

2026 Issue



SEATS *of* CHANGE

Amplifying women rights and leadership through
community journalism

COLOPHON

Publisher

Vice Versa Global

Editor-in-chief

Eunice Mwaura and Marc Broere

Project Coordinator

Hezron Ochieng

Final editing

Pius Okore and Faith Muiruri

Programme Lead Trainer

Rebecca Mutiso

Trainers

Eunice Magwambo
Juliet Atella

Community Journalists

Beryl Akinyi
Catherine Kamanga
Charity Kilei
Damaris Kiilu

Marion Kithi
Reginah Mwanza
Rey Bulambo
Victor Wanaswa

Design and layout

Ephy Mwaura and Caleb Nyaga

Cover

Caleb Nyaga

Websites

www.viceversaglobal.com

www.viceversaonline.nl

Email

info@viceversaglobal.com

This magazine is supported by the Government of Germany [the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)] and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH through the Promotion of Human Rights and Empowerment of Women in Africa (AWARE) project.



6 From Excluded to Elected
Redefining leadership and belonging.
By Reginah Mwanza

12 The Fight Against Preventable Loss
Reducing infant deaths through awareness.
By Marion Kithi

20 Healing Should Not Be a Luxury
Making therapy accessible to children.
By Charity Kilei

28 The Business of Survival
Enterprise in uncertain times.
By Victor Wanaswa

34 The Women Who Refused to Break
Rebuilding What Violence Tried to Destroy
By Damaris Kiilu

46 Fighting Back Against the Gully
Reclaiming land from climate destruction.
By Beryl Akinyi

52 Beyond Donor Dependence
Local solutions keeping services alive.
By Catherine Kamanga

60 Beyond the Ration Card
Refugees building survival beyond aid.
By Rey Bulambo

66 When Schools Close, Danger Opens
Why holidays expose girls to greater risk.
By Charity Kilei

72 Breaking the Trafficking Chain
The Woman Fighting the Coast's Hidden Trade
By Catherine Kamanga

78 The Women Rewriting Climate Survival
Grassroots solutions to a growing crisis.
By Beryl Akinyi

84 The Cost of a Period
When funding cuts hit girls first.
By Rey Bulambo

92 The Classroom as Escape Route
The School Defying Kibera's Odds
By Damaris Kiilu

102 Born Between the Boxes
The cost of early gender assignment.
By Marion Kithi

110 When Motherhood Interrupts Childhood
Young mothers rewriting their futures.
By Victor Wanaswa

118 When Motherhood Interrupts Childhood
Young mothers rewriting their futures.
By Victor Wanaswa

EDITORIAL



Eunice Mwaura

Veronica Lotesiro in Turkana is sitting at a table signing documents that will determine what happens to community land and who has a claim to it. Years ago, she would likely have sat on the sidelines of that same conversation, listening as decisions about land, inheritance, belonging, and future generations unfolded around her without her name ever being mentioned.

Then there is Grace Odembo, in the coastal town of Kilifi, standing beside survivors of trafficking and helping rebuild lives that violence and exploitation had almost taken away. Finally, there is Mwanamkasi Hassan in Kilifi, moving from one household to another, patiently challenging long-held beliefs and ensuring that children receive healthcare that could mean the difference between life and death.

Across different places and realities, these women wake up every morning and step into responsibilities that quietly shape their communities in ways that can easily be overlooked. They influence who has access to healthcare, owns land, receives protection, finds opportunities, is heard, and who can imagine a future beyond mere survival.

What stands out most is the reality of what communities would lose without this work. Imagine communities without Veronica safeguarding collective rights and access to land; young girls without Lydia creating pathways toward possibility; survivors returning home without Grace helping them rebuild their lives; or healthcare systems without women like Mwanamkasi connecting institutions to the people they are meant to serve.

Their work invites us to rethink leadership beyond formal power and to recognize how women advance rights, strengthen representation, and shape change both within institutions and in the everyday spaces where communities live, organize, and seek justice. Through this work, they navigate complex systems, support their communities, build trust where institutions have faltered, create opportunities where none existed before, and make rights and opportunities something people can actually experience in their daily lives.

This is where community journalism becomes powerful.

Every story in this edition has been written by a community journalist from within the communities represented here. That matters because there are things you can only see, understand, and explain when you are close enough to the people, the histories, the culture, and the everyday realities shaping a place.

These stories show communities as places where knowledge already exists, where leadership is already being practised, and where solutions are already taking shape. They bring forward the context that is often missed when communities are only spoken about from the outside.

A report may say that children are missing vaccinations, or that girls are leaving school. But local voices help us understand what sits behind those realities: the fears, beliefs, responsibilities, poverty, safety concerns, family dynamics, and cultural expectations that shape people's choices every day.

This is the value of community journalism. It allows communities to speak with dignity and depth. It gives space to the people closest to the issues to explain their own realities, in their own voice, with the kind of honesty and understanding that cannot be explained from a distance. By strengthening the community journalism ecosystem, we are also investing in local knowledge systems. We are creating a pathway for knowledge to move both ways: from institutions to communities, and from communities back into the spaces where decisions are made. In this way, storytelling becomes part of how action is shaped.

Eunice Mwaura

Editor-in-Chief, Vice Versa Global



Journalism for social change

Where Women Were Once Excluded, One Now Leads

Text: Regina Mwanza

In Turkana County, where land decisions have long excluded women, Veronica Lotesiro now leads them. As chair of a legally mandated land committee, she oversees decisions on ownership, disputes and community rights—demonstrating how legal reform, when locally enforced, can shift power and bring women into the centre of governance.

She calls the meeting to order, signs official documents and mediates disputes over land that stretches far beyond the village, functions that, until recently, women in Turkana were rarely allowed to perform.

“I knew it would not be easy,” she says. “But the land belongs to all of us.”

Veronica is chairperson of the Lokichar Community Land Management Committee (CLMC), the legally recognised body mandated to register and protect community land in Turkana South. Her position places her at the centre of decisions that determine who belongs, who inherits and who is

protected, decisions that for generations were made almost exclusively by men.

From the margins to the table

For most of her life Veronica watched land meetings from the margins. Decisions were made under trees and in elders’ councils; land was surveyed, sold or allocated and women were rarely consulted, even though they raised families and worked the land. “In the past, women were just told what had already been decided,” she says. “Even when it affected our children, we had no voice.”

That began to change when the Lokichar CLMC was established and formally registered under the Community Land Act. The committee formed in line with the Community Land Act 2016 and the constitution’s two-thirds gender rule, counts fifteen members, four of them women. Veronica emerged as chair after a contested selection process, and her leadership has become a visible exercise in shifting local power.

“Some people questioned why a woman should lead land matters,” she recalls. “But they had to accept the reality.”

From exclusion to agency

Today, when Veronica opens a land meeting and signs the minutes, she is not only administering a process, she is modelling a new politics in Turkana: women who claim, document and defend collective rights.

Her leadership is a testament that legal reform can matter when combined with organised evidence, public participation and relentless political pressure.

“The land belongs to all of us,” she says. “If we don’t protect it, who will protect our children’s future?”

Legal architecture and the political room

The Community Land Act gives communities the right to hold, manage and protect communal land; Article 60 of the Constitution demands equity and freedom from gender discrimination; Article 63 recognises community land. Veronica and the CLMC have used these legal tools as both shield and leverage. They have turned legal recognition into a set of practical actions: by registering the community, developing bylaws, drafting sketch maps and keeping detailed minutes. The CLMC has reframed land questions as matters of public administration rather than private bargaining.

On 14 November 2023, Lokichar received its Community Certificate of Title, marking a formal milestone that Veronica and the committee treat as both protection and political capital. “The certificate means our land cannot be sold behind closed doors,” she says. “It means the county and investors must consult us.” The CLMC rewired local participation. Barazas became the forum for consultation; women began to attend in larger numbers and to speak openly about inheritance, boundaries and planned land sales. CLMC records show that attendance at community barazas rose to more than two thousand after registration began, compared with fewer than twelve hundred beforehand. Today, widows are challenging decisions made without their consent and mothers are asking how land would be protected for future generations. Those civic shifts have had practical effects. Local records reported to the assistant chief indicate land dispute incidents in Lokichar have declined since the CLMC began operations, even as pressure on land rose because of oil



“Some people questioned why a woman should lead land matters, but they had to accept the reality.”

exploration and development projects nearby. “Disputes were once common. Now they are fewer,” the assistant chief says, attributing the change in part to more transparent, women-inclusive decision-making. “Women leaders have played a key role in mediating conflicts, discouraging rushed sales and reminding the community of the long-term consequences of losing communal land.”

From community evidence to county rooms

Veronica and her colleagues have not stop at local meetings. They have brought documented cases, bylaws and minutes to sub-county and county offices. They have presented memoranda and evidence at public participation sessions and met officials from the Ministry of Lands and county planning units to insist that the CLMC’s authority be recognised in practice as well as on paper.

“We were not asking for favors,” Veronica says. “We showed records: who lives where, who uses which pasture, and what our bylaws require. That convinced officials to take our claims seriously.” That political pressure has produced measurable institutional responses including routine visits by county survey teams, formal recognition of the CLMC in county planning conversations, and greater oversight of proposed land deals

by sub-county offices. The CLMC has also negotiated protocols such as informal MoUs with county officials to ensure that any private actor seeking access to land must first consult the community.

Mediating value and protecting livelihoods

Lokichar sits where land value is rising because of oil exploration. That has put pressure on customary holdings and exposed the vulnerability of households that once depended on charcoal, logging or informal sales. The CLMC has tightened controls by enforcing restrictions on destructive activities, negotiating compensation terms for community projects and vetting proposed deals to ensure communal benefit. Those protections have costs. Restrictions on logging removed a source of cash for some women, and the committee now seeks donor and government support for alternative livelihoods and training.

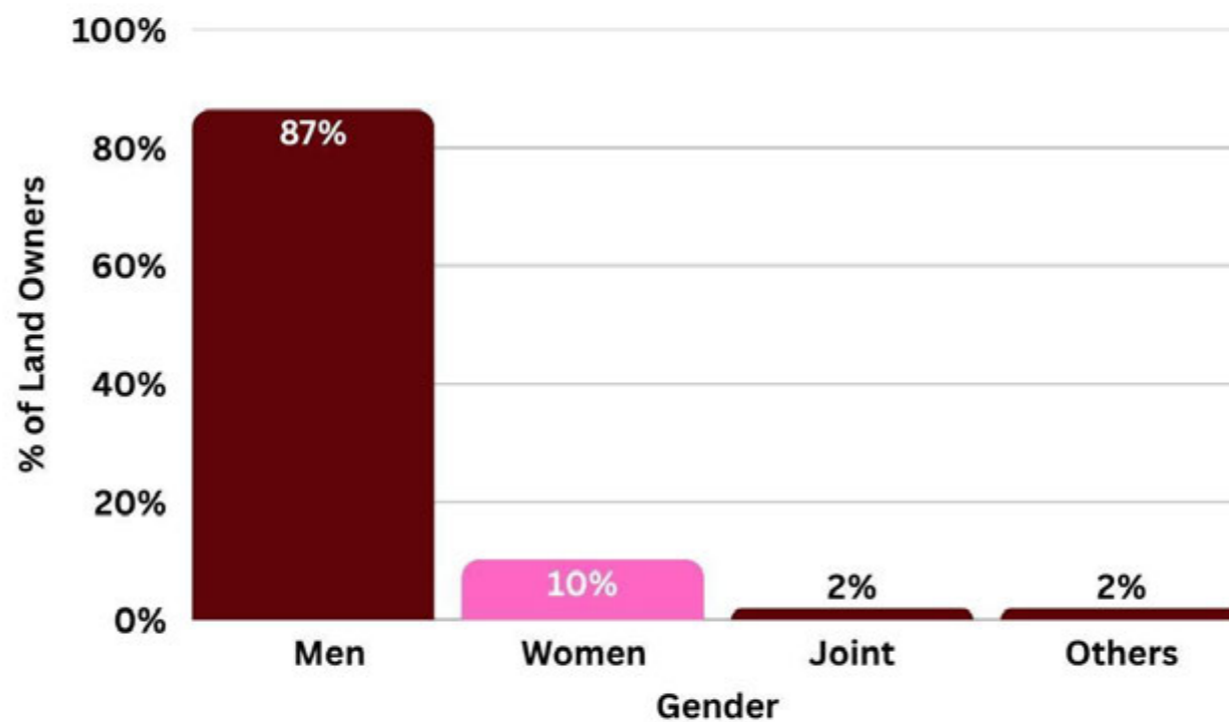
“We need help to replace the income that stopped when charcoal was curtailed,” says Jane Atabo, CLMC treasurer, who previously depended on firewood and charcoal sales to support her family. “The law protects land, but people also need ways to eat.”

Beyond dispute mediation, Veronica has pushed the CLMC to translate participation into institutional demands. The committee has proposed local bylaws on land use, submitted requests for budgeted support for women’s livelihood programs, and asked county committees to include CLMC needs in the sub-county development plans. “Those are explicitly political acts: they shift land governance from customary discretion to budgeted public responsibility,” she adds.

“We present costed proposals to the county,” Veronica says. “We ask for training, seeds, alternative income support and for our participation to be part of county planning.” The CLMC’s approach reframes women as rights-holders demanding concrete public investment, not passive beneficiaries of charity.

Land Ownership By Gender From 2013-2017

10% of Registered Land Owners Are Women



“In the past, women were just told what had already been decided.”

Accountability, documentation and dispute resolution

A core task of the CLMC has been to professionalise record-keeping: minutes, parcel maps, membership rolls and dispute logs. That documentation is political; it undercuts informal land captures and creates an auditable trail officials cannot easily ignore. Where disputes arise, the committee offers mediation and refers cases upwards with a paper trail, an administrative fix that raises the cost of corrupt, behind-closed-door sales.

“Documentation changes power,” says Jane. “When you can point to minutes and a certificate, it’s harder for someone

to steal land.” Lokichar is not unique: neighbouring Kapese and Nakukulas have also registered community land and set up CLMCs. What sets Lokichar apart is the prominence of women in leadership, a chairperson and a finance lead and the deliberate tactics they use to convert community evidence into county action. Veronica’s role demonstrates how local leadership can scale influence: by convening barazas, documenting claims, submitting memoranda, and insisting that county planners and MCAs include

CLMC priorities in CIDP discussions and budget lines.

Limits and the work ahead

Despite progress, the path is unfinished. Some CLMC rules restrict income-generating activities that previously sustained women. County budgetary support is modest and the CLMC’s requests for formal MoUs and predictable funding remain partly unmet. Moreover, the two-thirds gender rule is a floor,

“We were not asking for favours.”

not a ceiling: meaningful participation requires more than presence at meetings. It requires power to shape decisions and budgets. Veronica and her team are clear about next steps: secure formal MoUs with county departments that guarantee consultation and referral protocols; win explicit budget allocations for community land protection and women’s livelihood alternatives; and push for county adoption of CLMC bylaws into the CIDP so that protection is sustained across administrations.

“If the county writes it into the plan and the budget, it will last,” Veronica says. “That is what we are working for.”

Lokichar’s story is a test of devolution in practice: can county institutions translate constitutional commitments into protections that survive market pressure and elite interest? The Community Land Act gives communities rights; the CLMCs make those rights operational but only if county assemblies, treasuries and planning departments convert promises into line items and enforce consultation. If Lokichar’s certificate and committee work produce sustained county budget lines, signed MoUs and published dispute-resolution statistics, the shift will be durable. If not, the gains remain fragile: legal title without administrative follow-through can be contested in courtrooms or quietly undermined by powerful actors.

Lokichar’s CLMC has moved the community from being passive subjects of land deals to active rights-holders in the county’s development conversation. That transformation from exclusion to agency is both practical and political, and it offers a template for other communities where women must be at the table if land is to protect lives as well as livelihoods.



Demystifying Cultural Beliefs to Lower Infant Mortality in Kilifi County, Kenya



Mwanamkasi Hassan, a community health Promoter [CHP] in Kasarani village in Kilifi county, is attending to a mother and her child.

Efforts to improve child immunisation in Kilifi County highlight a deeper tension between cultural beliefs, access barriers, and health system capacity. At the centre of this shift are community health promoters, working to translate national policy into real change at the household level.

Text: Marion Kithi, Kilifi - Photos by Marion Kithi

She moves from door to door to spread vaccination awareness campaigns, educating parents on the importance of vaccinating every child aged five and below. [Marion Kithi]

In many households across Kilifi County, cultural beliefs continue to outweigh medical advice. This is particularly concerning for families with newborns and children under five, an age group where immunisation is critical to survival. Yet, deeply rooted traditions often discourage vaccination, exposing children to preventable diseases such as measles and chickenpox, and increasing the risk of early mortality and long-term complications.

This tension is reflected within Kilifi County's primary healthcare system, where immunisation planning, funding, and outreach are coordinated through county health departments under Kenya's devolved governance framework.

Jemima Katana, 76, a grandmother from Dodosa village in Kilifi County and a member of the Mijikenda community, raised her children without vaccinating them. She believed ancestral spirits would protect their health. "My son is named after his great-grandfather, who was a seer. In our culture, we believe he watches over his health," Katana says.

She also believed that vaccinated children had weaker immunity compared to those who were not vaccinated. This perception changed when she encountered Mwanamkasi Hassan during one of her community outreach campaigns.

Mwanamkasi began her work in 2014, moving from home to home to educate parents on the importance of vaccinating children under five. Through persistent engagement, she encouraged families to visit health facilities and adhere to immunisation schedules. "My goal is to ensure no child is left behind.

Every child should receive all required vaccinations by 18 months and continue attending clinic visits until the age of five," Mwanamkasi says.

According to the Kilifi County 2025 Long Rains Food and Nutrition Security Assessment Report, 76% of children in Kilifi County had been fully immunised against communicable diseases as of June 2024. Measles vaccination coverage stood at 76.7%, reflecting a 2% decline compared to the same period the previous year

Findings from the Kilifi County 2025 Long Rains Food and Nutrition Security Assessment Report, drawing on the Nutrition SMART survey conducted in June 2023, indicate that coverage of all basic antigens among children aged one stood at 89.8%, while measles coverage was at 80%.

The report further attributes the recent decline in immunisation indicators to vaccine stockouts experienced in many health facilities between March and May 2024, which disrupted services and weakened health-seeking behaviour. Despite these challenges, the gains in immunisation coverage reflect sustained, coordinated efforts by healthcare workers and Community Health Promoters (CHPs). Through consistent community engagement, they have worked to dispel myths and challenge entrenched cultural beliefs that have historically hindered vaccine uptake and placed infants at risk. These efforts align with Kenya's broader commitment to universal immunisation under its national health policy and devolved healthcare system, as well as continental priorities under Agenda 2063 to improve access to basic healthcare and reduce child mortality.

Mwanamkasi Hassan serves more than 234 households, making daily rounds to ensure parents follow recommended vaccination schedules for their children. After nearly a decade of continuous outreach, she has witnessed a gradual but significant shift in attitudes.

"I can confidently say that cases of kifaduro (whooping cough) and pindamongo (curved back) have almost disappeared in this area, compared to before," she says.

She has just completed a training session with Gladicy Kadzo, a nursing mother, on the importance of vaccinating children under five. Kadzo credits these community awareness efforts with helping her stay on track with her child's immunisation schedule.

"Back then, I didn't see the need to vaccinate my child because my culture was against it. We believed that children were protected by their ancestors," she says.

"My son has already received the measles vaccine. The government should empower CHPs and allow them to administer vaccines during door-to-door visits, especially for families in hard-to-reach areas."

Undocumented and Unvaccinated

"Children born at home often remain undocumented and unvaccinated. When they die, they are buried without ever being recorded in government systems," Mwanamkasi says.

Each month, she visits more than 80 households, making referrals to health facilities whenever a child is unwell. Her work is driven by a strong sense of responsibility to her community, grounded in the belief that prevention is better than cure. She also explains that pindamongo (curved back) is a childhood condition that can lead to death if left untreated.

Over the years, Mwanamkasi says community attitudes toward immunisation have shifted significantly, argely due to sustained awareness efforts.



Gladicy Kadzo, together with her son, is one of the beneficiaries of Mwanamkasi's community awareness initiative. [Marion Kithi]

"My son is named after his great-grandfather, who was a seer. In our culture, we believe he watches over his health," Katana says.

"The community's perspective on child vaccination has improved. Before, people used to demonise immunisation," she says. "They would say, 'hizo chanjo zina mashetani'—those vaccines have demons."

"My goal is to ensure no child is left behind. Every child should receive all required vaccinations by 18 months and continue attending clinic visits until the age of five,"

Community Togetherness for Wellness

She recalls a time when communities rejected even basic public health interventions. “People used to refuse elephantiasis drugs and throw them away. But when we began working as CHPs, acceptance improved. Now, those who miss out even come back to ask for the drugs,” she says.

Today, mothers who miss vaccination appointments actively seek her out for guidance—something that was rare in the past. Mwanamkasi also participates in public barazas—community forums where health issues, including immunisation, are discussed as part of local decision-making processes. “The community has embraced me. Challenges are fewer now. We hold public barazas to educate people on the importance of timely child vaccination,” she explains. In addition to vaccination awareness, she supports broader child health interventions. Working with Kilifi Referral Hospital, she distributes vitamin A supplements and deworming medication to children every six months. “When I administer the drugs, I record each child’s name to ensure I don’t give them to those who are not yet eligible,” she says.

During her visits, Mwanamkasi also trains mothers to identify signs of malnutrition using the Mid-Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) bracelet—a simple, tri-coloured tool used to assess nutritional status. A yellow or red reading indicates moderate to severe acute malnutrition and signals the need for immediate medical attention.

“I train mothers to screen their children using the *MUAC bracelet*. It’s a simple tool that helps prevent their condition from worsening,” she says. “When a child is at risk, I refer them to a health facility and continue to follow up until they recover



Mwanamkasi Hassan, a community health Promoter [CHP] in Kasarani village in Kilifi county, displaying a MUAC bracelet which helps mothers recognise signs of malnutrition in their children [Marion Kithi]

According to the Kilifi County 2025 Long Rains Food and Nutrition Security Assessment Report by the County Technical Steering Committee, Kilifi recorded 40 measles outbreak cases in 2025, with Magarini sub-county accounting for 32 of them. The report also indicates an under-five mortality rate of 0.17% and a crude death rate of 0.10%. Nationally, the challenge persists. According to UNICEF, fewer than 50% of children in Kenya have received the recommended doses of both measles and rubella vaccines.

Challenges

Despite progress, structural constraints within the county health system continue to limit full immunisation coverage.

These include delayed funding for Community Health Promoters (CHPs), limited outreach resources, and persistent access barriers in remote areas.

Mwanamkasi notes that even in Kasarani, an urban setting, mobility remains a challenge. Some households frequently relocate, making consistent follow-up difficult. At the same time, she has observed positive behavioural shifts. More mothers are choosing to deliver in health facilities rather than at home, improving early access to immunisation services. “Pregnant women have changed. They no longer rely on traditional birth attendants for massages and are increasingly delivering in hospitals, which makes it easier for their children to begin

vaccinations early,” she says. “What keeps me going is the love for my community. These are my neighbours—knowing they are safe and well is my priority.” Her awareness efforts have also contributed to improved child care practices, including exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life—an essential foundation for child health.

Exclusive breastfeeding rates in Kilifi County have been rising. Data from the District Health Information System (DHIS) shows an increase to 91.4%, up from 86.6% in 2022. Meanwhile, KAP Survey data from May 2024 indicates that early initiation of breastfeeding stands at 70%, with exclusive breastfeeding at 86.6%. SMART survey findings further point to broader improvements in child care practices.

Before Mwanamkasi began her outreach work, many parents who did not visit health facilities had little to no access to information on vaccination, as awareness was largely confined to hospitals. “When a mother only takes her baby to the hospital when the child is sick, that is often the first time healthcare workers ask whether the baby has been vaccinated,” she explains.

Support

To carry out her work more effectively, Mwanamkasi is calling for increased financial support from the government to ease mobility and outreach efforts. According to the Ministry of Health, the government launched a KSh 3 billion stipend programme for Community Health Promoters (CHPs). Under this framework, each CHP is entitled to KSh 2,500 from the national government, matched by KSh 2,500 from county governments, bringing the total monthly stipend to KSh 5,000.

However, Mwanamkasi says delays in county disbursements continue to undermine their work. “The county does not pay us on time. They owe us several months’ stipend, which affects our operations,” she says, pointing to the critical role of county governments in sustaining community health services. She adds that inconsistent payments make it difficult to move around and reach households regularly. “We are doing our part. Let the government also do its part. We need their support for the benefit of the community,” she says.

A Beneficiary’s Story

Mwanamkasi recalls a case that reflects both the challenges and impact of her work. “Back then, I visited a family that had neglected a sick child. I took the baby to the hospital, where he received treatment and began his vaccination schedule, even though it was delayed,” she says.

The child had been neglected after losing a parent and was living with HIV. He had not been born in a hospital and had missed early immunisation. Through Mwanamkasi’s intervention, the child recovered and completed his vaccination schedule. “He is now in high school. He calls me his mother, and whenever he has a problem at school, he reaches out to me,” she says.

Immunization Coverage

Driven by the efforts of Mwanamkasi and other community health stakeholders, vaccination coverage in Kilifi County has improved significantly.

Her work reflects a broader shift within Kenya’s devolved health system, where Community Health Promoters (CHPs) are increasingly central to bridging the gap between policy and practice—especially in regions where cultural beliefs and

access barriers continue to shape health outcomes.

Kilifi County Health Director, Dr Hassan Lela, says that 60.7% of children in the county were immunised in the last financial year. “We have been conducting large-scale outreach programmes in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, using a multidisciplinary approach across all seven sub-counties. We expect both coverage and access to continue improving,” he says.

To strengthen awareness, the county has partnered with various organisations to expand vaccination campaigns. “We are increasing community awareness and improving access to vaccination services. One of our key priorities is to empower communities with the right information so they can access these services for themselves and their children,” Dr Lela adds.

He also emphasises the importance of facility-based deliveries in ensuring timely immunisation. “It is critical that mothers attend antenatal care and deliver in health facilities. This helps ensure that children receive the correct vaccine doses and are fully immunised by the age of two,” he says.

In addition, Dr Lela has urged parents to consent to HPV vaccination for girls aged 10, which is administered through schools as part of efforts to prevent cervical cancer.

Kilifi County Primary Healthcare Coordinator Edward Mumbo says all primary healthcare centres in the county have the capacity to provide vaccines prescribed by the Ministry of Health across all age groups—from routine childhood immunisation to vaccines for pregnant women and girls aged 10 to 14. “All community health units serve as immunisation points. They also play a

“The county does not pay us on time. They owe us several months’ stipend, which affects our operations.”

key role in advocacy, mobilisation, and promoting vaccination services across the county,” he says.

However, Mumbo identifies limited partner support as a major challenge. With few implementing partners, the county government remains the primary driver of immunisation services, which constrains outreach—particularly in hard-to-reach areas such as Ganze and Magarini sub-counties.

“Funding for outreach is very limited. As we speak, there are still communities that struggle to access immunisation services. Some people have to walk more than ten kilometres to reach a health facility,” he explains.

He also points to persistent misconceptions, particularly around the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, which protects girls aged 10 to 14 against cervical cancer. “Some communities still have misconceptions about the HPV vaccine, which has led to low uptake,” he says.

To address this, the county is developing targeted strategies to improve acceptance. “We are working to change community perceptions and encourage parents to bring their daughters for vaccination,” he adds.

Mumbo emphasises that demand for vaccination remains low in some areas, underscoring the need for continued

advocacy at the household level. “We need sustained mobilisation so that vaccination becomes a priority within families,” he says.

The county is also seeking to strengthen collaboration with the Ministry of Education to improve vaccine uptake in schools. “Sometimes when vaccination teams visit schools, teachers do not allow students to be vaccinated. We need teachers, parents, and healthcare workers to work together to support these efforts,” he notes.

He adds that the integration of Community Health Promoters (CHPs) into immunisation campaigns has helped expand outreach and address gaps in awareness. “CHPs play a critical role in following up with households, educating communities, and strengthening vaccination programmes,” he says.

While awareness of vaccination has improved significantly, Mumbo cautions that gaps remain, particularly in sustaining demand and ensuring consistent access.

As Kilifi County continues to expand its immunisation efforts, the progress made at the community level raises a broader question: whether these gains will be matched by sustained institutional support, adequate financing, and accountability within the health system, or risk stalling without them.

“We are doing our part. Let the government also do its part. We need their support for the benefit of the community.”



Making psychological therapy affordable to children in Kenya

Mary Akinyi, founder of Arukah Safe Haven, frames the issue simply: “Children are not broken. They are communicating pain the only way they know how. We just don’t listen.”

TEXT CHARITY KILEI

In Kenya, thousands of children struggle with mental health challenges, yet access to care remains limited by cost, stigma, and systemic gaps. As national policies lag behind growing need, grassroots initiatives are stepping in to bridge the divide by offering support where formal systems continue to fall short.

“I created a safe space for children—a space I always wanted to have as a child.”

More than 12 years ago, Mary Akinyi lost her mother. As a child, she struggled to understand the cause of her mother’s death, carrying unanswered questions into adolescence.

“My mother was constantly crying, but she would wipe her tears and tell me I wouldn’t understand,” Akinyi recalls. At the time, her mother had been treated for headaches and a short illness. It was only years later, after studying psychology, that Akinyi came to understand that her mother

had been living with severe depression, undiagnosed and untreated.

What she did not yet realise was that her mother’s experience reflected a broader gap in Kenya’s health system, where mental health conditions often go undiagnosed, underfunded, and misunderstood.

Akinyi remembers her mother becoming increasingly withdrawn—speaking to herself, expressing thoughts about death, and gradually losing the ability to care for her family. What appeared to be physical illness was, in reality, prolonged psychological distress that eventually took

a toll on her body.

“Back then, stress was not considered a disease, so she never went to the hospital,” she says. Healthcare affordability remains a major barrier for many low-income families in Kenya, particularly when it comes to mental health services. Limited awareness, cultural stigma, and financial constraints continue to restrict access.

The hidden crisis

According to the [Kenya National Adolescent Mental Health Survey](#), 44% of adolescents aged 10 to 17 experienced a mental health challenge within 12 months, affecting their well-being, relationships, and school performance.

Of these, about 12% were living with a diagnosable mental disorder that significantly impaired daily functioning, while a further 18% experienced substantial symptoms that interfered with their lives. Despite this, access to affordable, child-focused mental health services remains limited, especially for low-income households.

At 14, Akinyi herself began experiencing anxiety and depression as she processed grief without adequate support. After being sent to live with her grandmother, her struggles deepened, pushing her into a survival mode that would later shape her life’s work.

Years later, she enrolled in a psychology course at Moi University, driven by a desire to help children and parents navigate the kinds of challenges she had faced.

While all children are vulnerable to [psychological challenges](#), experts warn that those in single-parent households often face greater risk due to emotional strain, financial pressure, and limited parental support. This was the case for Deborah (not her real name), who struggled to understand the changes in her daughter’s behaviour.

Her 14-year-old daughter began spending long hours locked in her room—curtains drawn, windows shut—sitting in darkness, withdrawn and increasingly distant. Like many parents, Deborah initially dismissed it as a normal phase of adolescence.

Afraid of being perceived as a failed parent, she responded by correcting and disciplining her, hoping things would improve. Instead, the distance grew. “It disturbed me that my daughter had become rude, distant, and secretive. She used to be happy and respectful, but she had completely changed,” Deborah says. Looking back, she traces the shift to a few years after the death of her husband. In trying to fill that gap, she threw herself into work. “I was trying so hard to provide, not realising that while I was physically present, I was emotionally absent,” she says.

As time passed, the situation worsened. Her daughter began showing signs of depression, experimenting with substances such as cannabis and alcohol, and withdrawing further from family life. Attempts at discipline, including physical punishment, only escalated the problem.

“It was only after speaking to a therapist that things began to change,” she says. After overcoming the stigma of seeking help, Deborah enrolled her daughter in therapy at Arukah. “During the counselling sessions, I began to understand something painful but important: my daughter didn’t just need provision, she needed presence. She was carrying grief, confusion, and loneliness that I had not seen because I was focused on surviving and providing.”

Session by session, both mother and daughter began to heal, gradually rebuilding their relationship. “I thought being a good parent meant providing. Now I understand that being emotionally present in your child’s life is just as important,” she says.

Unaffordable care

Yet for many families, access to such support remains out of reach. Pamela Nasimiyu, a single mother of four, faces a similar struggle. She recalls receiving a call from her mother-in-law warning that her 16-year-old daughter was threatening to run away and live on the streets.

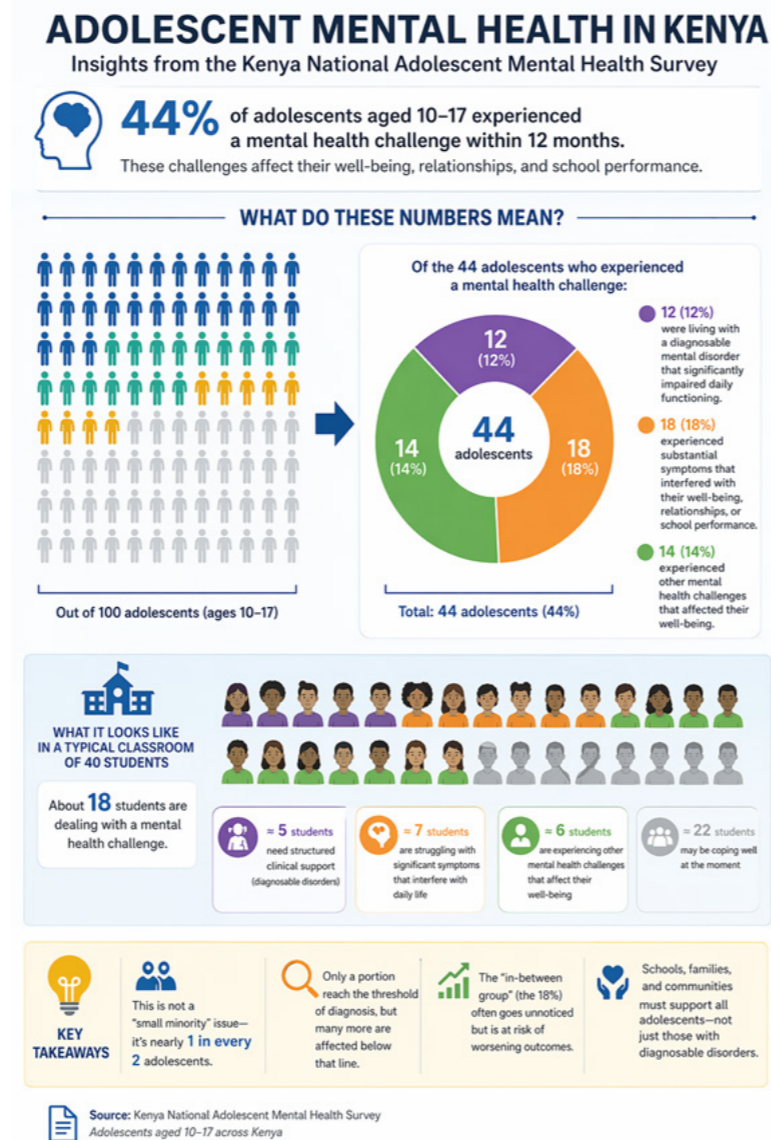
Her children had spent years moving between relatives as she worked in Nairobi to support them. She had also left her marriage after enduring prolonged conflict and abuse—experiences that left both her and her children grappling with fear and anxiety.

Findings from a study titled *The Prevalence of Psychological Problems of Students from Single-Parent Families* suggest that many children raised in single-parent households struggle with low self-esteem and heightened levels of anger. Many also experience symptoms of depression and anxiety, which interfere with concentration, motivation, and overall school performance.

For Pamela, this reality is deeply personal. The separation from her husband, though necessary for safety, added another layer of emotional strain to her family. Her eldest son, once full of ambition, now feels stuck and overwhelmed, unsure of how to move forward. Cultural expectations have further complicated his situation, as inheritance norms limit his ability to claim land after his mother left the marriage.

Her youngest son, in Grade 7, has grown increasingly withdrawn, barely speaking—a silence that reflects unspoken fear and emotional distress. Her third-born, now in Form Three, has also retreated into himself, using isolation as a coping mechanism.

“I don’t know where to get help. What I earn is too little, and I have to balance between school fees and feeding,” she says. For Pamela, therapy remains both inaccessible



and unaffordable. Like many parents in similar situations, she can only hope that time will ease her children’s struggles.

A child-centred solution

For many families, the lack of accessible mental health support leaves few options, forcing them to navigate complex challenges alone. It is this gap that drove Akinyi to act. In late 2024, she founded Arukah Safe Haven to provide free therapy to underserved children and parents. The initiative works through schools, churches, and community support groups, with dedicated programmes for vulnerable children, including those living with sickle cell disease.

Her approach is simple but deliberate: to offer accessible, child-focused mental health support for young people aged 10 to

18 facing anxiety, depression, and other psychological challenges. Akinyi’s work is grounded in Kenya’s legal framework, which guarantees the right to health and upholds principles of equality and non-discrimination—rights that often fail to translate into practical support for children.

She was particularly drawn to the experiences of children from single-parent households—children like herself. Many parents described their children as “stubborn” or “difficult,” while the children themselves felt unseen and unheard. For Akinyi, these stories echoed her own.

She began as a volunteer, offering counselling to both children and parents. Over time, her work evolved into structured programmes delivered in schools, churches, and specialised support groups. Yet her work unfolds against a much larger national challenge.

[Kenya is facing a growing mental health crisis](#). An estimated 5 to 10 million people—roughly 10 to 20% of the population—are living with conditions such as depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.

Despite the scale of the challenge, mental health care receives less than 0.01% of Kenya’s national health budget—a fraction of the 5% recommended by the World Health Organization for low-income countries. This underinvestment reflects broader prioritisation gaps within the health system, where mental health remains one of the least funded areas despite rising demand.

At a broader level, initiatives like Arukah Safe Haven align with continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Union’s Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy, both of which emphasise youth well-being, inclusive education, and equitable access to services. However, the gap between

policy commitments and implementation remains significant.

Multiple factors continue to drive the crisis. Poverty, trauma, and social and economic hardship—alongside the growing influence of digital environments—are intensifying mental health challenges, trapping many in a cycle where poor mental health and economic vulnerability reinforce each other.

Stigma further compounds the problem, discouraging individuals from seeking help and perpetuating harmful attitudes toward those living with mental illness.

Environment impact

The Kenya National Adolescent Mental Health Survey identifies anxiety disorders as the most common condition among young people, affecting more than a quarter of adolescents. Depression is also a major concern, particularly among older teens. Trauma-related symptoms and behavioural difficulties are especially prevalent among those who have experienced loss, violence, or other forms of adversity.

Experts emphasise that beyond individual experiences, a child’s environment—at home, in school, and within the community—plays a critical role in shaping mental health outcomes.

Loice Okello, a counselling psychologist, underscores the importance of the home environment. “At the core, children need their basic needs met, but beyond that, they need to feel loved, cared for, and appreciated,” she says.

Children who grow up in supportive and nurturing environments are more likely to develop self-confidence and emotional resilience. In contrast, exposure to physical violence, emotional abuse, or harsh communication can leave lasting psychological harm.

Okello notes that unresolved emotional pain can lead to unhealthy coping

mechanisms, including substance use and social withdrawal. “When children are pushed to focus only on achievement and image, they may begin to believe that success justifies any means,” she explains. “This mindset can later contribute to broader social challenges, including corruption.”

At the same time, she emphasises the need for balance. “While love and affirmation are essential, families must also teach discipline in a healthy and structured way,” she says. “Children who grow up in abusive environments may normalise that behaviour and replicate it in their own relationships.”

Without adequate guidance and support, children may struggle to navigate social environments such as school or places of worship. This can lead to rejection, bullying—both offline and online—and persistent criticism, all of which can trigger anger, self-stigma, and hopelessness. “When emotional distress is prolonged and unaddressed, it can escalate into suicidal thoughts or self-harming behaviours,” Okello warns.

Coordinated response

Despite growing awareness, systemic challenges continue to limit the effectiveness of mental health interventions in Kenya. Chebet Birir, a mental health advocate, journalist, and founder of Restored Minds Akili Care Kenya, argues that addressing these challenges requires a coordinated, multi-level approach.

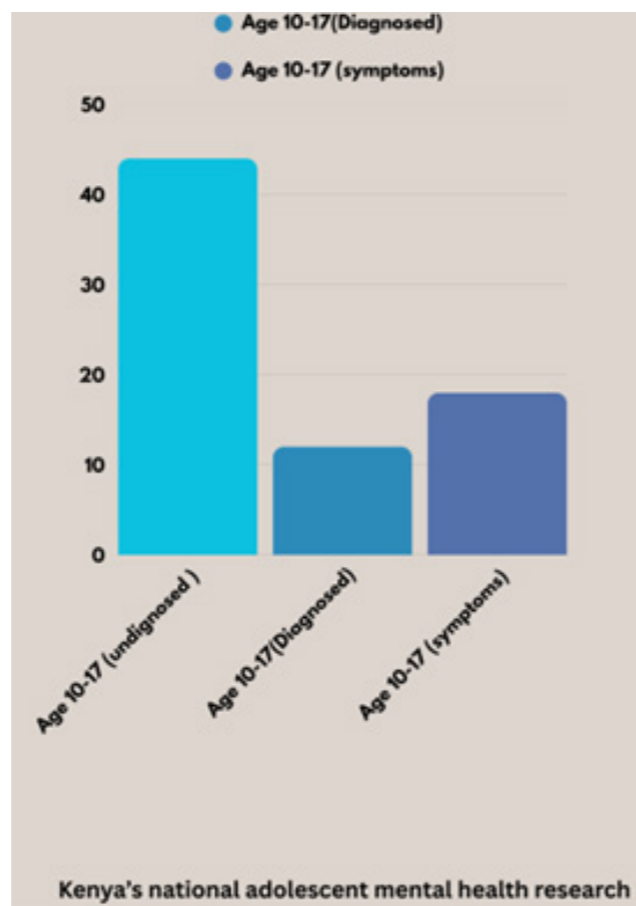
She calls on the government to prioritise mental health by increasing funding, fully implementing existing policies, and ensuring that all healthcare facilities provide consistent counselling and psychiatric services.

She also emphasises the need to integrate mental health education into school curricula and make counselling services

accessible to students. In addition, she recommends the development of national helplines and digital platforms to expand access to support. “Working with organisations, schools, community centres, and employers allows for pooling resources and expanding reach,” she says.

Birir further highlights the importance of culturally responsive care, where therapists adapt their approaches to reflect the social and cultural realities of their clients. She also points to the growing role of digital tools in delivering accessible mental health education and counselling services.

Within schools, she stresses the importance of involving parents in the therapeutic process, while ensuring that privacy and scheduling are handled carefully to avoid stigma or disruption to learning. For institutions with limited resources, she recommends shared or visiting therapist models as a practical alternative.



Challenges in Building a Child-Focused Mental Health System

She also underscores the role of employers in advancing mental health awareness, suggesting that workplace wellness programmes can support both employees and broader community initiatives.

According to Birir, sustainable progress will depend on collaboration, innovation, and sustained investment. These challenges are reflected in emerging evidence. [A study titled Understanding the Lasting Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences](#) found that one in five Kenyan adolescents has experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Young people with higher ACE scores were significantly more likely to experience mental distress—24% reported moderate to severe depression, while 21.4% experienced moderate to severe anxiety. Adolescents from single-parent households recorded ACE scores 18% higher than those living with both parents, underscoring the compounded risks faced by vulnerable groups.

Okello points to early warning signs that are often overlooked. Sudden behavioural changes—such as loss of interest in activities, disrupted sleep, neglect of hygiene, emotional numbness, and frequent physical complaints like stomach aches or migraines—can all signal underlying stress.

She also highlights “role reversal,” where children are forced to take on adult responsibilities due to illness, death, or family conflict. “The child must be supported and empowered, while the parent must also receive therapy,” she explains.

Policy gaps

“What we lack are the structures, trained personnel, resources, and motivation to put existing policies into action. Once the government commits the necessary support, we may not need to reinvent the

wheel.”

These challenges persist despite the presence of national frameworks intended to guide mental health services. The Kenya Mental Health Policy 2015–2030 recognises children and adolescents as a vulnerable group and calls for their inclusion in planning and service delivery.

It also promotes integrating mental health care across sectors such as education, healthcare, and community services to enable early identification and intervention.

However, while the policy acknowledges children’s needs, it provides limited child-specific implementation pathways, instead embedding them within broader system reforms. This gap continues to constrain practical impact.

For Akinyi, bridging the gap between affordability and stigma requires collaboration. “While free therapy is important, it is not sustainable on its own. We need stronger structures and partnerships to scale,” she says.

The scale of unmet need is reflected in recent research. A study published in *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* found that 37.7% of upper primary school children in Kenya met the criteria for at least one mental health disorder.

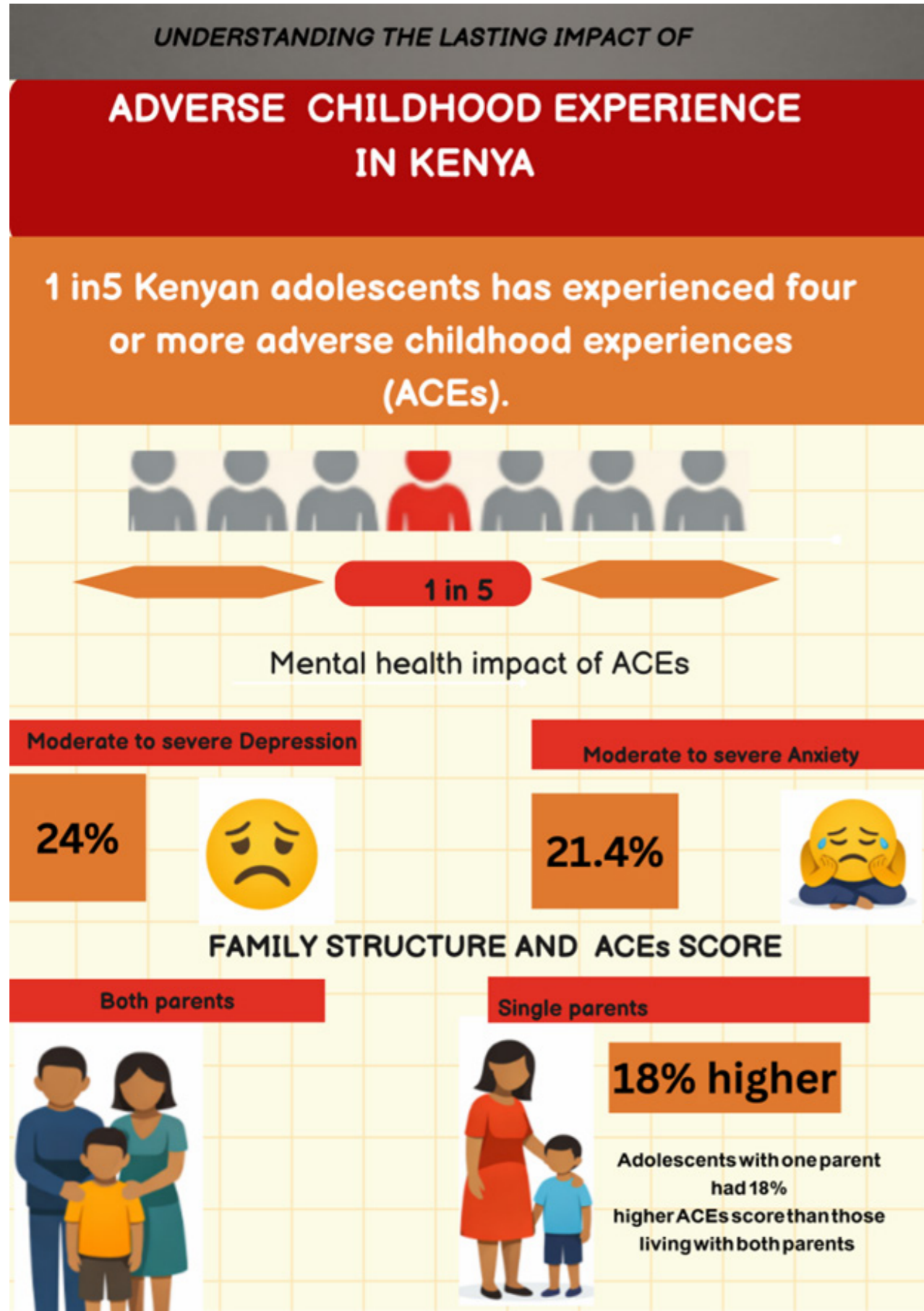
The most common issues included physical complaints linked to emotional distress (29.6%), followed by affective disorders (14.1%) and conduct disorders (12.5%). About 18.2% of the children experienced multiple mental health conditions.

These findings underscore how widespread mental health challenges are among school-aged children. Akinyi identifies underfunding as the single greatest barrier to care. She calls for increased investment in community-based counselling and the integration of mental health services into primary healthcare systems.

“When funding is this low, services remain

out of reach for those who need them most," she says. "We need sustained investment, not short-term projects."

For Deborah, therapy has been life-changing, but access remains limited. "I was lucky to find support," she says. "Many others are still struggling quietly because they cannot afford care or do not know where to turn. With more funding, more lives could be saved."



SEMA AFRIKA



Sema Afrika is a podcast that brings the voice of the youth to the corridors of power. It aims to provide a platform for young people to express their opinions and ideas. It seeks to foster open dialogue and present a range of perspectives to encourage constructive conversations and actionable solutions. Through engaging interviews, practical advice, and expert analysis, the podcast seeks to empower youth to pursue their passions and achieve economic independence while contributing to a vibrant and innovative global economy.



EVERY MONDAY
HOSTED BY
CALEB NYAGA

PODCAST



Innovative enterprise tackles youth unemployment in Makueni County

Text: Victor Wanaswa

In Makueni County, where youth unemployment persists despite training programmes, a local enterprise model is offering a different approach. By linking skills, mentorship and markets—and engaging county systems—Youth Asili is demonstrating how community-led initiatives can inform policy and reshape how employment solutions are designed and sustained.

For Kennedy Kioko, earning a diploma in Electronic Engineering was the easy part. Finding a job was not. At twenty-three he joined thousands of qualified Kenyan youth trapped in unemployment with degrees and certificates that opened few doors. “I spent two years in the city, moving from one office to another looking for work,” he remembers. “Every day ended in rejection. It slowly eroded my dignity and hope.” Kennedy’s story is not unique. Reports from a recent survey by the KNBS and Kenya Labour Market Information System shows persistent youth joblessness,

indicating that 17.7% of Kenyan Youths are unemployed. The counties like Makueni face the same drain of ambition and opportunity. But in this red soil county, a community-led experiment is offering an alternative path: skills-based enterprise, anchored in mentorship, markets and measurable support. Its name is Youth Asili, run locally by Jumuisha Initiative and for people like Kennedy it is changing lives.

From diploma to chicks

Kennedy found his pivot when Youth Asili arrived in his ward. The programme paired practical training with startup inputs: a three-month cohort, technical mentorship and a starter poultry pack. “They gave me thirty-two chicks and taught me husbandry, feed management and basic bookkeeping,” Kennedy says. “I grew my stock to more than a hundred and began selling eggs and birds. I earn

steady money now.” That turnaround from jobseeker to employer and mentor is central to Youth Asili’s pitch. Trainees are not left at graduation with certificates and no follow-through. Jumuisha’s staff provide ongoing mentorship, support market linkages and encourage participants to take small business steps immediately: sell eggs locally, supply nearby kiosks, or aggregate produce for larger buyers. Makueni County’s demographics underline the need. A majority of working-age residents are young, and local statistics show sizeable numbers of qualified but idle youth. National initiatives such as the NYOTA programme aim to inject seed capital into wards, but Kenyans and local implementers often point to a missing ingredient: structured mentorship and market integration. Youth Asili supplies exactly that: training plus incubation and a community safety net.



KEY LABOUR MARKET STATISTICS

Latest available survey

National Snapshot · Kenya

PRESSURE AREA

↑ High

17.7%

Youth Unemployment

Actively seeking but not finding work

UNDERUTILISED ↔ Underemployed

35.9%

Youth Underemployment

Working but not enough hours/income

VULNERABLE

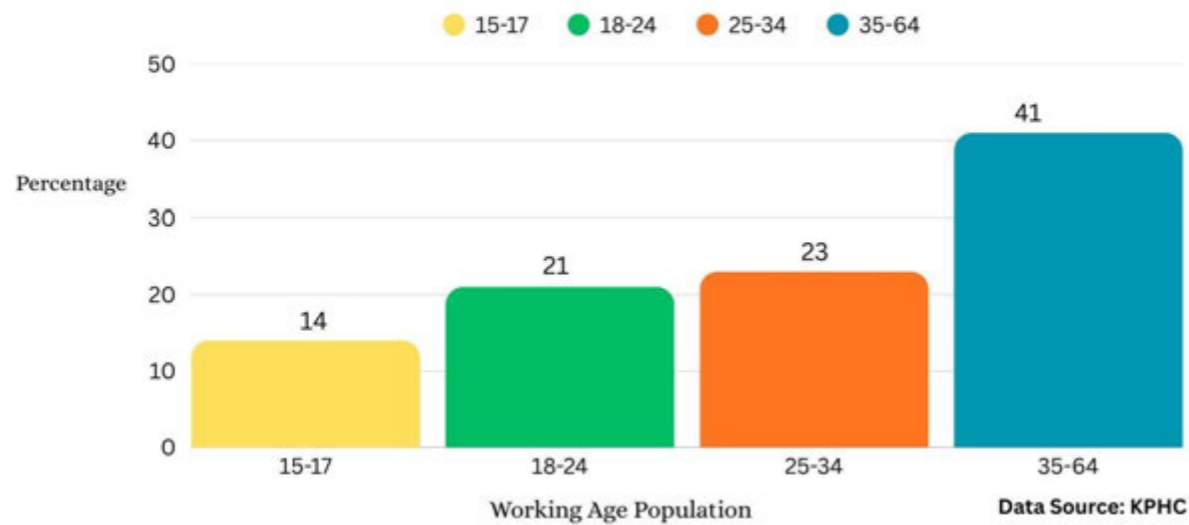
ⓘ Poverty

44%

Youth Below Poverty Line

Living below basic income threshold

Distribution of the Working Age Population by Age Categories



Designed by Victor Wanaswa

In nearby Ukia village, Priscilla Ndunge, who had no formal education, joined Youth Asili and now runs a mixed poultry-and-vegetable microfarm. “Before I relied fully on my husband,” she says. “Now I sell eggs and vegetables and plan to expand.” Her earnings pay school fees and reduce household vulnerability, a direct translation of training into economic independence.

Scale, impact and the numbers to watch

Since launching in two thousand and twenty-two, Youth Asili reports having trained more than two hundred young people, with ninety-four specifically in poultry farming. Some cohorts have transformed into microenterprises supplying local markets and schools. Jumuisha Initiative’s executive director, Karen Munyae, stresses the model’s endurance: “We don’t just train and leave. We walk with participants until their businesses become sustainable.”



Karen Munyae the Executive Director of Jumuisha Initiative in Makueni County

Yet the programme confronts capacity limits. Demand outstrips supply because resources restrict cohort size, and recruitment often relies on ward leadership, which can miss the most vulnerable. The initiative’s lessons are policy-relevant: training plus starter assets plus mentorship raises survival rates for microenterprises; replication requires public co-investment. Kennedy now mentors two young people

inside his poultry enterprise, providing wages and skills transfer. That multiplier effect that helps trainees to create jobs for other trainees is precisely what county planners need to see replicated. “With more support, youth unemployment can become a thing of the past,” Kennedy says. His testimony is practical: mentorship produces not just skills but sustained revenue, local hiring and civic stability. Jumuisha’s model sits where county

priorities and national law intersect. Kenya's Constitution obliges the State to create opportunities for youth under Article fifty-five; devolution gives counties responsibility for local economic development, agriculture and youth empowerment.

In Makueni, county officials such as the CEC for Gender, Children, Youth and Social Services publicly endorse enterprise approaches that convert training into work. Eng. Sebastian Kyoni, the county CEC, argues that "sustained investment in youth enterprise is critical to reducing unemployment," and points to programmes like Youth Asili as scalable complements to county development plans.

Where Youth Asili influences policy is in practice: it supplies a tested package counties can adopt. A cohort training, starter inputs, mentorship, market aggregation and follow-up. Jumuisha has begun presenting its results in county forums and budgets, urging officials to fund seed rounds and to integrate mentorship into county youth schemes. That kind of civic-to-county feedback is exactly what devolution was meant to enable.

Closing policy gaps

Youth Asili exposes practical policy gaps and offers remedies. First, small starter grants or in-kind packages must be matched with mandatory mentorship and market facilitation. Second, ward-level selection must be transparent and include

"I grew my stock to more than a hundred and began selling eggs and birds. I earn steady money now."

measures to reach excluded youth. Third, counties should create simple procurement or purchasing windows for small producers such as schools, clinics and county kitchens can become reliable offtakers for eggs, vegetables and honey. Finally, matching funds and recurrent budgets are needed so cohorts are continuous, not intermittent.

Jumuisha's leaders have begun to press these points in public participation forums and with county technical teams. "We present costed proposals that show how a modest county line in the youth enterprise budget can multiply into jobs and taxable activity," Munyae says. "That's the conversation we need with MCAs and the treasury."

Youth Asili is not only about young men; women like Priscilla find routes to autonomy. Gender-sensitive recruitment, mixed cohorts and targeted support for women with caregiving responsibilities are part of Jumuisha's design. The results matter not only for incomes but for household resilience: women who run microfarms can smooth consumption and reduce reliance on harmful coping strategies.

The initiative faces real constraints. Funding limits cohort size; transport and market barriers erode margins; and donor dependence leaves programmes fragile. Recruitment reliant on ward leadership sometimes excludes the most marginalized. And national programmes such as NYOTA, while promising, often lack the mentorship and local follow-through Jumuisha provides. Local advocates call for integrated responses: county budgets that ring-fence youth enterprise lines, technical support from agricultural extension services, and formal linkages to national youth funding with conditional mentorship requirements. When these elements

"We don't just train and leave. We walk with participants until their businesses become sustainable."

align, small startup grants can translate into durable livelihoods.

A public-private ecosystem

Some graduates have diversified in baking, catering and apiculture, showing the model's adaptability. Local small traders, aggregators and cooperatives have started to purchase from programme graduates, and Jumuisha is building those relationships into structured market pathways. That ecosystem is essential: training without buyers collapses; buyers without quality supply fails too. Youth Asili's work in quality control, packaging and business planning is the bridge. The project sits squarely within Kenya's constitutional and devolution frameworks: Article 55 on youth opportunity, county mandates on agriculture and local economic development, and national commitments to youth employment.

At continental level, Youth Asili echoes Agenda 2063's call for inclusive growth and the African Union's emphasis on youth as drivers of transformation. The political test is whether county treasuries and national programmes adopt the mentorship-plus-market approach as policy, moving from pilots to funded programmes.

For Kennedy, the change is intimate: "I no longer have to choose between pride and survival," he says. Priscilla's confidence now backs a family and gives her a voice

in local meetings. For Munyae and Jumuisha, these personal transformations are evidence and an argument that small investments, well structured, produce systemic returns.

Institutionalizing success

To move from promising pilot to county policy, Youth Asili needs three things: consistent public co-financing, formal mentorship standards embedded in county youth programmes, and reliable market offtake mechanisms that absorb increased production. Jumuisha has tested the model; Makueni's policymakers now face a choice: scale with clear county commitments and budget lines, or let grassroots gains remain localized and fragile.

Youth Asili's model reframes youth unemployment as solvable at the intersection of training, mentorship and markets. It demonstrates that counties can convert policy promises into livelihoods by funding starter inputs, mandating mentorship and creating local procurement windows.

For Kennedy, Priscilla and the hundreds of young people who have passed through Youth Asili, entrepreneurship is no longer an afterthought, it is a political and economic pathway that, with public backing, can be replicated across counties and turn policy into measurable progress.

"mentorship produces not just skills but sustained revenue, local hiring and civic stability."

That ecosystem is essential: training without buyers collapses; buyers without quality supply fails too.



From left, Ruth Juliet, the programmes coordinator at the Centre, Eunice [In purple] and Sarah Dafala during an interview at the centre /PHOTO BY VALLERY NAGARA

From silence to strength:

HOW KIBERA WOMEN ARE RECLAIMING THEIR LIVES

TEXT DAMARIS KIILU

In Kenya, thousands of children are navigating mental health challenges without the support they need. As stigma, underfunding, and limited access persist, one psychologist is working to bridge the gap. She is creating safe, affordable spaces where children and families can heal, be heard, and rebuild.

It is Wednesday afternoon in Kibera. Under the scorching sun, children play in narrow lanes, their laughter filling the air. The settlement feels alive, almost weightless. Just metres away, however, a different reality unfolds.

Inside the Feminists for Peace, Rights and Justice Centre (FPRJC), women sit in a circle on plastic chairs, speaking in low, measured tones. Their eyes shift uneasily as they revisit memories they would rather

forget. The room is quiet, but not empty. It carries stories that have been buried under fear and shame for years.

Place of refuge

Founded in 2016, the grassroots organisation works to combat sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) while supporting women and girls to rebuild their lives. What unfolds in spaces like this is not isolated. It reflects a broader gap in Kenya's response to gender-based violence, where legal protections exist, but access to justice, protection, and recovery services

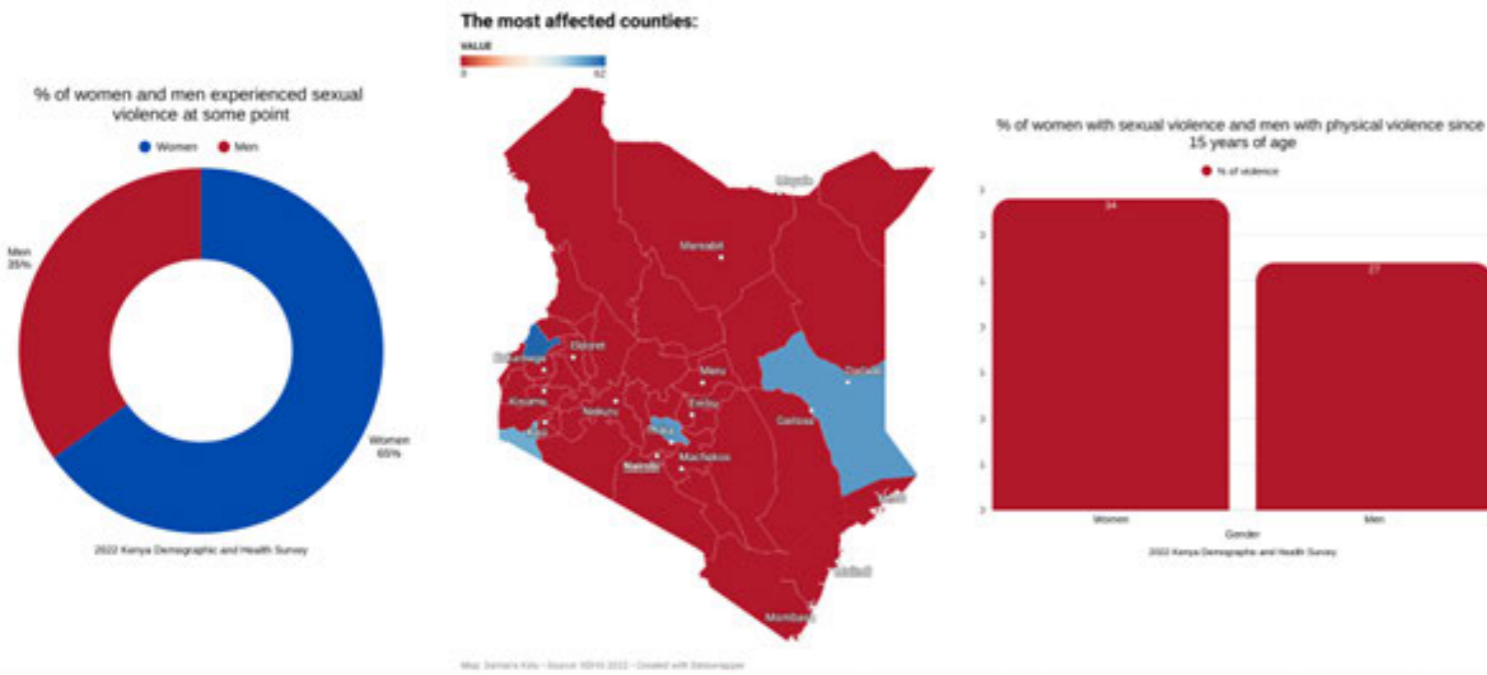
remains uneven.

For many who walk through its doors, this is the first place where their pain is met with belief, rather than judgment. Eunice*, a mother of five and a resident of Kibera, is one of them. Her life before the centre was marked by violence, loss, and constant struggle.

She married young, without guidance or support, after becoming pregnant while still in school. Her mother had died, and her father was her only source of support. "I had no one else," she says quietly. Her story mirrors a broader pattern.



GBV IN KENYA - KEY STATISTICS



SOURCE: KDHS

Designed by Damaris Kiilu

The organisation also uses what it terms “feminist activism”—including community murals—as a way for survivors and staff to process trauma and build collective resilience.

stigma, and systemic barriers continue to limit survivors’ access to justice and protection. Organisations like FPRJC attempt to bridge this gap by offering safe spaces, advocacy, and pathways to recovery. The centre provides psychosocial support, legal referrals, and temporary shelter for survivors. At the same time, it addresses economic vulnerability through skills training and income-generating activities. It also produces and distributes handmade, reusable sanitary towels to help address period poverty, enabling girls to attend school with dignity.

It runs intergenerational sessions that bring together girls and their parents to discuss reproductive health and rights, while also operating a safe house for survivors of rape and domestic violence. Through this, survivors receive psychosocial support, medical referrals, and legal assistance.

The organisation also uses what it terms “feminist activism”—including community murals—as a way for survivors and staff to process trauma and build collective resilience.

According to the 2022 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, 34% of women in Kenya have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, compared to 27% of men. An estimated 13% of women have experienced sexual violence, nearly double the rate reported by men. A 2020 report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) further estimates that about 45% of women and girls aged 15–49 have experienced some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime.

Despite these figures, enforcement gaps,

Ruth Juliet, the programmes coordinator at the centre, says their work is grounded in three key areas: sexual and reproductive health, access to information and services, and advocacy against gender-based violence. “We serve as a safe space for women and girls seeking support,” she explains.

The centre has 20 active members and has reached more than 1,000 women. “Some survivors walk in on their own, while others are referred through partners, community networks, or phone calls. Over time, it has become known as a place of refuge. Because many of our staff live within the community, we can identify vulnerable women and respond quickly,” she adds.

For Eunice, however, the journey to that space was long and painful. After giving birth to her first child, she returned to school, hoping education would offer a different future. However, without a stable support system, she eventually married the father of her child, believing it would provide security. Instead, it became a space of conflict.

“Arguments and fights became routine. After my second child, nothing improved. By the time I had my third, the abuse had escalated. My husband’s family said I was not respected because I had not given birth to a son,” she says, holding back tears.

One day, during a violent altercation, her husband attacked her. “He took a knife and stabbed me,” she says. Fear and stigma kept her from leaving. She worried about being judged as a woman who had failed in marriage.

She was taken to Nairobi Women’s Hospital for treatment, but the case did not progress. “I was not empowered. Nobody followed up,” she says, pointing to gaps in institutional support and accountability.

After some time away, she returned—because surviving alone was even harder. The violence continued. As tensions

with her husband’s family deepened, particularly over her not having a son, the pressure became unbearable. In 2014, she left the marriage for good.

Raising her children alone has not been easy. Making ends meet remains a constant struggle. At one point, heavy rains flooded the single room they lived in, sweeping away the little they had. “I had to start afresh. I found casual work at a construction site, where I met Editar Ochieng, the founder of the Feminists for Peace, Rights, and Justice Centre,” Eunice says.

“I told her about my life, hoping for a job. She could not offer me one at the time—but she offered support.” That support began with conversations.

For many survivors, navigating the justice system becomes a second battle.

At the centre, Eunice met other women who had survived gender-based violence. As they shared their stories, a pattern emerged. Their experiences, though deeply personal, were not isolated.

According to the 2022 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, 41% of women who have ever had a partner have experienced physical, sexual, emotional, or economic violence. Data from the National Police Service further shows that 1,639 cases involving the killing of women were recorded between 2022 and 2024—a 10% increase over the period.

Within the centre, shared pain became the foundation of collective healing. After joining the group, Eunice began therapy. She describes the process as slow and, at times, overwhelming. “Healing is not easy. It happens step by step,” she says.

At first, she struggled to speak about her

experiences without reliving the pain. But listening to others helped her realise she was not alone. Gradually, she found the strength to open up. The centre also trained her in peer support, equipping her with skills to care for herself and assist other survivors still trapped in violence. Today, Eunice is an advocate against gender-based violence. “I would not want anyone to go through what I went through,” she says.

Cost of Activism

But this work comes with risks. Eunice

explains that rescuing women from violent situations is often dangerous. Activists are frequently accused of breaking up families or encouraging women to leave their marriages.

The work also takes a personal toll. “There is also the risk to our safety,” she says. “Rescue operations often happen at night, in unfamiliar places. You don’t know who you will encounter.”

“Sometimes, our children are left alone as we respond to emergencies. Distance and lack of transport make it even harder,” she adds.



Purity during an interview at Feminists for Peace, Rights and Justice Centre /PHOTO BY VALLERY NAGARA*

Despite these challenges, Eunice continues. She says she cannot stop because she knows what it means to be trapped in violence.

But her story is not unique.

Purity*, a resident of Kibera, joined the organisation after surviving prolonged and severe domestic violence. She says the abuse was sustained over time. At one point, her husband assaulted her so severely that she suffered spinal injuries, head trauma,

and damage requiring bladder surgery. She experienced memory loss and was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit.

She later underwent further treatment and mental health assessments, which helped her recovery, though not fully. Through the organisation, Purity has received continued medical care, psychosocial support, and a safe place to live. “I cannot return home because that is where the abuse happened. I now live in a safe house with my children, but they have not



Purity during an interview at Feminists for Peace, Rights and Justice Centre /PHOTO BY VALLERY NAGARA*

returned to school because it is near the home we fled,” she says.

Despite her husband’s arrest, the case did not proceed as expected. Eight months later, he walked free despite Kenya’s 2010 Constitution guaranteeing women’s rights and the Sexual Offences Act criminalizing GBV. The matter was closed, highlighting persistent gaps in survivor protection, accountability, and the integrity of justice processes.

“I am unable to work because of my injuries, and the animals I once depended on for income were poisoned,” she adds.

Purity recalls how she came into contact with the centre. “One day, Sarah Dafala found me in critical condition. She took me to the hospital, helped me access legal support, and ensured my husband was arrested,” she says. She has remained under the organisation’s care since 2023. Before the case was concluded, Purity says she began receiving calls from a senior government official urging her to go to court and state that she had forgiven her husband. She refused.

“When the case went to court, documents were presented saying I had forgiven

him—but I never made such a statement. Later, I learned the case had been closed,” she says.

Through the organisation, she says, she has regained a sense of stability. Her medical care and basic needs have been supported throughout her recovery.

Holding back tears, Purity makes a direct appeal: “Authorities should ensure cases like mine are handled fairly, and that survivors receive justice.” She adds that her husband should be compelled to provide financial support so she and her children can live with dignity.

Legal hurdles and access to justice

For many survivors, navigating the justice system becomes a second battle. Lawyer Margaret Nyambura explains that justice does not look the same for everyone. “For some, it means a perpetrator being punished through the formal justice system. For others, it comes through negotiation—often via alternative dispute resolution—which is discouraged by law because it can disenfranchise survivors,” she says.

She attributes many of the system failures

to structural barriers, including a lack of safe alternative housing, limited awareness of legal processes, and corruption within enforcement systems. She also points to the mishandling of cases by police, ranging from dismissing survivors to failing to investigate or soliciting bribes.

While procedures exist—such as recording cases, issuing OB numbers, providing psychosocial support, conducting investigations, and presenting suspects in court within constitutional timelines—implementation remains inconsistent.

Nyambura calls for specialised SGBV courts, survivor-centred adjudication, stronger enforcement of the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act, increased funding for legal aid, and more safe houses. Kenya's legal framework provides clear pathways for protection and prosecution. However, for many survivors, lived experiences reveal a gap between policy and practice. In this space, grassroots organisations often become the bridge between survival and justice.

Anne's Story

As the day unfolds at the centre, Anne* joins the group—her presence warm, her energy noticeably lighter. But her journey

has been anything but easy. “I faced very difficult circumstances when I was young. Before I knew about the organisation, my life was very hard,” she says.

At the age of 14, she was assaulted by multiple perpetrators—an experience that left her with serious medical complications affecting her reproductive health. She reported the case to the police, accompanied by her mother. But despite assurances, no action was taken.

“I did not feel safe or supported,” she says. “It marked a long period of struggle.” Her experience reflects broader systemic challenges in case handling, survivor protection, and accountability.

Things began to change after she found the centre. “A friend told me about the organisation and encouraged me to seek help. Here, I received safety, counselling, and medical support. Over time, I regained my strength and confidence,” she says.

Today, Anne* speaks openly about it—not because the pain has disappeared, but because she has found a way forward. “I now see a future for myself,” she says. She runs a small clothing and shoe business, which she started with assistance from the organisation. The business has since



become a source of independence and stability.

Reflecting on her journey, she encourages other survivors not to give up. “What happened cannot be undone, but life can still move forward,” she says.

Bridging support systems

The centre operates a short-term rescue shelter, hosting survivors for up to 48 hours before connecting them to longer-term support through referral networks. Cases that cannot be handled internally are referred to partner organisations and specialised shelters.

A dedicated GBV team lead coordinates safety planning and ensures survivors receive timely, dignified care across medical, legal, and psychosocial services. According to Juliet, working in a community facing economic hardship brings challenges. She says limited resources constrain how many women and girls the centre can assist and restrict access to mental health support for both survivors and frontline staff.

She describes the work as emotionally draining, particularly where insecurity is high. “Perpetrators can target staff responding to abuse, while the organisation lacks sufficient resources to

relocate or support them when they are at risk. Resistance within the community also poses difficulties,” she says.

Some residents accuse the centre of breaking homes or promoting immorality. This pushback reflects broader tensions around feminist organising and women's rights advocacy. Juliet says the team counters this by emphasising their core mission: building a safe and dignified community where women's and girls' experiences are taken seriously.

Despite these challenges, she notes that impact is often gradual and measured in small but meaningful ways.

“For us, transforming even one woman's life is progress,” she says. “Economic empowerment programmes do not benefit everyone equally, but even two women sustaining a small business is a step forward. For survivors, finding the courage to seek help or report abuse is already a significant shift.”

She adds that many women continue to suffer in silence due to fear and social pressure. “Impact can be as modest as a woman finding ten shillings to move from one place to another; or as profound as finding her voice after years of violence. Each step matters,” she says.



Key recommendations from the GBV Technical Working Group

Measures aim to strengthen laws, enforcement, and survivor protection



Source: Report of the Technical Working Group on Gender-Based Violence, handed over to President William Ruto on January 27, 2026

Building the centre from within

Sarah Dafala, a Project Officer under the Women’s Health, Rights and Well-being pillar and the GBV team lead, says the centre emerged directly from the lived realities of women in the community. “I support programmes in the safe house and assist with legal processes. The organisation’s Executive Director was herself a survivor, and together with other

women, they formed a group that later became this centre,” she explains. “In the beginning, they were simply sharing their experiences. Many realised they had all survived sexual violence. From that, the idea of the centre was born—to create a space where women could be free from violence and rebuild their lives.” She says one of the biggest challenges remains access to information. “Many

survivors do not know their rights. They do not know the law or where to seek help when violence occurs,” she says. The centre works to bridge this gap by connecting grassroots groups, communities, and service providers. “We bring information closer to the community and empower people with knowledge that is often out of reach.” According to Sarah, the impact is visible in the trust survivors place in the space. “People come back because they feel safe here. That trust and freedom are an impact in themselves.” She also points to cases where sustained follow-up has led to arrests and prosecutions. “It shows that systems can work when there is consistent follow-up,” she says. “We also see survivors starting small businesses, gaining independence, and reducing their vulnerability to violence.”

Some residents accuse the centre of breaking homes or promoting immorality.

Empowered recovery

The centre also runs FemiNgarisha, a small business initiative designed to support survivors’ economic empowerment. “FemiNgarisha was born out of the realisation that we cannot just host women without supporting them,” Sarah says. “Survivors need transport, food, and basic necessities when we respond to cases. Through this initiative, some have been able to gain economic independence.” On counselling, she describes their approach as a form of first-response support. As a paralegal and peer counsellor, she provides immediate comfort and reassurance before referring survivors for specialised psychological care, alongside medical and

legal interventions. “It has had a significant impact,” she says. “You met a survivor we have worked with for two years—you can see the trust she still has in us.” For Sarah, healing is measured in small but meaningful shifts. “There was a time we could not speak to some survivors without tears. Today, you met them, and no one cried. That is how we gauge healing, when the tears begin to stop.” Still, the burden of care remains heavy, particularly in the absence of adequate resources and the challenges survivors face in navigating justice systems. “For survivors, you may not forget—but you learn to forgive, including yourself, and begin again. We are here to walk that journey with them,” she says.

She also calls for stronger government action, including stricter enforcement of laws and greater accountability for perpetrators. “Survivors continue to suffer while perpetrators walk free. The system must ensure justice is not only promised but delivered,” she adds. For the Feminists for Peace, Rights and Justice Centre, impact is rarely immediate. It is seen in a woman learning to tell her story without breaking down. In a survivor starting a small business. In a mother who finally feels safe enough to sleep without fear. For Eunice, the centre has been transformative. “My life has changed,” she says. “I have become more stable. I have a business, and I can stand strong.” She now sells toiletries—a small but steady source of income that allows her to care for her children and rebuild her life with dignity. Her message is simple, but urgent: “Women need opportunities. They need support.”

Legal gaps

These individual stories unfold within a broader national conversation on

accountability. Wangechi Wachira, Executive Director of the Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW), says one of the key challenges is the absence of a distinct legal definition of femicide in Kenyan law. This omission continues to complicate efforts to address and prosecute gender-based killings.

“When cases are treated as ordinary murder, the gendered motive is erased,” Wachira says. “It strips away recognition of femicide as part of a broader continuum of violence against women—one that begins with control and discrimination, escalates to physical and sexual abuse, and can ultimately result in killing.”

Without legal recognition, she adds, responses remain fragmented—data is inconsistent, accountability is weakened by pressure to “settle” cases, and prevention efforts remain underfunded and uneven. She calls for urgent legal reform, a survivor-centred justice system, and sustained investment to break the cycle of impunity. At a broader level, Kenya’s commitments extend beyond national frameworks. Under Agenda 2063 and the Maputo Protocol, the country has pledged to promote gender equality and prevent and punish violence against women. These commitments place clear obligations on state institutions. These priorities are further reinforced in the African Union’s Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy (2018–2028), which emphasises protection, access to justice, and economic empowerment for women.

These concerns are reflected in recent national efforts to address gender-based violence. In January 2025, President William Ruto gazetted a 35-member Technical Working Group on Gender-Based Violence, including a focus on femicide, following a surge in cases across the country.

The group’s findings were stark. Despite

Kenya’s progressive legal and policy framework on equality, dignity, and freedom from violence, survivors continue to face significant barriers in accessing justice, protection, and recovery services. At the same time, perpetrators often evade accountability due to weak enforcement, harmful social norms, and systemic failures.

A key gap identified in the report is the absence of a legal definition of femicide as a distinct offence. As a result, cases are handled inconsistently, data remains incomplete, and prevention efforts lack coherence and scale.

The group also highlighted the evolving nature of gender-based violence, which manifests in physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and technology-facilitated forms—many of which remain underreported or inadequately addressed. Vulnerable groups, including women in informal settlements and persons with disabilities, face compounded barriers to protection and justice.

Community and family interference was identified as a major contributor to impunity, with cases often resolved informally through clan or family negotiations that silence survivors and undermine formal legal processes. At the same time, social media has increasingly been used to perpetuate victim-blaming, misinformation, and online abuse, further retraumatising survivors and their families. To address these gaps, the group has proposed a range of reforms aimed at strengthening both prevention and accountability. These include formally recognising femicide as a distinct criminal offence, strengthening survivor-centred adjudication, expanding specialised SGBV courts, and tightening bail and bond conditions for perpetrators.

The report also recommends amendments to the Sexual Offences Act to prevent the

withdrawal of cases once prosecution has begun, as well as measures to ensure cases are resolved within defined timelines.

Further proposals focus on closing accountability gaps beyond the courtroom, including criminalising informal settlements of gender-based violence cases through family or clan negotiations, strengthening enforcement of existing laws such as the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act, and expanding systems that improve reporting, monitoring, and response.

As the day ends, the women at the centre call it a day. While many feel that the struggle is constant in Kibera, the Feminists for Peace, Rights, and Justice Centre has created a space where women can begin again. It is a place where pain is acknowledged, healing is possible, and hope is no longer just a word.

Here, joy is not a fleeting moment. It is rebuilt by women who refuse to be defined by violence and who are learning, together, how to live again. Whether these efforts can be sustained and matched by stronger institutional support remains an open question.

****Survivors’ names have been changed to protect their identities.***



One woman's resolve to turn gullies into greenlands

TEXT BERYL BEATRICE

What was once fertile land in Makueni has been carved into deep gullies, threatening homes and survival. As climate change accelerates land degradation, one woman and her community are pushing back—transforming loss into action and rebuilding both their land and their future.

For Joy Wambui, a small-scale farmer from Mboni Village in Makueni County, the danger was personal. A gully near her home had grown so wide that it nearly swept her house away. Across Mutiswa village, nearly 200 households faced a similar risk: living on land that was slowly being eroded, season after season.

According to the Makueni County Forest and Landscape Restoration Implementation Action Plan, at least 13% of the county's land is classified as degraded. "When a neighbour lost part of her farm to erosion that kept widening the gullies, I realised the problem was a communal one, not an individual one," Wambui says.

The crisis in Makueni reflects a broader regional challenge. A study by the Heinrich Böll Foundation estimates that over 40 percent of East Africa's soil is degraded, threatening food security and livelihoods. In Kenya, only 20 percent of cropland is arable, with losses of up to 26 tonnes of soil per hectare per year due to erosion. Soil salinisation further affects 40 percent of irrigated land, undermining agricultural productivity and long-term sustainability.

Cost of neglect

During the release of the report last year, Joachim Paul, Director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, underscored the far-reaching impact of soil loss on food security: "Soil is the foundation of life, yet it remains one of the most overlooked and undervalued resources.

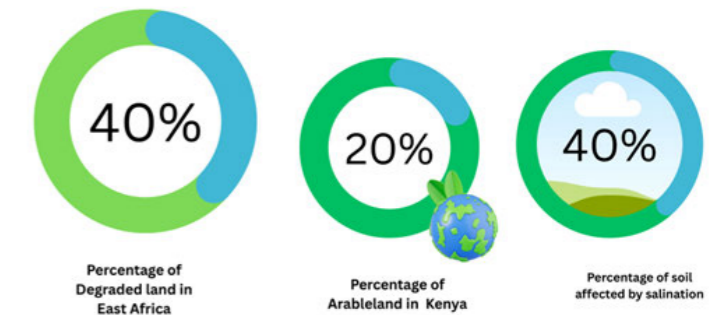
"Its health influences the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe. Protecting soil is not merely an agricultural concern—it is essential to sustaining ecosystems, ensuring food security, and strengthening climate resilience, particularly in Africa."

The economic cost is significant. The German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) estimates that Kenya loses approximately KSh 170 billion each year due to declining soil fertility, erosion, and poor land management practices.

These patterns point to deeper challenges in land management and climate resilience, where communities often bear the brunt of environmental degradation with limited institutional support.

For Wambui and her neighbours, the situation was dire. Each rainy season brought destruction—farms washed away, roads and footpaths cut off, and homes near riverbanks collapsing under the force of the water. Farmers struggled to make ends meet, and putting food on the table became increasingly difficult. This local

Soil health situation in Kenya



By Beryl Beatrice

Source: Heinrich Böll Foundation

crisis reflects national obligations. Kenya's Constitution guarantees the right to food and freedom from hunger (Article 43), while Article 21 requires the state to protect these rights.

But rights require implementation. Under devolution, counties are responsible for planning and service delivery through County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs). Yet many ward-level priorities—such as gully rehabilitation—continue to struggle to secure consistent funding and technical support.

Where implementation falls short, communities are often left to act, so Wambui decided to take the bull by the horn. Despite never having held a leadership role before, she called a community meeting to confront the crisis threatening both livelihoods and homes. "We engaged, and everyone was willing to find a solution," she says. "The conversation centred on how we could come together and contribute what we had to build the gullies."

That meeting led to the formation of the Joyful Women Group.

Frustration with the government

When they started in 2019, they were just ten members. Today, there are 30 women, each directly affected by soil erosion and determined to reclaim their land. Wambui

says the group emerged out of frustration with delayed or insufficient government response.

“We were tired of lamenting to both the county and national government,” she says. “We had to step up. We wanted our agricultural land back. We wanted our children to go to school, to access markets, and for our families to rebuild their livelihoods.”

At one point, Wambui says, up to seven homes were destroyed by flooding, forcing affected families to seek refuge at the Chief’s camp. At least three of those families were unable to rebuild, lacking both savings and insurance.

Rebuilding homes

In response, the women turned to collective action. Through savings, contributions, and table banking, they raised funds to construct two-bedroom homes for affected members while also reclaiming nearly five hectares of land.

Each house required more than 2,000 stones—costing approximately KSh 30,000—an enormous commitment for the group. But leaving their neighbours exposed to recurring destruction was not an option.

Soil erosion is not unique to Makueni.

Across Kenya, regions such as Migori, Kajiado, Kitui, and Marsabit continue to experience land degradation, with expanding gullies destroying farms and livelihoods—pointing to a broader national challenge in land management and climate resilience.

For the Joyful Women Group, restoring their land became both a necessity and a strategy for survival. Armed with shovels, spades, seedlings, stones, and wire mesh, they began constructing makeshift barriers and sandbags. They planted sisal and napier grass to stabilise the soil and prevent water from overrunning their homes.

“We used to complain daily through the media and go back to our degraded land, but complaining did not bring change or stop the erosion,” says Susan Kioko, one of the group’s founding members.

Kioko, a small-scale farmer, recalls watching erosion sweep away her farm and those of her neighbours, forcing her to abandon her land and relocate to safer ground.

Even with their progress, resources are still a constant challenge. To sustain their work, the group relies on table banking—pooling contributions to purchase materials such as wire mesh, seedlings,



A section of the group inspecting the aftermath of growth and change after building and greening the gullies

and to hire additional labour. “We reached a point where we needed materials we did not have and had to buy them. So we began contributing a thousand shillings each to afford seedlings and wire mesh,” Kioko explains.

Since 2024, the group has saved over KSh 200,000, which members also use to pay school fees and start small businesses, extending the impact of their efforts beyond land restoration.

Despite these gains, the initiative faces significant limitations. Extreme weather conditions continue to test the durability of their work, with some gullies unable to withstand the rapid flow of water during heavy rains.

Addressing these challenges often requires technical expertise that remains beyond the group’s reach. “We did our best, but excessive rain damaged our gullies. This work requires support from other teams or organisations,” says Wambui.

The leading support

For those working closely with the Joyful Women Group, the crisis extends beyond land degradation. Ndinda Maithya, programme manager at the Voices for Just Climate Action Programme, describes climate change as a human rights issue—one that disproportionately affects women and vulnerable communities.

“It undermines democracy and threatens the economy and development at large. The greatest burden falls on those already poor—the vulnerable, mainly women, and young people who are the least responsible for climate change,” she says.

The programme adopts a rights-based approach, working with communities to build locally driven climate solutions, strengthen grassroots alliances, and bridge divides across gender, age, and geography. Yet for many communities in Kenya, meaningful involvement in climate decision-making has often been limited. Indigenous and local populations—despite being among the most affected—have historically had little influence over how climate interventions are designed and implemented.

Policy frameworks

This is gradually beginning to change. In Marsabit County, for instance, a community-led and community-centred climate action plan was launched in Loiyangalani within the Elomo community. The launch took place during the Lake Turkana Cultural Festival and was officiated by President William Ruto.

Developed through a participatory risk



Joy Wambui started the Joyful Women Group to save their homes from soil erosion.



Members of the group during a meeting

assessment process by Pastoral Community Initiative and Development Assistance, in collaboration with Hivos, the plan identifies priority investments needed to strengthen climate resilience.

At the national level, Kenya has established legal and policy frameworks for addressing climate-related challenges. The Kenya Climate Change Act (2016), amended in 2023, alongside county-level legislation, seeks to integrate climate resilience into development planning—including efforts to combat land degradation.

The law recognises that soil erosion can be mitigated through sustainable land management practices, supported by coordinated policy interventions and long-term planning. It also aligns with broader commitments to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030.

At the county level, the Makueni Climate

Change Act (2022) provides a framework for mainstreaming climate action across sectors. It mandates the development of five-year climate action plans and outlines mechanisms for integrating climate resilience into local development priorities.

These frameworks reflect wider constitutional and continental commitments. The Constitution guarantees the right to be free from hunger (Article 43) and obliges the state to protect that right (Article 21), while also promoting gender inclusion in public decision-making.

At the continental level, Agenda 2063 calls for resilient, food-secure communities, while African Union gender frameworks emphasise women’s economic participation and leadership—priorities reflected in community-led efforts such

as the Joyful Women Group. However, the scale of the challenge remains significant. According to Joash Munyua, a county official, Makueni, particularly Mboni sub-county, faces high levels of climate vulnerability. With a population of over 181,000 people, the area experiences fluctuating rainfall patterns and rising temperatures, placing additional strain on already fragile ecosystems.

Over the past five decades, rainfall in the county has steadily declined, with fewer wet days recorded across both the long and short rain seasons. These trends underscore the urgency of sustained investment and coordinated action to strengthen local resilience.

The climate risks and hazards are shown below.

The Voices for Just Climate Action programme, working alongside the Joyful Women Group, received a grant from the Next-Level Grant Facility (NLGF) in September last year to strengthen their climate response efforts.

The funding—KSh 193,500 (USD 1,500)—enabled the group to construct more

advanced gullies designed to slow water flow during the rainy season, while also supporting tree planting and the establishment of a seedling nursery.

Part of the grant was used to provide daily wages of KSh 400 (USD 3) to women involved in the construction work, offering both immediate income and long-term environmental benefits. The NLGF mechanism is designed to make climate finance more accessible to local communities—recognising their critical role in driving grassroots solutions.

“Even with limited capacity, we took the initiative to write a proposal and were able to secure funding,” says Wambui.

Building on this progress, the group now plans to expand its work to other affected areas, replicating the success of its gully restoration efforts. Their experience highlights what is possible when local initiative is matched with targeted support—turning vulnerability into resilience, and degraded land into opportunity.

1.5.3 Mbooni Sub County Climate Risks and Hazards

Mbooni sub county has a population of 181,046. It has the following wards; Mbooni, Tulimani, Kalawa, Kako/Waia, Kisau/Kiteta and Kithungo/Kitundu. The climatic condition of the sub county is semi-arid, rainfall averages 800-1200mm and temperature ranging 16-24°C. The major climate risks and hazards are shown **Figure 9** below.

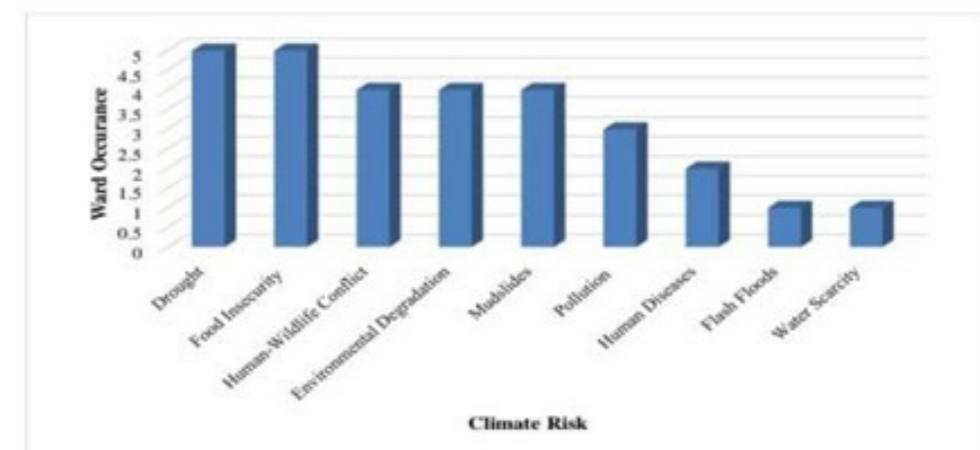


Figure 9: Mbooni Sub County Climate Risks and Hazards

Some of the risks and hazards identified by the communities were also represented using the maps as shown in **figure 10** below.

Local organisation turns to innovation to provide answers to donor fatigue for family planning

Text: Catherine Kamanga

When contraceptives disappeared from Kilifi health facilities, Leila Abdulkheir turned a service gap into a governance issue. Using community data, digital tools and public participation forums, she pushed county officials to confront procurement failures, showing how local innovation can move beyond outreach to influence budgets, systems and accountability in reproductive health.

In Kilifi County, Health Care Providers often reply: “We do not know, disbursements have not arrived.”

When contraceptives disappear from health facilities, the consequences are immediate and measurable. Kilifi records the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Kenya at 71%, with cases rising by 28.9%.

At the same time, Kilifi County Government funding for family planning has declined from 26% to 16% in recent years.

These shortages reflect a broader systemic breakdown. Nationally, 6.6 million women of reproductive age rely on modern contraceptives, with 62% accessing them

through public health facilities. Stock-outs in counties like Kilifi are therefore not isolated failures; they disrupt the primary source of care for millions.

Leila Abdulkheir moved quickly. She mobilised digital tools, trained community health volunteers, ran trauma-informed adolescent circles, and carried community demands into county policy rooms.

This response is unfolding at a moment of global donor retrenchment. A report by KFF, an independent source for health policy research, polling and news, shows that funding for family planning declined by 8%, from Ksh 189 billion in 2023 to Ksh 175 billion in 2024, well below the 2019

peak of Ksh 203 billion.

Within this shrinking fiscal space, Youth Voices and Action Initiative (YVAI) has linked grassroots problem-solving to county budgets, national obligations, and African Union commitments—turning local innovation into a political claim for sustained public action.

An app, a brigade and a bargain with power

YVAI’s response was both practical and political. The organisation adopted the *Hesperian Health Guide app*, a Kiswahili, read-aloud, low-bandwidth tool that explains contraceptive options, maps which clinics have stock, and preserves

user privacy. The app is paired with a trained network of Community Health Promoters (CHPs) who verify stock-outs, report patterns, and help women find available services.

The technology does three things at once: it returns information power to women, it produces verifiable data on supply gaps, and it builds an evidence base for county procurement. “Technology helps women find where commodities exist,” Leila says. “But we do not stop there, we take that data to county officials and demand budgets and timetables.”

YVAI shares aggregated app data with Reproductive Maternal Newborn Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH)



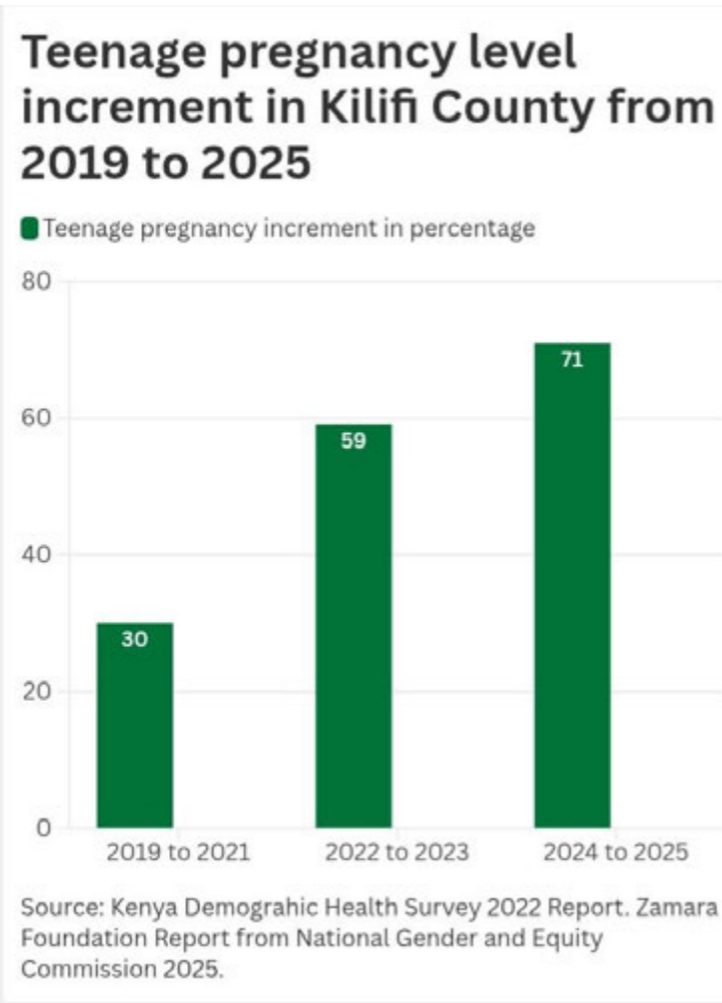
Youth Voices and Action Initiative Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Leila Abdulkheir

coordinators and uses it in public participation sessions to show where procurement must be tightened.

As a result, the county, Leila says, has piloted a similar digital reporting approach to track family-planning commodities, an operational step toward linking civic data to county procurement.

According to Kenneth Miriti, Kilifi RMNCAH coordinator, the county has piloted a similar app to track family-planning supplies as part of efforts to build resilient health systems.

Apart from the App, Leila has been instrumental in pushing for healthcare reforms at the county level. In 2021, she led the grassroots task force that helped design Kilifi's reproductive-health strategy.



The Coordinator, Reproductive Maternal Newborn Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) in Kilifi County, Kenneth Miriti says there is a significant reduction in funding for family planning commodities in the region.

She was also part of the coalition drafting the Kilifi RMNCAH Act 2024 — a county law assented by the governor that sets standards for quality, affordable and respectful care across the life course. The Act establishes a legal framework for county obligations on maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health and creates a stronger basis for budgeting and accountability.

Her advocacy is procedural and pointed and this is attested by the fact that YVAI participated in County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) public participation forums and submitted memoranda calling for ring-fenced

family-planning lines, CHP stipends to sustain referrals, and adolescent-friendly services including childcare for young mothers in training programs.

She routinely brings app-generated stock-out reports to RMNCAH coordination meetings, framing data as an administrative demand: fix procurement, not just patch distribution.

“We act as a temporary bridge, a catalyst to help public systems function,” Leila says. “But our goal is to push the county to own the solution, budgets, procurement timetables, accountability.”

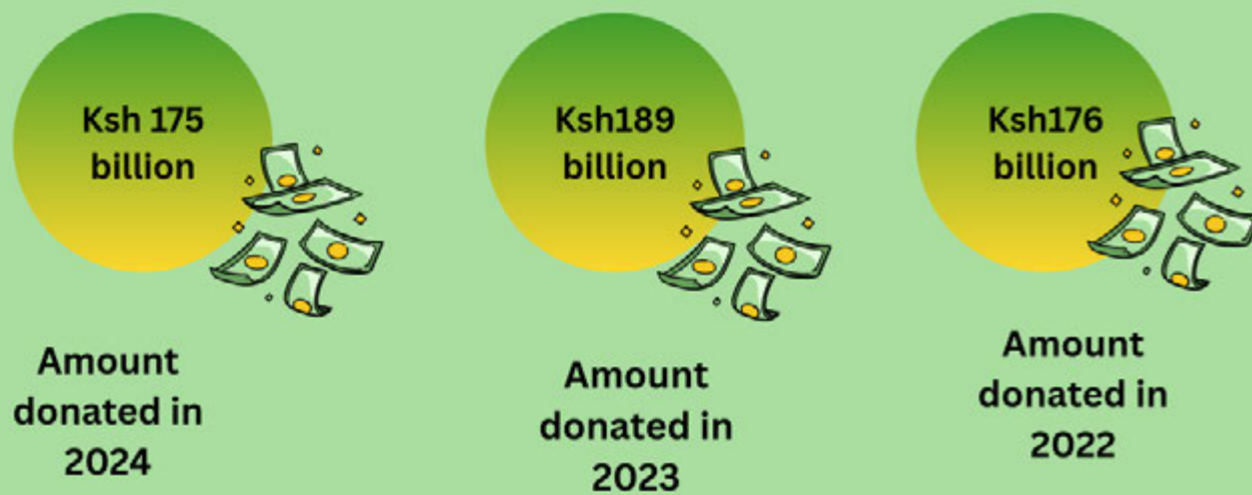
Rights, law and continental leverage

Leila frames her demands in legal and continental terms. Kenya's Constitution guarantees reproductive health under Article 43 (1a), while devolution assigns counties responsibility for delivering many health services. The Digital Health Act 2023 further opens pathways for integrating tools like Hesperian into public health systems.

At the continental level, African Union frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Strategy commit member states to advance women's health and eliminate barriers to reproductive rights.

These frameworks carry political weight. Leila uses them as leverage, arguing that when counties fail to budget for contraceptives or integrated digital reporting, it is not simply a local management lapse but a breach of national and continental obligations.

Reality of donor funding for family planning



Source: KFF

“Agenda 2063 and the AU gender strategy give us a lever,” she says. “They make it possible to press county actors on obligations that go beyond politics.”

The stakes are clear. Kenya increased contraceptive use from 32% in 2003 to 57% in 2022, while unmet need declined from 27% to 14%. These gains are now at risk as funding declines and supply systems become more unstable.

YVAI measures two outcomes: access and agency. Access asks whether commodities are available when and where they are needed. Agency considers whether adolescents understand their bodies and can make informed choices.

The app reduces wasted trips and generates real-time evidence on stock-outs, while adolescent “power” circles build menstrual literacy, expand knowledge of contraceptive options, and strengthen confidence to seek services. Trained community health volunteers improve referral completion and reduce loss to follow-up.

So far, YVAI has reached over 7,000 adolescent girls and young women, combining digital tools, community networks, and advocacy to address both supply and demand gaps in family planning.

Leila is now pushing to institutionalize these gains. She advocates for integrating YVAI’s indicators into the county RMNCAH dashboard so that community-generated data becomes part of formal monitoring systems. “If our indicators are in the dashboard, the county cannot say it didn’t know,” she says.

Budget battles and the advocacy gap

Budget politics determine whether innovation scales. Leila presses for explicit, ring-fenced allocations for family planning within the CIDP and annual budgets—not vague percentages, but line items that can withstand mid-year reallocations. She also calls for Community Health Promoters’ stipends to be included in recurrent budgets, so referral systems are not dependent on donor funding.

Local officials confirm the challenge. Kenneth Miriti, the county RMNCAH coordinator, acknowledges that while United Nations Population Fund supplies commodities, gaps persist due to national procurement bottlenecks and shifting donor priorities.

He welcomes civic data that improve forecasting: “If we can see stock-out patterns early, we can adjust procurements and request funds through projects like the Building Resilient and Responsive Health Systems (BREHS).”

However, he cautions that county cash flow constraints and national procurement cycles continue to limit responsiveness.

The scale of the funding gap remains significant. Even with UNFPA allocating Ksh 387 billion (US\$3 million) for contraceptives in 2025, combined resources cover only 17% of national need, leaving counties to manage persistent shortages.

In response, YVAI is piloting livelihood and digital literacy programmes to reduce dependency and ensure women can effectively use and benefit from the app. Yet Leila is clear that these interventions are not a substitute for functioning public health systems.

She advocates for structural reforms: integrating app-generated data into the county health information system, incorporating CHP stipends into recurrent budgets, and ring-fencing procurement funds. Only then, she argues, can innovation serve as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, public service delivery.

Her asks are precise: “We need to adopt a ring-fenced family-planning commodities line in the CIDP and annual budgets.” She also underscores the need to integrate Hesperian-generated stock-out reporting into county procurement forecasting and the RMNCAH dashboard.

Leila further says there is need to fund

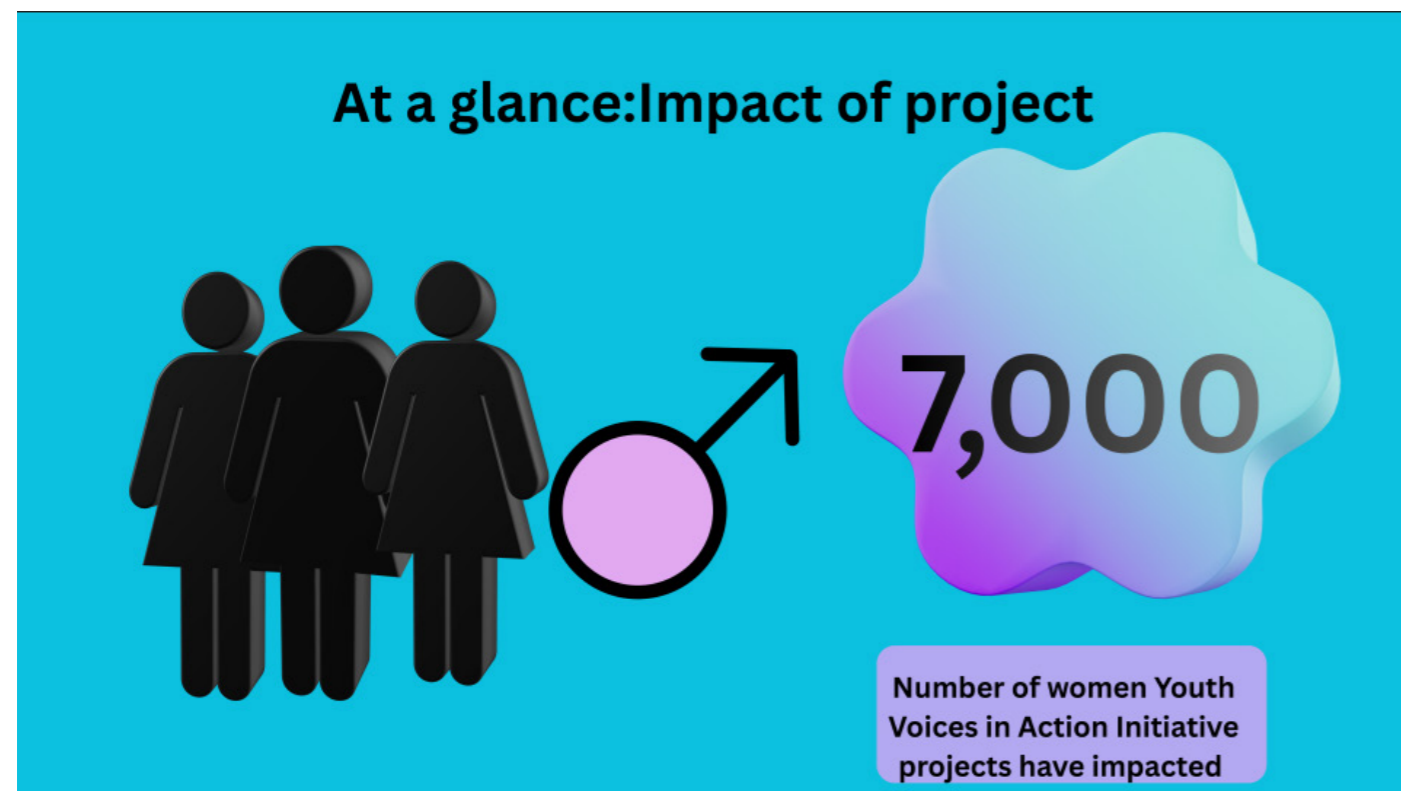
CHP stipends to sustain referral networks and invest in adolescent-friendly services and childcare support to ensure continuity for young mothers seeking training.

Kilifi’s stock-outs are a symptom of a broader implementation gap. Kenya reports to continental bodies on health and gender commitments; subnational performance must match those reports.

When counties fail to ring-fence funding or operationalise national procurement plans, Kenya’s ability to demonstrate real progress to the AU and other partners is compromised. Leila’s approach, which produces subnational evidence, pressing for line items, and citing constitutional and AU obligations makes local accountability traceable and auditable.

Stories from the field

Leila and her organization, runs a programme called “Building Adolescent Girls Power”, targeting girls between 10 to 19 years. One of the programme participants, Mekatilili, 17-year-old girl attests that since being incorporated into the programme, her mindset has shifted. She describes the “power” circle as transformative: “*Nimejifunza mengi kutokana na hii programu kama kujua mzunguko wangu wa hedhi, njia za kujikinga na pia njia mbali mbali za kuzuia kupata mimba*” (I have learnt a lot, how to track my menstrual cycle, ways to protect myself and the available contraceptive options) she says. From the training, she now mentors peers. CHPs report fewer wasted journeys by women searching for supplies; clinic logs show faster referrals from YVAI-linked CHVs.





The RMNCAH Act, the app pilot and documented public participation are tangible outputs that shift the debate from charity to duty. But Leila knows numbers matter. She is pushing to have the app's aggregated stock-out data published and to see CHP stipends and commodity lines appear in the next CIDP budget book.

Despite the efforts, Leila faced some backlash. Most of the community elders initially resisted family-planning messaging; she recalls village meetings where she and her team were accused of “promoting immorality.” As a result of her persistent engagement, she turned critics into allies: one of the village elders now recommends the program publicly.

Yet political resistance can be stronger in budget rooms. Convincing MCAs to ring-fence recurrent funds requires sustained civic pressure and clear, auditable evidence that budgets will reduce maternal harms.

Leila's work crystallises a critical question: can grassroots innovation compel fiscal change? She has the tools that include data, legal framing, public participation and the constituency. The next test is whether county assemblies convert memoranda and app evidence into line items and whether procurement timetables shift from emergency buys to predictable forecasting.

A wider lesson for AU commitments

YVAI's campaign illustrates a wider AU challenge: continental commitments require subnational follow-through. Agenda 2063 and the AU Gender Strategy call for universal access to reproductive health. Achieving those goals demands counties that can plan, budget and procure.

By converting app data into political pressure, Leila creates a replicable model: civic data generation, public participation, legal framing and budget advocacy, a method that other counties across Africa could adopt to translate AU ambitions into local realities.

YVAI's model demonstrates how grassroots innovation can close information gaps, mobilise demand, and generate auditable evidence. But Leila's strategy is clear: technology and outreach are only leverage if county governments respond with budgets, procurement discipline, and legal recognition.

Without sustained domestic financing, Kenya risks reversing hard-won gains in reproductive health as global funding continues to decline and local systems remain under-resourced.

By taking app data, community testimony, and adolescent outcomes into county forums, Leila turns innovation into a political claim: adopt the budgets, integrate the data, and meet national and African Union obligations—or explain why you will not.



SURVIVING BEYOND AID:

HOW ONE WOMAN IS HELPING OTHERS SURVIVE IN KAKUMA

TEXT BY REY BULAMBO

Biclaire Shukrani Hota did not imagine a sewing machine would become her way out of hunger. She only knew that when she switched it on each morning in Kakuma refugee camp, her children might eat that day.

By 7 a.m., the small room Biclaire Shukrani rents in Kakuma 1 is already open. Fabric hangs from nails along the mud-stained walls. Young people sit shoulder to shoulder, cutting cloth,

measuring hems, and guiding fabric beneath whirring needles. Outside, dust rises as customers arrive—refugees from neighbouring blocks, traders from the market, and, increasingly, clients placing orders from beyond the camp.

“I open this shop by 7 a.m. with my co-workers ready to receive clients and complete orders, including those from outside Kakuma,” she says, continuing to sew. “When I see the shop running well and everyone working, it gives me hope for

a better future. Because of this, I have been able to move my children from public to private school and ensure they have food on the table.”

Her story reflects a broader shift in refugee policy, where humanitarian systems increasingly promote self-reliance, even as structural barriers to formal employment and mobility remain firmly in place.

Aid dependence

She arrived in Kakuma in 2012 from the Democratic Republic of Congo with her younger brother, fleeing persecution.

More than 5,700 Congolese refugees were registered in Kenya that year, according to UNHCR. She entered a humanitarian system designed to provide safety—but not certainty. Formal employment was unavailable. Movement was restricted. Food assistance was predictable only in its decline.

Kakuma and the neighbouring Kalobeyei settlement host an estimated 300,000 to 310,000 refugees and asylum seekers as of May 2025. This is according to UNHCR and the Kenyan government—making it one of the largest refugee-hosting areas in Africa.

Managed jointly by the Kenyan government and UNHCR, the settlement operates under policies that restrict movement and limit access to formal labour markets. More than half of the population is women and children. Many, like Biclaire, live with disabilities or carry caregiving responsibilities that further constrain their ability to earn.

For years, Biclaire relied on aid. Then the aid began to shrink. “You still have responsibilities. You still have children. But the food is less,” Biclaire says.

Shrinking aid

According to the World Food Programme (WFP), food rations in 2025 were reduced to between 28% and 40% of the daily allowance, while cash assistance was suspended due to funding shortages. Global acute malnutrition rates have exceeded 13%—three percentage points above emergency thresholds—raising concerns about worsening food insecurity

among refugees in Kenya.

These cuts reflect broader funding shortfalls across humanitarian systems, where protracted refugee situations remain underfunded despite rising needs. The impact was immediate. Households reported skipping meals, selling essential items, or taking on debt.

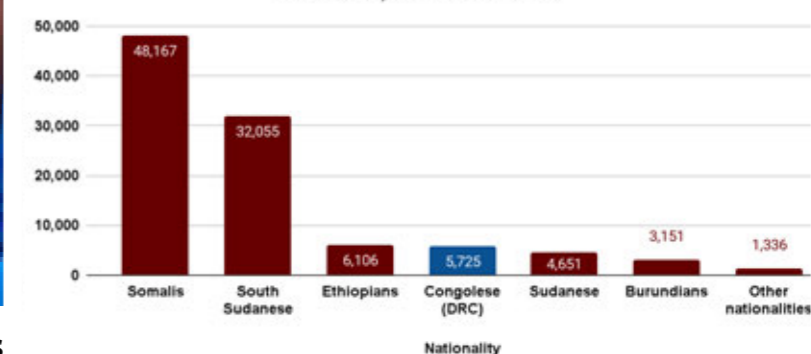
Youth unemployment in Kakuma—already [estimated](#) to exceed 60%—worsened. For women heading households alone, and for people living with disabilities, the risk of extreme poverty deepened.

In a context where movement is restricted and formal employment is scarce, informal businesses have become one of the few viable coping mechanisms. UNHCR estimates that more than 2,000 refugee-run enterprises operate across Kakuma and Kalobeyei, ranging from tailoring shops and grocery stalls to salons, cafés, and electronics repair kiosks.

This informal economy operates largely outside formal regulatory frameworks,



Kakuma Registered Refugees & Asylum-Seekers As of August 2012
More than 5,700 came from DRC



underscoring both the resilience of refugees and the limitations of existing policies in supporting sustainable livelihoods.

Self-reliance shifts

For Biclaire, waiting for assistance to return was no longer an option. In 2021, she rented a small room and began working with two sewing machines she paid to use. At first, she worked alone—taking small tailoring jobs from fellow refugees, mending clothes, sewing dresses, and making school uniforms. The income was modest, but unlike aid, it was predictable. What began as a personal effort to survive, soon began to grow. As orders increased, young people started asking to learn. Many had completed secondary school or vocational training but found no work inside the camp. Biclaire allowed them to stay, teaching them how to sew, price their work, and manage customers and deadlines.

“It was not planned,” she says. “I just knew I could not survive alone.” Her decision came at a time when humanitarian policy was shifting. Government frameworks

and international agencies increasingly promote refugee self-reliance, women’s economic empowerment, and the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Yet these ambitions often outpace the structural reforms needed to support them.

At a broader level, such efforts align with continental commitments under Agenda 2063 and the African Union’s Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy, both of which emphasise economic inclusion and self-reliance. However, implementation gaps at national and local levels continue to limit their impact in refugee settings.

Funding mismatch

In principle, refugees are encouraged to build livelihoods. In practice, less than a quarter of humanitarian funding is directed toward long-term income generation, with the majority still allocated to food assistance and emergency response.

“Women, single parents, and people with



disabilities are hit the hardest,” says Clement Otiang of the Build Up project under GIZ. “They carry family responsibilities while facing physical, social, and economic barriers that limit their ability to earn.” Disability adds another layer of exclusion. According to UNHCR, [refugees living with disabilities](#) are twice as likely to be unemployed as those without disabilities and are significantly more dependent on aid.

Inside Biclairé’s shop, however, those statistics begin to loosen their grip. Orders now come from across the camp and beyond it. Clothes are made on request, with payments sometimes sent by clients outside Kakuma—including from the United States, Canada, and Australia, where former refugees have resettled. The income sustains Biclairé’s household and keeps the business running.

She has since opened a second tailoring shop, now managed by her brother, Dieumé Hota. To date, Biclairé has trained more than ten young people. Some have

since been resettled abroad and continue working as tailors.

Others remain in Kakuma, either working with her or running their own businesses. One former trainee, Faraja, now operates a tailoring shop next door to hers in the Ethiopian market of Kakuma 1.

“For someone like Faraja, seeing him open his own shop makes me proud,” Biclairé says. “It shows that the mentorship is working.” For Faraja, the opportunity was rare.

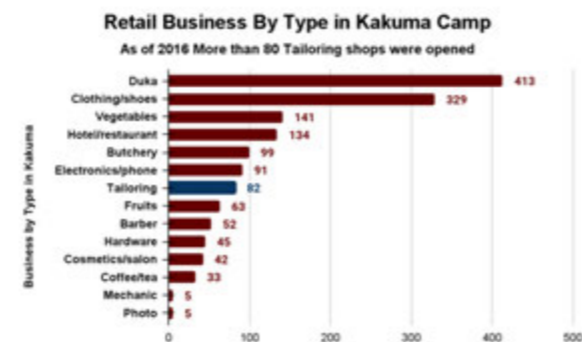
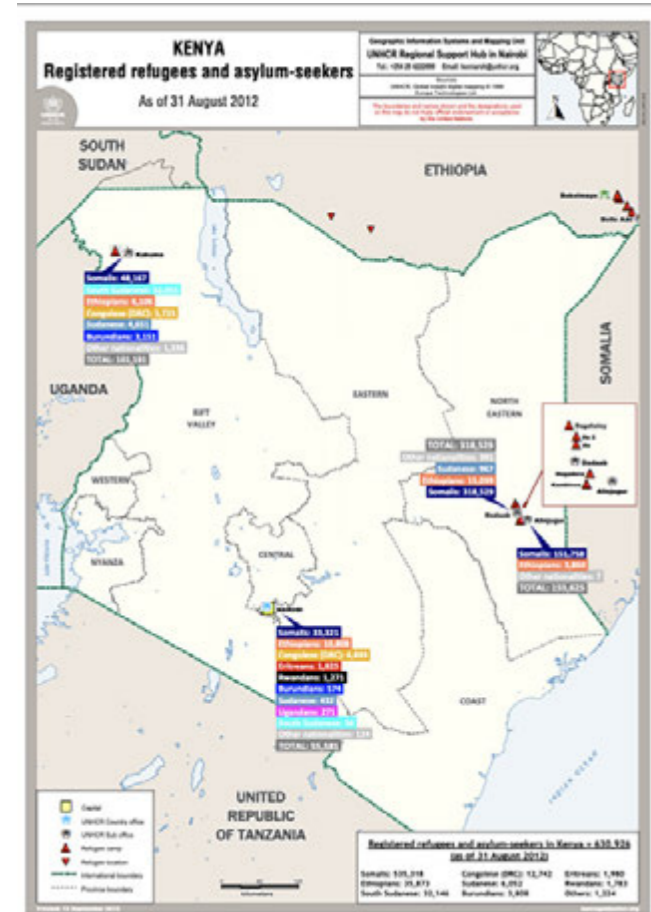
“When I arrived in Kakuma, I saw many people struggling to find work, even with an education,” he says. “That pushed me to seek help from Biclairé. Now I run my own tailoring business and work with other young people who have had no opportunities.”

Ripple effects

The ripple effects are tangible. Each trained tailor supports dependents. Each business reduces reliance on food aid. Customers access affordable services within the camp rather than travelling long distances or relying on charity. On average, earnings can reach up to KSh 1,500 per day.

Yet refugee-led enterprises like Biclairé’s continue to operate on the margins.

Despite growing emphasis on self-reliance, structural barriers still limit the scale and sustainability of such businesses. Access to finance remains constrained. Refugees cannot easily open bank accounts or secure loans. Work permits are difficult to obtain. Livelihood programmes often



prioritise short-term training over long-term business support.

“It is not only about implementing policies,” says Clement Otiang. “It is about guiding people on how to access resources, especially finance. Someone like Biclairé has the potential, resilience, and skills. With mentorship and capital, she could do much more.”

He adds: “Her story exposes a deeper contradiction in humanitarian aid. While self-reliance is widely promoted, systems often remain structured around control and short-term relief. Refugee-led livelihoods challenge this by showing that, when given space and trust, refugees can support themselves and others.”

In that sense, the failure lies not with aid recipients but with systems that reinforce long-term dependency while excluding women, youth, and people with disabilities from meaningful economic participation. Inside the shop, the sewing machines

continue humming. Young men and women work quietly, focused on their tasks. Outside, customers wait. The business does not erase the hardships of camp life—the ration cuts, the restrictions, the uncertainty—but it shifts something fundamental.

“It started because I needed to survive,” Biclairé says. “Now it is about helping others survive, too.” In a place where aid can disappear overnight, that difference is clear. What remains uncertain is whether policy frameworks will evolve quickly enough to match the realities refugees are already navigating.

Is a school break the most dangerous time for teenage girls in Kenya?

TEXT CHARITY KILEI

When classrooms empty, vulnerability rises. Across Kenya, school breaks have become one of the most dangerous periods for adolescent girls, exposing them to exploitation and early pregnancy. As systems struggle to protect them, community initiatives are working to fill the gap and safeguard their futures.



Evelyn Bowa- founder Awoche foundation

An unexpected reality emerged when schools reopened after the COVID-19 lockdown—many teenage girls never returned to class. During just three months of school closures, an estimated [152,000 teenage girls in Kenya became pregnant](#)—a 40 percent increase in the country’s monthly average.

These figures, recorded as early as July, were among the first indications of how the pandemic [disrupted protection systems for adolescent girls](#).



For many, the consequences were immediate and lasting. Verol Otieno, now 22, became pregnant for the first time at 17 while living under her parents’ care in Homa Bay County. She had little understanding of her body or the risks involved in sexual activity.

Naive and it being her first, she only realised she was pregnant when schools reopened. “When I discovered I was pregnant, I was afraid. My parents were already struggling to provide, and the shame I felt was unbearable,” she recalls.

She left home with her boyfriend and moved to Migori County, where they worked near a gold mine. Survival quickly replaced education. But the security she

hoped for did not last—her boyfriend eventually abandoned her.

Verol’s experience reflects a broader pattern.

Data from the [African Population and Health Research Centre](#) (APHRC) shows that in informal settlements, there are approximately 116 births per 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19, with nearly half of these pregnancies unplanned. In areas such as Kibera, pregnancy rates remain consistently high, particularly where poverty and limited access to services intersect.

Economic pressure

Evelyn Bowa, founder of Awoche Foundation in Kibera, says the choices available to many girls are shaped by survival rather than agency. “Poverty has a way of cornering young girls into situations where every choice they make is a compromise—between preserving their dignity and surviving harsh conditions that often demand transactional sex,” she says.

She adds that for many girls, the lack of basic needs creates a pathway to early pregnancy. “Young girls in slum areas are vulnerable to early pregnancies because they lack basic necessities. For some, sex becomes a way to meet those needs.”

Earlier research by APHRC found that more than 90 percent of teenage mothers in Nairobi’s informal settlements were already out of school when they became pregnant—highlighting the strong link between disrupted education and adolescent childbearing.

In these communities, school attendance remains low. Only about 22 percent of girls aged 15 to 17 are enrolled in school, which is significantly lower than the national average.

For those who are enrolled, the risk does not disappear. In fact, some of the most

vulnerable moments come when school is not in session.

Juma Salim, a gender advocate working with the Kamukunji Peace Network and other civil society organisations, warns that girls in informal settlements face heightened risks when they are out of school.

He points to a pattern of vulnerability—where exposure to drugs, sexual exploitation, and early pregnancy increases significantly during school breaks. “The most dangerous time is during school holidays,” he says. “That’s when many predators target schoolgirls.”

Despite ongoing efforts by community organisations to address sex trafficking, substance abuse, and teenage pregnancy, many girls continue to fall through the cracks.

Economic pressure remains one of the strongest drivers. According to data from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, financial hardship often pushes girls toward risky coping mechanisms, including transactional sex.

The scale of the challenge is evident. The Economic Survey 2025 reports that in 2024 alone, [241,228 girls aged 10 to 19](#) were recorded as pregnant during their first antenatal care visit. Of these, Nairobi accounted for the highest proportion, 6 percent, with informal settlements such as Kibra among the most affected.

In these spaces, vulnerability is not accidental but structural. This structural vulnerability is also reflected in Kenya’s legal framework. The Constitution guarantees the right to health (Article 43) and affirms the principles of equality and non-discrimination (Article 27).

Under devolution, counties are responsible for planning and delivering social services through County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs) and annual budgets—placing them at the centre of prevention,

protection, and response.

Bowa’s motivation

For Evelyne Bowa, founder of Awoche Foundation, the response began with a simple but urgent question: how do you keep girls in school, and safe, when the system does not fully protect them?

She established the foundation in 2012 to support girls through practical and preventive interventions. These include providing reusable sanitary towels, mentorship programmes during school terms and holidays, re-enrolment support for teen mothers, and skills training for those unable to return to school.

“There were girls I grew up with—girls who got pregnant not because they were chasing luxury, but because they lacked basic needs,” she says. Growing up in Kibera, Bowa witnessed these challenges firsthand. Her mother sold vegetables to support the family, while her stepfather relied on irregular electrical jobs. Even basic necessities were often out of reach.

She recalls struggling with self-worth from an early age, feeling invisible both at home and in school. “Being at the bottom of my class, with a big body in primary school, made me feel invisible,” she says. That experience shaped her understanding of vulnerability—not as an individual failing, but as a shared reality among many girls around her.

Today, the foundation focuses heavily on school breaks, recognising them as critical intervention periods. During holidays, between 70 and 100 girls and boys gather at the centre for open, judgment-free discussions about life, choices, and responsibility.

Awoche Foundation now works with 25 schools across Kibra, and includes boys in its mentorship programmes—an approach that Bowa says is essential in shifting attitudes and behaviour over time.

She has already begun to see change. Boys who once avoided even touching sanitary products now confidently request them—often on behalf of their sisters. Teachers now routinely reach out to Awoche Foundation whenever a student is pregnant or in need, and home visits have become a core part of the response.

In its early days, Bowa’s approach was simple. She bought sanitary pads, visited schools, placed pad boxes in restrooms, and spoke openly with girls—not just about menstruation, but about life, pressure, and the consequences of early pregnancy.

She had narrowly avoided becoming a teenage mother herself, but many of the girls she met had not been as fortunate. For them, education had already been interrupted—often permanently.

Over time, the initiative evolved into a more structured support system. To sustain its work, the foundation produces reusable sanitary pads made by teenage mothers—providing them with income, practical skills, and a pathway to economic

independence.

Scaling impact

Beyond this, the programme equips young mothers with skills such as tailoring, baking, and entrepreneurship, while also supporting their reintegration into school where possible. “Awoche supports fees, transportation, healthcare—anything that keeps a child in school. Because once a girl stays home, the risk of pregnancy increases,” Bowa explains.

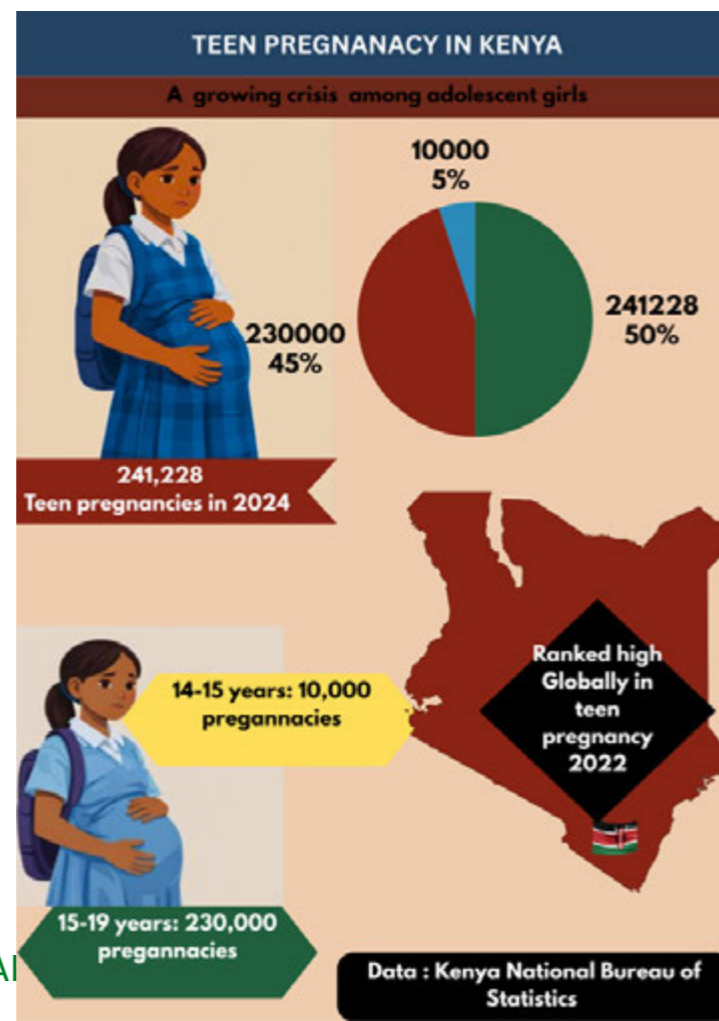
The organisation also works closely with parents and uses peer mentors—girls who have faced similar challenges—to support others navigating the same path. “We’ve seen girls that people had given up on now running businesses,” she says.

So far, the foundation has reached more than 15,000 children, 12,000 of them girls, and supported 252 teenage mothers through skills training and economic empowerment. Yet even with this progress, challenges remain. Limited resources make it difficult to support every girl who needs help.

“For those who cannot return to school, we offer skills training and alternative ways to survive,” Bowa says.

The foundation’s approach balances prevention and response—keeping girls connected to education, family, and community, while addressing the realities they face. In schools, it provides comprehensive support, including access to reproductive health education and medical guidance. Outside school, it equips young mothers with parenting skills and links them to health services.

But structural barriers continue to limit outcomes. “Once a girl drops out, she becomes vulnerable,” says Juma Salim, a youth and gender advocate. “Most of them don’t get the chance to return. It’s a massive challenge.”



Financial constraints, childcare responsibilities, and transport costs often prevent teenage mothers from re-entering school—even when policies allow it. Bowa notes that while the school re-entry programme has made a difference, sustaining young mothers through education remains difficult.

“Some schools lack basic facilities, and some teachers are not trained to support teen mothers. This leads to stigma, name-calling, and discouragement,” she says—barriers that continue to push girls out of the system.

Visionary Milestones

“Every time a school called to tell me one of my mentees was pregnant, it broke my heart,” says Bowa. “But I kept going, believing that one day we could have zero teen pregnancies in the schools we work with.”

Her goal is simple but ambitious: to remove every barrier that places girls at risk. Yet even as community-led efforts expand, broader structural challenges remain.

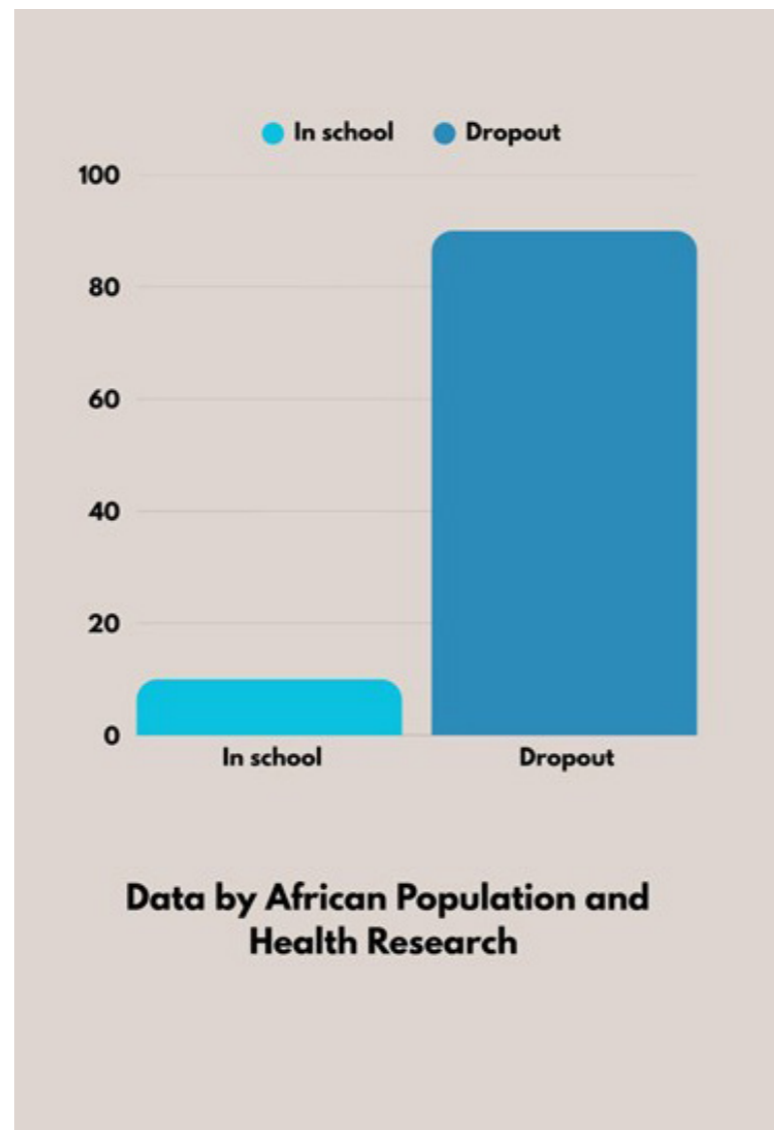
In 2020, [the government introduced the National School Re-Entry Guidelines](#) to ensure that pregnancy does not permanently interrupt a girl’s education. The policy affirms that no student should be expelled due to pregnancy and encourages schools to work with parents, health providers, and community organisations to support reintegration.

It recognises adolescent mothers as students first, not as disciplinary cases. However, implementation remains uneven. At the continental level, Agenda 2063 and the African Union’s Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy call for inclusive education, youth well-being, and women’s economic participation.

When counties allocate funds for menstrual health, enforce school re-entry protocols, and track outcomes, these commitments

move from policy into practice. So, while these policies allow girls to return to school, financial barriers, childcare responsibilities, and persistent stigma continue to limit their effectiveness. Thousands of girls—particularly those aged 10 to 14—remain vulnerable, highlighting ongoing gaps in protection, access, and support systems.

These challenges reflect broader commitments at the continental level. The African Union’s Strategy for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment outlines a set of core outcomes that anchor efforts to improve the lives of women and girls. These include guaranteeing free and compulsory education, alongside targeted vocational training and literacy programmes for youth and women.



Equally critical is advancing economic empowerment and financial inclusion—ensuring women and girls have income autonomy, access to social protection, and the opportunity to participate fully and meaningfully in economic life.

In this context, organisations like Awoche Foundation play a critical role—bridging the gap between policy and lived reality. By supporting girls to return to school, building skills, and creating pathways for economic independence, they demonstrate how grassroots action can translate policy into tangible change.

For Verol, that change has been deeply personal.

After leaving home and navigating early motherhood, she found her way back through Awoche’s mentorship programme. Today, she earns a modest but steady income producing reusable pads and bags—skills she now passes on to other young mothers.

“Awoche changed my life,” she says. “My children now look like they have a parent.” Her journey reflects the reality faced by many girls growing up in informal settlements—where basic needs are often out of reach, and silence around issues like menstruation shapes early vulnerability.



Verol Otieno- beneficiary- Aruka foundation

When she got her first period, she told no one. For years, she improvised—using whatever she could find, hiding it out of shame. It was only later that she began to understand how something as basic as access to sanitary products—and the absence of open conversations—could shape the trajectory of a girl’s life.

Witnessing the struggles of other girls like her, Verol turned that experience into purpose. After studying community development, she returned to Kibera to work with Awoche Foundation—supporting other girls through mentorship, awareness campaigns, and access to essential resources.

“We distribute sanitary pads, support hospital visits, and provide mentorship to cushion girls and young mothers,” she says. Her story, like many others, underscores a central truth: preventing teenage pregnancy is not only about individual choice—it is about systems, access, and support.

And while policies exist, it is often community-led efforts that ensure those policies reach the girls who need them most.

Why breaking the cycle of sex trafficking at the Coast is a community affair

Text:
Catherine
Kamanga

Behind the postcard image of Kenya's Coast lies a growing crisis of sex trafficking, where vulnerable girls are targeted and systems often fail to respond. In Kilifi, community-led efforts are pushing back by rescuing survivors, rebuilding lives, and exposing the systemic gaps that continue to allow exploitation to persist.



Grace Odembo, founder of Okoa Sasa

The coastal town of Kilifi, with its sandy beaches, often evokes a sense of tranquillity. But looks can be deceiving. Beneath that calm surface lies a more troubling reality. Data from a 2019 report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) shows that at least 9,480 girls in Kilifi are survivors of sex trafficking. This reality reflects deeper systemic gaps in prevention, protection, and enforcement, where trafficking networks continue to operate despite existing laws and interventions. As the tentacles of the KSh19 trillion (USD 150 billion) global trafficking industry extend into the Coast, Grace Odembo is working to disrupt it, often stepping in where formal protection systems fall short.

Odembo is the founder of Okoa Sasa, a community-based organisation that rescues, rehabilitates, and reintegrates survivors of sex trafficking and gender-based violence. Established in 2003 and registered in 2013, the organisation has supported over 1,000 women, girls, and children, and helped them find their footing.

“*Mimi ni wa hapa* (I am from here),” she says. “The traffickers are also from here, and they target vulnerable girls in our communities. I rely on the trust of the community to do my work.” Although based in Mombasa, her work extends to Mtepeni Ward in Kilifi County, an area identified as a hotspot for trafficking due to its proximity to tourist zones.

At the centre of Okoa Sasa’s work are safe houses that provide survivors with shelter, medical care, and counselling. “The first step is restoring a survivor’s sense of belonging,” Odembo explains. “When they arrive, they have lost their dignity. We need to help them understand that what happened to them is not their fault.” Thirty-year-old Zumi* is one of the survivors who found refuge at Okoa Sasa. She had endured prolonged physical abuse from her husband. When she sought help from family members, she was told to return home and be patient—to protect the family’s image. Her experience reflects broader social and institutional barriers that often discourage survivors from seeking justice or leaving abusive environments. With no support and nowhere else to turn, she confided in a friend, who connected her to Odembo. “She welcomed my daughter and me into the safe house,” Zumi says. “After several counselling sessions, I regained my confidence.” Her daughter was cared for in the centre’s creche as Zumi began to heal from both physical and psychological

trauma.

Today, she works with Okoa Sasa as a case management officer, helping other survivors navigate their own journeys toward recovery.

A report by the Technical Working Group on Gender-Based Violence, appointed by President William Ruto in January 2025, notes that Mombasa and Kilifi counties face significant challenges in providing safe houses for survivors—an essential link in responding to sex trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence. “We should not view survivors as victims, but as people who need help. If you can offer help, help them. You don’t know what someone is going through,” says Zumi.

Yet even when cases are reported, justice often remains out of reach.

Odembo notes that while many cases are reported to the police, few proceed to court—complicating efforts to secure justice for survivors. This reflects persistent gaps in investigation, prosecution, and survivor support within the justice system.

To bridge these gaps, Okoa Sasa has built close working relationships with law enforcement and other anti-trafficking organisations. The organisation partners with the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) for pro bono legal services, Solidarity with Women in Distress (SOLWODI) for safe housing, and Inua Dada Organisation to support survivors—particularly girls—in returning to school to pursue their education.

Together, these partnerships demonstrate how civil society networks often compensate for gaps in state-led responses. “The law enforcement officers don’t just receive cases,” Odembo explains. “They walk survivors through statement recording and follow-ups. We



Directorate of Criminal Investigations officer Alex Warui Photo: Courtesy viceversaglobal

build trust between traumatised survivors and the justice system. This collaboration helps ensure cases are properly investigated and prosecuted.”

Alex Warui, a senior officer with the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI), says he has worked closely with Odembo for eight years in efforts to combat trafficking and gender-based violence along the Coast.

“*Nilimpata hapa* (I found her here),” he says, describing her as instrumental in

tackling trafficking in Mombasa and Kilifi. He recalls a case involving a girl trafficked from Uganda.

“She came to Kenya expecting work but was forced into sex work. She sought help from a security guard, who brought her to Odembo while we followed up on the case,” he says. “Okoa Sasa is responsive, which makes referrals easier. We cannot keep survivors in police stations for long, and not all organisations provide the psychological support needed for

recovery.”

For Warui, the work is demanding—but worthwhile. “Seeing survivors heal, rebuild their lives, and succeed makes every effort worth it,” he says. “Odembo’s commitment is selfless—she always puts others first.”

His account highlights the importance of coordination between community organisations and law enforcement in improving case outcomes. Still, he notes that dismantling trafficking networks takes time. “These cartels are well-funded and well-connected,” he says. “We must never take these cases lightly because of the impact on survivors.”

For Odembo, rescue alone is not enough. “The solution is at the community level,” she says. “It begins when communities can identify suspicious individuals. It continues when survivors return home and help others understand their rights.” This is particularly in contexts where formal systems are overstretched or inaccessible.

Through outreach campaigns in schools and public barazas, Okoa Sasa educates children and communities about the tactics traffickers use—often disguised as promises of jobs or better opportunities. These challenges are also reflected in international assessments of Kenya’s anti-trafficking efforts.

Odembo is under no illusion about the scale of the problem. Kenya remains on Tier 2 in the United States Department of State’s 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report—meaning the country does not fully meet the minimum standards for eliminating trafficking, but is making efforts toward compliance.

The report acknowledges progress in some areas, including improved victim identification tools for Kenyan diplomatic missions, increased funding for anti-trafficking activities, and expanded

awareness efforts in rural and coastal communities.

But these gains are uneven.

A key gap remains the limited availability of safe houses, with the report noting that the government continues to rely heavily on civil society organisations, like Okoa Sasa, to provide shelter and financial support for survivors. This dependence points to a broader weakness in survivor protection systems, despite the existence of legal frameworks.

The report also raises concerns about accountability. “Despite ongoing concerns of official complicity in trafficking crimes, the government did not report any law enforcement action against allegedly complicit officials,” it states, adding that efforts to curb exploitation by fraudulent labour recruitment agencies remain inadequate.

National data tells a similarly troubling story. A 2021 report by the National Crime Research Centre, titled *The Problem of Human Trafficking in Kenya*, found that adults make up the majority of trafficking victims across all categories. They account for roughly six in ten cases of internal trafficking, eight in ten cases involving movement from Kenya to other countries, and nine in ten cases involving trafficking into Kenya.

Children, while fewer in number, remain highly vulnerable, particularly in domestic trafficking. Women are disproportionately affected by both internal trafficking and cross-border exploitation, while men are more commonly trafficked into the country. Despite legislation such as the Counter Human Trafficking Act (2010), the Children’s Act, and Kenya’s commitments under the United Nations Palermo Protocol, significant gaps in enforcement,

coordination, and accountability continue to limit their effectiveness. In the pursuit of justice, Odembo faces significant challenges. Her work exposes her to intimidation, threats from traffickers, and smear campaigns—risks that come with confronting well-established networks. “Most traffickers are wealthy and well-connected,” she says. “Slow judicial processes retraumatise survivors and drain organisational resources. At the same time, poverty continues to fuel vulnerability, trapping many girls and women in cycles of exploitation.” Limited funding adds another layer of constraint. Much of Okoa Sasa’s work remains donor-dependent, making long-term sustainability uncertain. These challenges reflect broader structural conditions that allow trafficking networks to persist. In response, the organisation is exploring more sustainable models. It has introduced income-generating initiatives

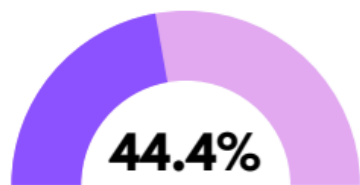
such as knitting, tailoring, and farming—programmes that also involve survivors as part of their healing and reintegration. At the same time, Okoa Sasa is strengthening community-led approaches to cushion against declining donor support and ensure continuity of its work. Looking ahead, Odembo is calling for systemic change. She advocates for mandatory training for law enforcement officers, stronger and more consistent funding for grassroots organisations, and increased county-level investment in anti-trafficking efforts. For her, the path forward is clear—but uncertain. Whether these efforts will be matched by stronger enforcement, sustained funding, and coordinated policy action will ultimately determine the success of the fight against trafficking at the Coast.

Not her real name

DISTRIBUTION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN KENYA

9 out of 10 

Victims trafficking from other countries to Kenya.



of human traffic victims were children

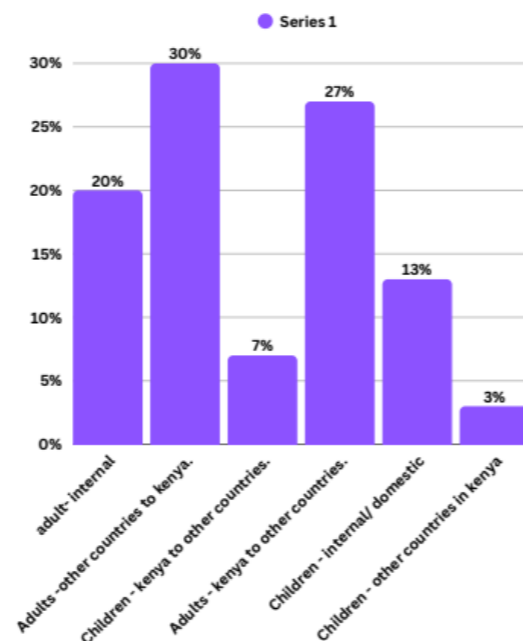


6 out of 10 

Victims in internal/domestic human trafficking

8 out of 10 

Victims trafficking from Kenya to other countries.



Source: National Crime Research Centre 2021

By: Catherine Kamanga

VICE VERSA GLOBAL



SEATS OF CHANGE

SHORT FILM
COMING SOON

An observational journey into Kenya’s everyday governance spaces, where women claim power, challenge exclusion, and shape rights in health, land, safety, and essential services.

Filmed in:
Turkana | Kilifi | Nairobi | Makeni

Women leading, communities transforming

-  Real women. Real decisions. Real impact
-  Rights are not given. They are won
-  Governance is more than an office
-  When women lead. Everyone thrives

implemented by **giz** Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

german cooperation DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

Stay tuned for the release

Join the conversation. Witness change. Share the stories.

From kitchen gardens to county budgets: How Makueni women are driving climate resilience

TEXT: BERYL BEATRICE

Climate change in Kenya is no longer an abstract threat, it is a daily governance challenge shaping what families eat. In Makueni County, women are actively influencing local government responses, rather than coping with challenges. Through organised engagement and evidence, they are pushing climate-smart agriculture, water systems, and nutrition into public budgets.

Penninah David stands outside her home in Makueni, surrounded by spinach, kale, and indigenous greens. This would have been impossible just a few years ago. For a woman who grew up watching crops fail and livestock perish, her kitchen garden is more than a source of food. It is proof that organised community action can turn policy promises into everyday reality.

“We used to wait for rain that never came,” she says. “Now we harvest every week, and we eat well.” Her small plot is part of a wider, women-led movement that has moved from demonstration to sustained public support.

Kenya is already paying a high price for climate change. A 2024 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) report estimates losses at about 5% of GDP—roughly KSh 810 billion annually.

To put this into perspective, if this

amount were allocated to the Makueni County Government to support women in strengthening food security, it would fully cover the entire budget of the Department of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries, and Cooperative Development for the last financial year—and still leave a surplus of over KES 250 million. At the household level, this translates into failed crops, livestock losses, and rising food insecurity. In response, Candle of Hope Foundation and local groups, such as Sombe Muuo, have combined practical interventions with policy engagement. They support kitchen gardens, agroforestry, and rainwater harvesting, while also engaging county planning and budgeting processes. This dual approach is changing outcomes. Women are utilising public participation forums and county planning sessions to embed these practices in CIDPs and budgets. This is turning pilot projects into

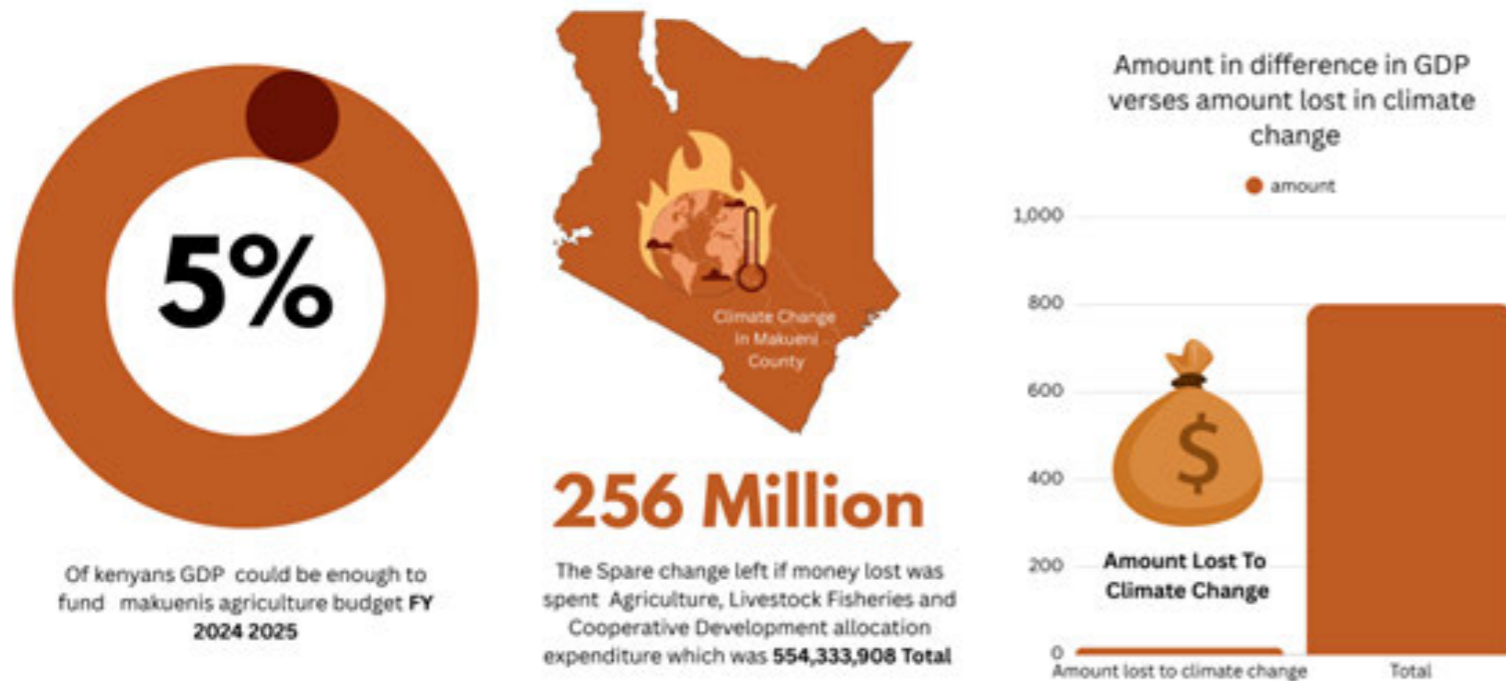


Peninah David, Leader of the Sombe Muuo group in Makueni County

“Once the county recognised our work, it became easier to get support for more families.”

funded programmes. The Candle of Hope experience shows that three policy shifts determine whether local successes endure. These include mainstreaming climate-smart nutrition into County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), investing in small, decentralised water

Climate Change Economic Costs Explained



Data Sources: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, International Conference on Population and Development and Climate Change Kenya and Makeni County government

By Beryl Beatrice

and irrigation infrastructure, and formally recognising and funding community-based animal and human health providers. Where women have organised to engage county planners and officials, these shifts are already taking place, and household resilience is improving.

Mainstream climate-smart nutrition

Kenya's Climate Change Act (2016) and the Ending Drought Emergencies framework set national direction, but counties hold the purse strings. Candle of Hope supported women to participate in CIDP public forums, presenting practical solutions such as kitchen garden kits, training modules, and demonstration plots.

The result: climate-smart agriculture and nutrition were no longer abstract policy items but line-budgeted activities in ward-level extension plans. County extension officers adopted the project's training modules, and seed distributions and technical visits became regular rather than episodic.

"Once the county recognised our work, it became easier to get support for more families," Penninah says. Embedding these activities in CIDPs translates constitutional rights to food into predictable support at the household level.

Erratic rainfall remains the primary constraint. Candle of Hope's advocacy is led locally by women who track harvests and household nutrition, grounding their demands in lived data. They have persuaded county planners to fund community water tanks, recharge schemes, and micro-irrigation pilots in targeted wards.

These investments have stabilised yields. Households with access to stored or pumped water can sustain kitchen gardens through dry spells, improving dietary diversity and generating extra to sell.

"When households can water a garden through the dry season, dietary diversity improves, and families can sell surplus produce," explains project manager Jonathan Mwaniki. Counties that allocate contingency funds to small, decentralised systems are seeing faster, measurable

returns on nutrition per shilling spent. Livestock losses erode both nutrition and household capital. Women trained as community animal health workers and community health volunteers have helped fill critical service gaps, while advocacy has ensured these cadres are recognised in county service blueprints. Candle of Hope collaborated with FAO and county veterinary officers to certify and supervise community providers. After which, counties introduced modest recurrent budget lines for vaccines, deworming supplies, and supervision. The results are clear: lower animal mortality, higher milk yields, and increased household income. "Now we

"When households can water a garden through the dry season, dietary diversity improves, and families can sell surplus produce."



A kitchen garden in Peninah's backyard



Jam made from baobab by the Sombe Muuo group after receiving training on value addition.

have community ‘vets’ who treat, deworm, and advise, and animal mortality has fallen,” says trainer Joseph Ngoka. Policy recognition has turned informal volunteers into resourced frontline providers.

Women at the heart of governance

Sombe Muuo and Candle of Hope show that women are not merely beneficiaries, but policy actors. They lead community consultations, document results, and petition county assemblies to fund proven interventions.

Training integrates agro-nutrition, value addition, and market linkages for drought-tolerant species such as baobab and tamarind. Women process wild fruit into jam and sell it in Mombasa, using the proceeds to purchase seed, fertiliser, and veterinary drugs.

“We used to ignore these trees; now we process and package products that bring income,” says Lilian Mutua. That income, especially when combined with county services, strengthens resilience at the household and community level.

Kenya’s Constitution guarantees freedom from hunger and obliges the state to protect the right to food. Devolution assigns counties the responsibility for planning and financing local interventions through

CIDPs.

By mobilising women to engage in planning and budgeting processes, Candle of Hope is translating constitutional and continental commitments into local action. These include the AU Agenda 2063 and the AU Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy, which are now reflected in funded programmes.

When county budgets reflect women’s priorities, local pilots can scale into sustained public programming across ASAL counties.

Candle of Hope supported its advocacy with evidence, including improved dietary diversity, higher weekly sales from surplus vegetables, reduced livestock mortality, and positive feedback from the beneficiaries. Joint monitoring reassured officials that public funds were delivering measurable results. This included field visits with county officers, beneficiary validation, and community complaint mechanisms.

“Accountability is central; if county funds are allocated, the community must track them,” Mwaniki says. This transparency helped counties justify scaling the model in subsequent CIDP and budget cycles.

Persistent constraints and final ask

Gains are tangible but not guaranteed. Women and county officials continue to contend with weak roads, limited market access, and recurrent droughts that shorten planting windows.

Candle of Hope’s strategy remains pragmatic: diversify into indigenous, drought-tolerant crops; promote fodder conservation; and scale household water management technologies, while pressing counties and national agencies to invest in roads, bulk water infrastructure, and reliable electricity for pumps.

The replicable lesson is clear: cash-plus programming—combining small grants with technical training, market linkages, and early county engagement—delivers faster and more sustainable outcomes than isolated inputs. Where women lead advocacy that embeds such programmes in CIDPs and county budgets, pilots scale into sustained public programmes.

“When the county adopts the model in its CIDP and budget, the approach moves from pilot to programme,” Ali says.

For Penninah, the change is both practical and psychological: weekly earnings from surplus vegetables now cover school fees and medical costs. Ngoka receives calls and responds promptly when animals fall ill, reducing losses.

County Executive Elizabeth Muli reports that recent vaccination campaigns have treated nearly 200,000 animals, increasing coverage from 30 to 70 percent. These public investments matter: healthier herds mean more milk, meat, and traction, helping households buffer against dry spells.

Candle of Hope’s experience shows that resilience is rooted in gendered governance. Women shoulder disproportionate burdens, yet when mobilised into policy processes, they drive stronger food security outcomes.

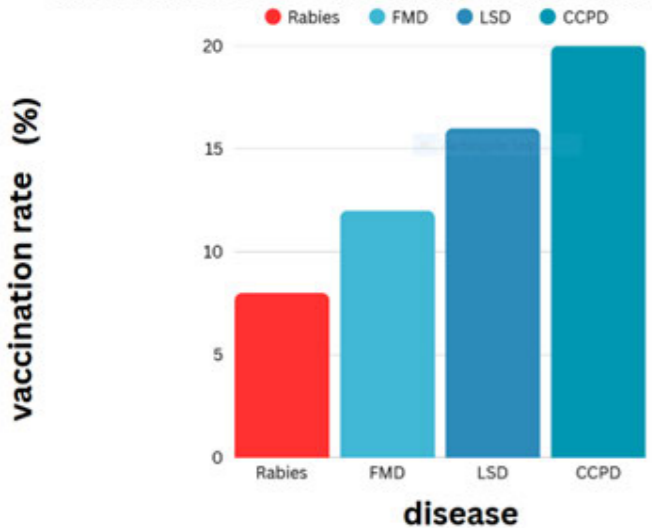
Policies that recognise and fund women-centred interventions—across community animal health, small-scale water infrastructure, and nutrition within CIDPs—advance gender equity while translating constitutional obligations into tangible household benefits.

The message from Makueni is clear and evidence-based: invest in small-scale water and irrigation; integrate climate-smart nutrition and agriculture into CIDPs; and institutionalise community-based animal and human health cadres through predictable funding and supervision.

“We need county money on paper and in the bank,” Ali says. When counties commit resources in this way, women’s kitchen gardens shift from exception to foundation—becoming the backbone of climate-resilient communities across Kenya’s drylands.

“Accountability is central; if county funds are allocated, the community must track them.”

livestock disease vaccination rates in Makueni County



Key

FMD - Foot and Mouth Disease

LSD - Lumpy Skin Disease

CCPD - Contagious Caprine Pleuropneumonia



A group photo of the Sombe Muuo group.



Budget the Period, Protect the Future

Text: Rey Bulambo

In refugee settlements like Kakuma and Kalobeyei, girls' education is shaped as much by policy gaps as by poverty. Menstrual health, adolescent SRHR and protection services remain inconsistently funded and delivered. A refugee-led movement is now reframing these issues as matters of public finance and governance, pushing for budget lines, systems and accountability that protect girls at scale.

Sudi Omar remembers the first time a girl told her she had stayed home from school because she had no sanitary pad. It was not a one-off. In Kakuma and Kalobeyei, girls miss school for biological, economic, and social reasons. Policies promise protection. On the ground, they often fail. A refugee herself, Sudi founded the Girl Power Action Initiative (GPI) after watching girls quietly disappear from classrooms. Her approach treats menstrual health, adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention as system challenges—not just acts of charity. She integrates the distribution of hygiene kits and training on reusable pads with age-appropriate SRHR education, GBV awareness, and the establishment of safe spaces. Peer mentors are trained as first responders within schools and neighbourhoods. Community assessments and 2024 studies show that 50–70% of adolescent girls miss one to three school days each month due to menstrual poverty and poor sanitation facilities. Limited SRHR

knowledge and weak protection systems increase vulnerability to early pregnancy, exploitation, and abuse.

In a settlement of more than 300,000 refugees and host-community members in Turkana County, these gaps translate into lost learning, reduced opportunities, and continued dependency. “We can no longer wait for solutions from outside,” Sudi says. “We must act within our communities and push policy to match reality.”

Practical, frontline solutions

At the programme level, GPI's model is simple but strategic. The initiative provides menstrual hygiene kits and trains girls to make reusable pads. It delivers SRHR education, runs GBV awareness sessions, and creates safe spaces where girls can learn, speak openly, and lead.

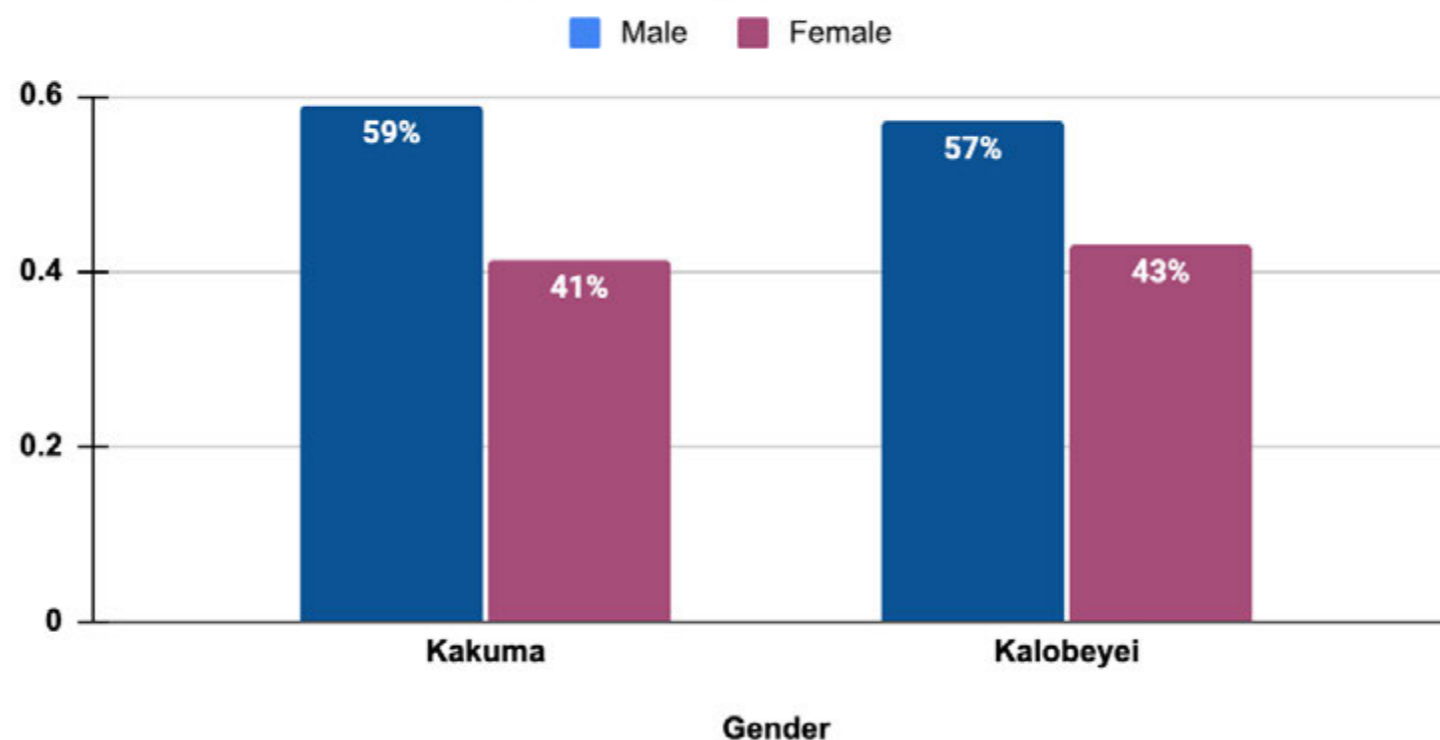
Mentorship and leadership training help girls move from silence to agency, while trained peer educators act as first responders in schools and neighbourhoods. But Sudi's ambition extends beyond service delivery. She is pushing county education and health officials, donor agencies, and UN partners to adopt standards that make these interventions sustainable. Her proposals include dedicated budget lines for menstrual health and adolescent SRHR, standardised sanitation facilities in schools, mandatory GBV-prevention and referral training for teachers, and integrated data systems to track attendance and protection outcomes. “If you want durability, you must budget for it,” she says. “Storytelling matters, but budgets decide.” Humanitarian financing continues to prioritise response over prevention. Less than 2% of aid funding is allocated

to GBV prevention, despite its wide-ranging effects on health, education, and livelihoods. In refugee settings, where food and shelter dominate funding priorities, menstrual health and adolescent services are often left to short-term donations. This results in inconsistent supply chains for pads, insufficient teacher training, and sanitation facilities without privacy and water. GPI is working to change this. It uses data from community surveys, school attendance records, and case documentation to engage policymakers directly. Sudi presents costed proposals to county officials and donors. These focus on recurring allocations for menstrual supplies, maintenance budgets for WASH facilities, and pre-positioned stock before rainy seasons. They also include dedicated County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP) budget lines for adolescent SRHR in refugee-hosting areas.

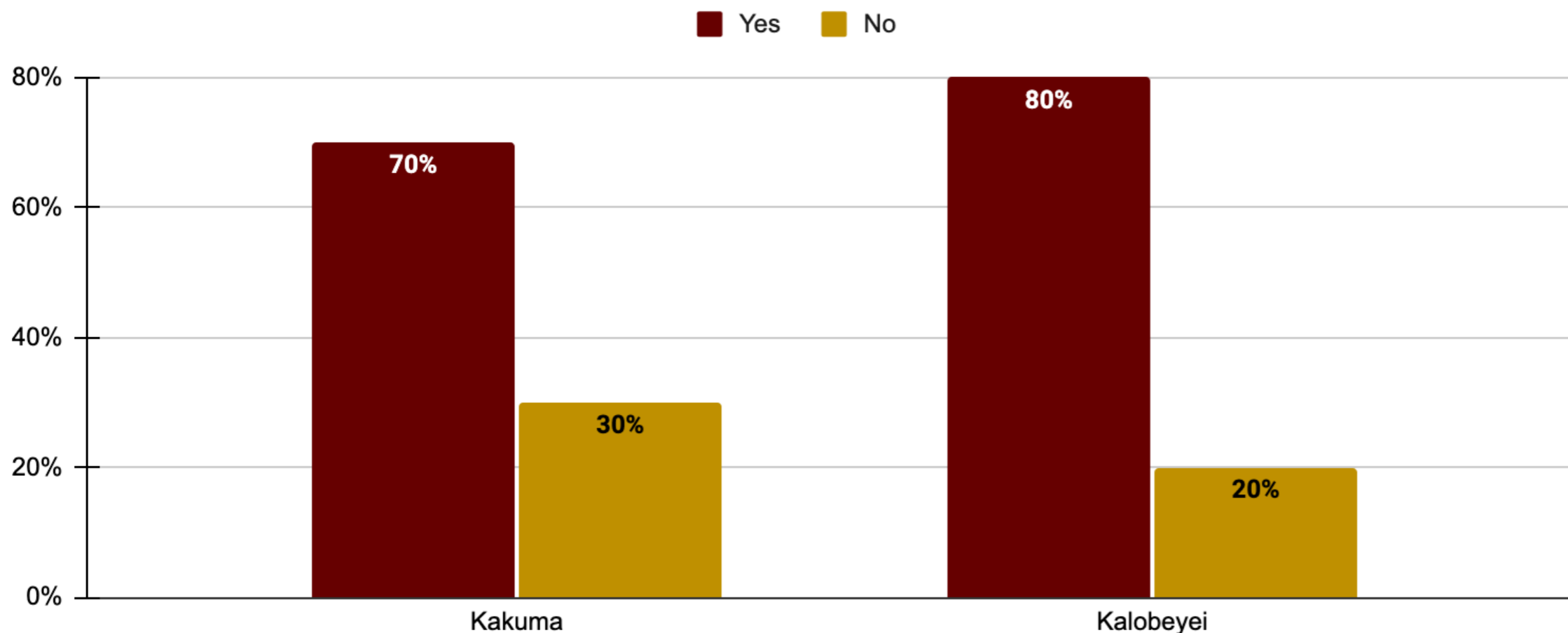
Tactics that force the system to act
Sudi's approach is procedural and persistent. She submits memoranda to the County Gender Technical Working Group and presents evidence during CIDP public participation sessions. She works with local NGOs to draft model budget language that Members of the County Assembly (MCAs) can adopt.

She also trains school administrators to record reasons for absenteeism, ensuring that missed days due to menstruation are captured in the Education Management Information System (EMIS). By connecting programme outcomes to procurement and budgeting cycles, she transforms an unseen problem into a measurable responsibility.

Population of Pupils By Gender in 2024
Nearly half of the pupils were female



Proportion of schools With Menstrual Products in Kakuma and Kalobeyei



The strategy is already yielding positive results. After GPI distributed menstrual kits and conducted peer-led sessions across ten schools in 2023–2024, teachers reported an improvement in student attendance. Parents noted an increase in confidence and participation among girls. Some schools introduced segregated latrines and modest privacy improvements. A two-day Girls Summit held on Menstrual Hygiene Day 2025 brought together young advocates who publicly called for a county plan to end period poverty. The summit also produced clear policy demands, which GPI compiled into a formal submission to the county’s education and health departments.

Sudi is clear about the limits. “What we challenge is not just poverty—we challenge power,” she says. Sustaining change requires predictable funding and

political commitment. So far, progress has been uneven. Donor support is often short-term, and county co-financing remains inconsistent. Scaling beyond pilot schools in Kakuma and Kalobeyei will require stronger national alignment, including integration into education, WASH, and refugee policy frameworks.

Legal framework

Kenya’s legal framework recognises girls’ rights to education and protection. The 2010 Constitution guarantees equality (Article 27) and the rights to health and education (Article 43). Devolution assigns counties the responsibility for planning and financing key services through instruments such as the CIDP and annual budgets.

However, these commitments are not consistently reflected in practice. Sudi’s

advocacy focuses on translating legal guarantees into funded, operational systems. Mitch Ambatsu, field coordinator for Kakuma operations at the Refugee Consortium of Kenya (RCK), supports this view. He argues that counties hosting refugees must establish clear, dedicated budget lines for menstrual health, adolescent SRHR, and GBV prevention.

These should be embedded in CIDPs and annual budgets, covering menstrual supplies, WASH maintenance, school counselling, and referral systems. “If counties treat menstrual health as a recurring obligation, not a one-off project, girls stop being a short-term fix and become a long-term priority,” he says. Ambatsu also calls for stronger national coordination. He urges the Ministries of Health and Education to issue joint

technical guidelines for refugee-hosting schools. These should include gender-segregated sanitation, safe disposal systems, teacher training on SRHR and GBV referrals, and school-based psychosocial support linked to clear referral pathways.

“Clear protocols remove uncertainty at the school level and guide staff on how to respond,” he adds.

He further recommends integrating menstrual absenteeism and GBV indicators into EMIS and health systems, alongside procurement reforms that enable pooled purchasing and buffer stocks. Counties should also publicly report allocations and spending to strengthen accountability. “Data and predictable procurement make this auditable,” he says. “Without that, nothing sticks. This is budget politics, not charity.”

Sudi reinforces this point. “We are asking for practical changes—sinks with locks, pads in the supply chain, trained teachers and counsellors, and money in the budget,” she says. “That is how you stop supporting girls one by one and start protecting whole generations.”

Connecting local action to continental commitments

GPI’s work aligns with broader continental priorities. Agenda 2063 calls for inclusive education and women’s empowerment, while the AU Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy emphasises investment in girls’ health and learning.

In Kakuma, these commitments are proven in practice through county budgets, procurement systems, and school infrastructure. When national and county systems align with these goals, impact can scale.



Sudi Omar, founder of Girl Power Initiative (GPI) poses during the Girl Summit event in Kakuma refugee camp

“We can no longer wait for solutions from outside. We must act within our communities and push policy to match reality.”

Sudi reframes protection as a governance issue. Documented cases of abuse, early pregnancy, and school dropout compel institutions to act. GPI collaborates with GBV referral networks to improve

response times, and with legal aid actors to pursue cases where necessary. It also pushes for clear standard operating procedures so that vulnerable girls are not passed between agencies, but quickly connected to psychosocial, medical, and legal support.

When procurement lines, training systems, and CIDP provisions are in place, frontline workers can be held accountable. GPI recognises that solutions must be locally grounded. The initiative engages parents, community

“National strategies promise inclusion on paper, but without predictable county financing, refugee girls still pay the price.”

leaders, and religious figures through dialogue and training, helping shift norms around menstruation, education, and protection.

Digital campaigns and local media amplify these conversations, while girls themselves take on leadership roles—facilitating sessions, mentoring peers, and representing their schools in public forums.

External validation and persistent gaps

External partners are taking note. UNHCR Kakuma and local NGOs emphasise the value of refugee-led initiatives, which are closely aligned with lived realities. “Refugee-led organisations understand the challenges on the ground,” says Mangati Conzana, Youth Activities Coordinator at UNHCR Kakuma. “Programmes must respond to those realities, not follow generic models.”

Yet funding remains the central constraint. “We can replicate training and community engagement quickly,” Sudi says, “but lasting change requires counties to budget and national systems to provide guidance.”

Ambatsu offers a direct assessment: “National strategies promise inclusion on paper, but without predictable county financing, refugee girls still pay the price.” He adds, “Short funding cycles create a

boom-and-bust cycle. Counties need to commit recurring resources so gains do not evaporate when a donor moves on.”

Sudi’s argument is ultimately about governance. Rights without budget allocations remain unfulfilled. By incorporating menstrual health and adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) into public budgets, she transforms the issue from a matter of charity into one of public responsibility.

This shift opens up practical avenues for action, such as incorporating budget lines in the CIDP, adjusting procurement rules, enhancing teacher training, and implementing small administrative reforms. When these measures are institutionalised, they can significantly protect and benefit girls on a large scale.

On the ground, the change is visible. Girls who once missed school now attend more regularly. Parents report greater confidence in their daughters. Teachers who once overlooked cases now initiate referrals. Where silence once allowed abuse to persist, transparency is beginning to break that cycle.

GPI’s model offers a pathway for other refugee settings. It demonstrates that when communities generate evidence, engage policy processes, and secure budget commitments, local solutions can be scaled effectively.

Sudi’s message is clear: embed protection in budgets, integrate it into systems, and make it measurable. Ambatsu puts it clearly: “If counties treat menstrual health and adolescent SRHR as ongoing obligations, not one-off projects, we will see lasting change. That is budget politics, not charity.”



Lydia Opiyo, the founder of Passion to Share Foundation, during a session with students /PHOTO BY PASSION TO SHARE FOUNDATION

School offers girls in Kibera ticket out of cycle of poverty

TEXT DAMARIS KIILU

For many girls in Kibera, finishing school does not open doors, it closes them. With limited access to higher education and few job opportunities, uncertainty quickly sets in. But through skills training and mentorship, a growing number are finding new pathways to independence and purpose.

When Lydia Opiyo talks about Passion to Share Foundation, she does not begin with buildings, courses, or long-term plans. She begins with a moment—food shared, support offered, and families reached in times of need.

Founded in 2020, the organisation's roots stretch beyond Kibera. Its earliest work involved supporting families affected by a devastating landslide in Bududa, Uganda. It was a painful encounter that revealed how small acts of kindness can carry deep meaning.

But it was a story closer to home that ultimately shaped its direction. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lydia and her team met a young mother living in extreme hardship. She had to leave her daughter alone while she worked odd jobs to survive. The reality was stark, reflecting a broader pattern.

Across informal settlements, many girls complete secondary school only to find themselves with no clear path forward. Financial constraints, social pressures, and

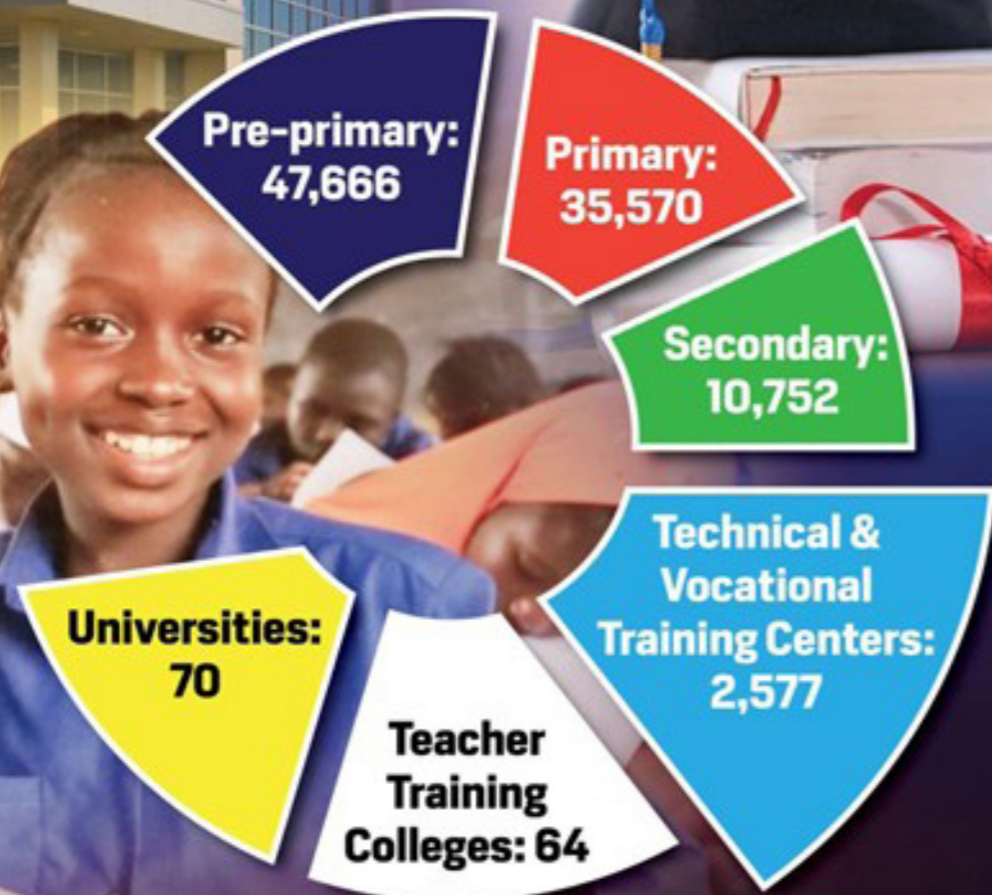
limited access to higher education often close off opportunities before they begin. That reality fuelled Opiyo's resolve to act. Today, the foundation supports over 300 girls, has mentored more than 1,000, and reached over 100 families—helping young women rebuild confidence, gain skills, and reclaim a sense of direction.

At a national level, the gap between education and opportunity is clear. According to the KNBS Economic Survey 2024, in 2023, Kenya had a total of 47,666 pre-primary institutions, 35,570 primary schools, 10,752 secondary schools, 2,577 technical and vocational training centres, 64 teacher training colleges, but only 70 universities.

While many children can access basic education, far fewer transition into higher learning. This disconnect reflects a broader structural challenge where education does not always translate into livelihoods, particularly for girls in informal settlements.

Number of registered educational institutions in Kenya

As at 2023



Source: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
Economic Survey 2024

While many children can access basic education, far fewer transition into higher learning.

Solutions from within

In places like Kibera, these barriers are even more pronounced. Skills and mentorship programmes such as the Passion to Share Foundation offer a practical pathway to independence, helping to bridge the gap left by limited access to higher education. Similar models are emerging across other organisations working in informal settlements. Initiatives like the Youth Impact Global Training Programme,

led by Beryl Achieng of Success Afrika, demonstrate how targeted skills training and mentorship can transform outcomes for young people.

While distinct, these programmes share a common approach: combining mindset development with practical, market-relevant skills to build confidence, agency, and sustainable livelihoods.

Participants receive training in entrepreneurship, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. These are skills that enable them to start businesses, secure employment, and contribute to their communities.

“The programme begins with mindset and confidence-building,” Beryl says, “recognising that many young people in informal settlements face low self-esteem, limiting beliefs, and social pressures that can block progress.”

“After developing the right mindset, participants move on to practical skills that match market needs—including financial literacy, business planning, and digital skills. These are reinforced through mentorship from experienced leaders who provide guidance, role models, and support to navigate challenges in business and life,” Beryl explains.

Over time, she says, participants become more proactive, independent, and capable of shaping their own futures. Many go on to start small enterprises in areas such as waste management, retail, and community services, while others secure formal employment.

For experts working in this space, the effectiveness of such programmes lies not only in what they offer, but in who leads them.

Women-led initiatives

Jane Anyango, a gender expert and Executive Director of Polycom Girls, says initiatives supporting girls and young mothers are most impactful when they are rooted in the communities they serve.

“These organisations are often led by women and girls who have experienced the same challenges. They are not just responding to problems—they are redesigning solutions from within,” she says.

She adds that young women are increasingly involved in shaping programmes, working alongside stakeholders, and even contributing to policy conversations.

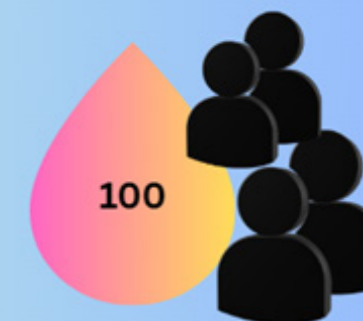
IMPACT IN NUMBERS



Number of girls mentored



Total number of girls who have gone through the programme



Total number of families assisted

source: Passion to Share Foundation

By Damaris Kiilu

The importance of practical skills is also reflected in the broader education landscape. With technical and vocational training centres far outnumbering universities, alternative pathways have become critical.

But beyond employability, these programmes offer something less visible and equally important: renewed agency. “Through skills training, girls are not only equipped for long-term opportunities, but they also regain a sense of purpose,” Jane explains. “Last year, we supported 20 young mothers to choose their own paths—some returned to school, others pursued vocational training. That choice alone begins to break the cycle of poverty.” For many girls in settlements like Kibera, this combination of training, mentorship, and support opens doors that formal higher education often leaves closed.

Designed for change

At the Passion to Share Foundation, that idea has taken shape in practical ways. What began with just two courses has grown into a training centre quietly transforming lives. Today, the foundation offers programmes in Graphic Design, Fashion Design, Hairdressing, and Beauty Therapy—each designed to equip young women with skills they can use to earn a living and rebuild their futures.

For Lydia, the motivation behind this work is deeply personal. “I hated to see young girls engage in things like robbery and prostitution,” she says. “Not because they wanted to, but because they lacked options.”

She understands that lack of options firsthand. “Growing up in the slum is not easy,” Lydia says. “I came from a poor family where even basic needs like food were not guaranteed.”

When she meets the girls who apply to the programme, she often sees her younger self

reflected in them. “When I meet this girl, I see the mini me. And I think—if I had not had this opportunity, my life would be very different.”

That memory continues to shape Lydia’s work. Today, the Passion to Share Foundation operates what she describes as a college-like institution, offering six months of fully sponsored skills training to vulnerable girls in Kibera.

Access to the programme is carefully managed. “We ensure that we give the opportunity to only deserving girls, and our recruitment process is very strict,” she says.

Applicants submit forms—either physically or online—before undergoing shortlisting, followed by oral and written interviews. “After that, we enrol only those who are qualified and ready,” Lydia explains.

The results, she says, are often transformative. “We have seen girls move out of the slums, earn an income, and pay their own bills. Others have completely changed after securing good jobs,” she notes. “Usually, a year after training, the girl no longer resembles the one who walked into the interview room.”

Over time, she says, participants become more proactive, independent, and capable of shaping their own futures.

Fighting root causes

Yet sustaining that transformation comes at a cost. Funding remains the programme’s biggest challenge. “The cost per girl for six months is about Sh154,347,” Lydia says. Supporting a cohort of 44 girls at a time requires consistent donor backing, something that is not always guaranteed.



Lydia Opiyo, the founder of Passion to Share Foundation PHOTO BY PASSION TO SHARE FOUNDATION

Beyond individual success stories, Lydia sees the programme as a response to broader structural realities in informal settlements. “I may not speak much about policy,” she says, “but what we are doing addresses key challenges—unemployment among women and girls, gender-based violence, and poverty.”

For her, the root issue is clear. “Poverty is an enemy we must fight with everything we have, especially in informal settlements.”

Her vision stretches well beyond the current programme. “We envision building the best women-only university in Kenya,” Lydia says—one that would go beyond skills training to address the full spectrum of challenges facing women, including access to childcare and financial support. For many of the girls currently enrolled, that vision already feels within reach. Experts say such approaches are essential. According to Jane, economic empowerment is central to breaking the

cycles of vulnerability. “If young mothers are not economically empowered, they cannot make decisions for themselves. They rely on favours, which exposes them to exploitation and abuse,” she explains. “Economic independence brings hope, productivity, and growth—not just for the individual, but for the entire family.”

In many ways, this reflects a broader pattern seen across similar initiatives, where practical skills, mentorship, and mindset support combine to create lasting change.

“When I meet this girl, I see the mini me. And I think—if I had not had this opportunity, my life would be very different.”

Proof it works

Charity Achieng Binge, now 22, is one of the programme's beneficiaries and a member of its fifth cohort. Before joining the school, her life was marked by uncertainty. She had completed Form Four and carried big dreams, but had no clear path forward. "I dreamed of becoming a graphic designer, but I did not know where to start," she says. Raised by a single mother doing her best to provide, college fees felt out of reach. "At times, it felt like my dreams were too big for my situation," she recalls.

That changed unexpectedly. One day, she met a woman distributing flyers for the Passion to Share Foundation and explaining the courses on offer. "She encouraged me to apply," Charity says. "At that moment, something shifted."

She followed her to the centre and submitted her application. "When I stepped into the institution, it felt like a dream unfolding right before my eyes." Joining the programme gave her more than technical training. "It gave me hope, direction, and belief in myself again," she says.

Charity enrolled in Graphic Design—a

decision she says transformed her life. Alongside technical skills, she gained confidence, communication ability, and a clearer sense of direction. "Each of these skills shaped me in ways I never imagined. Where I once saw limitations, I now see opportunity."

After graduating, her life took what she describes as "a beautiful turn." She applied for a Graphic Design internship within the foundation and was selected, earning her first salary between 2024 and 2025.

She now works as a receptionist and graphic designer at the PSF Beauty School. "Today, I can confidently say my life has changed," she says. She can support herself, contribute to her family, and assist in caring for her younger siblings. "I no longer feel helpless or dependent—I feel empowered."

For Charity, the impact goes beyond income. "They didn't just give me a skill. They gave me a job, dignity, and a future." Her experience reflects a wider reality in Kibera, where many girls leave school with ambition but lack guidance and opportunity. "For many, the only options they see are early marriage or unsafe work

just to survive," she says.

She now hopes programmes like PSF can reach more girls facing similar barriers. Her journey underscores a broader gap faced by young women who complete school without access to further training or employment pathways.

Experts say mentorship plays a critical role in closing that gap. According to Jane, beyond technical skills, mentorship helps shape confidence, decision-making, and long-term life choices for young women.

"Poverty is an enemy we must fight with everything we have, especially in informal settlements."

Diana's skills journey

Diana Rakwach's story follows a familiar pattern—one of waiting, uncertainty, and eventual renewal. After completing high school, financial constraints prevented her from joining college. She spent two years at home, taking on small, irregular jobs to support her family.

"During this time, I saw no light at the end of the tunnel," she says. The Passion to Share Foundation, she recalls, appeared as "a beacon of hope."

An advertisement for free courses caught her attention, particularly Fashion Design, which offered a way to turn her passion into something practical. Through the programme, she learned hands-on skills, from taking measurements and drafting patterns to cutting fabric and sewing.

Since completing the course, Diana says her life has shifted. The skills she gained helped her secure employment and meet her basic needs, while soft skills, such as customer service, opened additional opportunities.

Yet her journey also highlights the limits

many young women still face. "Resources and opportunities are still limited," she says. "I need more mentorship and guidance to become fully self-reliant." That need for continued support reflects a broader reality: training alone is often not enough.

At the Passion to Share Foundation, programmes are designed to go beyond technical skills. Communication, mentorship, and peer support form a core part of the model.

Through its skills programme, communication is treated as a practical tool. Girls learn how to express themselves clearly, verbally and in writing, through real-life scenarios such as interviews, CV preparation, and workplace interactions. Non-verbal communication, including posture and confidence, is also emphasised. The mentorship programme builds on this foundation. "At the Passion to Share Foundation, we believe skills alone are not enough," the organisation notes. Girls and young mothers are paired with mentors who provide guidance, emotional support, and practical advice. Through both one-on-one sessions and group discussions, they learn to set goals, navigate challenges, and make informed decisions.

The mentorship extends beyond the training centre, reaching primary and secondary schools with messages of self-worth, education, and positive life choices. At the heart of the organisation's work is a principle that predates its formal programmes: sharing.

The Passion to Share Foundation continues to provide clothing, food, and basic supplies to vulnerable communities in Kenya and Eastern Uganda, particularly during festive seasons such as Easter and Christmas. "That moment opened our eyes to a powerful truth: there is beauty in sharing," the foundation says.

In Kibera, where opportunities are often



limited and futures uncertain, that belief has taken shape in practical ways—through classrooms, sewing machines, and computer screens.

Evelyn's Fashion journey

Evelyn Adhiambo spent three years at home after completing Form Four. With no clear path to college and growing pressure to support her family, she moved to Nairobi to live with her aunt and took up informal work selling fish by the roadside along Ngong Road. "Some days I earned Sh300, other days Sh100, and sometimes nothing at all," she says.

For Evelyn, the experience was marked by uncertainty and survival. The Passion to Share Foundation offered a way out. Driven by her interest in fashion, she enrolled in the Fashion Design course, where she learned tailoring, fabric selection, and garment construction.

"I had asked my aunt to teach me before, since she is a tailor, but she never had the time," she recalls. "So when this opportunity came, I took it."

"Economic independence brings hope, productivity, and growth—not just for the individual, but for the entire family."

After completing the programme, Evelyn secured a three-month internship at TungaTunga, a fashion company in Hurlingham, before moving on to Miyo Creations, where she now works as head of production in the fashion department. Today, her circumstances have changed significantly. She has moved out, rents her own space, and supports her siblings—two of whom finished form four and now live with her. "We manage what we have, but it

is stable," she says.

Her next goal is to open her own workshop, though she still needs essential equipment like an industrial overlock machine and some few dummies for showcasing clothes to get started.

For experts like Jane Anyango, such progress underscores the importance of economic empowerment. "When young mothers are not involved in decisions about their lives, programmes fail," she says. "But when they are economically independent, they can challenge unfair treatment and break cycles of poverty and abuse."

These realities are closely tied to broader structural gaps. Kenya's education system continues to produce far more secondary school graduates than higher education can absorb. With only 70 universities compared to tens of thousands of primary and secondary schools, many young people complete their education with no clear pathway forward.

This imbalance places growing pressure on alternative pathways such as vocational training—especially for young women whose opportunities are further constrained by poverty, caregiving responsibilities, and social expectations.

For girls from informal settlements such as Kibera—where poverty, caregiving responsibilities, and entrenched gender norms further constrict opportunity—the transition from school to stable employment is particularly difficult.

The Passion to Share Foundation positions itself within this gap, offering skills-based training, mentorship, and practical support as an alternative pathway to economic independence for those locked out of formal higher education.

This work reflects broader continental and national commitments. Under Agenda 2063 and the African Union's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy, countries have committed to

inclusive growth driven by women and youth—an approach that aligns with efforts to convert education into economic opportunity.

In Kenya, these priorities are reinforced by the Constitution (2010), which guarantees equality and non-discrimination (Article 27) as well as economic and social rights, including access to education and livelihoods (Article 43).

From a simple act of kindness to careers built skill by skill, Lydia Opiyo's vision has grown into a quiet but powerful force. In Kibera, where finishing school often marks the beginning of uncertainty, the foundation is helping to reshape that reality—turning skills into livelihoods, mentorship into agency, and opportunity into lasting change.

The question now is whether such models can be scaled and sustained to reach the many young women still standing at the edge of that gap.



Some of the students at Passion to Share Foundation/PHOTO BY PASSION TO SHARE FOUNDATION

Across Kenya, intersex children are assigned identities at birth through decisions shaped less by law than by stigma, silence, and pressure. These early interventions, often irreversible, expose gaps in policy, healthcare, and accountability, leaving some of the most vulnerable navigating systems that were never designed for them.

Hunielle Chivatsi, also known as Baba Huntha, is an intersex person and the founder of the Intersex Rights Initiative Coast (IRIC). This is a grassroots organisation that rescues abandoned intersex individuals and advocates for their rights and inclusion.

TEXT: MARION KIITHI

At puberty, Hunielle Chivatsi sat in a biology class, grappling with a growing sense of being different from other students. “I was different from both girls and boys my age. I began asking my mother questions, but she did not have answers.

“My father had disowned me at birth. Girls my age were already experiencing their monthly periods, but in my case, I did not. Whenever the school distributed sanitary pads, I would give mine to my sisters. I knew something was wrong,” Hunielle says.

At the time, it was not yet clear that these experiences reflected a broader legal and medical dilemma in Kenya—one in which decisions about intersex children’s bodies are often made early, shaped by cultural pressure, limited medical guidance, and the absence of clear policy protections.

Hunielle’s story is not an isolated one. According to the 2019 Kenya Population

Intersex children in Kenya: The policy gaps behind early gender assignment



and Housing Census, Kenya is home to 1,524 intersex persons—individuals born with physical characteristics that do not fit typical definitions of male or female. While these numbers may appear small in absolute terms, their implications are significant. Each case raises fundamental questions about protection under Kenya's Constitution, particularly the rights to equality, dignity, and health.

Yet despite this recognition in national data, intersex persons remain largely invisible in policy implementation and public health planning.

Forced identity

In the Coast region alone, 86 intersex persons have been identified, with Kilifi County accounting for 25 cases. Drawing from work in the region, Hunielle says many intersex children are raised by single mothers and are often subjected to early gender reassignment due to community pressure—decisions that can later result in identity crises.

Sostine Lewa is one such case. Born intersex at Kilifi Referral Hospital, Sostine later became a beneficiary of IRIC (Intersex Rights Initiative Coast). Sostine's mother died during childbirth. Shortly afterwards, the father authorised surgery

to alter Sostine's genitalia, removing what he perceived to be male characteristics.

Decisions like these—often made by parents and medical practitioners in the absence of clear legal safeguards—highlight the lack of regulatory oversight surrounding gender assignment for intersex children in Kenya.

“Intersex is a silent topic. Among the Mijikenda, children born intersex are considered *kijego*, meaning a curse. Many communities distance themselves from such children, viewing them as a bad omen or a sign of misfortune in the homestead,” Hunielle says.

Today, Sostine says the decision about surgery should have been deferred until adulthood. “Looking back, I feel so sad. Perhaps I would have fathered children by now. No one disclosed the truth about my sex, and I was raised as a girl,” Sostine says. “I struggled to fit in. I got along more easily with boys, but I was expected to live as a girl. At puberty, I never experienced menstruation. I do not know what it is like to use a sanitary towel. When my nieces ask me to show them how to use one, I feel sad because I have never experienced it myself.”

It was during an awareness session organised by IRIC that Sostine first learned

about being intersex. The discovery was deeply distressing and prompted a search for answers.

“I called a family meeting and asked my father to tell me the truth. He cried and admitted that I was born intersex. But because the community saw it as a curse, he chose surgery as a way of protecting me,” Sostine says.

These experiences have shaped Sostine's views on parental decision-making. “Parents should not choose the gender of their intersex children. They should allow them to decide when they are adults.”

Bridging gaps

Founded in 2022 by Hunielle Chivatsi and registered in 2024, IRIC is a grassroots organisation based in Mtwapa, Kilifi County. It advocates for the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of intersex persons. It also works to rescue and support individuals who have been abandoned or marginalised due to their intersex status.

Between 2024 and 2025, the organisation supported five mothers and their intersex children who had been abandoned by their families, providing shelter through partnerships with other stakeholders. It has also created employment opportunities for 15 intersex individuals and reached more than 200 people through community dialogue.

Beyond these direct interventions, organisations like IRIC often step in where formal systems fall short—bridging gaps in healthcare access, legal awareness, and social protection for intersex persons.

“Addressing the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of intersex persons is extremely challenging due to physical variations, compounded by stigma and the lack of appropriate medical equipment,” Hunielle says.

“It is these complexities that motivated

me to start the organisation. In the coastal region, there was a clear need for better SRHR services, a rescue shelter, and a centre for inclusion.”

An intersex awareness survey conducted by IRIC in Kilifi received 498 responses. It engaged more than 50 stakeholders, including police officers, religious leaders, village elders, and cultural leaders—many of whom are key decision-makers within the community. The findings highlighted the multiple layers of challenges intersex persons face, including those linked to religion.

“I wanted to address the issue of religion. As a Muslim, I am often unsure where to pray—women see me as a man, and men see me as a woman. This showed me the need for dialogue, so people can understand that religion goes beyond physical appearance,” Hunielle says.

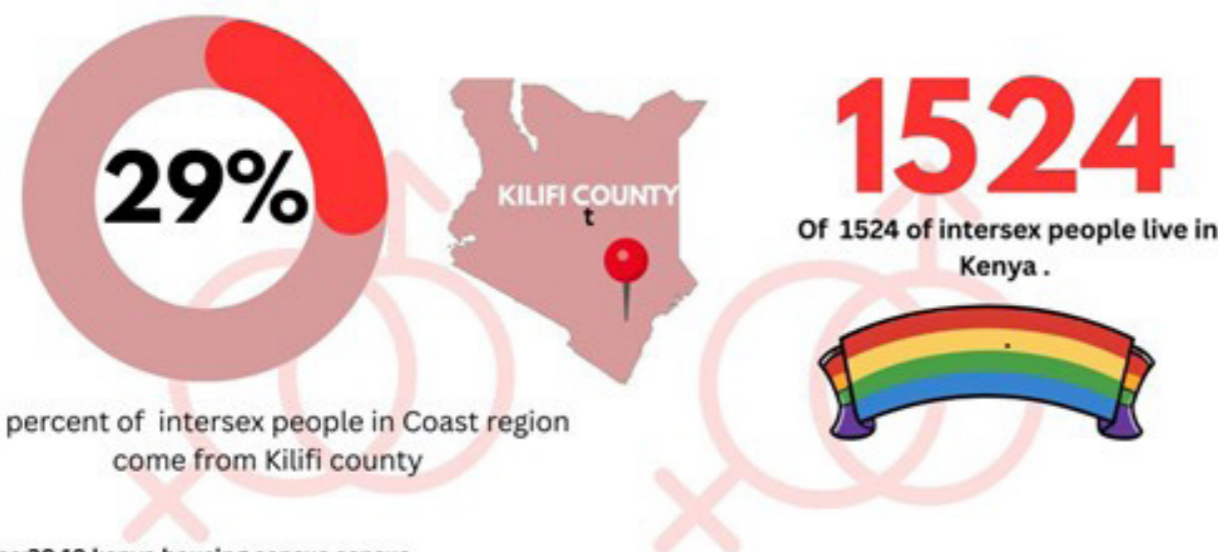
These lived experiences are unfolding against a backdrop of ongoing legislative efforts aimed at addressing such gaps. The [Intersex Bill 2023](#) seeks to respond to persistent human rights violations affecting intersex persons in Kenya, according to the [Kenya National Commission on Human Rights \(KNCHR\)](#).

Among its provisions, the bill proposes formal recognition of intersex as a third gender and requires that children born intersex be issued with official birth documentation reflecting their status. However, Hunielle notes that the absence of an enacted legal framework continues to limit the effectiveness of grassroots interventions.

“The lack of this law makes it difficult for organisations like ours to meet our objectives fully,” Hunielle says. “There is also no clear legal guidance for parents who assign gender to intersex children at birth.”

This gap extends beyond national policy. Advocates like Hunielle increasingly frame

Intersex Persons In Kilifi County



Source: 2019 Kenya housing census

their work within broader continental commitments. Under Agenda 2063 and the African Union’s Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Strategy, member states—including Kenya—have committed to principles of non-discrimination and bodily autonomy.

In that context, gaps in civil registration systems and clinical protections for intersex children are not only national challenges, but also raise broader accountability questions within Africa’s human rights framework.

Yet even beyond the legal and policy space, structural challenges within the health system persist. “Right now, there are no suitable sanitary products designed for intersex persons in the market. Even in cases like cervical cancer, public hospitals lack equipment that accommodates intersex patients for proper screening,” Hunielle adds.

Medical perspective

At the same time, medical perspectives within the health system continue to shape early decisions about intersex children—sometimes reinforcing, and at other times challenging, societal pressures.

Dr Kalama, a paediatrician at Kilifi Referral Hospital, advises that parents of intersex infants should seek specialised medical guidance, including consultations with paediatricians, endocrinologists, and geneticists. “Physical appearance alone is not sufficient. Genetic testing can help determine a child’s chromosomal makeup and guide medical understanding,” he says.

Dr Fondo adds that such tests typically identify whether a child has XX or XY chromosomes, which are associated with female and male biological patterns, respectively. “If a child has XX chromosomes, they are genetically female at the cellular level, with a predominance

of female hormones and internal reproductive structures such as ovaries. If the child has XY chromosomes, they are genetically male, regardless of external appearance, and will typically develop male hormonal patterns,” he explains.

He notes that internal reproductive organs may not always be externally visible and can be located within the body.

However, Dr Fondo cautions against early surgical intervention. “Parents should avoid making irreversible decisions in infancy. Proper medical evaluation should come first, and decisions should not be driven by social pressure,” he says.

He emphasises that surgical procedures should be considered a last resort and only after thorough medical consultation.

Akinyi* (not her real name) knows firsthand the consequences of stigma and misinformation. After giving birth to an intersex child in mid-2024, she was met with silence and suspicion at the hospital.

“Immediately after delivery, they took my baby away without showing me. They said they had called my mother-in-law,” she recalls. When her mother-in-law arrived, the reaction was harsh. “She looked at the baby and asked why I had brought a curse into the family,” Akinyi says.

Within days, her husband took a second wife and forced her out of their home. Akinyi later found support through IRIC, where she received counselling and guidance on raising her child.

Stigma in schools

Hunielle is advocating for a multi-agency approach to address stigma and create safer, more inclusive environments. IRIC works closely with parents, particularly mothers, to help them accept and support their children.

“We encourage parents not to rush into surgery. Many had lost hope in their children, but through engagement, we

have helped restore that hope. Some children had been hidden due to shame,” Hunielle says.

“I was raised as a girl, but many people did not understand me. Even now, some believe I am a woman, while others say I chose to become a man,” Hunielle says. According to Hunielle, intersex persons remain undercounted, noting that official statistics may not fully reflect reality due to low awareness and stigma.

Hunielle’s own experience reflects the barriers intersex individuals face within the education system. Following the family’s relocation, a primary school refused to admit Hunielle because of physical appearance.

“My mother took me to a new school, but the headteacher looked at me and refused to admit me without explanation,” Hunielle recalls. Even after securing admission elsewhere, Hunielle struggled to navigate gendered spaces.

“I started schooling in trousers, but I was still uncomfortable. When I went to the boys’ toilet, my classmates expected me to stand, yet I had to squat. They did not understand, and I felt exposed,” Hunielle says.

In response to these challenges, IRIC has developed targeted interventions that engage both community actors and institutions.

One such initiative is the *Muramuko* (“awakening”) project. It works with key community figures—including Community Health Promoters (CHPs), police officers, village elders, wazee wa nyumba kumi, security guards, and bodaboda riders—to build awareness and shift perceptions.

“We work with these duty bearers because they influence how communities think. We also collaborate with hospitals. When an intersex child is born, health workers call us, and we engage the parents,” Hunielle



explains.

Kenya is home to 1,524 intersex persons—individuals born with physical characteristics that do not fit typical definitions of male or female.

The *Fumbo* project focuses on schools, engaging teachers and management in dialogue around inclusion. “We encourage schools to create safer environments by moving away from rigid gender classifications—for example, using unlabelled toilets instead of strictly male or female ones,” Hunielle says. The initiative also uses social media to reach young people and expand awareness. Another programme is the *Ushindi retreat-Utamaduni Pride*, which engages diverse



cultural groups to explore how intersex identities are understood across various traditions. “It brings together different communities to reflect on what it means, culturally, to be intersex,” Huniella adds.

Fragmented efforts

Jane Nyambura, Head of Programmes at IRIC-Kenya, highlights a significant funding gap for intersex-focused initiatives in Kenya. “Reduced support from Western donors has affected our programmes. We need the government to allocate resources for intersex awareness so we can reach

more communities,” she says.

This reflects a broader structural issue: limited domestic investment in intersex rights programming, leaving organisations heavily reliant on external funding. “We currently depend almost entirely on international donors. With funding dynamics shifting, including the withdrawal of support from agencies like USAID, this is becoming a major challenge,” she adds.

Despite these constraints, IRIC’s advocacy has led to visible changes. Several facilities in Mtwapa have removed gender labels

from public spaces such as toilets, making them more inclusive. “These changes show progress. Some public hospitals have already done away with male and female labels in certain areas,” Nyambura notes. She is now calling for similar reforms across government institutions and schools to better accommodate intersex individuals. Intersex rights, like other fundamental human rights, are recognised in Kenya’s Constitution and supported by various legal frameworks that prohibit discrimination and violence. However, activists argue that legal recognition alone is insufficient to address deeply rooted social practices.

The persistent belief that all individuals must fit into strictly defined male or female categories continues to drive stigma and exclusion. In some cases, this has led to medically unnecessary surgeries and other invasive interventions on intersex infants and children without their consent—practices that are condemned by international human rights bodies.

Several institutions and organisations have sought to address these gaps, though efforts remain fragmented and uneven across regions. The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), alongside other human rights organisations, has been leading advocacy efforts to support intersex persons, particularly in the coastal region.

Other key actors include the Association of Intersex Parenthood (AIP), which works to support and empower intersex individuals and their families, and the Intersex Persons Society of Kenya (IPSK), a grassroots organisation focused on advancing awareness and rights.

However, stakeholders note that these interventions have lacked consistency and nationwide reach. Many are calling for a stronger presence at the county level to ensure sustained impact.

Frankie Kibagendi, Executive Director for intersex programmes at Jinsiangu Kenya, emphasises the need for policy implementation and grassroots awareness. “In many villages, local leaders and government representatives do not fully understand what it means to be intersex,” she says. “Without that understanding, policies cannot translate into meaningful change.”

Kibagendi is also urging the government to fast-track the passage of the Intersex Bill 2023, arguing that its absence continues to perpetuate exclusion. “The lack of legal recognition creates barriers, especially in documentation. Even in electoral processes, there is no provision for intersex persons, forcing them to identify as either male or female,” she explains.

She adds that, despite the 2019 census recognising intersex persons, there has been limited visible progress in translating that recognition into tangible support at the community level.

Until these gaps are addressed through clear policy frameworks, sustained funding, and institutional accountability, intersex children will continue to navigate systems that are not fully designed to recognise or protect them.

Interrupted at 15: Giving Teen Mothers in Makueni a Second Chance at Education

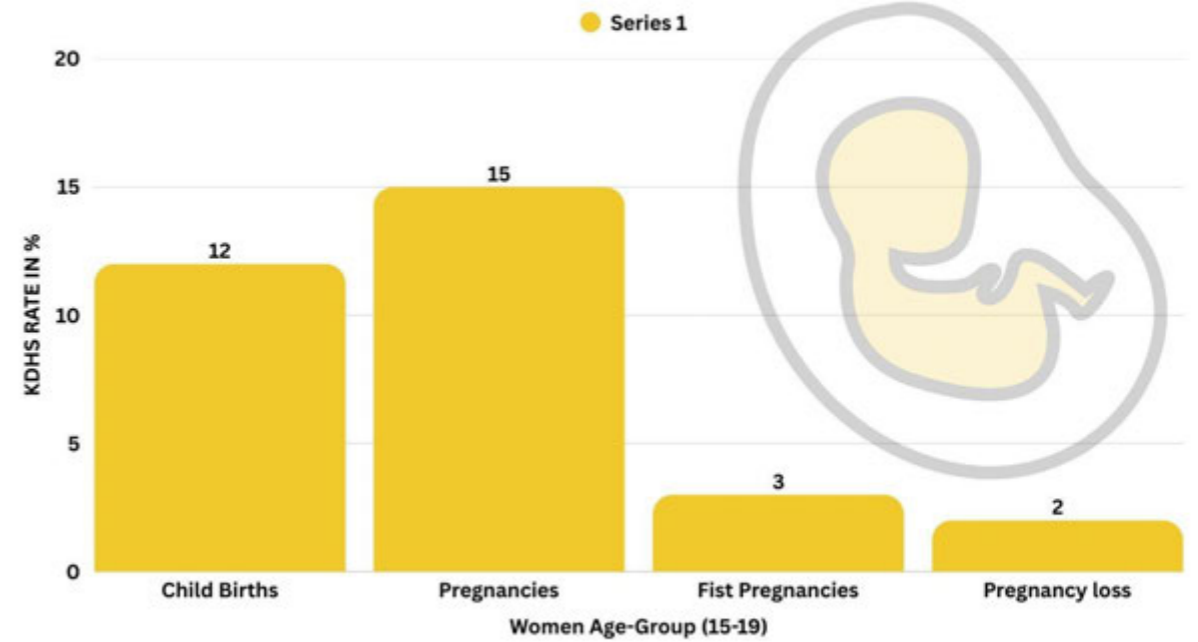
Text: Victor Wanaswa

At just 15, many girls in Makueni see their education, and future, abruptly interrupted by pregnancy. Behind these stories lie deeper gaps in access, protection, and opportunity. As stigma and systemic barriers persist, a growing effort is helping teen mothers return to school and reclaim their paths.

“I was scared to have sex. I didn’t want to become pregnant, but my boyfriend convinced me it couldn’t happen the first time. I was 15. I thought my period would come—but it never did,” says Mary*. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mary* lost her virginity to a slightly older peer. Lured by misinformation and limited access to accurate sexual and reproductive health education, she became pregnant at just 15. In her village of Musunguu in Mbooni East, she had been seen as a symbol of hope for a brighter future—until that future was abruptly disrupted. Her



Rate of Women (15-19) Pregnancy in 2022 in Kenya



DATA SOURCE: KDHS 2022

Designed by Victor Wanaswa

experience reflects broader gaps in access to reproductive health information and protection systems for adolescent girls.

A growing crisis

According to the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) 2022, 15% of women aged 15–19 in Kenya have been pregnant—12% having given birth, 1% experiencing pregnancy loss, and 3% currently pregnant with their first child. These figures highlight how early pregnancy continues to disrupt education and limit long-term opportunities for adolescent girls. In Mukuyuni village, Makueni County, a similar story unfolds. Everline* also became pregnant at 15. Fear and shame drove her to seek an unsafe abortion. She believed a handful of pills from a local vendor could quietly erase her situation.

Instead, severe abdominal pain struck within hours, followed by heavy bleeding that left her weak and barely able to stand. She was rushed to a nearby health

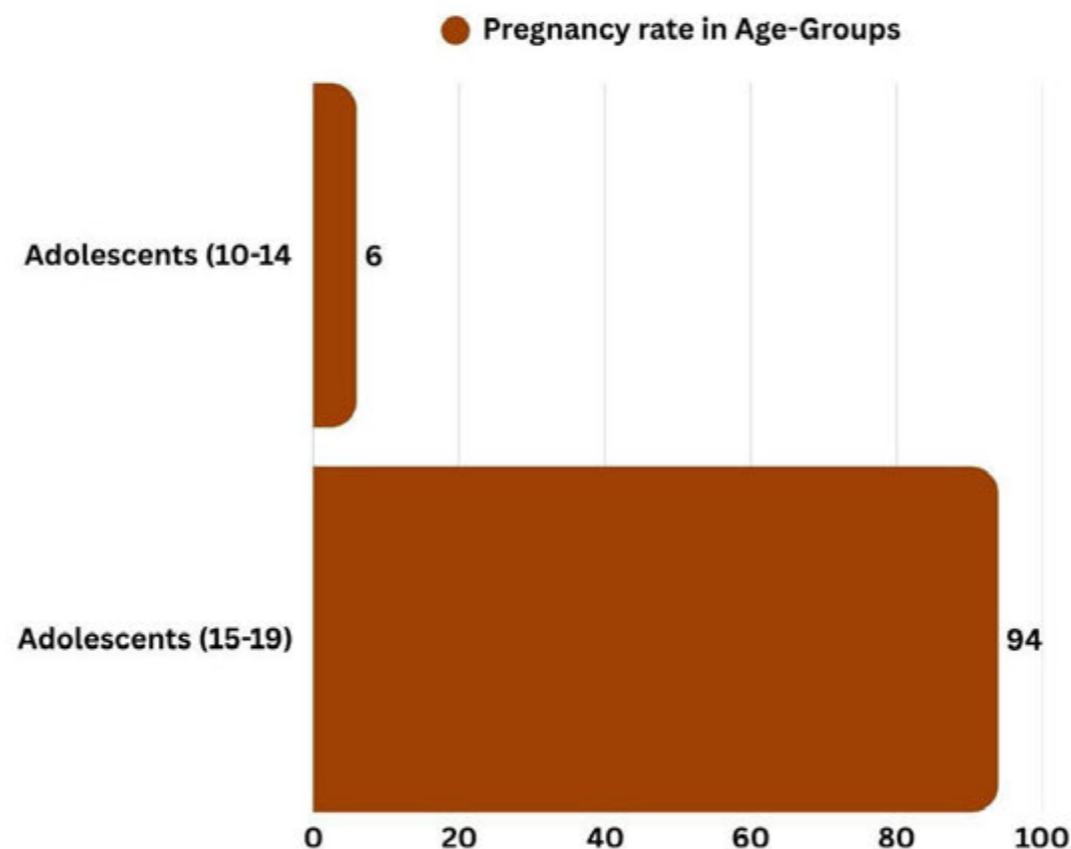
facility, where medical intervention saved her life—and the pregnancy continued. Teenage pregnancy remains a major challenge in Kenya. In 2023, a total of 110,821 pregnancies were recorded among adolescents aged 10–19 within the first five months alone. According to the Kenya Health Information System, 6,110 of these pregnancies were among girls aged 10–14, while 104,711 were among those aged 15–19. These trends underscore the scale of the challenge and the vulnerability of adolescent girls.

“As a boda-boda rider, he would often give me small amounts of money to buy sanitary towels and other necessities.”

Wanza says the person responsible took advantage of her parents' economic hardship. "As a boda-boda rider, he would often give me small amounts of money to buy sanitary towels and other necessities. In return, he demanded sexual favours," she recalls.

Approximately 44.7% of the population in Makueni County lives below the national poverty line, according to 2022 data from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. Poverty continues to intersect with teenage pregnancy, increasing vulnerability to exploitation and limiting access to education and health services. These risks are often more pronounced in remote and arid areas, where limited access to water, markets, and essential services further compounds vulnerability. For many girls, these conditions narrow their choices early, and make recovery even harder.

Pregnancies Recorded Among Adolescents in 2023

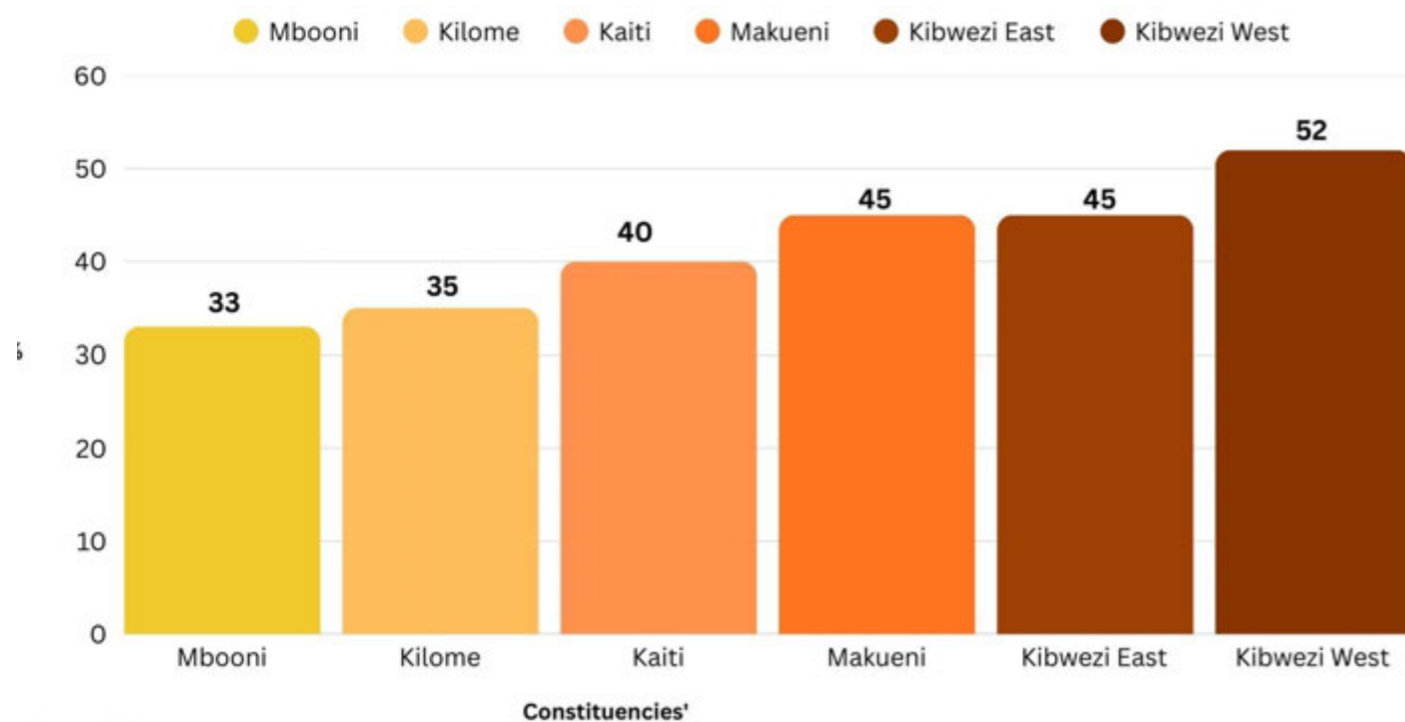


Source: KHIS



Designed by Victor Wanaswa

Rate of Poverty level in Makueni County



Source: KNBS

Designed by Victor Wanaswa

Second chance initiative

To address rising cases of teenage pregnancy, Makueni County Woman Representative Rose Museo launched the Second Chance Initiative programme as a pathway for teenage mothers to rebuild their lives through education. It provides full sponsorship for girls to return to school, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to compete with their peers and reclaim future opportunities.

The initiative represents a targeted local response to gaps in education access for teenage mothers. "I made a deliberate decision to use the National Government Constituency Development Fund (NGCDF) to sponsor teen mothers in my county—especially those whose parents refused to pay their school fees after they became pregnant," says Museo.

Funded through KSh 15 million from the National Government Constituency Development Fund (NGCDF), the programme supports girls whose families are unable or unwilling to cover school fees after pregnancy. Beyond tuition, it also provides basic necessities for students in boarding schools and offers mentorship to help them reintegrate and stay on track.

Many teenage mothers are reluctant to come forward and seek support, fearing discrimination and social rejection.

In Makueni County, teenage pregnancy remains a growing concern, contributing significantly to school dropout among girls. While the county records a relatively high literacy rate of 82 percent and a 97 percent transition rate from primary school, the transition to secondary school drops to 82 percent.

Between 2018 and 2021, a total of 25,511 teenage pregnancies were reported in the county, with the majority occurring among girls aged 14–18—highlighting a critical break point in education pathways.

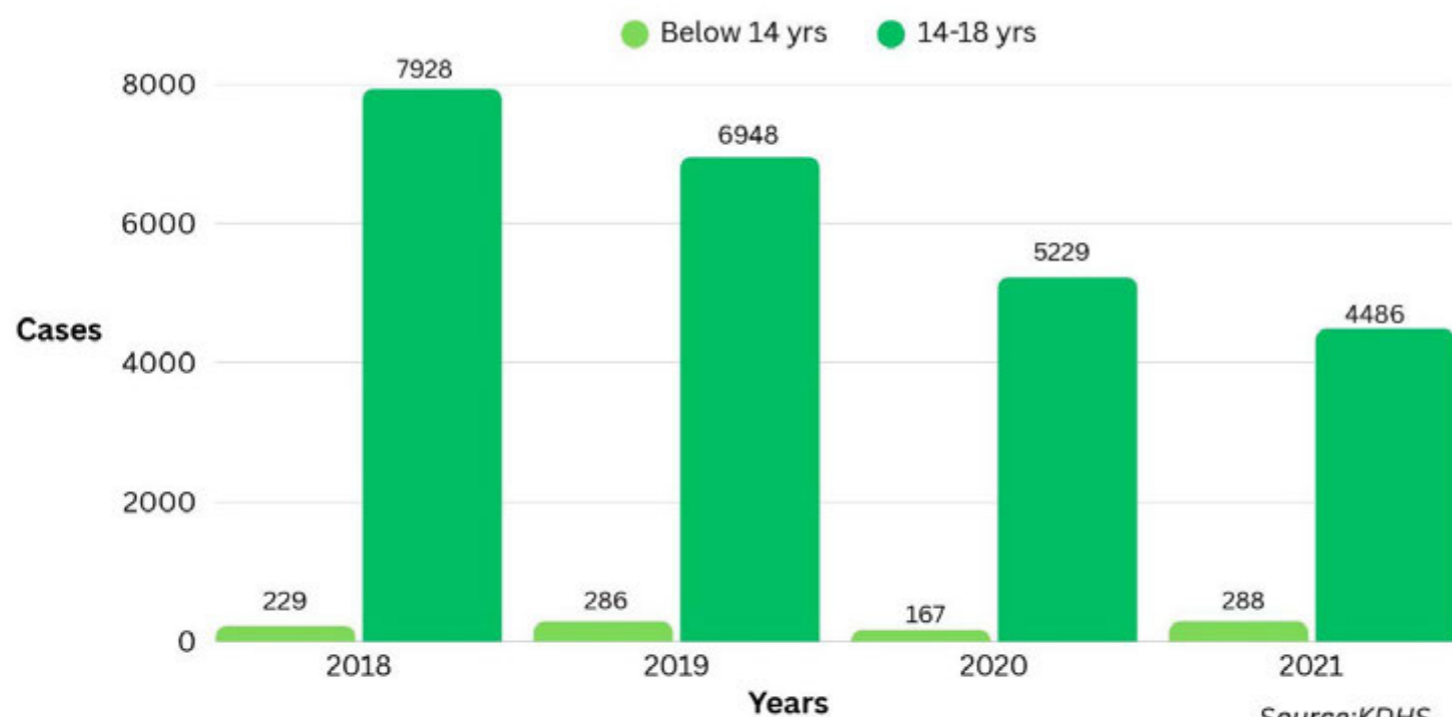
According to Museo, access to sexual and reproductive health information remains limited for many young people. Teenage mothers also face additional barriers, including stigma, poverty, gender-based violence, and peer pressure. Experts say these challenges are deeply interconnected.

Nyawira Wahito, Director of the Resource Centre for Women and Girls, notes that economic hardship continues to drive vulnerability. “While many families struggle financially, young girls are left vulnerable to exploitation and early motherhood. Lack of sanitary towels among school-going girls pushes them into transactional relationships with men who provide money to buy basic necessities—and in the process, they become pregnant,” she says.

Programme limitations

Despite its impact, the initiative faces significant structural and social challenges. Limited resources remain a major constraint. While many girls drop out of school due to pregnancy, the programme relies solely on the National Government Constituency Development Fund (NGCDF), which is unable to support all those in need.

Teenage Pregnancy Cases in Makueni Reported in 2018-2021



Nyawira Wahito (Right), the Director of the Resource Centre for Women and Girls.

Stigma also continues to act as a barrier. Many teenage mothers are reluctant to come forward and seek support, fearing discrimination and social rejection. At the institutional level, some schools still deny teenage mothers re-admission after childbirth. This undermines both their long-term well-being and their constitutional right to education, and exposing gaps in the implementation of national policy.

Yet there are signs of progress. Mukuyuni Mixed Day and Boarding Secondary School is among the institutions that have opened their doors to teenage mothers after childbirth. The school's principal, Reuben Musyoka, says many girls enrol there out of fear of returning to their former schools, where stigma and rejection remain common.

o”I challenge other schools to create safe, stigma-free learning environments, provide guidance and counselling, and work closely with parents, health workers, and local leaders to support teen mothers,” he says.

These realities persist despite existing national frameworks designed to support teenage mothers. Over the last three decades, the government has introduced policy interventions to facilitate school re-entry.

Over the last three decades, the government has introduced policy interventions to facilitate school re-entry.

In 2020, the Ministry of Education developed the National Guidelines for School Re-Entry in Early Learning and Basic Education, allowing teenage mothers to continue their education both before and after childbirth.

Policy meets reality

However, implementation remains inconsistent. Research by IDinsight highlights several key barriers. In many cases, enforcement is left to the discretion of individual headteachers, due to a lack of clear operational guidelines. This creates uncertainty around critical issues—such as how long a pregnant girl can remain in school, when she can return after delivery, and how reintegration should be managed.

Awareness of the policy is also limited among parents, teachers, and teenage mothers themselves, reducing its effectiveness. At the same time, stigma within schools continues to push some girls out of the education system altogether.

For beneficiaries like Winfred Vaati, however, the impact of the initiative is clear. Now a graduate of Meru University, she credits the programme with giving her a second chance at life. “I consider myself incredibly lucky that I completed my university education despite being a teen mother. This initiative gave me hope when I had almost given up on myself,” she says.

“I ask that it be expanded to reach more girls like me—those who feel forgotten, ashamed, and left behind—so they too can have a second chance at education and a better future for themselves and their children.” Expanding such initiatives, while strengthening policy implementation and addressing stigma, will be critical to ensuring that more girls are not left behind.



Winfred Vaati, a graduate of Meru University and a beneficiary of the Second Chance Initiative.



How Lolupe women stepped in when aid failed

Catherine Ajikon cultivating their sorghum farm

Text: Regina Mwanza

In Turkana’s Lolupe village, drought exposed more than hunger—it revealed the limits of aid that came too late. As children grew weaker, a group of women made a decisive shift: stop waiting, start producing. What followed is a story of survival turning into structure, and scarcity into strategy.

For residents of Lolupe village in Turkana County, 2019 is remembered as a year of fear. The rains failed again. Riverbeds cracked open, grazing land disappeared, and hunger crept steadily into homes. For mothers, the most painful sight was not empty granaries—but children growing thinner by the day.

When rains failed

The crisis exposed critical gaps in drought response systems, where delayed aid and limited local resilience measures often leave communities vulnerable at their most critical moments. A county nutrition briefing referencing the 2019 SMART survey reported that 25.6% of children were wasted, 23.3% were stunted, and 37% were underweight. The effects were visible.

Health clinics began to record a rise in cases of undernutrition among children under five. Hair thinned and lost its colour. Ribs became pronounced. Mothers walked long distances to health centres, carrying weak infants on their backs. Relief food was promised, but deliveries were often delayed, sometimes arriving after the damage had already been done.

For many families, waiting was no longer an option. “We waited for help, but help did not always come,” recalls Rose Ekiru, a mother of five and now chairperson of the Lolupe Women Group. “Our children were suffering. We knew we had to do something for ourselves.”

That realisation became a turning point. For years, families in Lolupe had depended heavily on relief food during droughts. While lifesaving, aid was often

unpredictable. Quantities were often insufficient, and delays meant households endured long stretches without food. And the drought cycles were not easing. An ACAPS drought impact report later projected that 556,000 people in Turkana would face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse between October and December 2022—up from 139,000 during the same period in 2020.

Action under pressure

In 2025, Save the Children warned of worsening conditions across Kenya, estimating that 87,000 children under five and 36,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women required treatment for acute malnutrition. A significant share of the population was also not getting enough food.



Rabeca cultivating their sorghum farm

Action under pressure

In 2025, Save the Children warned of worsening conditions across Kenya, estimating that 87,000 children under five and 36,000 pregnant and breastfeeding women required treatment for acute malnutrition. A significant share of the population was also not getting enough food.

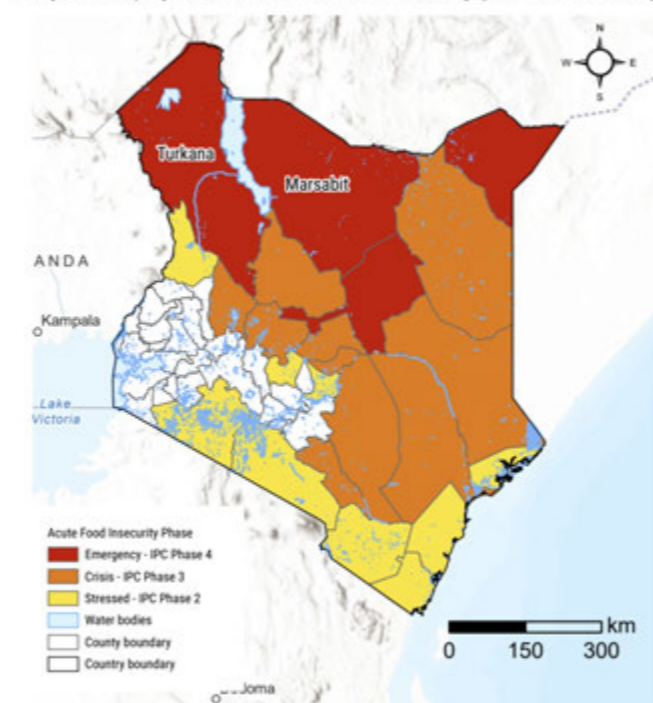
Women bore the heaviest burden. They skipped meals so their children could eat. They queued at clinics with malnourished babies. They lived with constant anxiety. “We would hear that food was coming, but it could take weeks,” Rose says. “By then, children were already sick.”

In the middle of one particularly harsh season, a small group of women began meeting informally under a tree near the village. They gathered around a simple question—but radical for a community long dependent on emergency aid: What can we do with what we have?

Despite Turkana’s harsh climate, the women believed small-scale farming was possible, if done strategically. With guidance from local agricultural officers and community partners, they selected crops suited to local conditions: kale, which grows quickly and is nutrient-dense; beans, a key source of protein for children and breastfeeding mothers; and potatoes, which are adaptable and filling even on small plots.

Their approach aligned with broader food security strategies that prioritise dietary diversity and local production in arid and semi-arid regions. “We chose kale because it grows fast, and beans because they give strength,” Rose explains. “We were thinking about nutrition first.” Using small plots near their homes and seasonal water points, the women pooled labour, shared seeds, and prepared land together. Some had never farmed before. Others had lost confidence after years

Kenya: areas projected to face acute food insecurity (October–December)



Source: Map by ACAPS using IPC 28/09/2022

of failed harvests. “When the first green leaves appeared, it felt like a miracle,” Rose says quietly. “We were no longer waiting. We were providing.”

Crisis to structure

What began as a crisis response, gradually evolved into a structured initiative. The women formalised their meetings, elected leaders, and agreed on shared responsibilities. Rose Ekiru was unanimously chosen as chairperson—not for being the loudest, but for being consistent. “She never missed a meeting,” one member recalls. “Even when things were hard, she showed up.” Each woman tended her own plot, but labour and knowledge were shared. When one member fell sick or gave birth, others stepped in. Solidarity became the group’s backbone.

Kale became a regular part of meals, replacing days when families survived on a single portion or relief porridge.

Beans provided reliable protein, particularly for children and lactating mothers. Over time, the women also improved food preparation, preserving nutrients instead of overcooking vegetables.

SITUATION PER COUNTY

Key characteristics/information

	TURKANA COUNTY
Total population (2019 census)	926,976 (KNBS 04/11/2019)
Drought-affected people (July 2022)	728,000 (KFSSG/Turkana CSG 07/2022)
Proportion of population facing acute food insecurity (October–December 2022)	60% (IPC 28/09/2022)
Absolute poverty rate (2015–2016)	79.4% (KNBS 11/2020)
Refugees hosted (as at 30 June 2022)	244,286 (UNHCR accessed 02/12/2022)
Livelihood source for majority of population	Pastoralism (KFSSG/Turkana CSG 07/2022)

“At the clinic, nurses started asking what we were feeding our children,” Rose says. “They could see the change.” These improvements underscore the role of community-led interventions in complementing formal health and nutrition systems.

In a county where acute undernutrition among children under five consistently ranges between 21% and 37%, such shifts matter. A national IPC analysis published in September 2023 reported Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) levels above 30% in Turkana South. This underscores how severe conditions remain, even with ongoing humanitarian assistance.

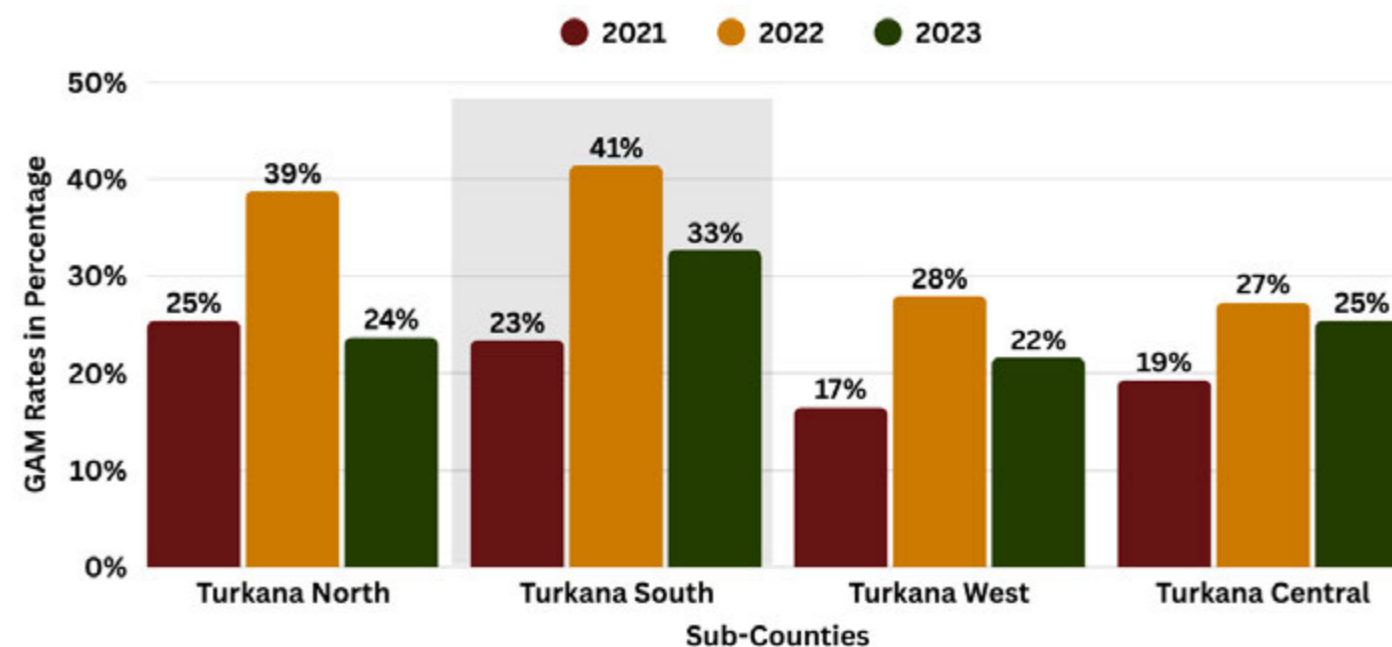
From aid to agency

Before 2019, many households in Lolupe depended almost entirely on supplementary feeding programmes run by NGOs and government agencies. While lifesaving, access was inconsistent. “Sometimes food came, sometimes it did not,” one woman recalls. “We lived with that uncertainty.” By growing their own food, the women began to reduce that uncertainty. Relief aid became a backup—not the foundation of survival. Families could plan meals. Children ate vegetables regularly. Mothers could think beyond the next distribution.

“We are farmers now,” Rose says with quiet pride. “Not just mothers waiting for help.” This shift reflects a broader move toward self-reliance in drought-prone regions, where communities are increasingly building resilience alongside—and sometimes in place of—formal support systems.

As the first harvests succeeded, membership grew rapidly. What began with fewer than ten women soon doubled. The idea spread across the sub-county: these women were no longer waiting for

Turkana Global Acute Malnutrition Rates (%) by Sub-county GAM (wasting) over 30% in Turkana South



Source: NDMA
Reginah Mwanza

aid—they were producing food. At the same time, some sustained interventions can shift outcomes at a larger scale. County data from the SMART survey indicates that Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) in Turkana declined from 26.4% in June 2023 to 21.8% in June 2024—a notable improvement, even as levels remain high.

Growth, however, brought its own challenges. Managing shared plots, scheduling watering, and resolving disputes required structure. The group responded by developing a simple but effective system. They introduced rotational labour on collective fields, shared knowledge instead of competing, and reinvested earnings into seeds, tools, and savings.

They also introduced a weekly savings and credit scheme—many members’ first experience with financial planning. This enabled them to buy farm inputs, manage

When one member fell sick or gave birth, others stepped in. Solidarity became the group’s backbone.



Meet the People Behind the Work



The Seats of Change project deepened my understanding of community journalism and the power of contextualised storytelling in amplifying untold, solutions-oriented stories that can influence attitudes and policy change. I gained valuable insights into gender-sensitive reporting and the importance of verified data in strengthening social accountability and advocacy. Beyond the technical skills, the fellowship connected me with journalism professionals whose mentorship and perspectives will continue shaping my professional growth.

Hezron Ochieng, Project Coordinator



It was a privilege to mentor the eight community journalists from Kilifi, Makeni, Turkana, and Nairobi. My focus was on digital storytelling and data visualisation, helping them transform complex issues, from environmental changes to local economic trends, into clear, compelling stories that resonate with their communities. These skills will strengthen their ability to combat misinformation and amplify the voices of their communities through factual, data-driven reporting.

Eunice Magwambo, Trainer

As a trainer, it was fulfilling to see fellows grasp the key concepts of solutions journalism, gender sensitive reporting, media ethics and field safety and translate them into compelling stories rooted in community perspectives. By integrating governance and policy issues into solutions-oriented narratives, the fellows brought the untold stories on the ground to life.

Rebecca Mutiso, Programme lead trainer, journalist and media researcher.



The fellowship strengthened my skills in gender reporting, data-driven journalism, and the use of AI in research and storytelling. I learned how to apply gender analysis in health reporting, use data to improve accuracy and credibility, and integrate AI tools into research and content development. These skills have helped me produce more inclusive, evidence-based stories and significantly improved the quality and depth of my reporting as a health and science journalist.

Charity Kilei, Nairobi Community Journalist



I worked closely with community journalists as they shifted from surface-level reporting to more evidence-based, data-driven storytelling on governance issues affecting women. One example came from Turkana, where a story on women's access to land evolved from personal testimonies into a deeper analysis of policy gaps and governance failures. Despite challenges such as limited internet access and equipment, journalists grew more confident in asking critical questions, grounding reporting in verified data, and connecting governance decisions to their impact on women's lives.

Juliet Atellah, Trainer



Through the fellowship, I gained valuable skills in data visualisation and solutions journalism that strengthened how I research, interpret, and present stories. I applied these skills in reporting on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and women's empowerment, using data to strengthen my reporting and highlight practical, community-driven solutions to the challenges women face.

Damaris Kiilu, Nairobi Community Journalist



The training strengthened my skills in data journalism, helping me turn complex information into clear, human-centred stories. One of the most valuable lessons was learning how to produce stories that not only highlight challenges but also showcase responses and innovations within communities. As a refugee community journalist, I now apply these skills to tell balanced, data-supported stories that amplify both the struggles and resilience of refugee and vulnerable communities.

Rey Bulambo, Turkana Community Journalist

Before the fellowship, my reporting focused mainly on highlighting problems within communities. Through the training, I learned how to tell more solutions-oriented stories, use data more effectively, and ask deeper questions around women's leadership and governance. Working closely with communities also showed me that many women are doing important work that often goes unnoticed. The experience strengthened my confidence as a journalist and inspired me to continue telling stories that amplify overlooked voices and highlight what is working.

Reginah Mwanza, Turkana Community Journalist



The fellowship equipped me with valuable skills in writing solutions-oriented stories informed by accurate data, particularly on women's leadership and social change. Through the training, I learned how to develop stories from a stronger data-driven perspective and connect local issues to broader governance and development conversations. These skills have greatly strengthened my storytelling as a community journalist in Kilifi County.

Marion Kithi, Kilifi Community Journalist



What stood out most for me during the training was the focus on data-driven storytelling and how facts, statistics, and evidence can strengthen human-centred narratives. The fellowship equipped me with skills in data mining and analysing leadership accountability, especially around women's leadership and social impact. It also deepened my understanding of how to combine credible data with community stories to create more accurate, impactful reporting.

Catherine Kamanga, Kilifi Community Journalist



Through the fellowship, I gained valuable skills which strengthened the way I develop my stories on women and governance. The training helped me move beyond highlighting problems to also reporting on solutions and progress within communities. I also learned how to use data more effectively and report on gender issues with greater sensitivity and impact. I am grateful for the opportunity and look forward to applying these skills in future stories.

Beryl Akinyi, Makueni Community Journalist

The fellowship was a transformative experience that strengthened my skills in gender reporting. These tools have improved the depth, credibility, and impact of my storytelling as a human rights journalist. I am grateful to Vice Versa Global for the opportunity, which has empowered me to tell more compelling and meaningful stories within my community.

Victor Wanaswa, Makueni Community Journalist



Community Journalism Trifecta



The community journalism trifecta is a model for supporting individual journalists by providing access to spaces, equipment, and financial empowerment for journalists in Africa to address the critical barriers to effective journalism.

It is also about uplifting entire communities and contributing to the greater African narrative. This model empowers journalists to produce work that resonates with their communities, promotes democracy, and ensures that the diverse voices of Africa are heard on the global stage.



Invest in the future of African storytelling and inclusion. By partnering with Vice Versa Global, you are championing voices and ensuring that Africa's stories are told by its people.

Join us in reshaping the narrative. [Scan to learn more.](#)

