati walio hatarini  
kwa kewli kutoka wodini ni  
mapenzi yake maulana  
na lile lishe bora nikila wakati  
wangu wa ujana

Elizabeth Sidi Kazungu. August, 2021



# Confession of a Heroine

Author

**Musa Kabwere**

## Breaking away from unworthy cultural practices

Three decades and everything seems the same. Though the world has changed and the pace is quickening, culture still dictates life decisions among individuals.

I have no problem with culture. It helps create order and minimize the chances of chaos, both individually and communally. Without culture, everything would crumble, individuals and communities would lose their identity and no one would know who they are, where they come from and where they are going. But what if the security provided by culture robs me of my freedom to be authentic and to live a life of my choice? That's where my problem lies. And that's where my rebellion started. It was my second birth.

Every time I thought of making a decision in my life, I had to look for what was needed and dictated by my culture. I eschewed most desires and meaningful life experiences to conform to my culture. But what more could I gain than the normal feeling of belonging to my community? Were my decisions just dreams which couldn't be realized? It was up to me to make a choice, one that will make me stand as a person; as a woman with an ability to make personal choices. That's what I would stand for in the course of my life.

I wanted a child; a child without marriage. What was marriage for? A means to an end and the child was the end. So, why not get the child and life moves on? I had a plan. I had a child and I became a mother while studying for my degree abroad. Was it wrong? To me, no. It was a choice and I could bear its consequences. To my family and community, yes. It was a wrong and a shameful act. I had failed my father, who was a big man in the community.

I had failed my mother, whose footsteps I was to follow as a woman. I failed my community, and the consequence I am to bear for the rest of my life is to be an outcast. I will never belong to my family. I will belong to myself and my child.

In my interactions with people, I am always branded inappropriate names for living how I live. How can a woman live on her own? How can a woman raise six children? On her own? It seems abnormal that I live on my terms. Men, in the name of marriage, approach me and call me selfish for turning them down. I'm not in for marriage.

**My womanhood sustains me. My life is on my independent terms and not dependent on an attachment with a man.**

I sometimes feel confused. I am African and the status of African women is viewed by their position in marriage. I am not married. My life is good without marriage. There are regrets I have sometimes. But, lesser they are since I couldn't be the woman I am at this moment if I didn't make the decision I took many years ago. I know my strength as a woman. I know what I can do and what I cannot do. I know how to raise daughters and sons on my own. I know how to face the harsh, biased world and live life as I want.

The world is changing. Some aspects of culture curtail what an individual can do to adapt to the world. I wouldn't want my daughter to lose her identity. I wouldn't want to lose my identity. I would want to live with what works; to adapt and change as the world changes, and to throw away that which isn't of service to me and to anyone I care about.

Three decades is a long time for a woman to have fought successfully and still have the zeal to fight the prejudices of a biased society. As a woman, I am in charge of my affairs. The best I am able to do is the best I want for myself and my family, and that is the best I care about.

There is hope for women to choose how to live without the influence of unwanted cultural practices. What works for them works, and what doesn't work isn't safe. As women and individuals, we always have a choice to take life on our terms. Or to take life on the terms of a culture that tries to take away our personal power.

Every woman can choose how to live her life. Culture shouldn't be a crippling tool. It should be a safety cushion for a woman's growth.





Distant Relatives Ecolodge & Backpackers, Seahorse Road, Kilifi. Photo: Natalia Szostak



# Umra Omar Bwana

Author

**Musa Kabwere**

Umra Omar is from Pate Island in Lamu, Kenya. After completing graduate school in the United States and working in Washington, DC, she returned to Kenya in 2010. In 2014, Umra went vacation to visit her family in Lamu. She was introduced to a French mobile medical project that had become defunct due to increased Al-Shabaab attacks in the area. With the nurse, Harrison Kalu, they revived it and it later became Safari Doctors. In 2015, she launched Safari Doctors, a community-based social enterprise founded on the belief that access to healthcare is a fundamental human right.

Safari Doctors delivers primary medical care and health education by boat, air, and land to the Banju and Aweer communities in Lamu. Her organization provides innovative, community-driven healthcare solutions for marginalized populations, currently reaching over 2,000 patients monthly across 24 remote villages.

In 2016, courtesy of her work, she was selected as a CNN Hero. In 2017, she won an Africa Leaders 4 Change award, featured in Business Daily's Top 40 Under 40 Women list, and won the United Nations in Kenya Person of the Year award. In 2019, she was among three finalists for the Robert Burns Humanitarian Award.

She is a 2019-2020 Aurora Forum Goodwill Ambassador and a 2019-2023 World Economic Forum Young Global Leader. Bwana is also part of the Western Indian Ocean Conservation Leadership Initiative, is a Segal Family Foundation Africa Visionary Fellow, and was recognized as a Real Life Hero by the United Nations during the 2020 World Humanitarian Day and most recently as Kenyan National Hero on National Heroes' Day in October 2020.

Drawing inspiration from the inauguration of Kamala Harris, the vice president of the United States, she believes in possibilities of attaining her goals. She is making history as the first female gubernatorial candidate in Lamu since the inception of the devolved government system.

Lamu has a history of denying women a shot at leadership. She is in the forefront to ensure women go for the top seats just as men do. She is the first female Banjuni to contest for the county seat. Despite her being a Muslim, she opts to take leadership. According to Islamic law, a woman cannot lead a man. She is defying this religious norm and take a shot at the top seat despite the religious culture observed by her Islamic community.

Male chauvinism has long made capable women shy away from attempting to vie for top political positions, including governor, MP and Senator over the intimidation that comes with it. In general elections, most women go for easier positions, such as MCA and others. She challenges women in Lamu and the country at large to go for top leadership positions.

Among Bwana's main goals for the Lamu community are bettering the living standards for all, with a focus on improved access to healthcare, education, land rights and a well-conserved environment.

She also is focused on fostering a united and thriving people of Lamu with appropriate infrastructure, security apparatus and investment in women and youth.

According to a past interview with The Nation newspaper, she says women have the ability to steer their communities toward development given adequate societal support.

In the history of Kenyan women, Bwana is one of those who lights the mantle of women empowerment. Her achievements and ambitions speak to the adage about a woman being equal to any man.



# Meeting the Needs of Islamic Travelers

Author

**Musa Kabwere**

**The adage about necessity being the mother of invention isn't lost on Samira Omar Bwana. A problem that perturbed most Islamic women is an opportunity she seized.**

Bwana, 36, always dreamed of traveling the world. However, she found only disappointment when looking for vacation accommodation that accommodated her religious beliefs: Halal food, hotels with women-only swimming pools and spas, and nearby prayer facilities are thin on the ground, especially in non-Islamic countries.

Most travel agents organize trips around alcohol and nightlife, which is haram – forbidden by Islamic law. Samia decided to start traveling alone instead, then with her sister, Nasra, and later joined by their female friends.

In Islamic dress – abaya and hijab – they toured Lamu, Zanzibar, Turkey and Malaysia. In their travels, they hunted for halal food resorts and women-only spaces. They planned their agendas around Islam's five daily prayers.

“That's when I realized that young Muslim women were neglected by the travel industry,” Bwana said in an interview with the Religion Unplugged website.

In 2017, Bwana started Halal Safaris Africa, a travel agency aiming to ease the burden of travel for Muslim women. The agency aims to help them to vacation and take trips without compromising their faith.

Bwana wanted to bring to Africa what she had experienced in Turkey and Malaysia. In Turkey, she experienced halal holidays, especially curated for Muslim women, that enable them to travel safely and without a male guardian.

She searches for halal hotels and fun activities that conform to Islamic law, such as dhow cruises and tours of monuments and archaeological sites.

Halal-friendly resorts must not serve pork. Their rooms must provide Qurans, prayer mats and markers to show the direction of Mecca. The art that decorates rooms should not depict the human form. Bidets and toilets must not face Islam's holiest city.

Her list of offerings – one package is named Sister's Safari – conform to Islamic ideals and permit Muslim women to travel to South Africa, Zanzibar and Kenya. Since African tourist attractions mostly serve foreigners from outside the continent and non-Muslim travelers, few hotels or resorts serve halal adherents.

It's a hard task enjoying halal vacation in non-Islamic countries. Most Muslims will mind ordering halal food from a menu that also serves alcohol and pork, as those ingredients make the kitchen and staff unclean.

By bringing female travelers together, Bwana has opened new opportunities that were previously closed off for the solo Muslim female traveler. Women from different faiths, as well as those who prefer modesty, book trips through the agency.

In the same interview, she said that through Halal Safaris Africa, “a group of female travelers or a solo traveler can easily stay in a private villa away from male guests, have a female chef to cook halal foods, a female tour guide for game drives, and a separate swimming pool.”

She has partnered with CrescentRating, a Singapore-based company that assesses travel and tourism services for their Muslim friendliness.

She currently trains hoteliers on halal practices so that they can cater to the growing number of millennial Muslim travelers – a fast-emerging market, according to a report published by Mastercard and CrescentRating in 2018. The report predicts global expenditure by Muslim travelers will exceed \$180 billion by 2026.

Halal Safaris Africa has operated throughout the pandemic, as domestic tourists seek staycations outside their homes during different phases of lockdown.

As a woman, she found a niche in what posed a problem. In the rules of her religion, she played with them to her and fellow women's advantage.



# My Life and the Terms of My Womanhood

Author

**Musa Kabwere**

**This is an interview with Wanjiru. She is a single mother who has led a life which breaks from her cultural practices. She is defying odds to live on her terms. She is an inspiration to women who want to live away from unworthy cultural practices.**

**Tell us about yourself as a woman.**

I am a single Kikuyu woman of 49 years of age. I live in a coastal town with four of my six children. My oldest two are 26 and 20. They reside at and study in universities in Nairobi. From the tender age of 21, I have parented alone, and I am still parenting alone. My lifestyle has been challenging, but I can say it has made me a very strong and independent personality.

**What has been your experience with culture? Have you felt disempowered with some of its practices?**

Being from the Agikuyu tribe, which I am super proud of, has been a blessing and a curse. As I mature, I find looking at my roots gives me a sense of pride and belonging, even

as much as the same culture can at times be the antagonist... I still cherish it and want to learn more about my culture to be able to ascertain what my tribal lineage is. Mine is a journey to learn more about myself. With time, I have come to realise that culture changes. It is influenced by society as it evolves and tries to find itself. Culture is a beautiful thing. But with time, it gets tainted by new societal norms and can become a burden. For instance, in Kikuyu history, there were no single mothers. Women were protected from stigma by being allocated a caregiver. Or afforded support from a male close to the family. In the case of a man raping or taking advantage of a woman, or making her pregnant and deserting her, the man was banished from the village. My understanding is that the Agikuyu were a matriarchal society. However, the missionaries and the religions they followed flipped societal issues and now a woman who finds herself single with a child is automatically an outcast.

**How did the experience affect you?**

The experience was heart-rending, lonely and traumatic, to say the least. More than 20 years

have gone by and I still find myself doing a lot of inner work to heal myself. Recently, you will hear people asking why I never tied my tubes as a preventative measure. I am overlooked as incompetent by some who think parenting alone is a disability. I have even lost jobs and been denied opportunities because I am a single parent. It has affected how I relate to people. As a woman, I feel I lost my femininity because I have had to double up as a man in my home in order to balance things out. It is very tough for a woman to fill the role of a disciplinarian, for instance. I am so good at the male roles that I often feel no need for a male presence. I depend on myself to get things done. This really does not sit well with any male trying to fit in my family setup. They end up with bruised egos and shy away when they find a woman who is able to do what a man can – sometimes, even better.

**Is there anyone who helped you? Was your helper a fellow woman or a man? Was it a family member or a friend?**

I can say that other single-mothers have been very supportive; this is where my passion for sisterhood stems from. I have siblings, blood-



-sisters who are sometimes at the forefront of the attacks and stigma about my lifestyle. I am grateful to the women who have quickly replaced them with love and support. My own mother was very supportive until her demise in 2001. This was a great source of comfort that I lost. However, her spirit lives on in my first-born daughter of 26 years, whom I named after her. She has walked side-by-side to help me out whenever she can. My father, who absolutely rejected me, and even disowned me later in life, found the heart to help. He catered for my children's education by paying their school fees.

**How do you express yourself and your feelings?**

I am not sure what you mean... To be honest... I don't visit those feelings surrounding my situation. It is heavy; very dark and heavy. I don't really think I can dare look at those feelings. I can't express them to anyone for that matter, because it's heart-rending and painful. I fear being paralyzed by those feelings. I'd rather just leave them buried and move on with life; appreciating my present-day achievements. However, I realise that healing can't be done overnight. It is a journey on its own. Every day I am fixing myself. I look forward to each day being brilliant and promising. The past is what it was and I can't change what already has happened. I realise now that I am an alchemist and creator who can shape her life by manifesting the life I truly desire. The important thing is to learn from your experiences, rather than die from them. I also realise that all that happened shaped who I am today. I do, however, find comfort in writing about my experiences. Words written down seem to help with the healing process. Looking at my own words makes me feel my journey is acknowledged for what it is. I can share one of my favorite quotes from a woman I love so much. She is my aunt and a single-mother herself, Prof. Micere Mugo.

"Writing can be a lifeline; especially when your existence has been denied; especially when you have been left on the margins; especially when your life and process of growth have been subjected to attempts at strangulation."

**At what age did you realize culture was holding you back from living the life you wanted for yourself?**

I was in my late teens when I realised that our culture had been tarnished. And I effectively took a great interest in tracing my roots. I started with dropping my Christian name and embraced my tribal name. My authentic self emerged intuitively. I had no real role models around me except those from the books I read. I realised it isn't our culture that is the hindrance. The whitewashed version of it has been prescribed to us through books and education offered to us by foreigners.

**How is marriage viewed by your culture?**

Marriage is important and integral in the general context. But what is marriage? Kikuyu believe in the man, woman and child as Divine. The Holy Trinity, so to speak. I am not sure about marriage as an institution. A woman is usually supported by the community with provisions to start a new home. The home belongs to a woman.

**What is your personal view on marriage?**

I think marriage, as we relate to it today, is a foreign concept that doesn't work. However, I do believe in a man and woman partnering to build families and communities for humankind to thrive.

**What does it feel like to have children without marriage?**

I can say that, for me, it gives peace of mind as I raise my children in my best way; without the influence of another person.

**Do you regret raising your children as a single parent?**

No, I don't regret it.

**How do you cope with the stigma directed at you by society?**

It may have hurt or influenced me before. I have made peace with everything as I grow older. I don't flinch if I hear negative stuff about it. Most people talk with no experience or knowledge. No one really understands what it is like unless they are in the same situation. I forgive them because they know not what they do, if I can quote the Bible.

**How do you feel about yourself and women in similar situations?**

I have so much respect and pride. I feel like a total queen; an empress in charge of her destiny... A goddess leaving a legacy to reckon with. I feel the same about other women in the same situation, holding it up for themselves.

**Should society change its culture to adapt to the changing world? Or, do you feel everyone has a choice about whether to follow culture?**

I believe in CHOICE.



Stencil by Jackline Wachira. Photo: Natalia Szostak

# Mama ongea na mwanao (Mother talk to your child)

Author

**Mazerah Fahari Safari**

**Meet Mary Kadzo, a 30-year-old single mother of one living in Kilifi, Kenya. She is uniting women under the initiative called Mama Ongea Na Mwanao, which translates to “Mother, Talk to Your Child.” She came up with this idea because she couldn’t stand seeing teenagers getting pregnant and young people embracing drugs.**

Drugs lead to bitter and toxic relationships. Drugs are rarely talked about in the community. Many teenagers welcome the idea of drugs and encourage them. But, it’s girls who suffer most. This is because a man who wants to marry will never take a drug-user to meet his parents. Men will leave these girls for a more suitable girl to present at home.

Kadzo also faced plenty of hardship from her ex-husband. He was extremely patriarchal

and Kadzo was concerned that this would deeply affect her child. Kadzo and her child lacked any freedom to express themselves in her former husband’s home. He was in total control of their home, friends and surroundings. His behaviour reflected the tribal belief that the wife should always listen and adhere to the husband without question. Her programme brings together women to talk about key issues that affect mother-child relationships, mostly focusing on the girls and how to tackle these challenges.

“Some of the main reasons why mothers in our modern society find it difficult to talk to their child is due to patriarchy’s way of silencing what the mother and child need,” Kadzo says. “Most patriarchal individuals are abusive in how they treat a woman and her child.”

“It’s also important to note that in a fast-growing society, where social media plays a key role in the development of a child, children get exposed to a wide range of data and information from the Internet at a very tender age. The child then adapts foreign traits, such as arrogance. But I have come to learn this has a major impact on a mother and daughter. A girl will rely mostly on Internet advice and friends over her mother, since she feels her mom is too outdated. It’s only when curiosity hurts and damages her reputation that she seeks shelter from her mom.”

Kadzo further explained, pampering can also lead a child to be spoiled. Experienced mothers can advise on how they raised their children. Mama Ongea na Mwanao is picking up speed and involving more women to talk about daily challenges with their kids.

“In today’s world, our children are growing up so fast,” she says. “That said, I took upon this mission to separate our differences as women for the sake of our children. If we don’t make a change in how we bond with our children, we will doom the mothers of tomorrow.”

Being a proud and educated Giriama woman, Kadzo adores her culture. She carried on explaining the Giriama culture is the best culture in how it treats a woman. Widows are given special care and not shunned. A barren woman will gladly accept her husband to have a child with another woman. When the baby is born, it is raised by the barren woman and her husband. For it’s how you raise and care for your child that makes a mother, not just the act of giving birth.

Tradition also influences mother-and-child relationships in different cultures. While some promote a close bond, another culture will take it as the man’s responsibility. Educated single mothers seem to merge the two elements, tradition and modernity, to guide their children.

One major factor that is rarely talked about is the child spending the majority of time in school. Yes, school life. School lessons are different from home lessons taught by a parent, in this case, a mother. The teacher has no regard for bonding time with the child’s guardian. They are paid to teach what’s on the syllabus.

In recent years, school girls are getting pregnant at a very young age and the perpetrators are either the teachers or fellow students. This speaks volume, since mothers trust the school system to build and guide their daughters and they end up suffering for it. If the mother is more involved with the daughter by building up a healthy relationship from a tender age, there might just be light at the end of the tunnel. Mama Ongea Na Mwanao is helping to bridge this relationship. It unites mothers, enabling them to discuss ways to sort out these issues.





Opposite Kesho Kenya Organisation, Kilifi. Photo: Justyna Machnicka



# The African Girl's Troubling Journey to Womanhood

**My story is no different from any other African girl as she comes of age. If women are to enjoy equal status with men in African society, the rituals, taboos and practices to which we are subjected along the way must change and for the better.**

## **CIRCUMCISION**

Female circumcision, also called female genital mutilation (FGM), is always traumatic and has no identified health benefits. Its complications are either physical, ranging from bleeding and infection to death. Or, psychological, such as anxiety and post-traumatic stress. In addition, it causes pain and difficulty during sex, as well as repeated vaginal infections that can lead to infertility.

Born into the very traditional community of Ol-Donyo Nyokie, Irene had no doubt about relating her own experience. But, she shrunk as she recalled the pain she endured when the practitioner sliced off her clitoris. “She slept in the same bed as me the night before,” she said. “My mother woke me up at six o’clock in the morning and poured a bucket of ice-cold water over me, and then I was taken back into the hut and cut.”

At just 11 years of age, Irene is below the traditional age of cutting. However, she said that

often, when the oldest girl came of age, her parents might have all her younger sisters cut to save the cost of having several ceremonies. She said she dreaded the pain, but looked forward to becoming “a woman”. She wanted to be cut because it would make her more acceptable in the eyes of her peers and her community. “If you are not cut, no one wants to talk to you; the girls and boys in school laugh at you because you are still a child,” Irene said. “No man will want to marry or have sex with you if you are not cut.”

Irene also said that despite her own willingness to be cut, she did not support the practice of FGM and she insisted that she would not permit her own children to be circumcised. “We are taught in our school health club that FGM is a harmful practice, and I wish the Maasai would stop forcing girls to do it,” she said.

Several circumcised teenage girls said that they would never put their own children through FGM, having been educated about the dangers of the practice. They were adamant that they would not bow to the community’s pressure to have their daughters cut, as many of their parents had. Irene and her friends, who were all circumcised in the same month, described how their wounds were coated with a paste made from cow dung and milk fat to

Author

**Stella Wambua**

stop the bleeding and accelerate healing. All maintained they had healed perfectly, and said they had never heard of any deaths or health complications arising from the operation.

## **MENSTRUATION**

Different cultures view menstruation in different ways. The basis of many conduct norms and communication about menstruation is the belief that menstruation should remain hidden. Cultural norms and religious taboos on menstruation are often connected to traditional associations with evil spirits, as well as shame and embarrassment surrounding sexual reproduction.

A good example is when I had my first period when I was 13 years old. I knew what was happening from science classes at school and I had known to expect it at any time. But I remember a deep sense of shame – one I couldn’t quite rationalize. I hid it from my mother, using countless amounts of cow dung until I knew I couldn’t hide it any longer.

As I was walking from the shop with a boy with whom I used to be friends and he started laughing at me. Not just laughing, but howling. He pointed to the back of my yellow dress, where I noticed a big red stain. Once again, my overriding emotion was shame.

Years later, something similar happened to me in a restaurant. I never expected to be on periods. A lady rushed to tell me I’d had an “accident”. She pointed at my white shorts, and there it was again. I just couldn’t look at this mishap as any other, like spilling food or red wine on my dress.

It’s high time we appreciated that menstruation is a natural thing and not someone’s fault.

## **DATING**

The way a person was brought up and taught to believe has an impact on the way they interact with individuals, especially those of the opposite sex. It also doesn’t help when we have preconceived notions of each other.

When I was 16, I used to believe that there is no way one could ever successfully date a person from a different culture. My thinking at the time was if you marry someone, you don’t only live with that person, but with their entire history, family, and past. While if you marry someone from a different country, that will exponentially and overwhelmingly multiply into acceptance of an entire country, culture, customs, history, religion, past, language, education, family...





Outside Olow Medical Center, Charo Wa Mae, Kilifi. Photo Justyna Machnicka

#### **MARRIAGE**

Early marriages were traditionally and carefully arranged, and marriage between cousins was encouraged so as to keep property and family together. A bride's price was paid to the girl's family, but was never a sign of total ownership.

The parents of a young man would visit the girl's family and negotiate on behalf of their son. A positive response would start up the beginning of the wedding plans. More visits to the girl's family followed, accompanied by gifts.

Swahili marriages take three to four months to plan, during which both families hold different ceremonies. On the wedding day, food and music are always offered in plenty. Divorces and polygamy are allowed, as provided for by Islamic law. Until today, we still have forced marriages. Even with changes in technology.

I had a friend of mine who was very bright in class and was very disciplined. She always wanted to be an engineer and always worked towards achieving the goal. When we were in Form Three we broke for an holiday but my friend never reported back after the break. The class teacher asked about her whereabouts but no one had an idea. She therefore requested the principal to make a follow-up and after two weeks she came with a report saying that my friend had been married off to an old man and the money used to educate her younger brother, who was considered as the "star-child" of the family.

#### **CHILDBIRTH**

Among the Mijikenda, a pregnant woman is advised to avoid eating too many eggs because it is believed to cause baldness in the unborn child. Intake of popcorns is believed to cause short temperedness after birth. The Mijikenda believe that taking too much pepper while pregnant affects the child's hygiene. The woman is also advised not to sit on the doorstep, as it will cause difficulty in delivery. They believe if the mother does so the umbilical cord will coil around the neck of the child during birth. The pregnant parents are not supposed to engage in sexual activities outside of marriage.

The delivering mother should not be visited by a close relative with whom they shared a husband in the past – that is, those having sexual relations with the same man. To them, this may cause the death of the mother.

They also believe that the umbilical cord should not fall on the private parts of the newborn as it will cause barrenness in girls and infertility in boys. The umbilical cord of the newborn must be well hidden, to keep it from those who use the cords to treat barrenness by witchcraft. Also after birth, the child is shaved and hair hidden in order to avoid being witched.

#### **PROSTITUTION**

Prostitution is the practice of engaging in sexual activity with someone for payment. It is an occupation that has become a norm in the coast for both boys and girls. Not only do adolescents engage in prostitution. Little girls do it for money, too. Sex work is seen as an acceptable means of earning a living in coastal Kenya. It started locally with girls standing by the streets, as they call it "work at night". Today, they look for bigger and better pockets, and they know where to get it. Mostly, they target tourists.

To parents and relatives, a child with a white tourist as a girlfriend or boyfriend is the fastest way to get the family out of poverty. Young girls and boys are encouraged by their families to look for tourists who will cater to family needs. This means families will purposefully keep their children out of school, freeing them to search the beaches for "work."

Because prostitution pays well, it's not easy to keep the young girls and boys from engaging in the practice. They have been exposed to so much, and they always prefer life at the beaches. They go through harrowing sexual experiences at the hands of their older, white tourist boyfriends and girlfriends. In short, they are sex slaves. Still, they prefer that kind of life compared to what their parents can offer. For all it is known, they want to save their family from poverty.

# Pwani Tech Women

Author  
**Tom O. Nyadida**

**Motivated by notable figures such Mekatilili wa Menza, women in the Coast region are breaking into the male-dominated world of tech. By sharing skills at schools, universities and in the local community, members of Pwani Teknowgalz and Pwani Girls in STEM are ensuring that women and girls can compete for employment opportunities in the Information and Communication Technology (ITC) sector.**

## RUTH KAVEKE

Hailing from a society where education for girls is less regarded, tech-hub maven Ruth Kaveke succeeds thanks to an uncompromising approach to ITC. As relentless as the wonder warrior Mekatilili, she beat the odds and made it to university. Seeing an opportunity for effecting socio-economic and educational change through ITC, she co-founded the Pwani Teknowgalz project aimed at teaching girls in coastal Kenya the skills they need to bridge the gender gap.

Pwani Teknowgalz is a non-profit organization that equips high school girls and university students with ICT skills. Through programs and workshops, it enables next-generation innovators, scientists, software developers and entrepreneurs. Kaveke's idea to train more girls to code emerged from the fact that so few of her female classmates at the Technical University of Mombasa (TUM) were interested in developing such skills. She and co-founders Aisha Abubakar and Joan Nabusoba started training their fellow TUM students with the help of Techwomen, an initiative of the US government. Later, they spread out to schools around the region. With time and thanks to increased demand, they started Pwani Teknowgalz at Pwani University in Kilifi. Upon its inception in 2015, the project took as its mission increasing the number of girls from the coast pursuing careers in science, technology STEM fields. The group sees these skills and subjects as means for girls to contribute to the digital economy. Pwani Technogalz has received accolades for improving the lives and development of girls in the region.

## WOMEN-LED

Kaveke heads a passionate and dedicated team that inspires, encourages and provides

direction for members of the organization. It is responsible for the day-to-day running of programs, sourcing funds and establishing connections and partnerships in the region and elsewhere. As this team demonstrates, women are capable and competent leaders. They challenge women to take up roles in society in line with their dreams and talents.

## COMPUTER-AIDED LEARNING

Pwani Teknowgalz has trained over 800 girls at coast high schools and 150 students at university level, with beneficiaries building careers as software developers and graphic designers. Its structured curriculum runs for three months, introducing students to computer programming. Students receive practical lessons in HTML5, CSS3, and Python programming languages, as well as in web hosting, responsive design and content management systems like WordPress.

## RIDGING THE GENDER GAP

Pwani Technogalz provides a holistic environment for STEM training, mentorship and workshops. Girls are encouraged to use their creativity in developing innovative solutions to community problems in line with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The program enables girls and women to link with like-minded counterparts from around the globe. These exchanges of ideas and experiences are seen as foundations for social change.

## DIGITAL SKILLS FOR WOMEN

Pwani Technogalz helps women to acquire skills that enable them to increase their employability and start their own businesses. Through STEM Café Kenya, the project trains them to access public resources with mobile phones and other devices. Endowed with the right skills, they can access a fuller range of resources and do it more easily.

## TECHNOVATION CHALLENGE:

### GIRLS FOR CHANGE

Technovation is a global program that helps teams of girls to learn and apply the skills needed to solve real-world problems using technology and in line with sustainable development goals. Since 2016, Pwani Teknowgalz has engaged 11 high schools and over 500

girls in developing mobile applications that target health, education, security, and the environment.

## COMPUTER AND CODING CLASSES

Pwani Teknowgalz helps girls from marginalized areas who are passionate about learning technology and are unable to afford the classes. Members lead courses in computer skills and offer coding classes, with students earning certificates upon completion. For every five students who pay for the class, the project supports two girls for free. Corporate partnerships create opportunities for certificate holders and provide donations of tech resources. More than 60 girls have participated.

## CODE HACK PROGRAMS

CodeHack helps young adults from marginalized communities in Mombasa become more employable. Through the initiative, they learn to code, focusing on website and mobile development, graphic design and the use of the Python programming language. The skills allow those who are passionate about technology pursue careers once their STEM studies are complete. The impact of Pwani Teknowgalz can be seen at several levels. Upon acquiring digital skills, participants mentor others in their communities. Providing young women with skills in mobile application development through CodeHack advances their economic empowerment. Moreover, members say it equips them with relevant skills and confidence to be part of developing technology solutions rather than simply being consumers.

## WE NEED MORE WOMEN IN STEM

“The percentage of female students in IT-related fields of studies in college and university education in developing countries is minimal,” Kaveke says. “Similarly, women are less acquainted with the economic, social and psychological gains to be had from the full range of opportunities afforded by ICTs. There is a need to create an inclusive environment, where more women are involved in the ICT fields. This provides the basis for Pwani Teknowgalz to equip high school and university students with digital and software skills to increase the percentage of women in technology, as well as creating job opportunities.”

Pwani Technogalz accomplishments include:

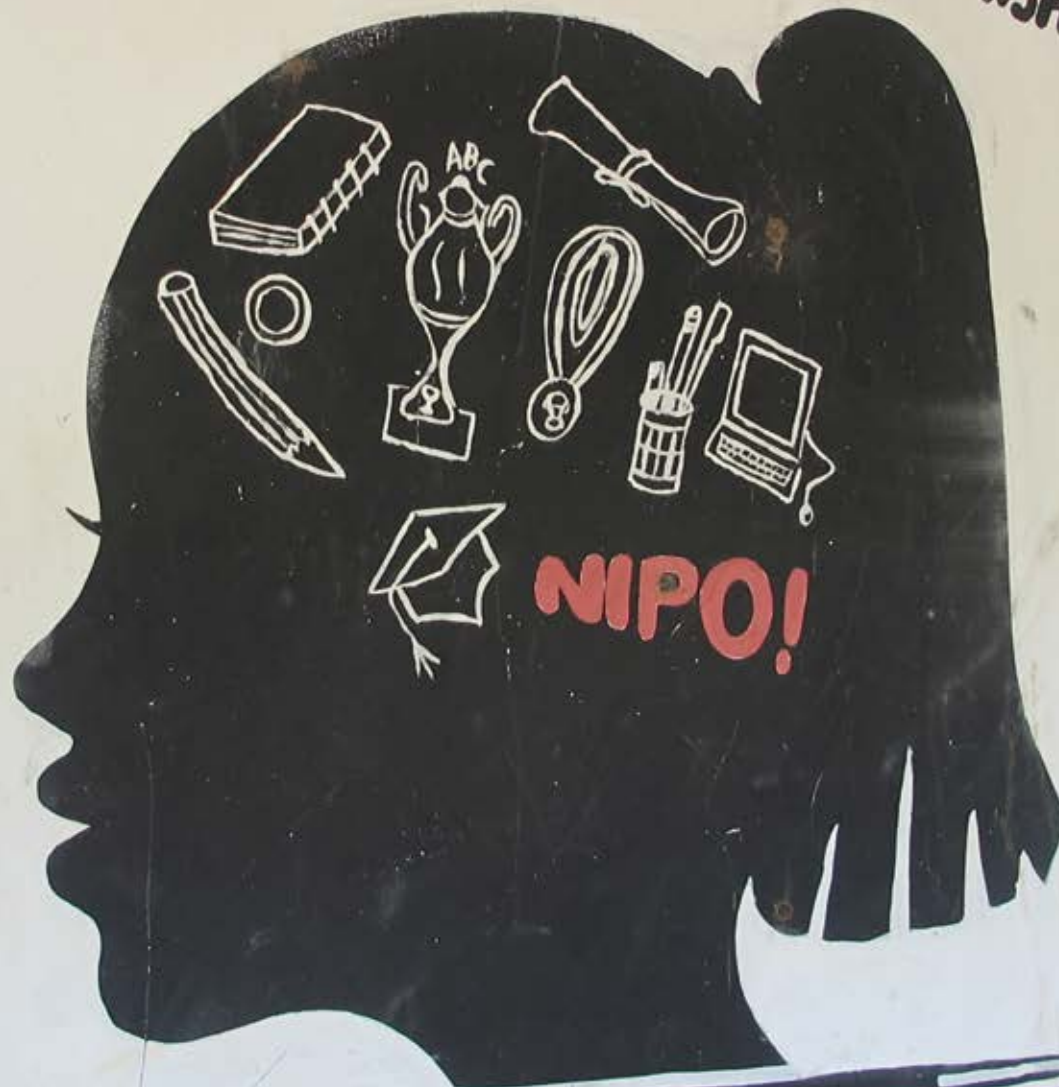
- 5000 girls have benefited through the program, through training, classes and sponsorships
- The project has helped 300 women in their various businesses
- Partnerships with two dozen schools
- 50 projects established, including Pwani Girls in STEM, STEM Café Kenya, and Django Girls
- 750 teachers trained



# SUCCESS

HUANZA  
NA MIMI  
KUJIFAHAMISHA.

IF BEING INDEPENDENT  
MAKES ME AN OUTCAST  
LET ME BE ONE



FEMALE  
GENITAL  
MASSACRE 7

CHANGE

Kilifi North Youth Empowerment Centre at Mazingira Park, Kilifi. Photo Natalia Szostak

# Why We Need Women Leaders. Meet Kilifi Mums CBO

Author

**Odanga Lawrence  
(Larry Poet)**

**What’s interesting? A WhatsApp group turning into a Community Based Organisation (CBO). To clear my doubts on what others are saying about a woman, a cause and her organisation’s effect in the community and the county, I visited KILIFI MUMS CBO to get first-hand information.**

**The CBO started as a WhatsApp group in 2015, as a place where women could discuss issues related to marriage; how they were being mistreated by their husbands. Their problems needed someone to address them and Kibibi Bakari Ali found herself in the fight.**

**“Women in Kilifi don’t know their rights,” she said. “And that’s what instigated me to register Kilifi Mums Women’s Group as a legal group.”**

I interviewed Kibibi Bakari Ali on some controversial issues and this is how it went down:

**LP:** Who is Kibibi Ali?

**KA:** I am a woman, a mother of two, and a human rights defender.

**LP:** I understand that men in this town hate you. Why the animosity?

**KA:** Men hate me because I enlighten their women to be independent. In fact, I am a threat to them and they don’t want me at all.

**LP:** Now that you’re popular, do you have a bodyguard?

**KA:** God is always my bodyguard, I fear no one. I am cautious and don’t trust people easily.

**LP:** What is your reaction, especially to being mocked by men when you walk down the streets?

**KA:** Honestly, despite all the fights I’ve fought, I feel like an outcast. That feeling of rejection, when you’re doing something good in the community. I suffer from loneliness and solitude.

**LP:** What are your cultural and religious beliefs?

**KA:** I don’t believe in culture; it undermines the well being of a woman. I am a Muslim.





Kibibi Bakari Ali. Photo: Yuda Oriema

But, mostly you'll find me in churches serving people.

**LP:** You started as a woman's right activist, why?

**KA:** Most women in Kilifi do not know their rights. They are still tied by their culture. They depend on men for everything, causing them all forms of gender-based violence. As a CBO, we realized the violence not only affects women, but also men. That makes us human rights defenders.

**LP:** What is your story?

**KA:** As a young woman in marriage, I was a victim of all sorts of domestic violence. I got tired of being looked down upon. It forced me to divorce my husband, taking my kids away from him. Yes, I was a victim and I always cry whenever I think of it.

**LP:** What does the Kilifi Mum's CBO do?

**KA:** Our organization tackles the following thematic areas: human rights, law and justice, peace and security, female empowerment and teenage pregnancies.

**LP:** How do your CBO empower women?

**KA:** We train women to be financially independent. We organize training and

seminars for skills acquisition. We initiate income-generating projects like soap making, basket weaving, helping them to start small grocery stores, and tailoring. As a matter of fact, we've taught them recordkeeping. They are now doing table banking and merry-go-round.

**LP:** Any comment about teenage pregnancies in Kilifi?

**KA:** It used to be a major problem here, but not anymore. We've worked tirelessly with the police department to ensure the culprits are jailed. Sadly, the teens were raped, molested, and impregnated by people close to them. What a shame.

**LP:** Do you have a safe house protecting the already-affected girls?

**KA:** For now, we do not have a safe house. We're working closely with the local police to monitor the affected girls and also boys who have been sodomized.

**LP:** Do you feel like you've conquered the fight against gender-based violence?

**KA:** Certainly, yes. Because the number of cases have fallen by a large percentage.

**LP:** What are your sources of finance? Do you have any donors?

**KA:** We do not have donors. We receive gifts from well-wishers. We are calling upon donations from donors willing to join us in this fight

**LP:** How can donors who want to help find you?

**KA:** They can reach me via email: [kibakari@gmail.com](mailto:kibakari@gmail.com). They also can find us on Twitter @KilifiG, Facebook: kilifi mums c.b.o.

**LP:** Thank you for your time. I wish you well in your fight.







# A Dream

Author

**Shaila Agha**

I dream about her almost every night. I start out in a forest, abundant, plentiful, dense, fresh. Vines dangling from trees older than many of our cities. With hues of green and brown that Salvador Dali, himself, couldn't replicate. The sun's rays piercing through the leaves, casting shadows that dance with the wind. Birds call out in excellently choreographed harmony, the colourful love bird's soprano perfectly harmonized with the cacaw of the eagle that hunts it. What marvels me most isn't the animals I see and hear in the trees, but the hidden fauna that reigns in the overstory and understory. The forest floor is brimming with life. When you look closer, you see soldier ants in all their glory carrying leaves and twigs into their underground network that spans for more than 3 kilometres. The worms that aerate the soil and the little critters each playing their part to turn the fallen leaves, branches and bark into the nutrient-rich soil in which the many seedlings will thrive.

I lay down and watch the forest factory symphony working away and start to pay attention to the roots of the trees. The interwoven roots merely bend and turn and meander synergistically with each other. Whether oak or mahogany or baobab, all the trees respect and mingle with each other. It is said that we see less than half of the tree as above-ground dwellers; that under each tree is more than double the surface area of roots, more tangled than my hair will ever be. Each one with a mission to explore the earth and find precious resources for their existence.

As I lay there on the moss floor with the cool breeze blowing through my body, I feel a presence around me, a force that is unexplainable. As I rise up, I feel assisted by the wind and embraced in every direction. I feel safe, as though this is where I am meant to be. As I crunch dried leaves under my feet, a millipede crosses my path and turns to look at me. In awe, I come closer to it and hear it say "follow me, mwana." Curious as to why walk behind her, closely following her path. Slow and steady,

I admire her million legs and watch as she weaves the forest floor, intricately and elegantly.

"Tumefika mwana," she says as we arrive at the roots of a tree so large that each of its tendrils looks like the foot of an elephant. Gray and wrinkled with skin like bark that seems very much alive. As I lift my head, my heart sings. A giant mbuyu majestically erupting from every corner of the forest, its leaves span out as far as my eyes can see and the velvet dangling baobab pods create a natural chandelier. I walk around it 17, 18, 19." The wind billows and I hear a voice call out... "Mwana wa msitu... karibu."

Well aware that this is where I am meant to be, I gently caress the gray, smooth bark; sparks fly between my hands and the trunk. I feel euphoria sweeping all over my body as I look to the sky and see only metres and metres of tree trunk above me. I place my head on the body and, in a flash, get transported into the baobab. My heart is racing, sweat dripping down my back and forehead. I can hear the thump of my heartbeat in my ears, like a drum echoing around its walls and resonating within.

I am scared, but I do not know why. Although the baobab is dark, I feel a sense of calm and security. The light piercing from above illuminates the hollow insides. There is a thatched pillow and some grass laid down, a makeshift bed that feels all too familiar. Few indentations on the insides of the trunk show a climbing path that I follow. I am almost at the top when I hear distinct voices in the distance. The hairs at the nape of my neck stand up and my stomach turns. I hear the rough, gruff voice of what seems to be a large man approaching. He seems out of breath and as he nears the tree, I feel his presence nearing and his footsteps getting closer and louder. A sharp, stabbing feeling in my side drops me to the ground, as I lift myself up I hear the frightening sound once again. CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! With each sound, my body writhes.

I feel her pain as mine, her fear as mine, her deep sorrow as mine. Finally, as I regain my strength and composure, I hear him call out.

"We need more axes," he huffs. The statement brings me to my knees, disillusioned and weakened by the heavy blows to my spine and side. I let out a cry that comes from the depths of my soul and yell "KOMA!" and with that thunderous yell, the forest trembles and the bough of the majestic baobab crackles. I felt a force flare up within me and the next thing I know, I feel a huge thud that shakes the ground.

The end of my dream is not as exhilarating as I would have hoped it to be. I wake up in my bed, confused and profusely sweating. I have no explanation for what happened, only more questions. Did I just kill a lumberjack trying to cut me down? Was I the tree? Or, was the tree me? One can only assume the journey down the forest path following my jongolulu friend would lead me to the answers I seek. Nevertheless, the spirit that led me to the forest still visits me sometimes. I feel her calling me there. Pulling me towards her and forcing me into her depths. I feel obligated to protect her and all her inhabitants. Could it be you? Mekatilili?

Appendix of words

Jongolulu – millipede

Mwana wa msitu – child of the forest

Mbuyu – baobab

Koma – stop



FUTURE IS FEMALE