ON THE FRONTLINE OF PEACE AND SECURITY
Reflections and contribution of women to peace and security in Kenya

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The strength of woman in forestalling conflict

BY RUTH OMUKHANGO

The name Amina Hassan Ahmed is cherished in Mandera County, where locals equate it to the peace they are enjoying now. This is because Amina has tirelessly worked to ensure peace prevails in a County that has known nothing but perennial conflicts.

Having been born and bred in Mandera, she knows too well what it means to live in a conflict prone region, where women and girls have to endure the negative effects of conflict.

Her journey into peacebuilding was informed by a strong desire to stop the loss of lives and violation of women and girls during conflict.

“I wanted to help bring a stop to this. Pain of lost lives and property, and violations of women and girls was too much to bear,” says Amina. She believed and still does that for lasting peace to be realized, women have to be involved in finding peace. “Unite women to promote peace. Women have learnt that there are no boundaries of clans because there is only one tribe called ‘women’.”

Amina’s journey in search for peace for her community started in 2000. Interestingly, this is the very year the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 that recognised the importance of women in peace processes and structures was adopted.

In that year, she and other women founded the Mandera Women for Peace and Development (MWPD), a community-based organization whose objective was to unite women in Mandera to demand for lasting peace. The outfit is now registered as Horn of Africa Women Empowerment Network-Kenya (HAWENKA) that champions for peace and dialogue beyond Mandera.

When they started the organization, their main interest was to address the persistent inter-clan clashes that had brought the region to its knees especially in the 1990s.

Amina and her colleagues held hundreds of meetings and outreaches to build peace among the warring clans. “Our aim was to address the root causes of conflict in this region-fight over scarce resources and rivalry among the major clans - and plead with the various clans to give peace a chance.”

Locals admit that the peace they are enjoying today is largely attributed to the peace building efforts of women in Mandera.

“I will always be in solidarity with the women in this region. We look at peace as a woman’s...
Amina Hassan Abdi,

We empowered women economically through a revolving fund that gave credit to over 3,000 groups.

Amina Hassan Abdi

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FROM PAGE 4 issue and all women are one. This has helped us reach every corner of this county preaching peace,” says Amina, who coordinated the work of MWPD for many years.

Conversations to include women in restoring peace in the region began in the market places where women traders from different clans would meet to engage in trade. They started talking about how they could help bring lasting peace to their communities.

“In our analysis of the conflicts, we found that as women, we were the most vulnerable in all forms of conflicts in the region. If it is not rape, women were widowed or lost theirs sons during conflict.”

The women started by acknowledging that they too had played a role in the conflict. This was through cooking for the perpetrators, encouraging them to fight other clans, and praising them when they won or castigating them if they lost. They agreed this had to stop.

Instead of singing songs that provoked men to fight other clans, the women started singing constructive songs for peace.

Amina and fellow women also realised that they needed to improve on their strategies to guarantee lasting peace.

Women in the neighbouring Wajir County had done well in fostering peace. Amina and her team turned their attention to them. They visited Wajir to understand how the women in that county contributed to ending perennial conflicts.

“It is after our visitation to Wajir that we came up with tangible strategies on how to advance peace in Mandera. These included holding dialogue meetings, and engaging in door to door sensitisation of communities on importance of peace,” says Amina.

But they ran into resource challenges. They did not have money to run their peace activities. She and her team had to raise resources from their own sources and well-wishers to implement these activities. They also reached out to the elders to allow women to speak during meetings discussing peace issues.

“When they accepted that we could speak at the meetings, it started shaping how men looked at issues of peace,” recalls Amina.

From playing a critical role in community dialogues, Amina and her team trained their eyes on the formation of structures that advanced peace. One of this was the Mandera Mediation Council which is still in existence today. Other important structures that she and other women helped set up include District Peace Committees in 18 Divisions, which have male and female representation.

Amina notes that they also initiated peace clubs programmes in schools to inculcate a culture of peace among children. It is as result of this that Mandera Youth for Peace programme was born.

But as they pursued peace, they also empowered women to enhance their economic and bargaining power. They set up a micro-credit finance facility which gave women grants to start businesses.

“We empowered women economically through a revolving fund that gave credit to over 3,000 groups.”

Amina’s work and contribution to peace has been recognized both in Kenya and beyond.

In 2005, she earned the Head of State’s Commendation (H.S.C.) in recognition of her contribution to peace building in Mandera.

Outside the country, she has been invited to Somalia to assist with trauma healing and social reconciliation in a country that has known nothing but unending conflict.

Even with these many successes, Amina says there are still hurdles that have to be overcome for sustainable peace to be realised in her county.

Issues of political representation where big clans want to dominate the smaller clans remain a major source of conflict that needs to be addressed. So is negotiated democracy that excludes women and other minorities from decision making processes.

“But this can only happen, she adds, if the National and County governments recognise the remarkable role that grassroots women play in peace and security.

“I have been recognised by the international community because of the work I have done in Northern Kenya but my knowledge and experience is yet to be fully tapped in my own country.”
For Judy Jebet Lamet, peace and security matters have been her staple interest for the past three decades. Indeed, Lamet has had an illustrious career in the National Police Service (NPS), rising through the ranks from a cadet Inspector to her current position of an Assistant Inspector General.

Today, she holds one of the highest posts for a woman in NPS, a heartbeat away from the Inspector General, Hillary Nzioki Mutyambai’s office. Her employment as a police officer did not happen by chance. It was a childhood ambition.

“The desire to become a police officer was fueled by my father and role model, the late Major Justin Yatich Ruto, who served in the Kenya Army. I also had enjoyed being a Girl Guide and a Brownie while I was in school, which informed my decision to become a police officer.”

Her career as a law enforcer started in 1990 after she graduated from the Kenya Police College in Kiganjo, Nyeri County. She was then posted to Busia County, where she served for two years before her transfer to Nairobi as Chief Inspector of Police in charge of crime and intelligence operations.

She has also served in many stations across the country. These include Officer in Charge of Station (OCS) at Kabete in Nairobi, Deputy Officer Commanding Police Division in Nairobi Central, staffing officer at Kilimani police station, and later to Central region (formerly Central province) where she served as Superintendent of Police.

Lamet credits her rise to hard work, discipline, determination, and professionalism. Impressed by her work, her bosses not only promoted her, but entrusted her to handle numerous local and international assignments.

Some highlights in her career that came about as result of her performance include working as instructor at the then Criminal Investigations Department (CID) Training College.

But the most outstanding international assignment happened between 2004 and 2005, when she led a contingent of Kenyan police officers in a peace-keeping mission to Liberia to restore peace following civil war.

“I was the first...
A woman contingent commander in charge of 30 officers, both male and female. It was a big honour and responsibility for me. I received three commendation awards for exemplary and dedicated service,” says Lamet.

While in Liberia, she was promoted to the rank of Assistant Commissioner of Police. On her return after one and a half years, Lamet was posted to Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) as the formation criminal investigations officer, where she was in charge of all the airports in the country.

Her tenure at JKIA saw the arrest and capture of the highest number of narcotics suspects and contraband. This performance was recognized by the retired President, Mwai Kibaki, who awarded her with the Order of the Grand Warrior medal for her diligent service.

In 2014, she was promoted to the rank of Assistant Inspector General and served as the commandant DCI Academy before being deployed as the Central Regional Commander. By the time of this interview, she was serving as the Director of Community Policing, Gender, and Child Protection.

In 2015, she was elected as the chairperson of Kenya Association of Women in Policing (KAWP), an association supported by UN Women. KAWP has over 4,000 members and its main objective is to promote a policy of inclusivity in the NPS in the areas of welfare, recruitment, posting, and promotion. A share of challenges

But her career has had a share of challenges. Stereotyping is a big challenge, she says. People phone her office and start by saying: “Hallo, sir!” She has to constantly correct and reassert her authority both in the office and in public.

She is worried that over 55 years after independence and 10 years under the 2010 Constitution, the National Police Service remains male-dominated.

“We are in a male-dominated field where women are considered to be soft and rarely deployed in hardship areas!” laments Lamet.

During her tenure, she has advocated for equal treatment of and equal opportunities for female police officers. Her advocacy efforts have been fruitful as more action is being taken to address female officer’s grievances.

Says Lamet: “We are lobbying to ensure increased gender representation in decision making positions. So far, gender representation has been successful at the management level.”

She feels that the service-board need to be made gender sensitive in line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the Kenya National Action Plan (KNAP) II.

When not conducting police work, she joins her husband in their philanthropic work. At the moment, they are supporting Otí Primary School, in Kajiado County, with sanitary towels, desks, and windows.

A share of challenges

Equally heartwarming is that decision makers and the public now appreciate the role of law enforcers, particularly female officers, in peace and security issues. Lamet proposes that out of every three senior positions, one should be a woman.

“This woman’s voice must not only be heard, but be taken seriously in line with the KNAP II, which must be implemented to the letter,” says Lamet.
For the past nine years, Salome Ndiwa Matakwei has been the face of peace in Mt. Elgon, Bungoma County, a region that experienced prolonged conflict, resulting in the loss of lives and destruction of property.

Renowned for spearheading a series of peace initiatives in the area, Matakwei has emerged as one of the women who have shown that when women take centre stage in peace building, the outcomes are outstanding.

Experts indicate that women play active roles in causing and escalating conflict as they are known to be spies, conceal important information, carry and hide arms, cook for the fighters, sing heroic/encouragement songs and plan execution of conflicts.

That is why, women like Matakwei, are best placed to advance peace and provide intelligence information that is critical in stalling conflict in the first place.

Matakwei’s story and role in conflict and peace matters goes back to 2006 when her husband, Wycliff Matakwei, led a group that fought for land rights in the region.

The group dubbed, the Sabaot Land Defense Force (SLDF), was accused of killing and maiming hundreds of people, forcing many of them out of their land and livelihoods. He was later killed by the Kenya Army which was deployed to keep peace in the region.

The conflict only came to an end when the Mabanga Peace Accord was signed between the warring Bukusu, Teso, and Sabaot communities.

But his widow refused to carry the burden of her late husband and the tag of conflict to follow her. She has since established Matakwei Peace Centre, in Mount Elgon, which not only serves as a centre of excellence for women and girls but also helps to promote peace in the Mt. Elgon region and beyond.

In addition to the centre, she also started a network of widows in Cheptais with the support from ACORD and Action Aid. According to Matakwei, the network comprises of widows whose husbands were killed during the conflict, but are now on the forefront of preaching peace and reconciliation among community members.

“We usually sensitize women to be vigilant of what is happening in their surroundings and the community at large,” she explains, adding that her network has been providing early warnings of any signs of conflict to the relevant authorities.

In addition, the network runs a series of educative and awareness creating outreaches in the community on the implications of conflict and value of peace. “During some of these sessions, we educate the women on how to monitor how family finances are being used by their husbands to avoid scenarios where it is channelled to funding conflict,” she says.

Public forums and schools are some of the avenues her network uses to preach peace. In this regard, Matakwei says that the group has embarked on an initiative that seeks to encourage the youth to go back to school instead of following up on land cases such as inheritance.

In her efforts to promote peace, she has reached out to other communities to seek forgiveness for all the wrongs committed by her late husband.

But her journey to realize peace in Mt. Elgon still faces challenges. She notes that most of the widows are yet to come to terms with the painful deaths of their husbands killed either by the military officers or the SLDF. This makes it difficult for them to be at peace with the past before they can preach peace.

But as widows, she says, they have resolved to remain united in a bid to promote peace and make sure conflict does not recur in the community.

Another platform that they use to advance the peace agenda is the merry-go-rounds that are known to pull women together.

As a team leader, Matakwei is a symbol of resilience and has been able to exploit every opportunity to make peace. She considers herself a change maker, an attitude that has motivated her to stand out to enhance peace in the community.

Matakwei’s story is a testimony that the spirit of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 adopted in 2000 can be realized if women at the grassroots are put at the centre of peace initiatives and processes.
For the past 16 years, Chief Irene Ombima Okwaro has proved that women make a great difference if given an opportunity to serve in leadership positions. She has shown how to be an effective administrator who carries her peace and security duties diligently.

One of the few women in security who are making a difference, Okwaro says her interest of becoming a chief grew out of her admiration of her local chief. While in school, she confided in him her ambition to serve as a chief after completing school. The Chief laughed her off. He dismissed her, saying the powerful office was a preserve for men. Okwaro was not deterred but worked hard to prove him wrong.

A couple of years later, the assistant chief retired and the post was advertised. This was a perfect opportunity for Okwaro to go for what she had admired for many years.

“I was among the 15 people, and the only woman, who applied for the job. After lengthy interviews, I emerged the winner and was offered the job of Assistant Chief of Emmaloba sub-location in Vihiga sub-county,” recalls Chief Okwaro with pride.

The work was challenging, she admits, saying she was thrown in the deep end, literally, with no training and armed with only a rubber stamp and an office to carry out her duties in the expansive area. But her work impressed the locals who started witnessing improving security situation in the community.

After four years into the job, another opportunity arose. Her boss, the Chief of South Bunyore, retired creating a vacancy. Again, she was among the six applicants—two women and four men—who responded to the advertisement to replace him.

After going through the interviews, she emerged a winner again. She was elevated to the position of Chief of South Bunyore location, Vihiga County. The location would later be split into two, leaving her in Maseno location with an office at Luanda, where she has served for the past 12 years.

Her tenure as a Chief has been celebrated by the locals as one that has brought sanity, discipline, and enhanced security in their neighbourhood. One of the areas where she recorded remarkable success was reduction in the number of illicit brewers.

Locals’ estimate the number of such brewers to have gone down by about 80 per cent during her tenure. This drop has also contributed to the reduced insecurity and few cases of gender based violence that were associated with heavy alcohol consumption.

Interestingly, she...
FROM PAGE 9 did not use force to record this impressive success. Okwaro says she did it through dialogue by asking the brewers to abandon the business and seek alternative sources of livelihoods.

She worked with their family members, the community, village elders, Community Policing Committees, Nyumba Kumi officials among others to talk to the brewers and in tackling the problem.

In addition to reducing illegal alcohol, Okwaro has recorded impressive results in handling domestic violence, land disputes, cattle theft and other petty crimes in her area of jurisdiction, many of them through dialogue. Where dialogue does not work, she deals with the suspects according to the law.

Says Chief Okwaro: “Most Luhya men fear the law, so they abandoned their bad ways and comply.”

In education, she is known for no-nonsense approach to learning. She has used her office in collaboration with the elders, the community, and the local administration to ensure that all children benefit from free primary education. It is therefore not a surprise that she has achieved over 70 per cent retention in schools under her jurisdiction.

Okwaro is also credited as being the first Chief to bring to an end “Disco Matanga”, night discos conducted in funerals and which have been associated with increased insecurity, teenage pregnancies, defilement, and high drop-out rates in many parts of the country.

Okwaro attributes 50 per cent of her success in her work to her good working relations with the community, CPC, Nyumba Kumi and the local police officers.

But all has not been a bed of roses for the chief. Even after serving for 16 years as an administration officer, some men find it difficult to recognize her and the authority she wields.

They instead tell her she cannot control them because “she is our wife (in law) whom we married from another community, Ebusakani village in Luanda!”

There are also those in the community who are yet to reconcile with the fact that their chief is a woman. They believe “it is a man’s job” and that Okwaro is serving in the wrong position.

A case in point was when she and members of the CPC had to wait for six hours outside the house of a suspected murderer for reinforcement from the armed police to arrive before the suspect was arrested.

Some of the men who were watching the unfolding events jeered, mocking her to prove her worth by confronting and arresting the murder suspect “mundu khumundu (man to man!)”

The other challenge is her personal security especially when she has to, in the middle of the night, attend to urgent matters in the community. Police officers who are supposed to provide security to her are many kilometres away. She has to do it alone without any security.

Refusal by witnesses in criminal cases to appear in court for fear of being victimized or attacked by the perpetrators, their accomplices, or their family members continue to make her efforts of fight crime very difficult.

Nevertheless, her journey in the security sector has taught her useful lessons. She has learnt that winning the trust of the community and security structures at the local level is key to making the work of administration officers, especially women, easy and successful. She has also learnt that support of women is critical to peace and security in the community.

In this regard, Chief Okwaro has been a leading advocate of having more women in peace and security committees. Thanks to the two third gender rule in the Constitution, there are more women in her community in peace and security committees and in leadership positions in these structures and others like schools and village committees.

“I am very happy that more women have been encouraged to take up leadership positions in the local administration like me. In Luanda Sub-County, we are now 15 women, four are chiefs while 11 are sub chiefs.”

Okwaro is appealing to women to come out and take up more peace and security jobs saying there is no need to fear. She is also asking public and private organizations to elevate women to leadership positions if the agenda of peace and security is to be taken to the next level.

Her future looks bright. In 2020, she won an award for her peace and security work in Vihiga County.

“I am happy that my efforts in peace and security have been recognized by the Deputy County Commissioner (DCC) and look forward to next year’s Mashuja Day for the actual presentation. Meanwhile, I will continue to “chapa kazi (work very hard) and prove women make a difference in leadership.”
Zeinab Ido is a woman on a mission. She has defied odds in a region that does not recognize women as players in conflict and security matters to earn the respect of her community as a major player in dispute resolution.

Through her efforts, Ido has managed to mobilize women to create a group known as Peace and Development. This group has seen the creation of women driven peace initiatives in Balambala, Madogashe, Lagdera, Dadaab Fafi, Ijara and Holugho districts that are currently engaged in cross border peace negotiations.

Since the inception of this group, women have been able to encourage their husbands and sons to surrender illegal fire arms that were used to fan conflict in Garissa and neighbouring counties.

“Women had to use all manner of strategies at their disposal including boycotting sex, cooking and other household activities until their frustrated husbands yielded to pressure and surrendered illegal fire arms that were used to fan conflict in Garissa and neighbouring counties.”

BY FAITH MUIRURI

Zeinab Ido, chairlady for Garissa women for peace and Development

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Ido is proud that her group has been able to expand its peace activities in Garissa County and in the neighboring Somalia.

Her efforts and that of her group have been recognized and supported by elders, religious leaders, government agencies and Non-governmental organizations.

Several donors, including PACT-Kenya and UNDP, have funded Ido’s work including cross border activities that brought together women peace builders from Garissa county and women from Dobley in Somalia.

“Women peace builders from both countries are only separated by the thin and dusty border line; but they share pain brought about by small arms and light weapons” said Ido. They remain key in enhancing cross border peace initiatives.

She cites an incident where a women peace group in Dobley was able to put up a maternity facility that serves women in Kenya and Somalia.

She also singles out the construction of a school and water source at Dek Elema village that is currently shared by women in Kenya and Somalia, thereby enhancing mutual cross border peace activities.

“Women had to use all manner of strategies at their disposal including boycottting sex, cooking and other household activities until their frustrated husbands yielded to pressure and surrendered illegal firearms used in highway robbery, inter-clan clashes and cattle rustling,”

Zeinab Ido

“Women peace volunteers are very aggressive to see peace prevails because they are the biggest beneficiary of a peaceful society,” said the chairlady.

This involvement of women in peace and security is key since women can advance both conflict and peace if they are sucked into clan rivalries or other competitive processes.

“Women contribute a lot to violence during electioneering period by crafting poems, songs and traditional dances that are very provocative and are likely to trigger inter clan violence. This is because voting in the region is based on clan allegiance,” says Ido.

Ido and her group have decided to educate the women that their voting patterns should be inspired by the push to reduce poverty, rights advocacy, better healthcare and peace and not ethnicity and conflict.

She says that by using the women peace groups, they are able to reach all women voters so that politicians do not misuse them.

However, the chairlady acknowledged existing challenges that hinder their peace initiatives within the county. The vastness of the county remains a challenge since they do not have a vehicle for their outreach programs.

She also noted that negative attitudes by men were making their work difficult. Some men feel that the women were getting empowered and overstepping their traditional roles of being housewives.

However, this has not weakened their resolve. The community likes their work because women peace builders pursue healing and forgiveness instead of revenge to bring harmony among warring communities.

Ido is proud that some of the women they mentored through their peace efforts have contributed massively to peace building within their jurisdiction and their neighborhoods.
When Rachel Baraza conceived the idea of the talking tents, she never thought the initiative would result in peace dividends that are being witnessed today.

Established at the height of the 2007/2008 Post Election Violence to respond to the suffering of many women and girls, the tents have become a major source of solace and comfort to the survivors of the sexual violence.

The tents provided a unique social platform where survivors of violence could meet and interact with each other.

Inside the tents, scores of people affected by the violence would come together and share their stories with other survivors. “This helped them to know they were not alone,” says Baraza.

The talking tents became a household name and attracted women who were hard hit by the violence. “The women recounted harrowing ordeals both at the Jamhuri showground and in their homes where they had been ejected,” recalls Baraza.

According to her, majority of the women were raped because their men fled leaving the women and children behind and as a weapon of war against the
Moved by their plight, Baraza decided to do something. She reached out to the church and together they approached the provincial administration, which gave them a go ahead to establish tents for survivors outside the District Commissioner’s office.

The objective of the Talking tents was to build peace and promote ethnic diversity in Kibera where inter-ethnic fighting left dozens of people dead and scores of others injured. Tens of women and girls who were sexually violated needed a safe space to speak about their ordeal. The Talking tents became that place.

Baraza says the survivors would meet every week, share their experiences and feel a sense of healing. Men from the Nubian community who were also suffered as result of violence begun coming out as well.

“The Talking tents became therapeutic and people were able to forgive each other and heal as they realized that other people really cared.”

In additional to providing space, the tents enabled Baraza and other actors from the civil society to document the stories and the needs of women and girls. As result of this, many women benefitted from psycho social support and were compensated by the government to rebuild their lives.

Baraza’s talking tents are a powerful testimony of the power of women in peace building and reconstruction. It also confirms the call by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 that women have to be at the centre of conflict management and peace building.

To date, the talking tents have become a household name. They continue to enrich Baraza’s role in building intercultural understanding in the sprawling Kibera slums.

“The Talking tents became therapeutic and people were able to forgive each other and heal as they realized that other people really cared.”

Rachel Baraza

As result of the conversation in the tents, men and women from warring communities began and continue to work together to create a more peaceful and secure society.

So rewarding is the initiative that it has received support from other well-wishers. “The Change Agents Peace Initiative (CAPI) has supported us to venture into income generating activities. Members bring old clothes which the group uses to make beddings for sale,” says Baraza.

Part of the money goes towards supporting Network activities and individual members. This includes training workers and community members on violence against women and girls. So far, the group has 80 of its members trained on these issues.

Baraza’s work has seen her being nominated by CAPI to attend a Peace forum in Burundi to share how Kenyan women were able to overcome the violence that brought the country to its knees.

Through her peace work, Baraza has also been nominated to serve in The National Authority for Campaign against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA).

In recent years, Baraza has been active in hosting meetings where women have intimated being raped by their own husbands, or beaten at night. Yet they have no one to run to.

“If they report to the chief, the man is released the next day but I have been able to link them with support groups and organizations that would help them seek justice,” she adds.

Another source of conflict that Baraza is addressing is the rift between landlords and tenants and struggle over limited resources. She has trained the community members, especially women, on civil rights, crime, and other sources of conflict such as water and sanitation.

“Women are effective in policing because they know how to identity most of the criminals within the community. They work well with the police by providing them with vital information.”
The years 2007-2008 will remain etched in the mind of Margaret Ochieng, who after voting in the general election of 2007, knew life would go back to normal. But it never happened. The post-election violence that ensued saw her ejected from her home in Nakuru.

She was forced to seek refuge at the Afraha Stadium with scores of other Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) during the two months of widespread violence where slightly over 1,200 Kenyans died and close to a half million displaced from their homes.

Even though it is twelve years since the violence happened, Ochieng says the horror that ravaged Rift Valley remains fresh in her mind.

“The overwhelmingly negative psychological, emotional, physical and economic impact on all Kenyans and more specifically on women, has not been forgotten and neither has it been addressed,” she says.

But this violence turned her into something else: A peace champion. She says her peace work was inspired by the plight of women and children languishing in the camps. “I decided to join the Centre for Conflict Resolution as a volunteer to preach messages of peace.

Her work at the Centre jolted her into public limelight. She became a voice of reason in the camps calling for sanity and peace to prevail;
and appealing to warring communities to embrace dialogue at all times.

On the surface, violence appeared ethnically motivated but reports by the Kriegler Commission and human rights groups accused senior politicians and officials of organizing and harping on local grievances to fuel violence for their personal political gains.

Ochieng says that the violence was also precipitated by decades of political manipulation, ethnic tensions, and impunity intertwined with longstanding grievances over land, corruption, inequality and other issues.

For over 13 years, she has traversed the Rift Valley preaching peace and harmony to various communities. She says when there is conflict, those who suffer most are women and girls. To her, absence of conflict is equal to safety of women and girls.

This outlook to life has continuously inspired her to push for peace and prevent conflict before it happens.

And as the world celebrates 20 years since the adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, Ochieng is one of those women who deserves to be recognized.

Her relentless search for peace has contributed to the many years of tranquility in a community that engaged in regular conflicts. She is currently involved in peace building efforts to unite ethnic and community groups, promote rights of women, social justice and cross-cultural understanding and dialogue.

A representative of the Caucus for Women Leadership in Nakuru County, Ochieng has not only been sensitizing the youth on conflict prevention but also pushing for their inclusion in peace processes.

She has also been conducting door-to-door campaigns to create awareness on the need to protect women and children from sexual and gender-based violence, and importantly, to respond to the needs of women.

“We should be proactive enough to engage in information sharing and conflict resolution to ensure that dialogue finds its rightful place in the approaches that communities pursue to resolve matters,” she adds.

A gender activist, Ochieng strongly feels that things that fan conflict and put women and girls at risk of violations in Nakuru county are unresolved historical injustices. The warring communities have continued to grapple with the question of land injustices and inequitable distribution of resources.

“At the moment, devolution presents a major challenge with dominant communities apportioning themselves a significant number of positions in the Assembly and Executive arms of the County government, leaving out minority tribes,” she notes.

She observes that this is against Article 56 of the Constitution which states that “the state shall put in place affirmative action programmes designed to ensure that minorities and marginalized groups participate and are adequately represented in governance and other spheres in life”.

Failure to implement this article to its fullest, notes Ochieng, is also to blame for the exclusion of women in decision making processes including matters related to peace and security.

She is also worried that the National government has not been very keen on peace initiatives at the grassroots level, but has instead concentrated on conflict management. It has not done well in pursuing approaches that ensure people live harmoniously.

“People have not integrated well,” a worried Ochieng notes. This might blow out into something bad if not nipped in the bud now. She stresses that perpetrators of many crimes including those who violated women and girls have not been brought to account; 13 years since the conflict happened.

“The overwhelmingly negative psychological, emotional, physical and economic impact on all Kenyans and more specifically on women, has not been forgotten and neither has it been addressed,”

Margaret Ochieng
Cheptai, a trailblazer in peace building

BY ODHIAMBO ORLALE

For more than two decades, the name of Rosemary Cheptai has been synonymous with peace and security matters in Mt Elgon, Bungoma County.

She has spent her life in the trenches, literally, promoting peace in a region that has witnessed perennial tribal, land, and political clashes.

It all started in 1989 when at the height of the clamour for multi-party politics, she and her family found themselves in refugee camps with neighbours from the Sabaot, Bukusu and Teso communities.

“It was at that time when officials from National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK) identified me as a peace builder and took me through a series of training on peace building,” she recalls.

At that time, notes Cheptai, there were no women peace trainees because of their fear and intimidation by their husbands and neighbours.

In 1989, she gathered courage and joined one of the peace committees. By then, it was uncommon to see any woman address a crowd, especially of men.

She had to use her local church, Reformed Church of Kenya as a platform to reach both men and women with peace-building messages.

Cheptai’s passion and efforts towards peace and secure communities started bearing fruits. Together with her colleagues, they witnessed peace prevail among the communities.

It was during this time of success that her efforts were recognised by a regional Non-Governmental Organisation, Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL), who appointed her the Mt Elgon Region coordinator to furnish them with regular situational reports.

In 2005, her peace skills were called upon to help calm conflict between the Sabaots and the Pokots and Bukusus over the prime land.

At that time, some of the Sabaots, mostly the youth, who were actively involved in these clashes, formed a rebel group, Sabaot Defence Land Force (SDLF). It engaged in acts that left misery in the community.

When the defied government order to surrender, the military was send to the region to restore law and order. This left more pain and sorrow.

Cases of rape, defilement, assault, destruction and looting of property, rise in ethnic hostility, and spouses separating, were reported.
Teenage pregnancies and school dropout were normal as residents fled to neighbouring counties and the country for safety.

Cheptai and other peace builders were in the midst of this working hard to calm the situation. They felt the only way to put a stop to this was for peace to prevail.

Says Cheptai: “During the 2005 Mt Elgon clashes, I went to work with the Bungoma Peace Committee. I was among three women in the committee of 15 who focused on reconciliation efforts.”

The committee worked closely with the public and area chiefs to try to get the SLDF to surrender. It was not easy. The environment was volatile and risky. Hate speech was the order of the day.

Looking back, Cheptai says their biggest achievement as peace monitors for the more than 20 years has not been without challenges. Sometimes the warring parties such as the SLDF militia threatened to deal violently with her and others if they exposed them to the authorities.

“The other challenge was the terrain. It was difficult to reach some remote parts of Mt Elgon because of the harsh terrain and poor telecommunications network. In some instances, I had to dip into my pocket to save women and children,” recalls Cheptai.

To reduce the pressure on the peace builders and the communities, her RWPL and others organised many empowerment forums for the residents focusing on the importance of promoting and maintaining peace among themselves and with their neighbours.

**Useful lessons**

Cheptai says many years in peace building has taught her useful lessons that are critical to success and sustainability of peace initiatives. One this is the involvement of women in processes that are actively seeking peace.

“The Council of Elders need to include women among their membership to help promote issues of peace and security. We also need to promote peace initiatives from the villages upwards by forming committees that are gender sensitive,” she notes.

Another lesson she has learnt is that failure to involve politicians -who most of the time promote hate speech – in peace committees, stagnates efforts of resolving issues peacefully.

Her biggest worry for now is that while women have shown to be a powerful force in bringing about peace, their numbers in peace and security structures and processes remain low.

“We need the national and county governments to implement UN Resolution 1325 to the letter. Women are still left out in the peace committees, Nyumba Kumi Initiative and Community Policing Committees among others”, laments Cheptai.

To her, for sustainable peace to happen in her community, there is need to build peace centres in the villages to promote peaceful and secure communities.

She also appeals to women of her generation to mentor and pass the mantle of peace building to young generation.

“We need to get more women involved in the peace building. Some of us are old and need to hand over the baton.”
The enduring journey of a peacemaker

BY JOYCE CHIMBI

Teresa Lokichu’s resume on community work reads like a book. It was therefore no surprise that she was among the first cohort of women leaders nominated as a Member of the West Pokot County assembly in 2013.

Her passion to better her community spans from girl child education, women empowerment, ending all harmful traditions and peacekeeping as conflict is not a new phenomenon in her pastoral community.

When the United Nations’ General Assembly declared September 21st as the International Day of Peace observed every year, it was a milestone built out of the great efforts of grassroots women like Lokichu who is popularly known as Mama Teresa.

She is among the very few women participating in meaningful peace keeping efforts. As it is, research by the Council on Foreign Relations shows that peace processes continue to exclude women, and that women like Teresa must fight for inclusion.

“As a grass root woman, I am facing double discrimination. Formal processes may have biases against women but even more so against a woman from the village like me. I am viewed as a flower girl invited to add numbers but not to contribute,” she laments.

“There are few women participating in peace efforts because unless we knock down barriers standing in the way, no one will extend a hand of invitation. I send myself to meetings and sometimes humiliate myself just to be heard,” she says.

Mama Teresa recounts an incidence where a senior government minister visited her community. She got wind of this meeting and made haste to attend.

“It was a peace meeting and many local influential people were in attendance to give their views. I raised my hand to contribute and was ignored time and time again. I stood up and refused to sit until I was given a chance to speak. This senior minister declared that no one will speak until I had made my contribution. How many women can do this?” she asks.

No effort is too small

Mama Teresa has devoted herself to the betterment of her community through the belief that no effort is too small.

“I started peacebuilding efforts through various women groups, and it has become an extraordinary movement where we are now engaging the council elders. As a former MCA, I have political capital now, so I am also able to engage local leaders who listen to me and respect my views,” she says.

Mama Teresa has gone a step further and pioneered a peace circle among the Pokot and the neighboring communities in as far
Nonetheless, Mama Teresa is unrelenting. “Very early on, I began taking a stand against this conflict because I knew there would be no winners, just causalities. Because of violence, our region was already extremely isolated and marginalized, cut off from the rest of the country,” she observes.

She decries the many pockets of conflict in West Pokot. As a result of the frequent conflict, there have been areas that could not be reached with peace campaigns. These areas include Kacheliba, Konyao, Kodich and Alale. Mama Teresa is defying odds but penetrating these areas and preaching peace.

“The position of women in the pastoral community is very low and so is our influence. But I have managed to penetrate spaces where only a man can speak, these spaces include the council of elders and other community elders. I am now able to invite a few respected women to dialogue with our male leaders over the safety and security of our women and girls,” she says.

This did not happen overnight, it was many years of being ignored and undermined but her patience paid. Mama Teresa has also learnt many lessons which include the need for women champions to build networks across the border.

“Cross border conflict spills over from the pastoral communities in Uganda, particularly the Pokot living in Uganda and the Karamoja. Our efforts must cross the border for them to be sustainable,” she observes.

To enhance cross border peace keeping efforts through grassroots efforts, Mama Teresa speaks of the need to mobilize resources to enable targeted women to move around freely or to communicate with each other and to share ideas.

“Peace work is supported by volunteer efforts. But volunteerism has its limitations. There are places I cannot reach by just walking, there are ideas we cannot share because we are not able to meet or talk often on the phone,” she states.

She says illiteracy, the nomadic way of life and the harsh terrain have complicated her peace efforts.

“I use my own resources to transverse West Pokot because well-wishers and other NGOs are not as active as they were before. Sometimes I cover many kilometers only to find an entire village has migrated,” she says.

“As a woman, I need the support of youths so that they can accompany to the interior. I need to provide them with an incentive. This too costs money. When accompanied by youths, I am able to address other youths. As a woman, I need to constantly work hand in hand with men or else I will not be given an opportunity to address anyone,” she says.

Despite these challenges, she soldiers on. Over the years, Mama Teresa has continued to grow increasingly concerned over the plight of women and girls in the region.

She says that when cattle rusting is rife and conflict over resources rages on, the rights of women and girls become secondary. To avert such a scenario, Mama Teresa is proactive in creating as many peace alliances as possible as this will ensure that peace is preached in all corners of West Pokot County.

As her peace champion profile continued to grow, Mama Teresa learnt the great importance of working with like-minded stakeholders be they the church leaders, council of elders, government agencies and other vibrant grassroots peace movements to advance peace in her work.
Footprints of a peace maker

BY FAITH MUIRURI

Her fierce determination to bring peace in Isiolo County is what earned her the position of chair within the Borana Council Elders, women wing.

Meet Mumina Konso who for over 20 years has been advocating for peace in her community. Her passion to find long lasting peace in the County that was reeling from inter-clan and politically instigated conflicts made her, in 1998, resign as an assistant education officer to promote peace.

This passion arose from the concern of the suffering of women and girls as result of conflict in her backyard. She had realized that majority of those internally displaced persons, sexually molested, or heading families as single parents, were women.

Today Konso has teamed up with other women in the county to address resource-based and boundary disputes. “I have spearheaded campaigns to sensitize the community on conflict prevention, management and resolution. I am also educating the public on the proliferation and dangers of illicit arms and advocated for voluntary surrender of the same,” she explains.

Konso is currently engaged in a series of consultative meetings to build consensus on issues that need to be reviewed in the much celebrated Modogashe Declaration.

The Modogashe Declaration was brokered by community leaders and government representatives from the Eastern and North Eastern provinces in 2001 at Modogashe, Isiolo District, following increased cases of banditry and
The Modogashe peace model was born out of the necessity to address vicious cycle of conflict in the arid parts of Northern Kenya. It has been hailed as one of the most exemplary community peace initiative by actors from across the Eastern Africa region.

The declaration outlawed gun culture; specified compensation for lives lost as a result of inter-communal conflict and took measures to make cattle rustling expensive.

The declaration identified key conflict issues which were spelt out as cattle rustling, highway banditry, unauthorized grazing and proliferation of small arms.

However, Konso says that with the changing conflict dynamics and emerging issues, stakeholders are working out modalities to review the declaration and explore possibilities of making it a binding peace pact in most of the conflict prone pastoralists regions in Kenya.

“The issue of compensation remains critical. If a woman is killed during an attack, the parties agreed to pay a fine of KSh50,000 while if a man is killed in similar circumstances, it attracts KSh100,000 in compensation. This is something I and others are working on to correct,” she says.

She points out that women now want their compensation revised upwards as they are not lesser beings.

Konso notes that other communities feel that the declaration only favours certain people as they were not involved in its formulation and thus the need to integrate and harmonise all cultures and bring proposals that are acceptable to all.

“At the moment, we are engaged in the formation, reconstitution and strengthening of Women Peace Forums through peace caravans in a bid to revive and consolidate the gains of women for peace movement of the 1990s,”

Mumina Konso

“In the Isiolo triangle, covering parts of Samburu East, Laisamis and Isiolo North, the enforcement of the declaration has been wanting.

From the onset, the Samburu community expressed their reservation to abide by the clause to compensate women which affected the overall implementation of the accord,” Konso notes.

However, she says that the declaration has helped to register notable success in reducing the levels of conflict.

“At the moment, we are engaged in the formation, reconstitution and strengthening of Women Peace Forums through peace caravans in a bid to revive and consolidate the gains of women for peace movement of the 1990s,” she explains.

The women in her County plan to incorporate perpetrators of conflict in their peace work to help find lasting solution to wars.

Among the challenges that she has faced in her peace work is the exclusion of women in the peace process.

“Despite playing a crucial role in the management, prevention and resolution of clan conflicts in Wajir in early 1990s, women have continued to be excluded in key decision-making processes,” she laments.

She blames the highly patriarchal society and gender norms that consign women to being house-wives is to blame for this.

“Failure to involve women in the peace process is retrogressive and undermines efforts in peace building.

Majority of these women have been accused of fuelling clashes and are likely to fan conflict if they do not take part in peace building,” she warns.

Konso expresses the need to engage women in peace committees at all levels from the grassroots to the national stage in order to promote reconciliation and peaceful coexistence across the county.
Why I want Mathare residents to say no to blood money

BY JOYCE CHIMBI

In December 2007 and early 2008, Julia Njoki, a resident of Mathare Slums, witnessed something she had never seen before. A disputed presidential election turned the life she knew upside down. She saw neighbours turn against each, goons walking around the slum wielding machetes. Many people chose to flee as the slum had become too violent, but Julia decided to stay.

“I have lived in Mathare for many years, and I do a lot of community work around health and gender-based violence. I could not leave now that it was burning, instead, I started speaking to influential young men to support my cause which I dubbed ‘Tia Rwabe Zi’ peace movement,” she explains.

‘Tia Rwabe Zi’ is a sheng phrase that means ‘say no to Ksh200’. The movement is Njoki’s brainchild born out of a sad realization it took a meagre Ksh200 to pay young men to cause violence in the slums.

“It was a risky step that to take, facing the men and pleading with them to choose peace. There was a viral picture of me in the Daily Nation newspaper lying on the ground wailing, I was crying for this country, for Mathare, for my people,” she says.

Blood everywhere

As the chaos went on and tension high, Njoki ventured into the slums preaching peace, though the country seemed to have reached a point of no return.

“There was blood everywhere, on the ground, in the air, in people’s eyes and on their tongues. I did not know where to start. I decided to talk to my neighbours first,” Njoki recounts.

After going house to house urging people to maintain peace, the movement gained traction, she approached more friendly youths and, they put their heads together on how to spread the message.

“It took months before calm restored in Mathare,” she states.

The aftermath of this post-election violence was a thousand people losing their lives, over 3,000 injured and
hundreds of thousands displaced.

Unemployment and poverty
To date, politicians continue to bribe youths in the slums with as little as Ksh50 to threaten, maim or even kill those with opposing political positions.

She says that with the high rate of unemployment in the slums, it is hard to have a peaceful and secure informal settlement.

“Poverty has left millions of voters in the slums at the mercy of politicians who can go to any lengths to silence their opponents,” she says.

And with less than two years before Kenyans head for the polls for looks to be the most competitive and polarized General Election in the country’s history, many like Njoki fear that we have not seen the last of electoral violence.

No to blood money
To avoid a repeat of the 2007-2008 chaos, Njoki is actively mobilizing residents of Mathare slum, which is the second largest in Nairobi to say no to blood money.

Through Tia Rwabe Zi movement, Njoki is also keen on dealing with negative ethnicity and a lack of sustainable cohesion.

“Candidates who are seeking for political positions here are usually from different tribes and often the contest quickly becomes tribal. As we speak, some people have already zoned Mathare such that some tribes cannot live or vie for political positions in certain areas,” she adds.

According to Njoki bridging the tribal divide will not be easy. “But if we did it in 2007/08 we can do it again. Our movement spread across Mathare through the benevolence of young people so even now, we are going to use the same strategy,” Njoki observes.

While the movement remains alive, lack of resources to support critical efforts like communication is a challenge.

“If we want to talk to each other we have to mobilize one another physically, we move by foot because many people are volunteers,” she notes.

Njoki says they are expanding base and have been reaching out to others in various slums like Kibera.

Covid-19
Njoki says that with the spread of Covid-19 pandemic, some people in the slums have lost their jobs and are becoming easy targets for bribes from politicians.

“In Kenya, we have the haves and the have-nots. The latter believe that it is the politicians will get them out of poverty.”

“This is the disease that is eating away our society. Leaders bribe voters to be elected, and when they get into power, they do not alleviate the lives of the people who voted for them,” she expounds.

“Unsupervised children roaming around slum areas as schools remain closed are being exposed to vices including being lured to political mischief,” she says.

In 2013, Njoki says Mathare still experienced some violence and murder as tribes rose against each other.

“Violence has become synonymous with General Election, as politicians send their foot soldiers to the slums, to intimidate, threaten and even to kill.”

“Politicians know that the middle class are hard to lure with promises, that is why they go to the slums, to the people who have one meal per day. Also, largely homogenous group inhabit the slums, thus are easy to access,” she adds.

Make a difference
Still, the ‘Tia Rwabe Zi’ campaigners are determined to make a difference in the coming electioneering period.

The group holds regular meetings and speaks strongly against violence and idleness.

“We encourage each other to take odd jobs and even notify each other whenever there is a job opening. People must keep busy to stay out of trouble,” Njoki explains.

To help finance her peacebuilding efforts, Njoki is actively seeking for well-wishers by printing t-shirts, lesos and drawing peace graffiti in open spaces within the slums. She also hopes to work with other peacebuilding initiatives in other slums including Kibera.

While acknowledging that expecting people to turn down bribes in the face of poverty and hunger is a tough call, she says that members are convinced change will come one day, and they are a step in the right direction.
Georgina Ann Nyambura’s experience in Kenyan politics unexpectedly set her on a peace ambassador’s path. It all started in 1997 when Nyambura decided to run for the seat of Member of Parliament for Embakasi. Nothing could have prepared her for the dangers that she went through when campaigning. She was very often insulted, threatened and intimidated. These challenges contributed to her losing the elections. She unsuccessfully tried again in 2002 and 2007.

“Throughout my time in active politics, I saw first-hand the violence that existed amongst us. The campaigning environment was not conducive. There were goons for hire on the ground ready to threaten, intimidate and frustrate some aspirants out of the race,” she says.

If she had earlier thought that Embakasi politics were hostile, she said the 2007 made it worse.

“The 2007 electioneering period was like nothing we had experienced before. Tension was high, and the playing field skewed especially for the female aspirants,” explains the mother of four.

That year, none of the female aspirants in Embakasi made it to parliament, but they quickly got over it because of the violence that rocked the country that year over the disputed presidential results.

“The 2007/08 violence was on a new level, very different from the pockets of violence we had experienced in the previous elections,” she says.

“It is at this time I felt that I had a duty to be part of the solution.”

Regrouping to create peace

As the country burnt, Nyambura and several others went to the ground, encouraging their communities to keep calm. They did this until a peace agreement was struck, bringing an end to a very dark period in the history of Kenya.

But even after restoring peace, and people getting back to their everyday lives, Nyambura’s life was not the same again, she had been transformed, her eyes opened to the insecurities all around her area in the Eastlands part of Nairobi. She had seen how fickle peace was.

This is how Nyambura became a peace champion. She was first elected to join the then District Peace Committee now Community Policing Committee in Embakasi Sub-County where she is the treasurer.

This was a legitimised process within the Vision 2030 road map under the Peace Building and Conflict Resolution efforts.

Nyambura says that the whole objective was to “promote tolerance and peaceful co-existence among all Kenyan communities” and to “establish and operationalise a policy and institutional framework for Peace Building and Conflict Resolution and early warning mechanisms on social conflict.”

Their committee was initially set up as one of only 20 District Peace Committee in the expansive Embakasi area.
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Committees (DPCs) that had initially been set up to put out the fire that threatened to burn down the country in 2007. They served as watchdogs and relayed early warning signs of looming conflict to ensure that they had taken necessary precautionary measures to prevent violence.

During her time in community policing, Nyambura says that they have been instrumental in arresting situations that would have otherwise turned violent.

“in Embakasi we have the issue of matatu touts grouping and forming gangs, having conflict over routes and money and this easily escalates and becomes a major problem affecting even those not in the transport industry,” she explains.

She therefore says that their committee keeps its pulse on this industry to ensure that they embrace a non-violent approach to solving conflict.

Child gangs

Whereas the committee has had a breakthrough in the transport sector, the unprecedented rise of gangs that are recruiting children in primary schools is keeping them awake at night.

“We have a ruthless gang called Gaza that is recruiting children, and when we lose our children at such an early age to this dark, life rehabilitating them will become difficult,” she says.

According to Nyambura, children are an easier target since law enforcers or the communities are unlikely to suspect them of crime.

“A child will easily carry weapons or contraband without being detected,” she says.

“They also easily pass messages down gang members without standing out,” she expounds.

Nyambura narrates a recent incidence where a child in Umoja Estate left home at night to join the Gaza Gang, but he was unable to trace them.

“I am also a Voluntary Children Officer so that is how I got hold of the boy and we have been in talks, counselling him and helping him get back to a normal routine and to most importantly, stay in school,” she says.

Nyambura also expresses concern over rising cases of domestic violence, saying children are increasingly experimenting with drugs and joining gangs “to escape the hell that has become their homes.”

“The society cannot be at peace if there is no peace at home,” she says.

Nyambura adds that they have learnt not to view violence within homes as a ‘family affair’.

“We are pleased that the government is doing its part in ensuring that there is legislation now that seeks to address this underreported form of violence in the form of the Protection against Domestic Violence Act 2013.”

“Those involved in community peacebuilding efforts understand that to prevent violence, we must address its root causes. We cannot wait until 2021 to start preaching peace and encouraging voters to shun conflict,” she says.

Gaza, unfortunately, is not the only gang that is posing a danger to the children.

“Many such gangs are mushrooming right under our noses and we all must join hands to ensure that we find solutions to these problems.”

Nyambura says that gone are the days when a parent’s biggest headache was raising school fees and ensuring that a child performs well in school.

“The times now are different especially with the Covid-19 pandemic that has threatened to destroy our societal structures. Children are not spared either as victims of violence or perpetrators,” she explains.

“We have also found out that it is not just the boys who are joining these gangs, in fact, they prefer girls as they are less likely to be suspected than boys,” she observes.

Nyumba Kumi initiative

Nyambura also explains that urban areas are facing challenges of land ownership.

“Land issue is not limited to the rural areas, we have had two tribes in Umoja that are fighting over land and we are doing what we can to solve the matter amicably.”

She says that focusing on the youth and children in the peace drive is not enough, they involve the committees in the Nyumba Kumi initiative where members of the community should know at least 10 of their neighbours.

Nyambura says that they have been working towards demystifying the Nyumba Kumi initiatives whose objective she says remains misunderstood.

“We are bringing the responsibility to keep peace to your doorstep because peace starts with you,” she says.

Some of the challenges they are facing is lack of resources to move around and mobilise peace movements across the vast Embakasi region. There is also lack of sufficient political support and inability to offer alternatives to get young people out of gangs.

She also speaks of people’s inability to see violence beyond the election-related violence. That even though communities are not at peace, it would seem that the society accommodates it out of fear of being attacked by gangs of they speak out.

Still, Nyambura says that the road ahead is long and daunting as the country approaches the 2022 elections. She calls for political goodwill and campaigns targeted at youth, both male and female.

Nyambura says that this is the time for budgetary allocations to community policing efforts to ensure that they are now more robust than ever before. She calls for a structured surveillance and reporting system as it was in place in 2008.

For now, the community policing efforts can only do so much even as political temperatures continue to rise.
There is one lady in Wajir County whose name is synonymous with peace and security issues, she is Sofia Gedi.

For the past three decades, Gedi has dedicated her life and work towards promoting peace and security in the volatile county where women’s voice were not heard and cases of sexual violence like defilement, rape, sodomy and domestic violence were the order of the day.

Says Gedi: “I joined the then Wajir Community Peace Committee (CPC) in 1993 after I resigned from my civil service job in the department of social services and started Wajir District Human Rights Watch, my own Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) to address the high number of violence against women and girls in the area.”

Traditional criminal justice system

The major issue that she was dealing with then was maslah, a Somali traditional criminal justice system, where elders would meet under a tree and dispense justice in cases involving murder, sexual violence and other offences at a fee.

The peace champion recalls that at that time, the CPC was made up of four women and two men, and were receiving an average of five girls reporting defilement and rape per day.

For girls between five and 10 years, the elders would fine the perpetrator 10 goats or one camel, while for anyone above 10 years the fine was three to four goats or one camel.

Gedi, who is still a CPC member says: “Initially, everyone was against me because I stood for justice for the vulnerable and I was out to change the negative culture to protect the women and girls whose rights were being violated. We worked but were frustrated by the elders who accused me of being sent by foreigners to change the age-old Somali culture of maslah. Even my co-workers feared the elders, but I said I was ready to work alone if the worst came to the worst.”

Since then, she has soldiered on with her NGO and in
ON THE FRONTLINE OF PEACE AND SECURITY
Reflections and contribution of women to peace and security in Kenya

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President Mwai Kibaki, in 2012, and by United Nations (UN) Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at an international forum in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia.

Another big achievement is that her war against maslah has borne fruit as the community, religious, youth and women leaders and chiefs have been brought on board.

Thanks to the intensive awareness and sensitisation forums supported by Save the Children, Afya Maisha, Kenya Human Rights Commission, Kenya National Human Rights Commission, FIDA Kenya and Womenkind Kenya, and Sexual Offences Act, most cases of defilement, rape and sodomy are now being heard and determined by the magistrates and judges.

She was part of a county-wide mentoring programme by Save the Child and Afya Maisha NGO has empowered girls and women of their rights.

But one war that is still on is on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) where the CPC has been working with the community and religious leaders to convince them that the outlawed and negative cultural practice is not recognized nor supported by the holy book, the Koran.

Out of the six sub-counties in Wajir which borders strife-torn Somalia, sexual offences and violence against women are most rampant in Wajir East and Wajir South. There are many cases of girls being attacked in broad daylight and defiled in the open fields while herding.

“There is no case of sexual offence that can go on without the 18-member CPC being informed and involved, the public have more confidence in us,” says Gedi who celebrated her 25th year as an activist this year.

She has received several awards for her volunteer work. These include Head of State Commendation (HSC) by former

She wears another hat as a member of the Wajir Children’s Advisory Committee where she deals with abandoned children, child labour, loitering and school dropout issues.

Asked about her major challenges, Gedi says donors support is dwindling and thus have little funds for logistical support for their programmes over the years.

On the brighter side she says because of her history and record in peace building and gender activism, many NGOs and organisations want to partner with her. One of them is Kenya Human Rights Defenders.

The peace champion says she is looking forward to handing over the baton to the hundreds of women and girls whom she has mentored and trained to take over leadership positions in peace and security matters as stated in UN Resolution 1325 and the Kenya National Action Plan (KNAP).

“I have sacrificed to work for women and girls in Wajir County for almost three decades, eight of them while on a wheelchair. I am ready to wake up in the middle of the night to help anyone in distress. I remember a case of a married woman who was assaulted by her husband and I was called at midnight. We got him arrested, charged and sentenced to two years in jail. That is my joy, working for the community to bring peace in the families, homes, the community and the society as a whole,” says Gedi in her parting shot.
Joyce Nairesia: A woman of many firsts in Samburu

Joyce Nairesia is the first woman to join the Samburu Council of Elders and chair it. This is no mean feat to achieve for a woman in a pastoralist community considering the gender inequality that characterises this area.

It has been a long journey, that dates back to when she was married before the age of eighteen, widowed after four years and left with two small children to raise.

Wife inheritance

As soon as her husband died, clan elders organized to have her inherited by an old chief who already had four wives and 13 children.

“I was to be inherited because my husband was Samburu, and they considered me Samburu even though I was born in Burat which is in Isiolo County,” she explains.

’Sire from the grave’

“The saddest part about this arrangement was that the chief would not really marry me but just have me sire children.”

“I would then be required to name the children after my husband’s family to ensure that his lineage continued to grow even after his death.”

Wife inheritance is also extremely oppressive as the man can even steal from the inherited widow to feed his other children.

“This is common if the man discovers that you are entrepreneurial, he can take your money and property and leave children starving,” she says.

She also explains that a widowed Samburu woman is very vulnerable as she has no rights and cannot make any decision in the family.

“The community perceives her as a ‘person standing on one foot’,” she says.

To make it worse, the woman shoulders all the costs of raising the children born out of this arrangement.

“I refused to be part of such oppression and this meant I would not be part of my husband’s family, and I had to return to my mother’s home in Isiolo.”

Nairesia’s mother had also faced injustices that women in pastoralist communities face. Her husband had kicked her out of his home for not getting a son.

“My father chased us away, and mother raised five of us single-handedly,” she explains.
Prosperity amidst challenges

While in her mother’s house, Nairesia was fighting oppression perpetrated in the name of culture and she started getting popular across Samburu County.

Being a member of the Council of Elder, Nairesia is redefining the role of a woman not only in Samburu but in the neighbouring counties of Isiolo and Meru where the culture does not recognise women as elders.

The area often experiences conflict over pastureland during dry seasons which has now escalated to involve pastoral herders against ranchers.

She is also involved in defusing tension and solving disputes that come in dealing with child marriages and the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

“As the Chair of the Council, I have to promote peace otherwise, it is hard to tackle child marriages, FGM and promoting education when there is conflict,” she says.

Her efforts have not been without challenges. Much as she was elected by men to be their chair, it is evident in the meetings that she is not their equal.

“When the men are addressing the Council or any of our gatherings, they lift their rungu (club) as a show of their power,” she explains.

But being a woman, Nairesia carries no such rungu and just like any other woman in her community, she must lift a piece of green grass to ensure that they listen to her.

“When they see me standing holding the piece of grass, they allow me to speak, by doing so, this is a symbol that I respect them and that I am humble in their presence,” Nairesia expounds.

“But, at least I have one foot in the door, and that is a step towards making the change that we are pursuing,” she observes.

“I was to be inherited because my husband was Samburu, and they considered me Samburu even though I was born in Burat which is in Isiolo County,”

Nairesia is passionate about education and believes that if the community raises a generation of educated people, they will beat retrogressive identities like moranism.

“I have learnt that ending conflict is hinged on education.”

Cannot be fed by mothers

She explains that when a boy is circumcised, they can no longer be fed by their mothers and have to go to the forest to fend for themselves.

“In the forest, they spend a lot of time discussing things that are not productive, a key reason why it has been difficult to end cattle raids in pastoralist communities,” Nairesia explains.

According to Nairesia, it is paramount that pastoralist communities replace moranism with education.

“My community view circumcision as an identity card or even a degree to certify that the young man has all it takes to take on the world.”

She states that educated youth will help address rivalry amongst clans and across ethnic groups “when your son dies in a cattle raid at the hands of a clan or particular tribe, the animosity causes a lot of bloodshed.”

Naiseria however blames the government for the plight of the pastoralist communities.

“The government has been focusing on providing us with water for the animals, but we also need schools. Only education will change our mindsets,” she says.

She explains that if her community becomes educated, they will begin to see the futility of having many cattle but with no real sense of livelihood.

“People will begin offloading some of that cattle and the abandon nomadic lifestyle. Living in one place will also ensure that the children stay in schools, and everyone will experience the benefits of peace,” she expounds.

She says that it is this nomadic lifestyle that has left the Samburu marginalised even among the pastoralist community and prone to conflict.

It is clear that her work is far from being done, but she is aware that a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. Meanwhile, she continues to promote peace through dialogue and education for all, as they are the surest way to build lasting peace.
Parents and the community in Kilifi County love teacher Charity Mapenzi for her passion for protecting and promoting school children.

For the past five years that she has been the Head Teacher at Mukwajuni Primary School in Kilifi South Sub-County, Ms Mapenzi has made a name for herself as an active member of the Community Policing Committee (CPC).

She wears two hats at the CPC, she is the only woman, other than police officers manning the Gender desk, and she is also the only teacher among them.

Teacher Mapenzi is appealing to the authorities to identify and empower more women to be given responsibility to sit and serve in CPCs, like her, in line with the UN Resolution 1325 and Kenya National Action Plan (KNAP).

Says Teacher Mapenzi: “My clarion call is that; if there is no peace in the house, there cannot be any peace in the school and the pupils cannot concentrate on their studies, by extension, in the society at large. That is why I am ready to defend and protect the girl-child to the hilt no matter what!”

“Disco matanga menace

One of the wars she has been fighting through CPC and the school’s board of management (BOM), is the culture of overnight Disco Matangas (funeral vigils) where the local brew called Magwe (made from coconut) is drunk freely while men, women, boys and girls mix freely and dance the night away.

It is during such occasions that school girls are impregnated and later forced to drop out of school and be married off.

“It used to be common to see pupils arriving on Monday mornings in class with hangovers, while many failed to attend, leading to low turnout,” says Teacher Mapenzi, recalling when she was posted to the school five years ago.

The school is off the Kilifi-Mombasa highway.

Indeed, the CPC member’s car triples up as an ambulance, police under cover patrol car and unofficial Gender Based Violence Recovery Centre (GBRC) vehicle to ensure that schoolgirls are safe and are in school learning.

We asked how she got into peace and security matters. The head teacher says it started soon after being posted to the school and identifying rising cases of incest, defilement, teenage pregnancies and school drop outs, especially among the schoolgirls.

The acting Kilifi OCS at that time was impressed.
FROM PAGE 31 with her zeal and passion to identify and report such cases to him to act upon. He then requested her to join the CPC as a member.

Says Teacher Mapenzi: “Since then I have never looked back. I ensured that our girls’ education is not interfered with until they complete their Standard Eight and proceed to high school.”

Done my part

Since then, she has had six successful cases brought to court and the suspects charged and sentenced accordingly: “To me that is my satisfaction, that I have done my part in addressing the problem.”

Looking back, the CPC member is glad that the cases of defilement had reduced from the 15 cases, when she joined the school, to below five at the last count.

She put her foot down and vowed: “This will not go on under my watch,” adding that the vice must be brought to an end because it was affecting the girl’s transition to secondary school.

Her campaign to protect and promote the girl child from sex predators, has paid dividends over the years and made the parents and stakeholders in the education sector respect and support her efforts.

Back to school and happy

Says a tough talking Ms Mapenzi: “If a girl is involved, I ensure she is picked up by the police and locked up in the cells as well as her male partner to teach them a lesson that defilement is a sexual offence and the message must be heard loud and clear by the community.”

Since then, her pupils, their parents and the public have built trust in her and have ensured that they always report all cases to her for action to be taken.

She started a “re-entry” programme for girls who had been defiled, assaulted, impregnated, dropped out of school and/or married off. The pupils “are now back to school and are happy.”

This year, with the Covid-19 pandemic challenges, two cases of pregnancies were reported.

According to the Head Teacher, the completion and transition rate has improved, a far cry from when she joined the school when seven candidates missed sitting for Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) because they were pregnant.

Another major achievement was change of attitude by the community regarding defilement, teenage pregnancies and early marriages which had been normalized. She now has the full backing of school board of management, and the community through CPC and village elders.

Asked to identify some of the major challenges she has faced as a teacher and as a member of the CPC, Ms Mapenzi says it has been to protect and manage the 1,360 boys and girls in the day school.

Thanks to her leadership and networks, the School Head has managed to lobby the area Member of Parliament to start a secondary school next to her primary school, to boost the transition of her pupils. So far, two of the four classrooms have been built using Constituency development funds (CDF).

“In my campaign to protect and promote the girl-child, I have been forced to sacrifice my time and resources in order to ensure that justice is not only seen, but is seen to have been done in all sexual violence cases involving minors,” says the CPC member.

Lessons Learnt:

The five years have made Ms Mapenzi a household name as far as girl-child protection is concerned, the community refers to her as: “the bridge between the girls and the police!”

Says a happy CPC member: “Everything is possible as long as you have the passion to do it. My actions have sent a strong message to the community that if you want help, go to Madam Mapenzi. Even boda-boda (motor bike taxi) operators fear me and warn each other never to mess around with schoolgirls.”

On way forward, the CPC member is appealing to the authorities to also consider giving volunteers like her more exposure through exchange programmes. They went to Makueni County, and invited others to learn from them. She recalls a delegation of teachers that visited Kilifi County from Mozambique to benchmark on the success story of the Kilifi CPC.

Ms Mapenzi maintains that the partnership between the CPCs, the police Gender Desk and non state actors like the media, should be strengthened and expanded. This is in order to have more school visits by the officers, to talk to the teachers and the pupils about security, Sexual Offences Act and peace issues in the home, at school and in the society as a whole.

In her parting shot, the Head Teachers says she wishes more of her colleagues would have a passion like her and go for training on peace and security issues to make their schools and communities better places for the pupils, the parents and stakeholders.
Mary Kuket’s biggest mission in Baringo County was to end the outlawed but still widely practiced Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and other retrogressive practices such as child marriages.

But she quickly realised that without peace, her mission was an uphill task. It took her time to understand how conflict affected fighting FGM.

**Chauvinism**

Ending FGM was also made worse by the low opinion that the pastoralist community has of women and girls.

“Women in pastoralist communities are to be seen and not heard, I had a big challenge deciding where to start my mission of preaching peace,” she says.

Baringo County has for a long time grappled with the twin challenge of drought and the ensuing conflict over scarce resources.

Much as the story of conflict and its resolution efforts in the pastoralist communities has been told many times, its connection to FGM is what needs to be the focus now.
“What we need to speak about even more is how lack of peace affects our efforts to promote the rights of women and girls. It also means that we need to bring more women to the peace building platforms and this is what I have purposed to do,” she says.

Recently, women and children have borne the brunt of sporadic conflict. This is a departure from the tradition that was keen on protecting women and children from conflict. Kuket speaks of an alarming trend where armed bandits are sexually abusing and wounding women and killing children.

Government statistics show that in 2017 alone, at least 10,000 residents of Baringo had been displaced by conflict. Kuket says that in a situation like this, it has become difficult to keep women safe.

“But I realized I could use the strong platforms that I had, like being the chair of Maendeleo ya Wanawake Baringo County chapter to promote peace and end FGM,” she says.

Maendeleo ya Wanawake is a strong, omnipresent grassroots women movement with roots and branches across the country.

Through the women movement, Kuket has been able to engineer dialogue among conflicting groups, amplify the role of women on conflict resolution and peace keeping, and to promote grassroots peace advocacy efforts.

She also uses the platform as an entry point to boost cross county peace keeping efforts. She notes that regions such as Elgeyo Marakwet that are peaceful, have abandoned FGM and girls are getting educated unlike before.

But with Baringo County battling conflict, her work has not been easy. “We are still struggling to disarm the communities fully and this presents many challenges in peace keeping and conflict resolution efforts,” she adds.

Other challenges include low literacy levels where the community is ignorant of peace and the development of women and girls.

While government statistics show that overall literacy rates among Kenyan men and women are nearly balanced at 85 and 78 percent respectively, these figures do not reflect the true picture of of women living in counties where conflict occurs frequently.

Kuket says that as Baringo is very expansive and she is working with minimum resources she has barely scratched the surface. She believes that representation in the grassroots areas is key because as long as women are excluded from political and economic decision making tables, their influence will not be effective.

Kuket calls for accountability for human rights violation in times of conflict especially among grassroots communities. The Human Rights Watch has cited lack of accountability for serious human rights violations including rape that was mainly perpetrated by security forces in the 2017 post elections violence.

Meanwhile, she continues with her mission through various women movements and especially the Maendeleo ya Wanawake as it has helped her broaden her peacekeeping efforts and networks. Through the organization, she has met other peace champions who, have encouraged her to keep on the mission to have peace in the communities.
Mary Chepkwony: Uasin Gishu’s veteran peace champion

**BY ODHIAMBO ORLALE**

Mary Chepkwony’s life changed forever after the 1992 tribal clashes that took place around the Rift Valley Region.

It left her family and hundreds of her former neighbors internally displaced. Some of who were injured and/or left for dead during the mayhem. They had to seek refuge at a trading centre in Uasin Gishu County.

“That experience of sleeping in the cold with only the clothes we had on our backs, made me resolve to volunteer to help fellow women to always embrace peace and security in their homes and community,” says Ms Chepkwony.

**She soldiered on**

But instead of giving up on life and her children, the activist soldiered on by joining National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK), as a volunteer. Her home was spared by the goons who torched and looted her neighbour’s houses.

The umbrella church body for protestant churches, was one of the many organisations that went to the aid of the victims of the clashes.

She later joined Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL) which was formed in 1992, and was a major implementor of the UN Resolution 1325 passed by the United Nations Security Council in its four pillars; and the Kenya National Action Plan (KNAP), endorsed by Kenyan government to domesticate the UN Resolution 1325.

The two instruments urged the government to promote inclusivity of women in peace and security matters by giving them leadership positions and a voice to be heard in public affairs on security.

From then on, Chepkwony has never looked back as a peace defender. She is always out to bring warring parties and/or communities in the seven North Rift counties together to co-exist peacefully.

This is in line with RWPL’s objective of recognizing the role of women in pace building and supporting activities around it.

The counties were Bungoma, Uasin Gishu, Nandi, West Pokot, Elgeyo-Marakwet, Baringo and Laikipia.

Says Ms Chepkwony: “I embraced it very fast because I saw how the pillar of protection would help women deal with peace and security among and within themselves. I was also happy with KNAP because it involved women in taking up decision-making positions on peace and security matters at all levels.”

She is one of the founder members of RWPL whose objective was to promote peaceful co-existence between communities in the six counties. The focus was on women and children who were the most affected by conflicts and clashes.

**Achievements**

Ms Chepkwony is happy to look back at the volatile sub-county of Mt Elgon in Bungoma County saying, their mediation efforts bore fruits when peace was restored.

Before then,
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clashes were common over land and boundaries. Under RWPL, they intervened and identified the problem as inter-clan feuds, they sat down with the elders and administrators and ironed out their differences.

The problem was clannism between the Pok, Ndorobo/Ogiek, Somek and Kony. It was being fueled by land and border disputes which led to hatred and hostility among them.

Another breakthrough was RWPL’s strategy to promote dialogue and to build a comprehensive peace process among the elders, community, women, youth, religious leaders and the authority.

That strategy has been replicated in other neighbouring counties whenever there was conflict or a breach of peace.

“We have also benefited from proper documentation of our records from all our public and inhouse meetings. It has been a way of getting all the parties to learn how to look at problems rationally. In fact, this has also helped us to get the feuding parties to look at the genesis of the problem and how we have resolved it amicably,” says Chepkwony.

Challenges

Some of the major challenges she has faced in the past and are ongoing, are lack of political will to fully implement UN Resolution 1325 and KNAP.

The heightened political temperature on the eve of every General Election, as is the case currently, is what triggers hate speech, conflicts between communities and disputes over boundaries and land.

There are some communities that still discourage women from addressing public meetings and rallies, these are the Elgeyo-Marakwets and the Pokots.

Says the peace monitor: “We were told in some of these areas that, it is because ‘women cannot make decisions!’”

“I am seeing many more women being elevated to decision-making offices on security and peace matters.

Mary Chepkwony

Opportunities:

RWPL has benefited from UN Resolution 1325 and KNAP as it was recognized and given the lead to train women and the public on the two instruments. They have been working closely with the national and 47 county governments on peace and security issues.

RWPL has expanded its networks and contacts by virtue of working with stakeholders in the six counties. These are the respective County Commissioners: County Peace Committees, Court Users Committee members, Council of Elders, women and youth leaders, religious leaders and respective devolutions departments in the counties.

Ms Chepkwony is a trained counselor and doubles as a member of the Uasin Gishu County Peace Committee. She reveals that that office has helped her see many doors opened for her in her peace and security work in the area and the region.

Lessons Learnt One of the major lessons she has learnt over the years is that peace-building is not an event, but it is a process. One needs to have a passion, be patient, promote humility and must be a good listener in order to succeed.

She attributes RWPL’s and her success to the spirit of volunteerism, in contrast to other NGOs that have fallen by the roadside because of emphasis on big salaries, renting expensive office spaces and buying big luxurious cars.

“We are a women-led NGO with a focus on mentoring and training young women to take over from us in future,” she says with pride.

Way Forward

More women have been trained by RWPL to take the peace and security agenda to the next level in line with the UN Resolution 1325 and KNAP.

Already, the national government has started implementing the fourth pillar of the two instruments, that is of inclusivity, by getting more women hired as County Commissioners, deputy County Commissioners, police bosses, chiefs and elders. They are given decision and leadership positions to promote peace and security issues with a bias towards women and children.

In her parting shot, Ms Chepkwony says: “I am seeing many more women being elevated to decision-making offices on security and peace matters. I’m very proud of UN Resolution 1325. I have seen and tasted the results. KNAP has also proved to be sustainable, we must all embrace it and help more women embrace and understand it for the good of our counties and the country as a whole.”
The Long journey to peace: Abdi’s story

BY RUTH OMUKHANGO

Her soft-spoken voice can easily be mistaken for a sign of weakness. But her unassuming nature belies the strength she has in bringing communities together to live in peace.

This is Nuria Abdullahi Abdi, one of the women in Wajir County who have made outstanding contributions towards the peace that communities in the county enjoy today.

Her work in peace building and mediation was recognised in 2015 when she got the Head of State Commendation.

According to Nuria, conflict in Wajir is due to a combination of factors: availability of arms, unhealthy political competition, and inter-clan conflicts mainly over scarce resources—water and pasture. These conflicts diversely affect the lives of vulnerable groups, women and girls.

“We witnessed cases of rape and defilement of women and girls mostly used as a weapon on intimidation among the communities and this propelled us to action as women,” recalls Abdi saying the peace being enjoyed today is the collective efforts of women of Wajir.

One of the strategies used by the Abdi and the women’s movement in Wajir to achieve this peace involved gathering women from various local clans to take a common stand on the issue of conflict. Regardless of the clan they were coming from, the women resolved to work together and preach peace.

“We came together as women because we had many things in common. Those killed were our sons, fathers and husbands,” says Abdi.

Nuria Abdullahi Abdi

“Some of the women who were married with other clans had been divorced because they were seen as betrayers and spies. All of us had suffered in one way or another because of conflict.”

According to Abdi, another strategy they employed was door to door campaigns to reach out to women, youth, and elders on the need for peace. The outreach was also geared towards getting as many people as possible to support the peace campaign.

“We also got women to monitor the situation in market places and inform relevant authorities of any suspicious happenings,” says Abdi, whose many years in peace has seen her become a scholar in the peace and security matters.

In 1995, the peace movement founded by her and other women evolved into the Wajir Peace and Development Committee that brought together traditional leaders, government security officers, parliamentarians, civil servants, Muslim and Christian leaders, and civil society organizations.

“I coordinated Wajir Peace and Development Committee for over four year until 2005,” says Abdi.

The committee gave birth to District Peace Committees, a model that has been replicated across the country by the government as the national peace architecture.

Abdi notes that in Wajir, the DPC committees were cascaded from the village to district level with women, men, youth and elders being members.

“We also set up the rapid response groups which consisted of elders, religious leaders and security officers that intervened when a problem occurred.”

Despite Wajir becoming relatively stable, Abdi notes that there is still a lot to be done to achieve sustainable peace.

A former coordinator and member of the Wajir Association for Women for Peace, Abdi says for meaningful peace to be achieved, everyone has to be involved as a peace builder.

“We also need to continue building women’s capacity in peace building due to changing dynamics and trends that affect peace and security such as terrorism,” says Abdi.

Although women in Wajir have done a remarkable job of restoring peace in their communities; their work and contribution is yet to be recognized.

She says young people, especially women, need to be encouraged to take interest in peace matters.

“We have an opportunity to start engaging in intergenerational dialogue to bring young people on board in the peace and security discourse.”

She believes that for more women to participate in peace and security processes, there is need to address culture, norms, and policies that hinder their participation in these processes.

“Addressing these issues will ensure that women are taken seriously as key actors in peace and security.”
For Dorothy Bonyo, peace and security issues have been close to her heart for decades.

The Treasurer of the Kisumu County Peace Committee says the bug of promoting peace and security started over four decades ago when she was married to Mzee Isaiah Bonyo, who was a career civil servant.

He served as Deputy Provincial Commissioner, Commissioner of Social Services, and later was promoted to be a Deputy Permanent Secretary before being Nominated as Member of the National Assembly.

Mrs Bonyo says 2007-8 post election violence was a turning point in her life as she came face to face with the bloodiest and darkest phase of Kenya’s history where thousands of people were killed and millions more were displaced across the country.

“I used to go to the IDP camp at Menara Chief’s camp to cook and feed the victims of the clashes, most of whom were women and children and a few men. Some of the victims were my farm workers and neighbours. I asked myself why should we fight and kill one another because of politics? I shed tears and my heart bled during such visits,” says the Peace Ambassador who has a home in Koru Settlement Scheme in Muhoroni constituency.

Passion for peace work

She joined the Muhoroni sub-county peace committees as a member of the local Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organisation (MYWO) and other non-state actors to support the internally displaced persons (IDP) with relief food, clothes and psycho-social support.

Her passion for peace work has grown over the years. When conflict and violence erupted along the Kisumu-Nandi border in 2011, which claimed one life, Mrs Bonyo was even more involved in the efforts by leaders from the two Counties led by two Cabinet Ministers, Dr Sally Kosgei (former MP for Aldai in Nandi County) and James Orengo (former MP for Ugenya in Siaya County) and respective Governors to restore peace and security.

Says the Peace Ambassador: “I was roped in to be a member of the 15-person team whose patron was the Kisumu County Commissioner with a focus on promoting peace and security in and along our common boundary with Nandi and Kericho Counties.”

Another committee,
Kisumu-Nandi-Kericho Border inter-county Peace Committee, was later formed by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) chaired by Mr Francis ole Kaparo, a former Speaker of the National Assembly at the height of tribal clashes along their common borders.

**Early warning signs**

Since then, Mrs Bonyo and her fellow committee members have been trained on early warning and response, conflict detection and resolution among others.

According to Mrs Bonyo, the major areas of conflict in the county and sub-county are: cattle theft, Gender Based Violence (GBV), land invasion, land and boundary conflicts and hate speech especially by politicians, elders and the youth.

“We have been trained on early warning and detection of violence, all these conflicts begin with us where we live, work or socialise in our homes, market place and where we work or meet along our common borders with our neighbours,” says the Peace Ambassador.

Issues of land and boundary conflicts are also very close to her heart as she served for a decade as a member of the Muhoroni sub-County Land Board.

She says her experience in the land board helped her address many conflicts within the family, in the village and along the common boundary with Nandi and Kericho Counties in the peace and security committees where she served in.

Some of the worst cases she handled were of family feuds over sub-division or sale of land pitting parents, fathers in particular, with their spouses or children.

Under the 2010 Constitution and Land Act, owners of land must get consent from their spouses and children before selling them through the respective Land Boards.

Says Mrs Bonyo: “There were many cases of children who were bitter with their parents, fathers in particular, for not giving them land. We also had many of women, who were vulnerable, who were disinherited.

**Happy and proud**

Looking back, the Kisumu County Peace Committee treasurer says she is happy and proud that their efforts have not been in vain citing the reduction in cases of conflict, violence, GBV, animosity and land and boundary conflicts in the area.

The committee members have formed networks and developed friendship among themselves and between them and their neighbours in Nandi and Kericho counties to promote peace and security.

Says the official: “The committees have created awareness and empowered women to see that they too can bring changes having trained many of them as trainers of trainers (TOTs) on peace and security matters.”

The committee has 15 members and works closely with the Assistant County Commissioner, Divisional County Commissioner, Officer Commanding police Division (OCPDs), Officer Commanding Station (OCS) and with non-state actors like Non-Governmental Organisations and the media.

When the committee speaks, Mrs Bonyo says, the authorities and the public listen: “I believe that we have gained people’s confidence, they see us as vessels of peace, both men, women and youth.”

**Recognized far and wide**

Her efforts have been recognized far and wide and in 2018, President Uhuru Kenyatta, awarded her with the prestigious Head of State Commendation. She is happy that during his tenure more women have been recognized and given awards for being Peace Ambassadors, like her.

On challenges that she has faced as a peace champion over the years, Mrs Bonyo says one of the major one was of women feeling intimidated and fear the repercussions that come with raising issues in private or even in public.

Many women also shy away from taking roles in peace committees because they fear for their security, and also lack resources to travel and attend meetings.

On lessons learnt, the official says there is need to encourage more women to participate in peace committees noting that they are usually the biggest victims and also the first ones to spot early warnings.

She is appealing to the national government to recognise the role played by women in the peace and security sector saying they are a very good sources of information as mothers, sisters, grandmothers and girlfriends with the perpetrators and suspects who usually live with or among them and can talk to them at their will.

On way forward, the peace ambassador expresses fear that the ongoing heightened political atmosphere two years to the 2022 General Elections, like has happened in the past, is worrying as they usually trigger conflict and violence.

The official is appealing to the national Government to beef up security and surveillance to deal with the early warning issues. She is also urging the authorities to continue to empower peace monitors like herself with allowance to help them be more effective.

Says Mrs Bonyo: “Let us involve more women in peace and security work. We are happy with the United Nations for passing the UN Resolution 1325 that acknowledges the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and girls. We are also happy with the KNAP because it involves and gives women a voice in peace work.”

In her parting shot, the official is thanking President Kenyatta for recognizing and promoting more women to be in the peace committees and appreciating their work. She sees a bright future if that spirit continues.
No easy walk to peace, says award-winning Magut

BY ODHIAMBO ORLALÉ

Former headmistress, Irene Magut, has literally spent the past three decades preaching peace and security issues in the North Rift region of the country. The soft-spoken board member of one of the biggest Non-Governmental Organisation in that region, Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL).

She says the journey has not been easy, especially for a woman like herself in a society that is patriarchal, conservative and traditional.

“I decided to resign from my teaching job and join the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission in 1994 because of the passion I had for women and children issues linked to peace and security matters,” says Magut.

Fought for her own space

Under the CJPC of Eldoret diocese, she was in charge of Catholic Women’s association Uasin Gishu, Nandi, West Pokot, Elgeyo-Marakwet and Trans Nzoia counties. They addressed many forums on gender, human rights and related to it was peace and security within the family, homes and the community.

Even in her own church, Catholic, she had to fight for her space and to have her voice heard to represent the views of fellow women. Her outspokenness landed her a spot in the parish council, becoming the first woman in her area to do so.

She later joined Rural Women Peace Link and is still one of its volunteers.

Achievements

Says s Magut: “It was not easy for us, women, to address meetings in some of those areas where there were clashes because men did not want to see any woman addressing a public meeting. This in turn fostered fear among many women to speak out their issues.”

In 2017, her efforts were recognised by the Nandi County government who gave her a Mashujaa Day award.

The peace committees managed to change the narrative by ‘preaching’ to the women to be in the forefront in promoting peace and security. Their message was a simple one: most people who go to war are men, but they are provoked by women who tell them: “go out and fight like a man!”

Women are the ones who give early warning through the war cry. This was the focus of the numerous trainings on peace and security to empower and sensitize them to be part of the solution and not the problem.

Says Magut: “We started asking women to come out and get involved. We knew that if women talked to men..."
Reconciliation

During the 1992 tribal clashes, which coincided with the eve of the re-introduction of multi-party politics and General Elections, CJPC team visited the volatile areas and distributed relief food, medicine and clothes. They used the forums to pray and reconcile the feuding communities.

Magut later actively used her other hat as a delegate to the National Constitution of Kenya Review Conference (NCKRC), better known as Bomas Conference, to promote peace and security in Nandi County. Since then, she has been involved in peace and mediation efforts among elders and leaders, along the volatile Kisumu-Nandi County boundary at Kebigori and Nandi Hills town.

Other peace forums were organised for leaders and residents along the Nandi-Kakamega and Vihiga county boundaries following flare-ups linked to boundary issues and hate speech by some leaders.

“Our theme, at all those meetings was: ‘We cannot have any development where there is no peace,’” says the renowned peace defender.

She has been interviewed severally on local and national radio and television stations on her role as a Peace champion in Nandi County and North Rift region as a whole.

The stations are: KASS FM, Chamgee FM, Upendo FM and Nation Television (NTV) among others. The controversial issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has also been featured prominently.

But she laments that in some areas, women and girls who were empowered by RWPL, and other NGOs have reported of being fought back by men and boys who feel demoralised and neglected.

Magut says the Peace Defender: “Recent rise in domestic violence in Nandi County has been linked to rise in alcoholism and drug abuse, by some men who blame it on role reversals, saying that their women and girls are too empowered for them!”

In order to address the new development, Magut says, they are now encouraging women and girls to “allow” the men to take the lead in family leadership and provision to avoid unnecessary conflicts in the home and society.

Challenges

Among the Nandi community, the council of elders have been using ‘kipkaa,’ a traditional criminal justice system, to settle disputes. This includes sexual violence like rape, defilement, FGM, incest and early marriages contrary to the Constitution 2010 and the Sexual Offences Act.

Ms Magut, who also sits in the Nandi Court Users Committee (NCUC), says they have had a lot of frustrations in the past, trying to convince the elders to respect the law and confine their mandate to civil and not criminal cases like the above.

She remembers a case of a five-year-old girl who she rescued after she had been defiled by a man old enough to be her grandfather. When the matter was taken to court, some elders tried to intervene and use ‘kipkaa’ to settle it out of court.

Magut turned down the emissary and ordered him to visit the home of the survivor to see the pain, trauma and torture she had experienced at the cruel hands of the perpetrator. The case was taken to the police arraigned in court, where he was charged with the offence while the girl was taken for medical test, counselling. She was taken to a rescue centre as the case went on.

Such cases are not rare, she recalls another case of a 14-year-old schoolgirl who was defiled by her stepfather, but when Magut and other activists intervened, the victim’s mother was compromised and the case could not proceed.

Magut says: “Peace and security matters are not gender based issues, they affect both men and women, boys and girls and should be treated as such. When there is no peace in the family or in the community, both men and women suffer.”

Lessons Learnt

According to the activist, there is a lot of ignorance and high poverty level in the county among the residents. This is exploited by perpetrators who foil justice.

Another lesson is that some politicians don’t want to observe peace and instead promote insecurity and divisions through hate speech and violence which they later cash in on residents during elections.

On the way forward, the activist says her motto is: “Not to give up on the peace and security matters,” she has been mentoring and empowering the younger generation to take over when she hands over the baton.

She maintains that, the authorities should ensure peace structures are put in place in advance. Instead of waiting until there is chaos for them to start fire-fighting.

In her parting shot, Magut says: “Let us not give up, let’s soldier on in promoting peace and security as outlined in the UN Resolution 1325 and Kenya National Plan of Action (KNAP). We need to speak upwards at the foundation village level about peace and security first, before we go to the County and National level,” says the veteran peace defender with confidence.
ON THE FRONTLINE OF PEACE AND SECURITY
Reflections and contribution of women to peace and security in Kenya