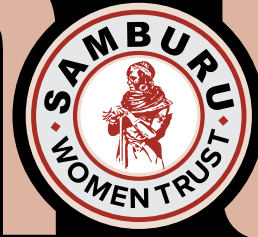


# THE Indigenos



SAMBURU WOMEN TRUST

## The Ambassadors of change



# THE Indigenous



The  
Ambassadors  
of change



## OUR VISION

We envision a society that recognizes; promotes and protects the fundamental rights and freedom of women and girls; and ensures full participation of indigenous women in their own development

## OUR MISSION

We exist to empower pastoralists' women and girls to claim their human rights, strengthen their capacity to influence local and national policies, and address harmful cultural practices through integrating the role of women as decision-makers in the community

## OUR GOAL

We seek to build and enhance indigenous women and girls' capacities using diverse strategies and approaches that are not in conflict with pastoralists cultural practices. Address traditional harmful practices that subjugate women position in the society and their roles.

## OUR CORE VALUES

- Accountability and transparency
- Innovative and Action oriented
- Passion for human rights
- Respect for culture
- Gender equality
- Professionalism
- Integrity

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The influencing grant supported by Voice-Kenya under the Ministry of Netherlands, has given Samburu Women Trust (SWT) tools which has increased their visibility at different levels, strengthening the capacity to amplify voices of indigenous women and girls with special focus on those unheard voices under “*Usawa Dada*”. The grant has impacted positively to grassroots women and boosted their girls’ confidence and gave them a platform to speak boldly against harmful cultural practices which has continued denying them dignity.

With SWT's mission of advancing women and girls rights with a view of influencing legal framework at different levels, it has strengthened grassroots women to organized and collectively dialogue to change community attitudes on women inclusion, consultation and involvement in decision making at all levels.



In this magazine edition we are amplifying achievement, challenges and gaps for women, girls and youth who have taken lead as champion of change in their respective fields. Their personal testimonies will trigger conversation that have remained silent, unheard or unspoken because the community regard the issue as a taboo hence this publication will openly enable discuss the issue openly at different structures of the community level. These conversations will influence positive perception and narrative change for silent harmful cultural practices which are hidden within the norms of our society with spirit of no one is left behind when major decisions are made.

SWT is supporting various voices at various level include: ten women champions and twelve paralegal workers with an aim to strengthen and promote their work, equip them and impact skills that advance women and girls rights at all level.

**At the community and county level,** we work with women human rights defenders, individuals activists, traditional guides/healers, reformed circumcisers, traditional Birth attendants (TBA) women and girls champions to change the negative narratives towards women and girls inclusions in decision making and increase safe working space for women and girls.

**At the national and Regional level,** we host and coordinate a network of Indigenous Women Council that constituted eleven (11) member council whose representative drawn from indigenous and hunter gatherers organizations advancing indigenous women rights and across the country.

The women council aims at increasing indigenous women engagement, visibility, participation, involvement and inclusivity in decision making process and also influencing formation of policies that are women friendly within their counties, national and regional

engagement platforms. The IWC act as a collective voices at the national indigenous women conference, an influencing platform of indigenous women leaders that seek to build, nurture, and increase women visibility by drawing conference commendation that collectively amplify women voices at the Africa commission on human and peoples rights (ACHPR), UNPFII, EMRIP, Commission on Equal Status of Women (CSW), and Elimination of Gender Based Violence (CEDAW) which has been a gap and concern among women in Africa continent.

All these collective voices at different levels enable women and girls build courage to demand equal opportunities, demand for respect and to be brought on the table where key decisions have in the past been made without their involvement. All these alliances and networks has given SWT success stories and assisted in strategizing on how to develop workable approaches that amplify women voices including numbers of women employed and appointed to committees and boards at county and national platforms.

We are proud of the milestone made but still there is need to build capacity on women at the grassroots so that they can continue advocating for the elimination of harmful cultural practices that continue to thrive at a number of regions inhabited by indigenous community.

Our sincere thanks to our development partners, project beneficiaries, the county and national governments for their continued support and positive engagement that has resulted in widening of space for indigenous women participation on matters national development.

### **Jane Meriwas**

Founder & Executive Director  
Samburu Women Trust



**STEPHEN LETOOIYE**

Ambassador of Cultural Change, SWT

## Letooiye, a moran with a mission

**He has taken upon himself to influence change from within. Though a college graduate, it is hard to distinguish Stephen Letooiye from his peers, Samburu morans (community warriors) of the same age group.**

Adorned in colorful warrior outfits, complete with a head gear, his pose and articulation on issues displays a young man with a mission, a mission to influence societal change, persuading his age mates to abandon traditional harmful practices that have continued to adversely affect the Samburu girl child.

It is something the 24-year-old has been doing for the past one year now, moving from village to village and at times riding on a motorcycle and tracking down the morans in the bushes where they spend most of their day time. One of his major topics of discussion and which he hopes to convince his peers to abandon is the culture of marrying girls who have been subjected to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

In the past twelve months, he has traversed Naisunyai, Ngutuk-Elmuget, Ngutuk-Engiron, Sasaab, Lempaute and Kiltamany in West Gate Community Conservancy in Samburu East Sub-County.

Letooiye admits that it is a hard task but remains optimistic that his soft approach to the issue will net followers though gradually saying it is the most effective way to address the deep rooted cultural practice that has continued to thrive despite a legislation banning FGM across the country being in force.

“The ones I have talked to say there is scarcity of uncut girls in the heartland of Samburu and those who have defied this cultural practice are educated and reside in urban centres,” says Letooiye.

He adds that some of the morans opt to marry girls from a different community where FGM is no longer practised.

In his crusade, Letooiye has won a disciple, a university student who has been accompanying him when he is not in the university lecturer hall. Joshua Letoole is a student at Kenya Methodist University (KEMU) and says he plans to marry a girl who has not undergone FGM, but is quick to add that she hails from a different community.

“We are in courtship and we are set to get married once we graduate from the university. Just wish I got a girlfriend from our community who has not been cut,” says Letoole.

Together with Letooiye, the pair has also been taking their crusade to women and elders in their campaign and has so far reached out to more than 500 people with plans to reach out to others in OI Ndongiro division in Isiolo County as well as in Marsabit. The duo say they have been accorded audience, something that was unimaginable a few years back in the conservative community where

elites have shied away from speaking topics deemed to be challenging deep rooted cultural practices.

The two believe that in order to win this fight, it calls for patience and strategies devoid of confrontational approach.

“We have short and long strategies in our campaign. The first phase is to change the mindset of our community that this practice is not beneficial but harmful. Afterwards we shall seek support to establish rescue centres where the girls who resist the cut can be enrolled as they prepare to join school,” says Letooiye adding that when this happens, eligible bachelors will no longer complain of scarcity of uncut girls.

Another strategy is to establish non-formal educational centres in the villages where the morans can study at night.

“Education is a sure way of changing the mindset of the morans. This is because it will give them exposure to diverse cultures and in the process appreciate that life is not all about herding cattle and marrying young girls who have undergone through FGM,” says Letooiye.

Samburu Women Trust (SWT) has now engaged Letooiye to be an ambassador of cultural change, facilitating him to move across the villages in Samburu and Isiolo counties in an effort to bring that desired change.



**KONGOMA NOLASO**  
Anti-FGM Crusader

## From a circumciser to an anti-FGM crusader

**She cannot state with accuracy the number of girls that have passed through her hands in the name of initiation but says they are in hundreds. That was before Kongoma Nolaso “saw the light” and stopped being a circumciser and became an anti FGM crusader.**

At her homestead in the outskirts of Merille market, Marsabit County, the elderly woman says she has been cutting the girls for five generations (a duration of over 40 years), an occupation that made her earn handsomely.

“By the time I stopped the practice two years ago, I would be paid Sh3,000 for every girl I circumcised. I could also be rewarded with meat, tobacco, tea leaves and a bucketful of sugar,” she recalls.

Fear of being jailed and persuasion by a local nurse Rose Orguba made Kongoma abandon the practice which has been blamed for myriad problems that affect girls in later stages of life. “I have seen with my own eyes my fellow circumciser being arrested and taken to jail and I panicked. Around the same time, a nurse called Rose approached me and persuaded me to stop subjecting young girls to suffering pointing out that female cut has many disadvantages,” she says.

Kongoma has never been to school and had inherited the occupation from her mother. The only tool she could use to cut the girls was a razor blade and her long fingernails which have however been trimmed now.

Today, the elderly woman is in the forefront advocating for a stop to the practice among her Rendille community. After she stopped, she reached out to fellow circumcisers who had managed to evade the long arm of the law and convinced them to stop as well.

“As we talk now, I do not know of anyone earning a living by subjecting girls to the cut. If you know of one, tell me where she is and I will visit her with a piece of advice,” she says and vows that even if she was to be given Sh10,000 to conduct the rite on a girl, she would not accept.



Having left the practice, she has now become one of the renowned Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA) in her village with expectant women seeking her services. With few and scattered health facilities in one of the most expansive counties in the country, TBAs are in high demand and Marsabit County Government has been supporting them in an effort to reduce maternal related deaths.

“We are supplied with gloves and some other items that assist a woman during delivery. At times we are invited to seminars by various health organisations and charitable organizations also pay for us to attend such trainings where we are taught how to handle complicated births

and who to reach to in case of an emergency,” explains Kongoma.

Since quitting the practice, the married woman says she has not suffered for lack of income and is able to cater for her basic needs through rearing cows and with support from her son who is employed at Kenyatta National Hospital.

“Actually I was not doing it for monetary gains but I felt it was a calling to serve the society since I found my mother doing it. A girl takes from the mother and a boy from the father and the money and goods I received from the girl’s family was a token of appreciation for a job well done,” says the reformed circumciser.

Having quit the inherited occupation, she now appreciates that FGM is an outdated practice that adds no value to a modern Rendile woman.

Kongoma says besides talking to the local community on the ills associated with the female cut, she is always on the lookout for anyone doing it and if one is found, she would make a report to government officials immediately.



## Nurse spearheads positive change at her birthplace

**Her resolve to uplift the well being of the Rendile girl child led to a family break up.**

While the unexpected turn of events can be devastating to any married woman, it turned out to be the launching pad for Rose Orguba determination to empower more girls in her community.

Her name rings a bell in every village in Laisamis Constituency, Marsabit County, having formed a strong network in the last nine years to advance her course.

"I separated with my husband in 2009 and I found myself being a single mother. It's something that I had not imagined could ever hit our family," she confesses.

Rose was sent packing after she enrolled their house help at a local school,



**ROSE ORGUBA**  
Nurse

something that her husband of 12 years was totally against. The husband reasoning was that the house girl had been hired to assist the family in household chores and not to benefit by being supported to get educated.

"I had made a decision that I would educate the girl, whether we remained together with my husband or separated. I moved out with our house girl from our three bed-roomed to reside in a manyatta near Merille Township," Rose explains.

In the process she lost all property that they had jointly acquired with her husband. The Husband also took custody of their two children.

By then, she was working as a nurse at a local dispensary and from her earnings, she enrolled the house help in school and later on gave refuge to other girls, victims of teenage pregnancy who had been pushed out of their family homes.

Within a short time, Rose was housing 21 girls with their babies and her sitting room in her modified manyatta became their dwellings. The girls who had dropped out of school due to pregnancy would later go back to the classroom to continue with education.

That marked the birth of a community based organisation - Feiyah Action Network whose objective is to empower the girl child through education, vocational training, life skills and working towards elimination of harmful cultural practices such as FGM and early child marriage.

Currently, the CBO has a network of 50 women spread across Laisamis Constituency. The women volunteer in playing a role of scouts and report to Rose cases of girls being forced to marriage or to FGM.

"Though scientific research has not been conducted, I can tell you without fear of contradiction that cases of female circumcision have reduced since our organization came into being," she says.

Her efforts have also seen several circumcisers throw away the razor blades and engage in other ways of earning a living. Kongoma Nolaso is one of those who quit the practice after 40 years and confesses that the nurse influenced her to change.

In the last two years, Rose has been organizing workshops for school girls during holidays to keep them away from the circumciser's razor blade.

Last year, she brought together 309 girls mainly drawn from primary schools. This year, the five day meeting commences on August 15 at Mercy Primary School and 200 girls, 20 from each village have been invited.

"This time we shall have girls from upper primary, secondary school and university students. The senior girls have not been cut and they will act as role models, telling the young ones that they can withstand the insults normally directed to uncircumcised girls," she says.

Rose says the main challenge she faces in her anti-FGM campaign is the society's attitude towards those who have resisted the cut.

"During disagreements, those girls who have stood firm against undergoing the cut are insulted and those who are fainthearted opt to face the circumciser. It is the self confidence of shrugging off the insults that we want to instill to the girls during the August workshop," explains Rose.

Rose is one of the most powerful Samburu Women Trust women and girls rights champion.



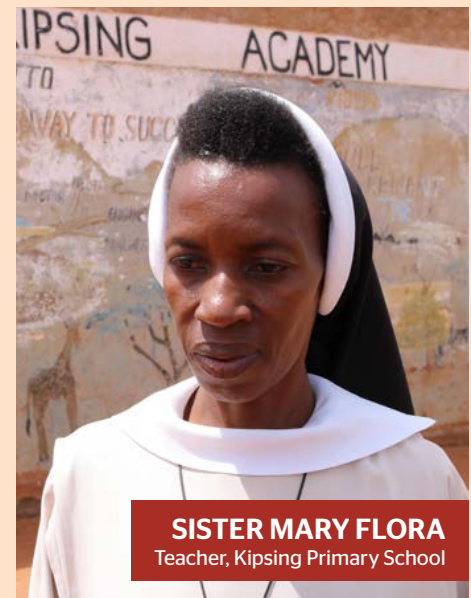
## Sister Mary Flora, the big hearted nun

**Before she landed in Kipsing village in Isiolo County, Sister Mary Flora had only heard and read in the media stories about the plight of girls among the pastoralist community. It was not until she was posted as a teacher in the village that she witnessed firsthand how girls as young as seven years are married off. "It had not struck me that this practice was such prevalence until I started working at Kipsing Primary School in 2017. Previously, I did not take what I read in newspapers seriously, thinking it was an exaggeration of facts," confides Sister Mary Flora.**

As she took over her teaching duties, it dawned on her that all what she had read was a reality and felt the urge to bring a positive change. However, Sister Mary Flora was apprehensive on the best approach to tackle this challenge, having been warned that anyone who dared speak against the common practice was putting his or her life at risk.

"I was told that the morans can easily harm anyone who tries to prevent them from beading or marrying the young girls. There are incidents when the community warriors have raided schools and taken away their girlfriends after issuing stern warning to the teachers," she says.

Not ready to give up in her mission, the Catholic nun started talking and counseling the girls under her care not to associate with members of the



**SISTER MARY FLORA**  
Teacher, Kipsing Primary School

opposite sex. Her new school had reported cases of girls dropping out of school due to pregnancy and others abandoning learning to settle in marriage.

But only a few months into the counseling duties, a timely programme was introduced to the school and to her, it was a God send. Samburu Women Trust (SWT) was in the process of rolling out a mentorship programme to various primary schools in Isiolo County and Kipsing was one among the identified. "I am very happy for the timely intervention by SWT on their mentorship programme.

They have given me the impetus to mold the girls with a renewed confidence of even engaging their parents in dialogue in a bid to stop the early forced marriages," she says.

Sister Mary Flora has now become the point person in the mentorship programme in Kipsing area and the neighbourhood.

Through her efforts, tens of girls have joined school in the last ten months, some joining Early Child Development (ECD) classes at age 11. The campaign to empower the girl child through mentorship has become so dear to the nun that she does it while conducting her religious duties and in the classroom.

The mentorship programme involves training the girls on their rights, confidence building, personal hygiene and most importantly dangers of FGM and relationship with members of the opposite sex.

Mentorship is conducted during school holidays where SWT invites professionals in various fields to sessions with a group of selected girls who in turn spread the word to their colleagues in the manyattas (traditional homes). Barely a year since its inception, girls have been trooping to the school, some of them secretly while clad in their traditional beads which they shed off and request to be issued with uniforms.

One of the present cases that has inspired Sister Mary Flora is where a class eight pupil dropped out of school due to pregnancy but has agreed to come back later in the year to sit for her Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exams.

"Once we discovered that this girl was pregnant, we talked to her and she agreed to come back to sit for the national exam after she delivers. Her parents are also supportive and have agreed to nurse the baby so that their daughter can join vocational training institution to make her self-reliant in future," says the nun.

Sister Mary Flora attributes her success in changing the community's attitude towards education to her religious approach and the timely support she got from SWT. "The mentorship programme has become so popular in the school such that the boys are feeling left out and asking that they be included as well," she concludes.



## Class eight pupil a source of inspiration

**At the young age of 14, Stella Letimalo has become a source of inspiration to her peers at Kipsing Primary School in Isiolo County. Pupils have been looking upon her for guidance and in the past one year, she has been doing it with fineness of a professional counsellor.**

As one of the pillars of the mentorship programme, Stella has been reaching out to girls at school and in her village, inculcating a sense of confidence to the youngsters. The girls she has mentored are now standing up for their rights, even convincing their parents not to subject them to FGM and early marriages, something that has not been witnessed in yesteryears.

"Last year, my parents organised that my elder sister and I undergo the cut. But I stood my grounds and convinced them that I was not ready to undergo the rite since I know the harmful effects of FGM," says Dariji Walani, Stella's school mate who is in class six. She regrets that the reason her sister accepted to be subjected to the cut is that she has never stepped in a classroom and spends time herding goats and hence believes female circumcision is normal and acceptable. "My advice to the girls is that they should not shy away from persuading their fathers not to force them to undergo the cut. In case the father fails to understand, the girls can approach a teacher, a police officer or the area chief," Dariji says.

Traditionally, women in the Samburu community are only supposed to be seen and not heard and are expected to obey instructions from men without questioning. That effort by a 14-year-old pupil is propping girls both in school and in the villages to find a voice is a milestone in the struggle against gender discrimination. "The mentorship programme has equipped me with skills that assist me to conduct sittings with girls in the village as they go to fetch firewood and water and we hold a candid discussion on harmful cultural practices in our community," says Stella Letimalo.

It is through her efforts that schools in Kipsing location have witnessed an increment of girls enrollment in schools and reduction of dropout cases as confirmed by the administration of Kipsing and Lengwenyi primary schools. Besides teaching the girls on ways to escape from FGM and early marriages, Stella spices her counselling lessons on overcoming challenges of adolescent. "Physical and hormonal changes during adolescent leads girls to seek company of boys and they end up getting pregnant and others get Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). I have been telling girls in upper classes that they should learn to control their bodies and wait until they are done with education and gotten employed to associate with men," Adds Stella.

The sense of confidence instilled to the girls have seen them improve in their class performance since they can freely interact with teachers to seek guidance on class work or on any other personal issue likely to affect learning adversely. Matilda Ntinyari and Mercy Letimaya have turned to be Stella's devoted disciples. Having gained a sense of self confidence, the class eight pupils are involved in counseling their peers both in schools and in their villages and their performance in class has also improved. "Whenever, we encounter a difficult situation when talking to other girls, we refer them to Stella and if she cannot solve the problem, our teacher Sister Mary Flora or the headteacher is informed.

Stella who is set to sit for her KCPE in two months says she will continue mentoring her class mates even after joining secondary school. "I have realized that mentorship can bring positive change and especially to girls. Whichever secondary school I will be admitted from here, I will continue inspiring girls and telling them about their rights," Stella boldly concludes her desire.

## A victor of bad traditions and now a role model

At the age of 26, Baraka Lekula has overcome many odds to be what she is today. As she goes about her daily duty of imparting knowledge to pupils at Oldonyiro Primary School, Isiolo County, she is optimistic that a big number of girls will follow her footsteps.

### BARAKA LEKULA

Teacher, Oldonyiro Primary School

Less than a year since she started teaching at the school, Baraka whose name means blessings in Kiswahili language has won the hearts of five girls. Just like their teacher, the girls have vowed to pursue their education and resist parental and societal pressure of getting circumcised and getting into early marriages. "I have had a one on one talk with more than 20 girls. While five of them have wholeheartedly committed themselves not to undergo FGM, the rest still need more persuasion since they are still fearful of their parents," says Baraka.

Talking to the girls on the ills of harmful cultural practices prevalence in her Samburu community has become a passion for Baraka. Hers has been a triumph against societal stigma that has eventually seen her become a role model in her village where she is now discussed on low tones as she heads home from school. "After all my age mates had undergone FGM, the pressure from my immediate family was so intense that my father who had assured me that I would not be cut devised a way to trick my unrelenting

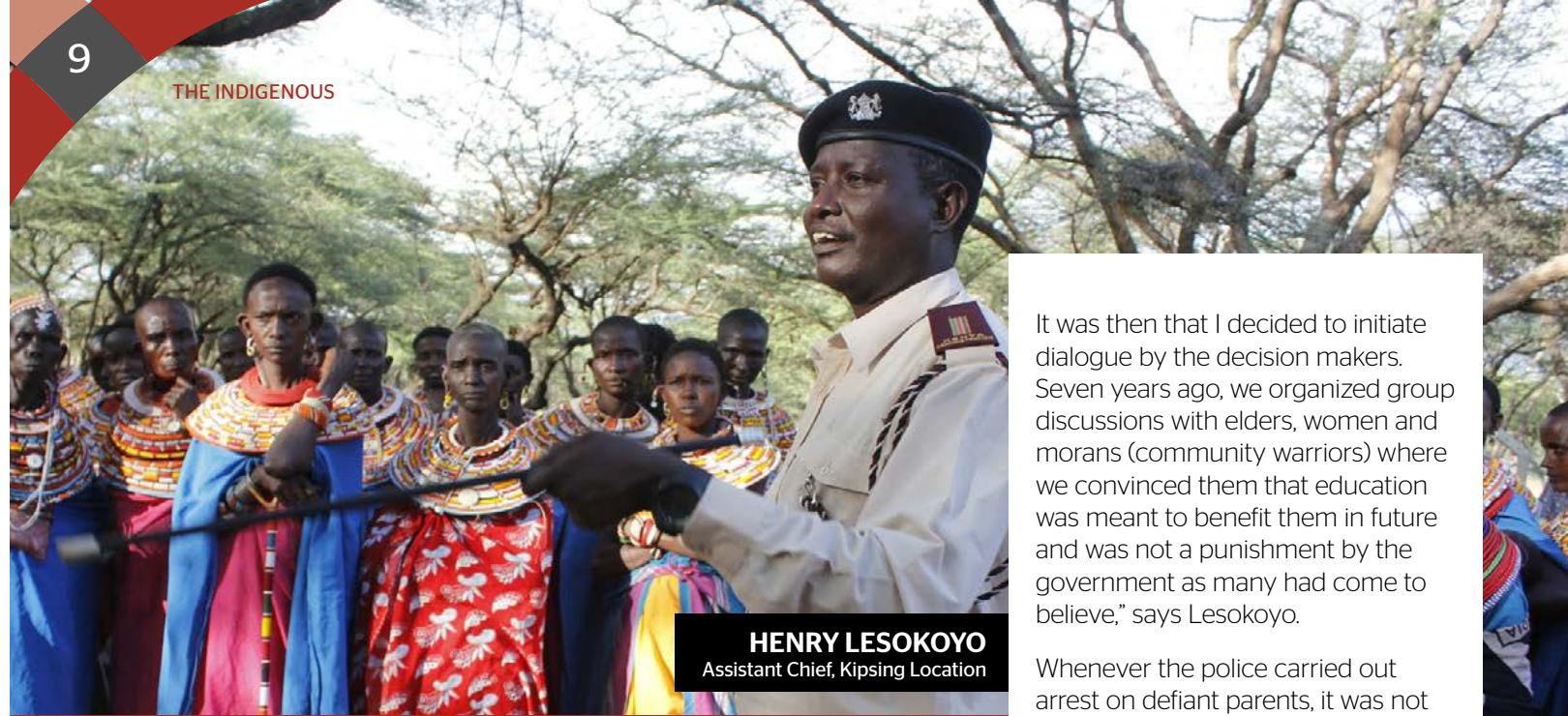
grandmother. A circumciser was called and pretended to have performed the ritual, then music and ceremony was conducted and that was it," recalls the first born in a family of 10, 8 siblings and the 2 parents.

Having passed that critical stage of her life, Baraka kept being focused in her education but still had to do with segregation by her age mates since they suspected she has been spared the cut. Afterwards, her father, the area chief became vocal, maintaining that none of her daughters would undergo this rite of passage valued highly by the community.

After class eight, she proceeded to a girls' boarding school, completing in 2014 and later proceeding to a teachers' college. "My desire is to work at my village for a time so that the community can learn that an uncircumcised girl can make contribution to the community. Many fathers fear that girls who do not undergo FGM cannot be married and hence cannot bring wealth in form of bride price," she says.

While talking to the girls, she has chosen to give her story as a case study. She says an educated and employed daughter can still buy cattle for her father and it is this argument that she has been advancing while telling her pupils not to be cowed by the societal stigma. "My strategy is to convince the girls to study up to high school without undergoing the cut or dropping out to get married. At secondary school, they will be safe since they only interact with parents for a short period and they will have an uninterrupted duration to shape their destiny," says Baraka.

Baraka says she plans to team up with a mother of three who resisted the cut, went to high school and did a church wedding after escaping to the Catholic mission and up to now she is married and have not undergone FGM. "Once I team up with this woman who still lives in OI Ndonyiro village, we shall form a strong team that will create a big impact in our campaign to dissuade the girls from undergoing the cut and dropping out of school to be married out to elderly men," says Baraka.



**HENRY LESOKOYO**  
Assistant Chief, Kipsing Location

## Chief with unique administrative skills

When history is written about the development of education in Kipsing location in Isiolo County, one name of a government administrator will no doubt feature prominently. Assistant chief Henry Lesokoyo is more of a child rights activist than a government officer and takes credit for the huge number of children who have joined school and establishment of several educational institutions.

In a community where a girl child education is least valued, it is then surprising that several schools have higher population of girls than boys.

“As we talk now, there are more girls than boys at Lengurma Primary School. Only a few years ago, parents here believed that girls can only fetch wealth for the family through marriage and taking her to school was considered an affront on societal norms,” says chief Lesokoyo.

But this change of attitude has not come easily. It was through strategizing on how to thaw the resistant openly displayed by the community.

While subjecting girls to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or to early marriage is an offence punishable

by law, arrest and prosecution of suspects has not deterred the practice.

“While effecting the government policy of arresting parents who have not taken their children to school, I realized that the community had developed some resistance and were ready to pay the court fines imposed on offenders,” says the administrator.

Those prosecuted could easily migrate to other areas with the family, making it hard for the authority to follow up if they had complied with court directives to take them to school. “It was out of this realization that I realized that applying the law as spelled out in the statute books would not bear results.

It was then that I decided to initiate dialogue by the decision makers. Seven years ago, we organized group discussions with elders, women and morans (community warriors) where we convinced them that education was meant to benefit them in future and was not a punishment by the government as many had come to believe,” says Lesokoyo.

Whenever the police carried out arrest on defiant parents, it was not to take them to court but to have a dialogue, explaining the importance of education to the community where illiteracy level is still high.

With time, the community’s resistance has thawed and many parents are willing to take their children to school at their own will without persuasion. “Several schools have now been established including Lengurma, currently with a population of 350, pupils, Lengwenyi and Kawarash have about 200 pupils each while the population at the oldest school-Kipsing, run and managed by the Catholic Diocese of Isiolo has now reached 500,” says Chief Lesokoyo.

The administrator says there was time he arrested 35 children and took them to school but now this has changed since they go to school on their own will or are taken by their parents. The parents are happy that some of the primary schools have boarding facilities to take care of the pupils when the pastoralist community migrates during drought in search of water and pasture.

With many children going to school where they are also taught about the dangers of FGM, children rights advocates are optimistic that education will play a pivotal role towards its complete eradication in the near future.



**JOYCE LESOITO**  
Ambassador, SWT

## Miraculous survival at birth fuels a noble resolve

The heartbreaking story of how she survived by a whisker soon after birth has embodied Joyce Lesoito to be a crusader of women and girls rights. She was born after her father had died and her paternal uncles, suspicious that she was sired by someone outside the family, ordered that the infant be killed immediately.

“The uncles brought a concentrated concoction of tobacco snuff and ordered my mother to feed it to me so that I die but my mother stood her grounds and refused to kill her newborn baby,” narrates Joyce at her Loruko village home near Ol Donyiro market in Isiolo County.

It was a story she only came to know many years later as a grown up and says she went into depression for days before gathering strength and resolving to fight against such practices that are demeaning to women and girls.

Now a single mother of one girl aged 16, Joyce has resolved to dedicate her energy and meager income in empowering women and girls about their rights.

“No other woman should be subjected to such a hallowing experience where family members orders widows to perform disgusting acts. Three years ago, I embarked on a campaign to educate women about their rights,” says Joyce.

Using the little money she earns from cleaning Oldonyiro market, Joyce has been moving from home

to home, village to village and to schools with one message - girls and women should have a voice on major decisions affecting their lives and the society should not be allowed dictate what is morally wrong!

A staunch Christian, Joyce has been using the Bible during her teachings, telling the girls that the holy book does not advocate for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and other ills girls and women are subjected to under the name of safeguarding culture.

Joyce is a regular visitor at Ol Donyiro Primary School where at no pay, she has been talking to girls, counselling them by telling them to respect and protect their bodies which are temples of the Lord and resist harmful cultural practices such as beading among others. “My only daughter is in Form Two and has not been cut. Despite pressure from some family members, I have resisted and that is what I would wish all mothers from the Samburu community to follow,” she says.

She has also reached out to three known circumcisers in her locality, urging them to stop the practice. “I talked to one of them in June this year and she confided in me that she is

doing it for lack of an alternative way to earn a livelihood. If I had way, I could support her start a small business,” says Joyce.

She points out that the Sh500 she earns weekly from cleaning the market is only enough to cater for her personal needs and to reach out to the community in her girl rights campaign. “I only have seven goats and nine chickens at my homestead. My daughter is in school courtesy of bursary from the county government. Well wishers and relatives have been financing her shopping at the beginning of every school term,” she confides.

Having reached out to more than 100 girls who have pledged to firmly resist FGM and early marriages, Joyce feels energized to carry on with her crusade, with a positive mind that in future, womenfolk will be able to stand firm and say no to cultural practices that undermine their dignity.

Joyce has now been incorporated into the SWT team as a pastoralist women and girls rights champion due to her self determination and drive to carry out the task entrusted to her.

## My dream is to empower women economically

Lack of economic empowerment among women in the pastoralist community is a major contribution to suppression of their fundamental rights. Majority of the women who never had a chance to go to school are always at the mercy of men and have to follow orders without questioning.



**SALANTE LEBULKASH**  
Chairlady, Memirloshe Women Group

However, one woman in Narasha village on the boundary of Isiolo and Laikipia counties has become the shining light among her peers, mostly to single women.

Salante Lebulkash separated with her husband for what she says was constant harassment that reached to a point that all her goats were taken and given out to co-wives.

"I reached to a point I could not withstand the disrespectful way he was treating me despite being the mother of his children. I moved out and started my own life as a single mother," Salante narrates.

As expected it was struggle at first and had to endure the stigma that stalks women who walk out of marriage, the community is never interested in knowing the reasons behind the separation and the woman carry all the blame," she says.

But nearly 20 years later since she walked out of marriage, she is today a respected woman and is looked upon by her peers to guide them on entrepreneurship.

"As women we have realized we can prosper without necessarily with the support of men. We have formed merry go round groups (chamas) and

at times we get support from Samburu Women Trust to move out to other counties to learn new ideas," explains Salante.

At her home, she is proud owner of a flock of goats that gives her income to educate her three children with the first born now in college.

"My desire is to see all single and even the married women are suffering become economically empowered and have a voice to shape their destiny," she says.

She has been empowering women practically, having brought together 60 women into a chama, taught them entrepreneurship skills where they make a collective savings on their earnings.

Representatives of the group have visited Maasai Mara in Narok County and the Kalasha Festival in Marsabit County where they learnt eco-tourism.

Out of these tours, the group has put up a tourist manyatta which they hope will start generating income in a few months to come.

"Economic empowerment will help us women overcome societal taboos such as standing in front of men and contributing constructive ideas. I have been receiving women visitors from other villages seeking my advice on how I overcame my predicaments as a single mother. I tell them I started from the scratch, hawking items including food stuffs and saving what I could until I bought my own goats," explains Salante.

Her education also targets young girls since she says she is getting old and it will reach a time she will not be able to be active as she is at the moment.

"First I tell the girls to resist from being subjected to FGM and early marriages. Additionally I tell them to go to school and later come back here and utilize the skills learned in uplifting the living standards of women in the rural areas," she says.



## A teacher and a child rights crusader



**LEARAO MBOTELA**  
Headteacher, Ethi Primary School

**In a village where the local community does not consider education a priority, one teacher has defied the odds and taken it upon himself to change this attitude.**

Kirimon location which lies on the border of Laikipia and Samburu counties was in the news last year when *morans* raided a school and beat up the teachers for keeping girls in school.

But for Mr Learao Mbotela, this unfortunate incident could not shake his resolve to see that every child access education as spelt out in the Constitution. He has warded off threats on his life after being warned that he is risking being harmed physically or cursed.

Though he was recently transferred to another school, Mr Mbotela has left an indelible mark at Garma Primary School, the institution he founded and headed for five years. His influence has also been felt in neighbouring schools

where he has been transferring pupils to join upper classes.

“My former school is still young and pupils had to be transferred once they reach class five. Some parents could take advantage of these transfers to marry off their daughter knowing that they were no longer under my care,” says the headteacher.

For over 10 years that he taught two schools in Kirimon location, Mr Mbotela took it upon himself to visit the manyattas, persuading the parents to take their children to school.

“My strategy has always been to enlighten the parents on the importance of educating their children. But for those who failed to heed my advice, I used to seek support of the chief especially where I sensed there were plans to marry off the minors,” he says.

He recalls an incident two years ago where the process of marrying off a seven-year-old girl had began and he got wind of it.

“Now that parents had taken part of the pride prize, I tried talking to the parents and once I realized they were not ready to rescind the decision, I informed by bosses at the local education office and through the intervention, the girl is now in school,” recalls Mr Mbotela.

But he adds that at times the process are not smooth since some chiefs are compromised by the parents and the headteacher ends up being treated as an enemy of his own community.

This mostly happens when a girl is subjected to Female Genital Mutilation, a precursor to marriage. A father of two girls now in secondary school, Mr Mbotela leads by example in the anti FGM campaign and have defied pressure from some family members to have them undergo the cut.

So far the headteacher has personally enrolled in school more than 30 girls who are past school going age through persuasion techniques and bringing other community leaders on board.

“One of the girls I remember was aged 14 when she agreed to joined school for the first time. I approached a local pastor and when she agreed to come to Garma, I enrolled her in class three to minimize the stigma of joining a class of young boys and girls,” he explains.

Since the girl joined the school nearly two years ago, the school has been supporting her with food and the County MP Maison Leshomo has chipped in to support her poor family.

Boys have also not been left out in Mr Mbotela’s campaign. Eight years ago, he established a temporary ECD at Lengusuranga manyatta and engaged an outsider to teach them at a small fee. This strategy has worked where the young ones are introduced to learning, right in their homesteads. Thereafter they proceed to other schools to join class one.



**TERESA LEKURAKI**  
Women Human Rights Activist

## A painful past is her driving force

She was beaded by a moran at the age of 10 and three years later was already a mother. Memories of the painful experience of being forced into sex at an early age still send a chill through Teresa Lekuraki, two decades later. She detests imagining that any other girl can be subjected to such an ordeal.

"I was totally ignorant about sex when this strong moran who was about 25-year-old forced me into bed. He had presented me with special beads that marked the beginning of a non-consensual sexual relationship, something that is culturally accepted by her community, the Rendile," narrates Teresa.

When she gave birth to her first child, the moran married her but little changed as they settled. She says the husband never treated her with respect probably because of her age and at one time neglected his parental duties of providing for the family.

"All what he could do is ask for food and then order me to bed after arriving home from his alcohol drinking sprees. Six year into the marriage and with three children, I decided it was time to walk out an," she recalls.

With three children, the eldest aged five then, she walked for six hours from Londoiro village to her parents' homestead near Merille Township in Marsabit County. That was in 2005.

"At first my mother was shocked and could not understand why I had opted to break up our marriage. But I explained that I was ready to lead a life as a single



mother instead of being hooked to an abusive relationship in the name of preserving dignity," she recalls.

Teresa settled at Merille town with her children where she started hawking items to commuters and motorists on the Isiolo-Marsabit highway. Though difficult at first, she progressed well and put up a shop and now resides in a well furnished house. His first born son is now in Form Three.

"Out of my unpleasant experience, I vowed to lead a campaign to stop exploitation of the Rendile girl child. We have formed a group of women where we gather and share



intelligence from the villages where the rights of the girls are violated,” she says.

At one time, Teresa was doing the campaign alone and many times she endured insults especially from men who accused the single mother of inciting wives to disobey their husbands.

“I would visit chief’s barazas in the village and completely cover my face with a lessa before addressing the meeting. This was to avoid seeing whoever was hurling insults at me,” she recalls.

But over the years and after coming together as women with the same mission, she no longer fears insults or threats. She delivers the message boldly and has teamed up with the chief in the campaign where she is often invited to address village barazas.

Her team has also been working closely with organisations such as Samburu Women Trust and World Vision in rescuing girls and taking them to school.

Through her effort and that of seven other women in her group, several girls have been rescued and taken to school with latest two-victims of early

marriage having been enrolled at a school in Machakos County.

Lekuraki regrets that she never went to school and that has been her driving force to ensure no girl is distracted from study by harmful cultural practices.

She hopes that more paralegal training would be conducted in Laisamis Constituency to empower and net women to the campaign to eradicate the deep-rooted culture of beading, FGM and early forced marriage for girls.



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