

# The Voices of Women Leaders in Africa

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**Louise Mullany**, University of Nottingham, Principal Investigator  
**Masibo Lumala**, Moi University, Co-Investigator  
**Roshni Mooneeram**, Africa Leadership Network, Project Consultant  
**Rita Atukwasa**, Institute for Social Transformation, Project Partner



**University of  
Nottingham**  
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA



# Introduction



The Language, Gender and Leadership Network aims to enhance the economic development and welfare of women and girls, supporting their careers and aspirations to become a successful generation of leaders in businesses and politics in Africa and beyond. The Network places women's voices centre-stage as Africa renegotiates its place in the world and rises as a continent at a time of great change driven, in part, by technology and improved international relations. As so much more becomes possible and accessible to women and girls, the Network has gathered first-person narratives to examine how women navigate socio-economic, cultural and political challenges. We have aimed to catch as wide a cross-section as possible, selecting a series of stories from Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Mauritius from women in urban and rural areas, speaking different languages, and from different professions and life stages.

This selection of unmediated voices provides self-reflection on the challenges faced by girls and women in their endeavour to emancipate themselves. The emerging themes from the narratives are education, health and well-being, economic empowerment, the importance of role models and mentors, entrepreneurship, the role women in professional life and politics, culture, including family relationships, parenting and traditional cultural practices,

faith, and the role of men in bringing about gender parity.

These stories are not about African women, they are of African women. They are not about the old script that we have heard over and over. The voices tell the stories as they are. The voices reveal their strategies in dealing with the contradictions of life. The narrators share their dreams and aspirations and reveal some of the tools that they use to write a new script. What brings these eclectic voices together is that they all "aspire to lead us and light up human talent". They thus provide a powerful platform of transformation available to younger women about to leave school or in early employment, or those wanting to make changes in their lives.

The narratives do not tell of poverty, they tell of the strategies to fight it. Their stories are not lamentations but tell of positive possibilities for women in the region. They do not shy away from the persistent reality of FGM and the role that women can play in cultural practices that physically and psychologically maim young girls and women for life. They demonstrate an indomitable will to do something about it by taking things into their own hands. They acknowledge the inequality in opportunities open to boys and girls, men and women, and they share how they transcend those sometimes through collaboration with men, sometimes through defiance and resistance, and always through ingenuity.

These are stories of survivors, shakers and movers, role models, pioneers, politicians, academics, all of them innovators and path-finders. These are women willing good for themselves and their environment, reinventing themselves several times in one lifetime to get a larger slice of life and thereby also redefining their environment. The collective consciousness that emerges from the stories, powerful and empowering, is the magical ingredient for social entrepreneurship. In turn the spirit of entrepreneurship has the potential to ride on the wave of technology and address the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals 2030, in particular, Goal 5, Gender Equality, alongside Goal 3, Good Health and Well-Being, Goal 4, Quality Education, Goal 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth and Goal 17, Partnerships for the Goals, to boost gender equality and social advancement.

The insights encapsulated in these stories, the multiple themes and perspectives, all count as invaluable knowledge capital that should be put at the service of aspiring young women. For every young woman and girl child, wherever she may be in the world, whichever her circumstances, dreams and aspirations, she will find a gem or two deep within the humanity from which these unique voices speak their truths.

# Women of the land

*Women in Conflict  
Women of the land  
Let's put our hands together  
Gather strength, energy and power  
Aspire to lead and light up human talent  
In writing down our history*

Poem collectively produced by  
delegates, Kampala Inaugural  
Networking Conference,  
April 2018

## Education

### Keeping children in school

At 14 years my sister became a victim of teenage pregnancy as she was looking for sanitary pads to manage her periods. She almost died while giving birth because of complications.

When I finished school and got married, I reflected back and imagined so many girls in rural Uganda who suffer the same as my sister did. I realised how disadvantaged girls are. I decided to make it my mission to reach out to the needy girls and offer guidance and counselling as well as seek for support for well-wishers to get sanitary pads for the less advantaged girls. I started an organisation called *Raising Teenagers Uganda*, with the purpose of keeping girls in school to end child marriage.



*Pictured: Hope Nankunda*

In the last 2 years I have been able to support over 10,000 girls with re-usable sanitary pads and 6 water tanks to six schools to help girls manage their menstruation with dignity. I have done this with support from well-wishers who follow my work on social media.

*Hope Nankunda, Uganda*



### Role models in classrooms

The textbooks should be representative of all the different roles women can have and just not one specific angle. I advocate for systems to be changed from within an education system from a younger age.

*Aidah Bukubuza, Uganda*



## Innovative leadership initiatives



Inside school we are getting girls into leadership roles. We have sessions where the girls share their stories, we have links with our friends who are nurturing the girls in the process of becoming leaders. For

example, we have a club called *Girls Voices*. The club helps the girls to share their stories via others and they motivate and encourage others to carry on the work of education and to study despite of their challenges, so that is quite helpful. Again we are partnering with a few ladies to help mentor. We have now a club called *Girls for Girls* and we are going to introduce it next term. The girls and the ladies share their stories and nurture one another to lead them to a blissful community. This is people from the local community, both from in the school and outside school. Some of the people in the school are the teachers but in addition to the teachers we are also going to engage other ladies from outside from different professions. *Grace Nabuduwa Musingo, Head Teacher, Uganda*

## Women's potential for leadership

My childhood experience shaped my leadership aspirations to promote gender equality by creating a conducive environment for women and girls to achieve their full potential. I took charge of leadership, my family role and my personal life very, very early in life. By the time I was going to secondary school I was already in charge of my life. You will go to school, you will go to read, do prep, do your work, make sure the family's looked after, you pay the workers and all that, but that is to say that the environment was not good. Especially later when I was middle-level secondary education, I was about 14, 15, and people actually truly recognise you're a very bright child, they recognise you're foresighted and they see a future for you, though the best thing for somebody is to have you for themselves, so at some points the traps you survive are quite many. Very, very, very many. The experience shaped my leadership aspirations to promote gender equality to create an environment for women and girls to achieve their full potential. 16,000 market women have regained their voice and power in matters that concern them. *Rita Atukwasa, Uganda*



*Pictured: Rita Atukwasa*

## Parental support

I was born in Bungoma County where the girl child is not valued. I went through school but my dad was not in support of it. My mother struggled paying school fees for me. My mother had to persevere with my father's beatings because she had chosen to support a girl child who was me. My mother struggled earning a living by selling vegetables and working on people's farms.

I went to high school and performed well. My dad still wanted to engage me to an old man in the village. I ran away through the help of my mother and stayed at my uncle's place. My uncle took me to college where I studied teaching. I never went back home. I graduated and now am a teacher by profession. I thank God.



My father is now proud of me as a girl child. He now believes that a girl is important. Just like a boy child. He now gets support from me. Let each and every person support and encourage girls and women in Kenya by providing technical institutions to learn and empower women. We are all equal.

*Linda Simiyu, Kenya*



## Becoming a teacher

I became a teacher through the help of my uncle who sponsored me and I wanted to help the children to be able to learn and develop in a holistic way. I had a call and feeling that I should also help the girl child education given a chance.

*Anonymous, Kenya*



# Health

## Childbirth

I am talking about women without the luxury of choice. Women who can barely afford the Mama kit let alone the boda-boda fee needed to seek help kilometres away. Women whose babies are born to no clothes, and must trek more kilometres back after childbirth.

Women who don't have the luxury to make follow up appointments and die from postpartum complications.

Mothers whose death remains whispered in their communities and graves never get cement. Mothers who have been failed by the health system that won't equip our health centers.

I am adding my voice to this cause and imploring government to do better by these mothers. For now, let's all have the hashtag #WithoutMum

*Carol Ariba, Uganda*

## Family planning

Today we had a camp at the health centre just at the training centre and that camp was comprised of family planning. We did nutrition, we did cancer screening, HIV testing and you know the men came on board as well. And of course, they said, 'Now what is our role here?' We say, 'yes we are really happy to receive you and these are the services we are going to offer you. We're just going to screen you for any STIs, we're going to take your blood pressure, take your weight and see how your nutrition is.' They're happy because they are also being assessed and we are bringing them on board, because with this issue of gender you can never succeed if you leave the men behind. Because these are the family heads, these are the people who are supposed to steer and whatever a woman gets from the facility she is supposed to come and say, 'my husband, my dear one, this is what they have told me.' Some of them listen, some of them do not listen. So, you find that when you want to bring up these issues of gender equality, bring the men.

*Dr Susan Owkakil, Uganda*



## Mental health

Mental health of African women is a pressing issue. Women have interiorated ideas such as, 'you are black, you are ugly'.

*Fanidh, Mauritius*

*Artwork (left) by Veronica Ayobo, Uganda*

## FGM

When I was a young girl, I actually was meant to believe that I was not a proper woman. I was not a woman because I had not undergone female genital mutilation. This meant that I could not have any friends. I did not have any group of girls who could play with me, who could talk to me from school to home, for I was in a day school for both primary and high school. I didn't have anybody to walk with, because in their view and even actually the view of the members of the community, if you have not undergone the practice, you are a half a human being. There's a term that they use in Kuria which is very derogatory. If you are called that, nobody wants to associate with you. But then as I grew up, I noticed actually other people from different communities, now we're at university, they don't undergo FGM and they're very noble. So, I wanted to be like these ones and to influence more girls because my mother taught me that if you are educated, you don't need to undergo FGM, you are a complete woman.

*Dr Judith Boke, Kenya*

## FGM

Just like any other girl in my village, I never treasured formal education as a great deal. My main aim was to grow up faster, reach puberty, get circumcised, get married off and start bearing children, my own children. Wasn't that an amazing thought? Being the firstborn girl, my father wanted to have me initiated and immediately married off so that he could perhaps get some bride wealth to pay for his second wife. An uncircumcised woman is considered to be useless and an outcast in my own community.

Even as a university student, and the only female in public university from my locality, I'm regarded as an outcast and at no point should I address "men and women of the society" as I'm termed a betrayer and unclean. That's why I bear this bracelet in my right hand just to avert being punished for lack of identification from the real women in the society.

Together with the Catholic Church Barpello, a group was formed and named *RoseFlower Girls* whose main aim was to spearhead for girlchild education and help stop FGM. Surprisingly, of all the first founders, only two girls aren't circumcised to date. Very painful.

Mine hasn't been a smooth journey to help reduce the rate of FGM in the community. I have faced so many life threatening challenges which has forced me to stay away from home during certain months of the year. I have seen many young girls lose their precious lives because of FGM, countless have died while giving birth, enormous numbers have developed obstetric fistula, many are living nightmare lives from longtime trauma from FGM, countless have developed Urinary Tract Infections, young girls are married off to old men immediately after the initiation rite, many are fighting STDs, while others are losing their infants due to related birth complications. For how long will this last?

Something needs to be done. If only men from this community would not force the ladies to circumcise so they can be married off. If and only if our fathers would not force us to circumcise and give us chance to study, we would now be enjoying the national cake.

*Lilian Koskei, Kenya*

## FGM

I did not cry during my cut. I was bold and courageous and my aunties were very happy with me. The next girl did not cry also but the third girl cried in flight when the knife cut her up. She asked the circumcisor, 'are you killing me,' before bursting out in loud cries. Because of this her circumcision did not go well. In fact, the circumcisor came into the room where we were lying on straw mats and with terrible curses and outrageous sounds, subjected her to another round of cutting and mutilation because she had undermined her prowess as a circumcisor. Although the aunties who had implored me not to cry during the cut never told me the reasons for this, it is my belief, in hindsight, that they knew what dangers befell those who cried out of pain during the cut. A girl's vagina will be intentionally mutilated and her female anatomy massacred for so much as moving her fingers during the ceremony.

So how come I and my other friend did not cry when they cut us? Because at the point when the knife hits you and begins to cut you up, you have no feelings. You are hypnotised by traditional medicine, your eyes are turned inside and you float above your body. The circumcisors are usually traditional medicine women and there is a strong possibility that they use this medicine to keep your body numb until hours later when searing pain begins to percolate your whole body. The pain goes on for a week or two and the wound will heal leaving a scar where your clitoris and labia minora used to be. For these are the parts they remove when they circumcise girls. These missing parts will haunt you to the end of your days.

Yes, it is true they remove your labia minora and clitoris leaving a stump and scar. Some wounds turn septic and some scars leave keloids when they heal. These developments change the look of the vagina and this affects your intimate relationships throughout your life. Many times, years later, the fact that you have a scar between your legs reduces your boldness and prowess in the bedroom. Making new relationships becomes difficult. Giving birth becomes difficult and sometimes nurses will deride and laugh at you when you go for medical checkups and treatments. FGM is humiliating, degrading and shameful to the women who undergo it. It restricts you from doing certain activities, from being your natural self and it limits your potential as a woman.

*Anonymous, Kenya*





# Economic empowerment

## Economic solidarity through women's co-operatives

After facing a number of challenges, especially when I lost my husband, I decided to interact with other women. It is important that we come together as women to fight poverty in our households. Also, to support the children especially because I had been left with five orphans. I lacked the resources, the necessary resources to help take the children to school. So, through coming together as a group at least we have been in position to fight those challenges, much as we have not yet managed to finish everything. And in the group we're empowered with the knowledge and skills for organic farming.

So, after empowering us with those skills, we were able even to save money because we got also involved in the saving group, to join hands to save some money. That is the money we are using to take our children to school here, and also save some money for goat rearing. Some volunteers accepted to join us in teaching the children, we are very grateful that those teachers have accepted to offer service.

*Janet, Farmer and Community Leader, Uganda*

## Rising to challenges

We face a lot of challenges as ladies, in any forum men are given more hearing than ladies but as ladies we need to work hard, study hard and when any job opportunities come, we need to go for them without fear.

*Anonymous, Kenya*

Girls and women should come up front and show their abilities for others to recognise their effort in the community.

*Maria Wakacha, Kenya*



## Career shifts: banking, farming and motherhood

I was a rape victim at the tender age of 18 years old (rapist known to me) and went on to be a young mother. I became a contestant in a TV reality show about leadership in Kenya and was a banker of ten years. I quit banking to start farming (it's a very funny story that shouldn't have happened in the first place) and looking back that was the best ever decision I made. I am an educationist currently equipping schools in my village with reading materials to help improve communication. I solicit books from friends on social media and publishing houses and donate the same to the village schools. I am very keen about what goes into my system. I am an ardent farmer who practices 'from the farm to the table' policy even when I stay far away from the farm which happens due to work nature. *Anonymous, Kenya*



## Multi-layered empowerment strategies

We've been working with rural women in Ethiopia on economic empowerment. In that work we do in Ethiopia, we ensure that we have a multi-layered strategy. There, we are looking at women accessing the land, which is very critical, for them to have control over the land, not only to use somebody else's land but to control it and have the right to use the land.

The second thing we have been doing is to ensure that, once they have the land, we have given them the tools, the equipment to reduce the labour of tilling that land because one of the biggest challenges for our rural women is that they spend a lot of time using rudimentary tools and hedging their bets, ploughing the land, so we are giving them the technology to actually use that land.

The third layer of the work we are doing is to think now they produce better, they spend less time, what next do they need? We also are providing them with processing facilities in their own areas. What has been the biggest challenge with our women producers in rural areas, has been that they produce a lot of very good quality and good, could be vegetables, tomatoes or whatever, but they can't take them to the market, because the market is very far, maybe from here to Nairobi or to another city and they don't have the resources, the cars and everything. So, what we are now trying to do is ensuring that they have the equipment to actually process some of those products, package them and then they can be taken to market without having a lot of losses from their production.

Then the other thing we try to do that also helps with markets of course, of their products, but more critically for me at least, is the issue to do with leadership. Transformational leadership skills for women. And I think we are beginning to see that once you empower a woman with knowledge, knowledge that goes here, nobody else will take that away from her and she will use it and use it for the right cause.

*Letty Chiwara, UN Women Africa, Ethiopia*



*Pictured: Letty Chiwara*

# Role models: politics and professional life

## The school teacher

Gender affected me in such a way that my parents concentrated on teaching my brothers, after high school, I had to hustle on my own so as to continue with my education for I wanted to accomplish my vision. I worked as a house girl so as to raise money that could take me to college which I managed.

While I was in high school, there was a madam who was a role model to me. She used to be my close friend and that made me to admire being like her in the future which I did.

*Anonymous, Kenya*

## The ICT technologist

First of all, I always tell girls: technology sees no gender. You can be anything that you want to be and if you want to feel relevant in this 21st century you have to adopt the trends by force. If you do not, the world is going to leave you behind.

I do lots of ICT advocacy in community empowerment, agricultural, financial and health sectors. I train women to be more relevant and empowered. I'm looking to work for a start-up where I know I can directly play a role in changing things, set up policies that ensure women are taken care of.

I'm extremely vocal when it comes to gender issues anytime, I feel. Because it's something that I'm passionate about, I don't just let things slide. I try and articulate what I feel and how it looks like from my perspective so that they also understand.

*Aidah Bukubuza, Uganda*

The parliamentary candidate

In life there is need to undertake calculated risks, know who you are, what you want for self-actualization and for your community, then go for it. In April, 2014, I reached a rather seemingly hard decision to resign from my job with the local government for whom I worked for eight years.

My vision was and still is to become a model leader in the Parliament of the Republic of Uganda as guided by the spirit to represent the voices of my people and improve their economic, social and political angles through evidence-based deliberations, consultation, openness and advocacy for fair policies.

Born, studied and worked within the constituency, I have firsthand experience of the life in there. Looking at priorities that are being deliberated upon, it is clear that most of our representatives are either people who were voted because they had too much money or based on division along party ideology and the principles of indoctrination. Sometimes they ride on the emotion of the electorate embedded in petty cultural inclination, for example one's clan of marriage, sometimes the community perceived older age as a gauge for mental maturity.

The low level of livelihood and extreme poverty in Africa has forced our people to equate their votes to a 'Sacket of waragi' which is less than half a dollar, thus political commercialization and monetized politics.

My question is how we can work together to conscientize our communities to be able to appreciate that they have a role in determining the leadership dimension for their desired destiny? How can I make them know that their short-term decisions during popular election of leaders determines and affects them immensely in a long run?

Regina Akullu, Uganda

The accessible leader

I'd like to say to all the women here, when you find a woman who is in a leadership position: Do. Not. Leave. Her. Alone. Do not say, "oh she's there now so you can't go near her." Go there, talk to her. Yes. Keep advising her. I think that's very, very important.

Dr Thelma Awori, Uganda

The NGO executive

I'm a team leader, with a title of Executive Director of IST. It involves steering the organisation to move, day-to-day operations, in terms of implementing its strategy plan. It involves resourcing mobilisation, looking for money. We are a charity organisation so really a hundred percent of the funds we use are from philanthropists and funding agencies. And then of course I have to do the human resource management including the staff, how they build their skills, opportunities for them, for capacity building, including myself, financial management and a bit of directing, planning and budgeting, implementation and all that. But I also take a critical role of linking the organisation into the public and other stakeholders.

Rita Atukwasa, Uganda

The engineer

When I was a kid, I got electrocuted and was near death for some time and I felt like I needed to associate more with the power and get to know where it comes from what it does and things like that.

It's not easy to prove yourself as a woman growing up. People always think you cannot do things until you actually do them. Even here at work when I was new, people from outside the organisation, you're going to hold a meeting and they ask you, 'oh how long have you been here?' to assess whether you can actually be able to hold the meeting in the field and they do not give you respect. They give your boss the respect until you actually earn it, you do something that actually proves you're good at your job. So it's not been easy even now, but I keep always determined.

For you to become a registered engineer you have to have worked for four years in the field, so I'm doing that right now. I'm already a member of the UIPE, the Uganda Institute of Professional Engineers. I'm working towards becoming a registered engineer, maybe next year. I will write a report and see how it goes, that's my short-term goal. Then I also want to pursue a Masters. I'm still looking for university but I've done a few applications to the UK and that will actually take me the next step because I know that in order to work in those big organisations, like the dollar funded companies, World Bank, among the qualifications of an engineer you should have a Masters, so maybe I'll work there for a few years and then become self-employed.

Adella Kyohairwe, Uganda

## The lawyer

Currently I work for the *Institute of Social Transformation* as a Programme Officer. I have been managing the Busia projects on gender-based violence, helping women and the vulnerable communities access justice. That means I follow up cases within the communities. I try to mediate those cases where necessary. If they're beyond, we refer them to courts of law, especially if they are criminal cases.

Because of the justice system being very slow, cases are not handled so immediately as one would expect. However, our system of work is that we do not really refer, in those cases, to courts, given the fact that they delay, so the system is that we try to find other alternative means of solving those issues within the communities. The communities know their issues very well, so we do not look at court as an option. We look at mediating these issues and trying to sit with the leaders within the communities and see how best these people can compensate each other. We have so many cases that we have handled within the communities that have been so successful without necessarily going to court.

*Norah Nabwire, Uganda*

## The journalist

As new mothers we would find ourselves reporting for the general election and you're trying to do exclusive breastfeeding for six months and they need an update at 12am and I remember at one point I almost went mad. You know how breastfeeding is. It should not be a taboo to talk about this because it's children's food and it's really important. So you're there at 1am, we would all have the 24 hour news channel and updates, and I remember, at that point then, all of the editors were male. They don't understand how breastfeeding works and how you cannot be on standby for three hours, that you need to go express and come back. Thankfully my cameraman is a father and a very dedicated father for that matter. I remember at one place, you know how when you're a new mother and you've not had a chance to express and you cannot move your neck and my cameraman looked at me and said, "I can turn off this camera" and said, "let's go to a different location, we tell them that we're going to a different location but let's pass through our hotel, so you can express the milk, then we work." I said, "my goodness! This is the support!"

*Mercy Tanui, Kenya*



## Market woman entrepreneur

I was married but separated with my husband. He left me with three kids and so I had to care for them, paying school fees, paying for the house but I had no inner solution so I got the advice from my friend when I was at home. I decided to go in the market which was very near. I started to practice the goods and I made a store so that made me to start a business.

*Agnes Nambi, Uganda*

## Market woman entrepreneur

In the market I sell tomatoes, I sell onions, I sell avocados, I sell silverfish in the market but after the trainings we got from *Institute for Social Transformation* who advised not to do one job, create other jobs so that you can earn more I added. I started poultry-keeping. I



have five hundred layers. They started laying and also I've resulted to work for another business. I sell decorations, I decorate because in the market we have very many functions, graduations, wedding ceremonies so I thought that I should go and see these functions, what do they use, so at least I've started decorations. With training from *Institute for Social Transformation* I'm happy because we were able to do customer relations and business management.

*Catherine Mbabali, Uganda*



## The reverend

I was a keen Sunday school attendee as a young child, and most times thought priesthood was more of a feminine calling as I saw the men clad in their robes. By Primary 5 I told my parents that I was inspired to work in Church. But it was also believed that was a job for only men. When I probed to ask my father in particular he bluntly told me that God and the Bible are patriarchal. He did point out to me that God only speaks to men and not women because of Eve's sin. He also opened and kept referring to Paul's letter in the Bible forbidding women to speak in the assembly of men or teach in church (Corinthians 14: 34\_38). He said all he could do is to pray I get a good husband so that whatever religious thing I wanted to say I do it at home. He outright discouraged me from thinking of it, as God never speaks to women. What beat my understanding was that the same men who thought they were the only privileged people to speak to God were such funny people, involved in defilement, polygamy, drunkenness, violence, robbery, theft, and many other sexual perversions. This got me all the more determined to stand before their assembly and preach the good news of Christ. He thought I had become insane and actually said he would never accept my request. He stood in my path many times to ensure I don't get there. Exposure came to my rescue as I happened to visit my aunt in the university and as we went for a Sunday service. I found a smart and eloquent lady priest leading a service. I was so encouraged, she became my role model instantly. I went back home and kept referring to her and from then on I knew I would one day teach in church too. My father travelled to the same church and saw with his own eyes that lady and somehow he relaxed.

*Xavier Tino, Uganda*

## The politician

I'm a politician. I got in last year in the election. I had more votes than both the presidential candidates. I had more votes than them in Nairobi. But it was my fourth attempt in politics. My first attempt was to be mayor of Nairobi fifteen years ago and my name wasn't presented by the current president. So immediately after, somebody died, a Member of Parliament, I ran again, and I won but I was rigged out. Africa has a problem with free, fair and credible elections. Elections are decided in the boardrooms, not by the ballot, so we've got a long way to go to get our democracy right. Then I tried again in 2013 for the woman's representative seat where I was up against a woman, but at that particular time, I think tribal politics and partisan politics played a key role and I lost. But last year, was when I got in and I got in with a bang!

*Hon. Esther Passaris, Kenya*

# The rural women

*Mother, Father, Ancestors  
Rise and collaborate to create  
Opportunities for the rural women  
Then draw a force to increase  
Hope and respect for all*

Poem collectively produced by delegates,  
Kampala Inaugural Networking  
Conference,  
April 2018

# Culture

## Rape

I will speak for Uganda's case, most women leaders they don't even speak in Parliament apart from maybe three and they are called 'unruly'. We have a very huge number of women in Parliament, it's a sensitive issue when it's about rape. When you have a case of a young girl's rape, then the woman judge herself will ask you, 'but did you see how that girl was dressed?'

I always ask them that if someone is dressed in maybe what you call indecent, does that mean they should be raped? I've seen people in India who put on hijab and they still get raped, so that attitude comes from women to women most of the time to be very honest.

*Aidah Bukubuza, Uganda*

## Rape

In first year in the university I was raped and got a baby still so young (it's my first time sharing) and this frustrated me. I was kicked out by my Dad for two years but he later took me back. This really affected my life and career and it's because of this that I started *First-Track Mentors* to talk to girls and be their big sister.

I chose ICT because the internet consoled me when my life was in a mess. I am a proud mentor and big sister today. Seven years ago, I lost my father and the struggles my mom went through led to my Program under *First-Track Mentors* which supports single women and widows through Agriculture and Skills Development. Economic empowerment and Mentorship improves the lives of women and girls.

*Anonymous, Kenya*

## Parenting and early marriage

I give credit to my parents who encouraged me to keep in school despite so many young marriages taking place around us, as young boys were encouraged to use up the cows for marrying than losing everything to rustlers. My mom in particular used to tell us to consider "education as both a parent and a husband". I held her advice at heart and read my books at any slightest opportunity. I was always on and off school as I would be chased for school fees, but with persistence and encouragement from parents to set a good example to my young sister and brothers I got through high school. There was a lot of pressure building up on my parents from the neighbourhood to have me and my young sister marry off. Relatives and friends openly came home to convince dad and mom not to stress with girls. Thank God they had seen the goodness of education. That's how bad gender biasness affected many girls around us and they dropped out of school.

*Xavier Tino, Uganda*

## Parenting differences for girls and boys

I felt bitter in my heart when my follower who was a boy was taken to a boarding school. Therefore, when I was growing up I learnt that my father loved boys more than girls. He claimed those are people who will lower him into the grave, while girls are just like passersby in the home.

*Jenipher Amadala, Kenya*

My gender has affected me so much since in our family and clan people valued boy child education than girl child. So I did not have good attention when it came to education. I remember when I was forced to repeat a class because they wanted to pay for my brother before my turn.

*Anonymous, Kenya*



## Parenting and forced marriage

My own late father loved having boys than girls and unfortunately produced 5 girls and 2 boys. I watched my mother facing gender-based violence because she produced girls. Life as a girl child was not easy in our community. It was a time when parents never thought that girls' education was very important and therefore most of the girls did not go to school. Life was hard since culturally the girls were not around to have babies before marriage and if a girl got pregnant then the family members would take her to the falls and ask the brother to push her on the cliff and die. Life was not easy because some girls would spend most of the time in gardens, looking after the brothers and sisters and the next option was to marry since the families took them as a source of income. My opportunities were affected by being a girl. I spent most of the time looking after my sisters and my brothers. My father never took me to good schools because the society were abusing him for taking us to school instead of marrying us away.

Forced marriage in Uganda is still a big issue. Yes, forced marriage has affected many girls because of poverty, limited access to education and some of the traditional norms that dictate that girls are married at a young age to fulfil their role. Such practices can be changed through providing education of girls to higher education, for example, enhancing girls' access to quality education in safe environments. Provision of economic opportunities and incentives for girls and their families are very important. There is a need for training of change makers to provide information at a household level and community in schools, markets and churches. Considering the high levels of teenage pregnancy in Uganda, engaging young boys and girls in the discussion will be one of the ways of fighting forced marriages. Cultural leaders and elders also have to re-strategize on the social norms and beliefs to end this scourge. Government policies must be emphasized and popularized for parents to be aware.

*Elliot Orizaarwa*  
*Co-founder and Executive Director,*  
*Women and Girl Child Development Association, Uganda*

## Family relationships

Alcohol is the main problem that has affected most of the men and now you look at a situation where a man does not stay at home with his children. Now the children grow up when there's no discipline and they drop out of school, deliberately of course. Also, the man is not supporting them so eventually the boys also start leaving. They go to town to see what others are doing, what type of games they play, learning from them instead of being at school. So that causes problems.

Some men go to the extent of selling a piece of land and he doesn't mind about his wife and the children that are in his home. He will sell that land that the home is on and then he gets the money and what does he use the money for? Not for developmental activities. He uses the money for his selfish needs: for drinking, for buying himself clothes, for buying himself shoes. Some of them don't even buy clothes. They just drink with the money or they have another woman and family somewhere.

*Alibina Asekenye, Organic Farmer, Uganda (translated from Iteso)*

## Sibling relationships

It was not easy for me to get education. My father prioritised my brothers for education against us. Being a last born, I told myself that I won't live the life my sisters were living but wanted to be someone better in life. During school days, I had only 2 panties which I was given by my sister which was difficult, especially during menstruation. I never had an opportunity to get a sanitary towel but used some old rags and cotton wool to prevent blood from flowing on my uniform. This meant that I had to stay out of school during my menstruation days. After completing my Form Four education I went to stay with one of my brothers and taken to be a house help (maid) for three years. Whereby he was paid and never gave me the money. I thought of what to do next and went to stay with my sisters who were doing their own businesses (RIP). One day I asked my brother-in-law for 100 shillings of which he gave my sister to give me and believe me it was turning point in my life. I took the money and bought 2 t-shirts of which I sold each at 250 and got 500 shillings. Thereafter I went and bought others. I really wanted to learn computer and I used the money to go to college, whereby I learnt and bought my own computer, started computer services business which included typesetting and internet services. Thereafter I engaged in youth activities in my District whereby I was elected as a youth leader and thereafter a provincial youth leader.

*Pascaliah Makonjio, Kenya*



# Faith

## Blessings

I thank God for the gift of life, peace, love and compassion. Because if it were not his grace, I could not have knowledge, understanding and wisdom of how to manage the little that I am blessed with.

*Anonymous, Kenya*

# WOMAN!

*A heart of love  
A soul above darkness  
Tell the past story to  
Inspire the future generation*

Poem collectively produced by delegates,  
Kampala Networking Conference,  
April 2018

# The role of men

I am a trained journalist. I have worked for more than 20 years in *National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK)*, *World Vision Kenya* and *Transparency International* in various capacities: Information officer, Project Manager and Programme Co-ordinator.

Gender is critical in the work of peace and advocacy. For example, in NCCK, Peace Programmes focussed on children and vulnerable groups and with World Vision it was even more categorical. The most affected groups in conflict were women and children. In Transparency International I focused more on capacity building the grass root groups affected by corruption.

Supporting women groups and vulnerable groups is a tall order, especially in communities that are patriarchal. Economic empowerment awareness creation in terms of individual rights would be instrumental in changing the perception of society over women and gender parity in general. Rural Women in North Rift, North Eastern, and Nyanza region require special support. Formation of pressure groups for change involving men would be an added advantage.

*Moses Wanyama Masinde, Journalist and PhD Student, Kenya*

I think men and boys should also take on equality work, it's not only themselves that deserve better. Equality should be put in place to looking at fellow women and girls as equal. I can encourage a fair amount of guys to take part. For example if there are campaigns ongoing advocating for girls, let's say 'He For She', let's say 'Girls not Brides', let's say 'School First Marriage Later', in such campaigns men should also be engaged. They have t-shirts. If you are moving around Kampala, people are looking at it. There are car covers – you can willingly design one and you put one on your car so whenever you're moving someone can be reading that message and you'd be spreading the message - it should not be only ladies doing it for themselves but also men like us.

*Benn Ankunda, Uganda*

# Equality

*The history of Africa*

*There is joy and pain*

*Men treasure and cherish*

*Boys not Girls.*

*Brothers take sisters for sale*

Poem collectively produced by delegates,  
Kampala Networking Conference,  
April 2018



### The power of narrative: future directions

The themes that we selected to showcase our stories in this publication emerged during our conference events and from fieldwork with a wide variety of individuals, communities and organisations across East Africa and Mauritius. The importance of quality education, consistent access to good health and well-being, economic empowerment, powerful and influential role models, the eradication of gender-based violence and a range of other cultural practices that infringe on the human rights of women and girls have time and time again been raised as crucial if sustainable social change is ever to be made. The critical importance of the involvement of men, through movements such as the UN’s HeForShe global project, has also been identified as paramount. Gender equality benefits the whole of society and for this goal to be achieved, women and men need to work together collectively to accomplish this for the greater good of society. It is important to reiterate that the thematic priorities focused upon in this book directly echo those of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals 2030. We aim to strive together to achieve these goals through collaborative partnerships as our Network moves forward into the next decade.

As a reader, we hope that you have been inspired by the stories we have shared from the many changemakers that we have had the privilege to engage with during the course of this project. We also hope that the stories have highlighted how much work still needs to be done and why it is so fundamentally important for us to continue to fight for the rights of women and girls globally. By coming together as academics, NGOs, charities, politicians, policy makers and as individual changemakers, we can collectively address the challenges that remain to gender equality and work towards the goal of bringing gender equality to all communities globally.

For more inspirational stories and details on how to join our research Network, please visit:

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/lipp/language-gender-and-leadership-network>



Louise Mullany



Masibo Lumala



Rita Atukwasa



Roshni Mooneeram

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