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GENDER IN EAST AFRICA:

Women Role Models in Kenya

Gender Report 4

Jane Rarieya and Alicia Fentiman

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WOMEN ROLE MODELS IN KENYA

This report focuses on research undertaken on 'WOMEN ROLE MODELS' in Kenya. It describes the background of the project, its aims, methods, and analysis. Another report that complements this report is a study on WOMEN ROLE MODELS in Uganda; the findings from that study are reported separately (See *Gender in East Africa* Report 3).

Background

The Kenyan women role model project was devised in connection with another research project on 'What keeps Girls in School Against the Odds' (See *Gender in East Africa* Reports 1 and 2 in this series).

The women role model project was aimed at identifying women in contemporary Kenyan society who have achieved prominent positions and who are regarded as 'role models'. The aim of the research was to record a detailed life history and to see how each woman was able to achieve and to explore in depth the factors or circumstances that allowed her to become a respected and revered woman in Kenyan society. The term success was understood to mean that the selected women had overcome adversities in their lives either as girls or young women and had gone on to do well in life. As a result, their personal achievements, as described in their narratives, had an impact on young girls and women as well as the wider population in Kenya. One of our interviewees, Leila, aptly captured the researchers' understanding of success during the study. She defined a successful woman as one who is 'successful not in terms of academic success but in the way that a person is exposed to challenge; challenge that you can associate with'. Success is a rather fluid term and needs to be defined within the context of a person's local situation and context. Success has a wide range of meanings which include being academically, professionally and economically successful. Earlier narratives of women in Kenya depict the limited choices that were available to women especially in patrilineal societies due to cultural expectations and societal demands. Detailed life histories or narratives provide a useful tool for understanding societal and cultural change; they help to capture the fluidity of society and various events in a woman's life cycle and not just a static moment in time. For example, Levine's narratives of 7 women among the Gusii (1979) capture changes in family structure due to the impact of

male migration in search of wage labour and the burden placed on the women 'left behind'. Narratives such as these provide a glimpse of the rapidly changing past and give a 'voice' to the subjects (Downie and Cottrell, 20001). As Kakuru and Paradza (2007) have shown in their work on rural women in Uganda and Zimbabwe, life history research by women about women provides additional empowerment for women.

Kenyan Context

The historical, geographical, and cultural contexts in which our sample of women grew up were taken into consideration when discussing each woman's life experiences. The Republic of Kenya gained its independence in 1963 from the British and formed an independent nation. Kenya is one of the most populous countries in Africa with an estimated population of 41 million. There are multi-ethnic groups within Kenya with differing livelihoods, cultural practices and beliefs. The geographical landscape is diverse ranging from the coastal areas to the savannah and the semi-arid almost desert environment. In the 2010 Referendum and New Constitution, 47 counties were formed within the 8 regions.

Structure of Education

From 1964-1985 the structure of education was 7-4-2-3 (seven years of primary, four years of lower secondary, two years of upper secondary and 3 years of university) (Buchmann, 1999). However, during the educational reforms of the 1980s this structure changed and in 1985 the new educational structure of 8-4-4 was introduced which included 8 years of primary, 4 years of secondary and 4 years of tertiary. In 2003 free primary education (FPE) was introduced, thus providing access to formal education to a larger population and enrolment rates increased. However, retention and completion of primary education still remain a daunting challenge. Although more girls are enrolling in school, completion rates in primary school still lag behind those for boys. According to the UNDP-Kenya report, the gross enrolment ratio for boys is still higher than that of girls, standing at 112.8% while for girls it was 112.2%. There are still significant regional and gender disparities in the ASAL districts and in the urban slums (<http://www.ke.undp.org>). Although the transition rates to secondary school have grown, the enrolment rate is lower for girls (43% females and 47% for males).

There are still a number of challenges affecting female enrolment, retention, completion and progression. Chege and Sifuna discuss the wide range of factors contributing to the educational challenges girls encounter (2006). Others have documented specific cultural practices such as female circumcision which affect some ethnic groups but not all. For example, it is well documented among the Maasai that early marriage, initiation rites and female circumcision have a great impact on female education (Warrington and Kiragu, 2011).

Methodological Approach

Selection of women role models

In order to identify women for the study, collaborative partnerships were established with the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE-K) and Nairobi University. In particular, we are indebted to Pamela Apia, Head of FAWE Kenya who helped to identify FAWE scholarship recipients of young women who are 'making it against the odds', and in many instances the first women to be educated in their communities; FAWE has provided scholarships, assistance and mentoring to them. We would also like to thank Dr Susan Kiragu for assisting us through her network of eminent women in identifying key women to interview. Our collaborating partners and colleagues provided us with initial introductions to the women and helped us secure illuminating and informative life histories.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

A preliminary interview guide was devised during a gender workshop meeting in Nairobi in 2010 with the CCE research team and invited representatives from FAWE Regional Office, Makerere University, and Nairobi University. The women role model interview guide was first piloted, refined and modified during field research in Uganda in April 2010 (See CCE Report No. 3 in this series).

The aim of the guide was to record a detailed life history of each woman, including family background, which provided the 'context' of the culture and household in which she grew up; specific questions included the parents' educational background, her siblings' education, and her educational history (from primary to tertiary), cultural environment, the challenges she experienced in her education, her career history and her personal history

(including both achievements as well as failures). The interview also examined the factors which put the woman against the odds – including childhood factors and challenges continuing into adulthood; these included the community or ‘cultural’ expectations, conflicts over the demands of family and career aspirations, discrimination in the workplace, and personal relationships. In addition, the interview probed to see how achievement has been possible. For example, what were the roles of education, role models and peers which may have contributed to her achievements? It also examined the part played by the family and extended kin members, the role of key figures in the workplace and the individual personal characteristics that contributed to success. Lastly, the interview examined the impact these role models have had and are still having in Kenyan society; in particular, the role they play in mentoring and advocacy for women today.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 20 Kenyan women from a wide range of communities and backgrounds in October 2010 in Nairobi and the outskirts. The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed by the researchers using a common data analysis tool. The main findings of the interviews are discussed in detail below.

Who were the Women?

The women were aged from nineteen to sixty. As Slater has shown the wide age range of interviewees helped us to understand the different stages that occur in a woman’s life cycle (2000:39). They came from a diversity of ethnic groups throughout Kenya including the Luo, Kikuyu, Maasai, Samburu, Somali, Borana, Saboat, Meru, Kisii, and Arab; the sample was representative of the formerly seven provinces of the country recently changed to 8 regions. Most grew up in rural areas where the major livelihoods were farming and cattle-rearing; five of the women were from pastoralist backgrounds. The majority of women interviewed had completed primary and secondary school and most completed some form of tertiary education. The professions of the women participants were quite varied ranging from teaching, accountancy, banking, law, health research, advocacy for women’s rights – breast cancer awareness, disability issues and three were students currently enrolled at tertiary institutions. One woman was a professional athlete and internationally renowned boxer. Significantly, four of the women had made it to the top of the corporate world. At the time of the study, one had been appointed a UN MD torch bearer for Kenya on gender equality

and empowering women while another had been appointed as a Vice Chair of a national commission established to foster peace and reconciliation in the country as a result of the post – election violence that had rocked the country in early 2008. Three of them were also members of school boards. Most of them were residing in the capital city of Nairobi or its immediate environs. The following table provides a brief profile of the participants at the time of the study.

Table 1: Summary of Participants' Profiles

Name*	Ethnic Origin	Marital Status	Profession	Age
Leila	Borana	Single	Banker	25
Cecilia	Saboot	Single	IT Specialist	34
Joyce	Luo	Widow	Originally teacher; now an Executive Director of an NGO ¹	60
Whitney	Meru	Married	Originally Psychologist; now the Deputy Managing Director of a Bank	49
Lillian	Kikuyu	Single	Engineering Student (5 th Year)	25
Mona	Kikuyu	Single	University Lecturer	50
Maggie	Luo	Divorced	Originally an Accountant; now Vice Chair of a National Commission	50
Maureen	Kisii	Married	Teacher	56
Nabila	Arab	Married	Originally Teacher; now a Director of an NGO	48
Susan	Maasai	Married	Project Director	47
Esther	Maasai	Single	Business in Cement Factory (part-time student)	25
Doris	Luo	Married	Teacher in a 'slum' area	45
Constance	Luo	Single	Professional Athlete (Boxer)	32

¹ Non-governmental organisation

Lucy	Kikuyu	Married	Motivational Speaker; Entrepreneur and Business Women	51
Maria	Maasai	Married	Nurse; Teacher; NGO	40
Frances	Samburu	Married	NGO; Spina Bifida Support Group	34
Beatrice	Luo	Single	US Army Medical Research	29
Carolyn	Maasai	Divorced	NGO – MAP foundation (HIV/Aids awareness)	52
Katy	Kikuyu	Married	Lawyer with the Military (Air Force)	32
Farah	Somali (Kiberanga)	Single	Student (School of Business)	19

* Names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity

Several had obtained successful qualifications at different stages during their life-cycle; many had their schooling interrupted at some point in their educational career. Irrespective of age, ethnicity and socio-economic status each woman had a unique narrative to share about how she was able to achieve and how she became what she is today. Their life histories provide in-depth personal accounts and recollections of the various challenges, obstacles and achievements they have encountered.

Main Findings: Women Role Models in Kenya

Analysis from the interviews showed that the women came from a diversity of backgrounds. In a few instances they were from well-off privileged homes; however, the majority came from much poorer socio-economic backgrounds, with some growing up in remote rural areas. They came from a wide range of ethnic groups throughout Kenya and their cultural background, in many cases, played a significant role in trying to prescribe the ‘gendered’ expectations of what it meant to be female. The participants came from diverse family structures; some grew up in large extended, polygamous homes with their fathers’ wives ranging from two to twenty-five, whilst others were raised by a single parent.

As mentioned previously, the women participants were successful in varied ways. Some of these women were the only females in their class in school or a select minority. For example, Nabila talked of how few girls were in her school:

In high school we were very few girls and from form one to form four it was purely boys and it's only form five and six that we were mixed. Also if you look at the proportion the girls were fewer than the boys, so you kind of stood out in the crowd.

For some of these women, they were either the only ones or one of two students in their whole class who made it to university. Farah, for instance, came from a culture (Kiberanga) where very few women were educated. Her father died when she was young, and her mother, although uneducated herself, saw the 'value' of education. Esther, a young woman from Kajiado, enrolled in P1 at the age of 10 and was the first girl in her family to go to school.

Another is a breast cancer patient, and she is viewed as a role model for many women who have suffered/are suffering from cancer in the country. She is regarded as brave for having gone public about her illness. She narrates her story:

I think the biggest decision influencer for me was my breast cancer diagnosis. I think it changed me in a way in the sense that, you know when you're going through life, especially working your way up the corporate ladder, you tend to just focus on things which will help you get a better life, or what people call success; milestones. You have a house, you have a husband, and your children are going to good schools. Then you don't really focus on the real issues of life. But after my breast cancer diagnosis I think what happened to me is that it halts you, you take stock of your life and at that time you realise maybe your priorities are different, or should be different.

However, despite the variations, there were many commonalities that all women shared throughout their life cycle and these included emotional and physical traumatic personal experiences, such as the death of a parent or parents, mistreatment, abuse (both physical and psycho-social) and the conflict between career and family life, and, more positively, the desire to give something back to their communities. In many cases the women have used their own personal experiences to advocate for different causes including female education, health issues (HIV/Aids, breast cancer, disability) and community development. The women have used their own personal experiences to help shape not only their lives but also hope to use these experiences to improve the life of people in their communities and in the wider Kenyan society. Significantly, the younger women in our role model study also felt that even at their young age they can still contribute an important role in advocacy and encourage their peers, especially in their local communities.

Challenges Affecting Women Over Time

Childhood Factors

Poverty

Most of the women came from rural communities and some were brought up in polygamous households with numerous siblings and extended kin members as well as monogamous households and female headed households.

For some, poverty due to the death of a parent made things worse as in the case of Farah. Her father was in an accident and died when she was only 10 years old. In another example, Lucy's mother died when she was very young and she was mistreated by her stepmother. The participants came from poor homes and hunger was often mentioned as an everyday occurrence. Their parents struggled to put them through school. For example, Cecilia described how she and her sister almost dropped out of school due to poverty:

At some point we almost dropped out of school. But because we didn't have anywhere to go and we thought life in school was better than being at home, whatever our mum would give us, if it was one, it would be for the two of us. At that time it was me and my sister, we would just go to school with one of the requirements. So from class 6 up to high school the whole of high school was a big struggle.

Lillian, another participant who grew up in poverty and still experiences it as a student at the university shared how her father was forced to sell the only family piece of land he had in order to pay fees for her and her siblings. She stated: "Dad had a plot. So when we were called to secondary school, my dad had to pay our school fees in order for us to be admitted first. So he sold the whole plot." Being poor but attending a national 'high cost' school was extremely difficult for Lillian as she could not afford what the other girls had. Consequently, she constantly lived a life of pretence so as not to be shunned by her classmates:

Many a time I could get my way round it (the lack of things). For example, I would tell them, 'Juice? It will spoil my voice, so I'm not taking it. Actually on visiting days I used to stay far away in class until the evening when all visitors had left. I asked my father not to visit because he would come walking when all the girls' parents came in cars to visit.

Esther also speaks of how the lack of school fees delayed her progression through secondary school. After completing primary school she had to wait two years before she could go to high school with the help from extended family kin members. Fortunately, while in secondary school she was selected for a Maasai girl's scholarship.

Although several women experienced poverty, ironically it served to motivate them to do well and to work hard in order to get away from it. For example, Leila, described the lack in her family as follows: “When you wake up you and don’t get what you want; when it’s not enough; when you always have to budget for what you have, you tell yourself that you must work hard and lead a better life.”

Some of the women grew up in very deprived, remote geographical areas that were prone to drought and poverty. Growing up in the harsh region of north-east Kenya as one of 9 children, Farah explained the hardships she encountered because her father died when she was 10 years old. According to the local culture, her mother, who had no education, was inherited by a relative of her father’s family. However, the stepfather offered no financial assistance because ‘only birth parents would assist’. Her mother had a daunting task of trying to find money to pay school fees for her four children. Fortunately, Farah excelled in primary school and she was offered a FAWE scholarship for secondary school; she passed her exams and achieved the highest accolade of the best female student in the district.

Carolyn was raised by her mother who walked out of a difficult marriage with an abusive and alcoholic husband. Consequently, the participant and her siblings were raised in difficult circumstances of poverty as well as rejection by their extended families as the latter refused to recognise the separation. She explained:

Coming from my community, Elgon Maasai, they are also called Sabaots, having come from a community like that, at first her [mother’s] brothers were not willing to take her [mother] back. She had left her husband and had four kids. It was up to her to feed them. So our childhood was very difficult.

Schooling

Another challenge faced by the women in their childhood was the long walks they had to endure to and from school, the poor infrastructure of the schools such as lack of water and sanitation and being made to work at the school (farming). Even in boarding schools, girls were often teased and humiliated. Katy recalls being bullied by her classmates and being labelled a “village girl’. Constance also experienced physical abuse by being punched and beaten by the head boy. Frances who was disabled was isolated and largely ignored by her fellow classmates. There were also several examples of schooling being interrupted either by enrolling late (Esther) or having to work as a house-help in between schooling to raise funds. However, most of the women stood out in school and excelled academically. Seven

of them held leadership positions while in school such as school prefects and led various co-curricular activities such as sports and clubs.

Communities placing little value on female education

In some of the communities in which the women grew up, female education was not 'valued' or taken as seriously as boys'. In fact, several women commented on being unusual or even unique within their village in continuing with their education through to secondary school: as Esther said:

In the community, some of them may discourage you, they can see your family is unable to take you to school, so some of them say you're straining your parents, why don't you just get married instead of struggling but that's what I was telling you, if a person doesn't have a vision you easily lose track. Your parents are encouraging you, on the other hand some people are telling you your parents are not able, your family is not able, just get married, but because of my vision and that I took my stand, I was able to overcome all this.

Likewise, although Carolyne grew up in a home where she shared the house chores with her brother and she was treated almost equally with her brothers, life in her immediate community was very hostile to the notion of girls being educated. However, she was one of the few who went on to secondary school.

Within the neighbourhood actually it was very difficult because I remember that as soon as we grew up to maybe class six and seven, it was difficult for the girls that I was with in school to continue at the same pace we were supposed to. I remember the secondary school that I went to I was the only one from my class in primary school who joined that secondary school in form one. The rest of the girls, the parents didn't feel like it was important.

Another aspect was that certain livelihoods demanded constant assistance with looking after animals and this is true in pastoralist communities. Maria's father was educated but his priority was his livelihood (cattle) as a result Maria's education was delayed until she was 10yrs of age when she was 'released' from looking after the animals by a younger sibling. Some of the girls recollected the conflict between being educated on the one hand, but not being provided with the freedom to make choices or be involved in decision making about their lives.

Educational status of parents/guardians

Parents' Education

Many of the women's mothers were only educated up to primary school level, and six had received no formal education at all. In some, but by no means all of these instances, they did not see the 'value of education'. Most fathers had received both primary and secondary education, with only two who had not completed primary school – though this did not mean that they supported education for their daughters. Interestingly, the lack of parental education did not always have a negative effect. For example, Farah's mother who was illiterate wanted her daughter to be educated.

Personal trauma

Several of the women experienced personal trauma during their childhood that included the death of a parent or parents. Farah's father died when she was 10 years old; Lucy's mother died when she was in primary school she was so distraught with the situation that she endured at the hands of her stepmother that she tried to commit suicide. Nabila's mother was killed in a tragic boating accident. Beatrice's mother died when she was in secondary school. Other issues such as ethnic conflict played a significant role in scaring one of the interviewees for life. Lillian described what happened to her family during the ethnic clashes of 1992 when all her family's property was destroyed and their livelihood ruined. She remembers growing up in isolation. "We were not allowed to interact with other kids when we moved to Lugai District; if someone was not a Kikuyu we were not allowed to talk to them".

Disability and Discrimination

Disability was another constraint affecting choices about enrolment. Frances, one of the participants in our study, was born with spina bifida. As Frances relayed her story, she said that amongst her culture (Samburu) it was viewed as a *curse* and that children born with disabilities (such as spina bifida) are normally killed. She narrated her story of how one of her grandmothers had plotted to kill her. Her narrative revealed how isolated and alone she felt because no one could understand her or her medical condition.

I felt alone and I tried to make friends. I would give them sweets but they would just take them and run away. 'fter a while I just wanted to kill myself. I tried twice and I took some medicine but then realised I need to continue with my life. My family told me I would never get married.

Tragically, her father who was educated and working for the government sent her siblings to private schools but he discriminated against her because of her disability.

Mistreatment by kin members

Mistreatment by stepmothers was a factor affecting some of the participants. Lucy recalls that her stepmother was jealous of the affection that her father had for her and that her stepmother beat her and actually damaged her eye (she showed her damaged eye during the interview).

So at the age of 11, I thought of hanging myself, committing suicide. My stepmother, if anything she would want the worse of me, she would tell me you can go and sleep with boys, but I had no interest in any boys. But she never told me there are stages of life of a woman, I didn't even know what periods are all about, nobody told me.

Socialisation and Child Labour

Most of the women were 'working' children, and child labour was viewed as the norm and part of their socialisation process; this often contributed to late enrolment and absenteeism. As Maria, a Maasai, explained she enrolled quite late in school because of childhood responsibilities amongst pastoralists. 'We lived in a manyatta and there are many normal activities like looking after cattle, fetching water, firewood, even building houses. We used to help our mothers to build houses and also make beads and ornaments. There was also milking every morning and evening, and looking after the young ones. Being a very extended family there are always young children around and we were left in charge of them. So at the age of ten, after looking after cattle for some time until other younger ones grew up so that they were able to look after the cattle, that is when my father decided to take me to a school, a public school.'

Puberty and Adolescence

Factors which affected the women during adolescence included cultural expectations of early marriage, female genital mutilation (fgm), and teenage pregnancy.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM); female cutting

Some of the women in the study were from ethnic groups where FGM is part of the initiation process for females leading to early marriage. In some cultures, girls who are not circumcised are considered 'dirty' or unmarriageable. Four of our participants were Maasai and they discussed the challenges they encountered in their culture. Several of them talked of their fellow classmates as well as other girls in the village who would drop out of primary school as a result of being circumcised (female genital mutilation). For example, Mona explained:

The girls who started in class one, by the time they got circumcised in class four, they dropped out of school and sometimes I was left alone in the class with the boys, because I didn't get circumcised. So I had no friends [among] the girls because they were mature and all that. I was the second girl in the village not to be circumcised. But I didn't have girlfriends in the village because of that, because all my age mates were circumcised except two.

Other women such as Carolyne described how difficult it was in the 80s to go against the traditional practices such as FGM when she was a schoolgirl. She was circumcised, and she also had her front teeth extracted. Poignantly she said that the school did not protect her – it didn't matter whether you were in school or not – it was the 'traditional norm'. However, now with more awareness and advocacy, young girls are opting out. Even her sister's daughters have not been circumcised, 'so for the next generation there is some light, there is a process, especially for females.'

Initiation Rituals

The impact of gender-specific cultural practices for men contributed to disruption in schooling for girls in the Maasai area. Maria speaks of the large numbers of girls who dropped out of primary school because of the 'morans' – adolescent men who went through the initiation process.

Mostly from classes 4,5,6,7 due to the interaction with the morans and the lack of protection for the girls; for example, girls could sleep alone in a homestead and be

interrupted by the men the whole night. That was the routine and the kind of life especially amongst girls who reached a certain age and are circumcised; you are believed to be a woman. From 1985 to 1987 we actually lost 100 girls within our school.

However, Esther in her narrative revealed that she decided to 'go against the cultural norm' and she refused to marry although she was engaged in 2005. Interestingly, she notes that this is a rarity because in Maasai culture, she believes, 'girls lack role models, they lack vision, that will be so easy for them to be carried away by cultural constraints.'

Teenage pregnancy

In a context where school dropout because of pregnancy is high (Colclough and Tembon), teenage pregnancy was a challenge for some of the women when they were still in school. Parents often instilled a sense of strict moral virtue as Lucy recalls, 'my father said whoever dares to get pregnant in my home, I disconnect you from me.' In some instances parents were supportive, in others they were not. For example, Whitney and Constance were both from 'educated, professional, upper class' families where the expectation was they should not get pregnant; however, they became pregnant when young teenagers and in school. Whitney explained:

When I was in form 3 going to form 4, when I was 15 years, I became pregnant and I had a baby. Now that was almost unacceptable in this family. If you're from a poor family and not brought up with a certain kind of attitude, and a very believing and Christian family, then it would have been expected. But from this particular family, that wasn't acceptable. So that's where my struggles started, much as I never missed the school fees.

Whitney further explained the enormity of her challenge by indicating that because of the social status of her family, girls from such homes were not expected to fall pregnant. If they did, then their families bore the brunt:

I didn't miss parental support, I didn't miss the basics, but I got pregnant at 15 years in a school that was considered elite and in a class that that was crucial as I was going to sit my 'O' levels. People began to talk: 'how come her father didn't teach her well? How come the mother didn't train her well? What happened here?' That was my struggle.

Constance also became pregnant in secondary school in Form 3 at the age of 16 yrs. Her mother was very supportive but her father (a doctor) was not. She said she had a responsibility to go out to work and provide for her son. She completed Form 4 and then went to Nairobi and excelled in sports. Rather unconventional at the time, she started playing football as a striker for the first Kenyan Women's National team. After that she took

up professional boxing and made her career and living through international fights so she could support her son.

Mona also fell pregnant while in the first year of her undergraduate studies at the university. She claimed:

It changed my life because now I had the responsibility of a child. I had to go home at the weekends, that kind of thing. My family's reaction was very bad. My father nearly killed me. My mother was supportive, she didn't have a problem. Getting a baby made me realise that I have a responsibility and life is not the way we dream about. Life is not easy and I started questioning my life and wondering what do I do with the responsibility.

The resilience of these women who became pregnant show how determination and responsibility for their children provided the catalyst to continue with their career – in some cases to continue their education and in others, such as Constance, to pursue a different path and to use her athletic ability to achieve in sports that were traditionally the preserve of men (i.e boxing).

Early marriage

Marriage during the teen years was the cultural expectation for many of the women in our study and the pressure of the community for women to marry young was paramount. In fact, several of the women's sisters and classmates dropped out of school to marry. Carlyne described the widespread prevalence of 'forced marriage' in her Maasai community. Interestingly, Katy remarked that in her Kikuyu community early marriage was not a common occurrence but early pregnancy was much more prevalent. Esther, a Maasai, was engaged according to her tradition but decided to cancel the engagement so she could continue her education. This courageous act created difficulties for her in her community because she did 'not honour them and value tradition'. She acknowledges and accepts their view but thinks decision-making in significant life events should be made by her not her community.

Adulthood

Most of the women in the research went on to tertiary education and these qualifications included diplomas, degrees, Masters and PhDs.

Challenges at university

However, for some, poverty continued to plague them at tertiary level. Beatrice had to work as a house girl while at university in order to pay for fees and Farah is looking for further sponsorship to continue her studies. Lillian suffered financially and would go 3 days without food. For others, arriving in Nairobi was a 'culture shock' and trying to fit and adapt to an urban lifestyle was challenging. One participant noted, 'they talk different, they dress differently, they do things which to me are a bit shocking like smoking, things you didn't expect ladies to do'. Only one woman encountered gender discrimination while at a small private university in Kenya where macho men dominated in decision making; this experience stayed with her and made her a perpetually angry woman.

Discrimination in the workplace

Some of the interviewees had experienced discrimination in their jobs because of their gender, and in one case, her ethnicity. This varied from overt discrimination to trying to adjust to new cultural expectations. Constance excelled in athletics and became one of only a handful of female professional boxers. Carolyn became an IT expert despite being told by her boss, "no you can't do that, that's work for men'. Whitney talked of finding herself at the end of stereotypical views and suggestive remarks by her male colleagues. In one incident she remarked of the expectation of her to pour tea because it is a woman's job:

The majority of the boards that I sit on I'm the only woman. It's tough when you stand up to serve your own tea. They actually sit and relax. Someone might tell you 'today I am not taking sugar, Whitney'.

These gendered assumptions were rife. Maggie also described the discrimination she encountered as a qualified accountant. "It was assumed that because I was a woman that I was the secretary."

Juggling a career, personal life, and cultural expectations

The women we interviewed were very open about their adult lives and the challenges of the 'double shift phenomenon' in trying to juggle their career and the various expectations that they faced within their personal lives. Many of the women encountered tension between their home and work lives. Nabila experienced tension with her relatives because she was not able to attend certain family events due to her heavy workload. Others thought they had to work extra hard in order to erase the 'stereo-typical' views held by their male colleagues; this had a detrimental effect in their personal lives.

Maggie's narrative showed how she had to forgo an opportunity to pursue a Master's degree at Harvard because her husband was not supportive of the idea. When she told him he said, "Who will look after the children"? In some instances women who married outside their ethnicity faced discrimination from their own communities. Carolyne, for example, was a Maasai who married a Kikuyu, and she experienced problems during a recent divorce because of different cultural values and because she wanted to continue her educational career. Frances, a Samburu, also married outside her ethnic group. In her case it was a very difficult decision because she had lost her leg due to spina bifida and her parents did not think she would ever marry. Even her fiancé's parents were against the marriage when they met her they said, "How could their son marry a disabled woman?"

Many of the women had to struggle between their careers and looking after their children. Katy stressed the difficulty of trying to be a full-time lawyer and look after her young children. Doris also tried to balance work and child care responsibilities; however, in her case her husband shared the responsibility. Carolyn had the added responsibility of looking after her parents and wider extended kin group.

For the unmarried participants their independence, which is an outcome of their success, seemed to be looked at unfavourably. For example, Leila explained the conflict of being a single, successful woman and the jealousy that ensues from others with remarks such as, 'Which man will marry you? You've become independent. You buy things for yourself. Which man will take you.'

Widowhood

In some cultures, widowhood can be viewed negatively. Joyce explained the rejection she faced because of being a widow and not having a son:

Even your mother-in-law doesn't recognise you. It is as if you never bore your children with her son. You go back after the burial to the family and your children are treated like they don't belong to the family. We had heads of cattle and you find they are sold; nothing is there for you. It was so painful.

Her struggles as a widow were further exacerbated by her continued experience of gender discrimination and it was not expected for her to have a voice within her extended family and the local community.

Overcoming Challenges and Factors Contributing to their Success

All of the women were able to overcome a wide range of challenges as discussed above and this report now considers what made that possible. Certain factors allowed them to achieve. These included the role of family members and others in giving support and encouragement at various stages in a woman's educational and professional career; the role of education and educators in the formal settings of school and university; and the personal characteristics and qualities of the women themselves in taking them to where they are today.

Role of family members

One of the major contributing factors to the women's success was the key role played by the family. About half of the women cited the support and encouragement they received from their father as a significant factor in their success. Others talked about the role their mothers played in encouraging them to be educated. A few examples help to illustrate how the women perceived the influence of their family members.

Fathers

In many instances, fathers were identified as key supporters in the women's lives. As Lois said,

My father has been my mentor as far as education is concerned. He has been the one who has made me to be in education, no matter the odds...he would tell us, "you girls you have only one thing you can inherit from me and that is education and he will be your first husband. Whose husband you will not fight with anybody, there will not be any competition. A husband you will not be telling him what to eat or to dress or whatever. So get education".

Mothers

The significant roles that mothers played in the women's education were a reoccurring factor for their success. In some instances the mothers were well educated and in others they had no formal education. In the case of Farah's mother, although illiterate, she had the foresight to see education as the key to social and economic mobility – even in very traditional rural culture where female education was lagging far behind.

Other kin members

A wide range of kin members often assisted the women at different stages in their lives and these included aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and cousins. In some cases, an educated kin member would encourage the women to continue with their education and would assist in paying school fees. For Esther, it was her aunt who was studying in the US who encouraged her and paid her school fees.

Faith-based organisations

Beatrice was supported in her secondary education through missionaries who paid her fees throughout high school.

Husbands

Several of the women cited their husbands as being not only supportive, but actively encouraging and enabling them to continue their education and further their careers.

Education and Educators

Some of the women attended good secondary schools where they were actively supported, praised and encouraged in their academic pursuits and their personal careers. Teachers played an important role as role models and mentoring. Joyce, for example, was told 'you have to really take care of yourself as girls. For you to succeed in life you have to stay focused. Don't engage in intimacy with boys'.

Exposure to women role models was important for some. For example, one of the participants explained that consciously acknowledging femaleness has been the pillar of her success and confidence by being exposed and influenced by an international women leader.

Personal characteristics

It was very clear that the women we interviewed, despite the challenging circumstances in which they grew up, had particular attributes that had helped them to succeed, often against the odds. When asked about the key characteristics which they thought helped them to achieve against the odds they mentioned: honesty, hard-working, determination, drive, belief in oneself, vision, inner-strength, discipline, and confidence. For example, several of the woman came from backgrounds where educated women were the minority and they attributed their success to self-drive and determination. Others realised they had a sense of agency about their situation and the only way to get out of the vicious circle of poverty and to escape traditional marriage was to excel at school and to study hard. Expounding on the notion of determination, Susan shared that:

I believed that what everybody else can do, I can also do. So I was not going to become a failure. I wanted to be different. I think that is one factor, wanting to see the results, wanting to see something in my life and wanting to leave a legacy.

Others spoke of religious beliefs and of divine and inner strength brought to them through God.

Significantly, the 'odds' or 'challenges' the women faced acted as a catalyst and motivated the women to overcome those obstacles. They saw obstacles as things they either wanted to avoid or to eradicate as a whole. Personal experiences and observations of things they wanted to change acted as motivating factors as well as adversity that affected many.

Achievements and Giving Something Back

All the women in the study irrespective of age and experience felt they were in some way role models and mentors for young women in Kenyan society. Interviews with the women participants revealed that they had been successful 'despite the odds' they faced and they felt they should give something back to their families, immediate communities, or society in general. Familial obligations were felt by some of the women. Leila referred to it a 'debt' and pointed out, "my big problem is my parents are depending on me, my siblings are depending on me". Similarly, Beatrice is currently paying the school fees for her younger brother in high school and building a house for her father.

Some of the participants give back to society through their daily work. They work with non-governmental organisations in the areas of health, education and HIV/Aids

awareness. Joyce works with an NGO in a slum in Nairobi and illustrates the importance of helping youngsters. She says,

Dealing with children from the slum is a bit challenging. They see you as the mother, leave alone the teacher. They see you as parent because these children normally come from abandoned homes.

Certain professions such as teachers play a significant role in encouraging and motivating young girls. Leila explained, "I'm a role model for so many girls because I am a teacher". Doris, who also works in a slum school narrated how difficult it was to motivate children when they come from drunken and abusive homes. Cynthia became an advocate for an HIV/Aids awareness NGO because her brother died of HIV at a time when people did not 'speak of it'. Frances works with disabled children at a centre in Thika because she knows through her own experience what it is like to be alone, discriminated against and misunderstood.

All the participants talked of giving back to younger women and society in general. A number of them are viewed as role models and/or mentors. Even the younger women in our study, such as Farah (19 yrs) and Esther (25yrs) still regard themselves as important 'role models' because the young women in their communities can identify with them. If they made it, so can the others. This attitude of belief, self-determination and achievement are powerful factors in instilling the ideal of 'go for it'.

Constance has become a 'role model' to thousands, irrespective of gender, because of her status as a nationally renowned athlete. She said that her success is not just for herself but for her nation - 'the flag is for my country'. She set up a gym in a deprived area in Nairobi to help women in the community to learn self-defence and to show them how to 'fight back' to protect themselves from domestic violence, rape and abuse. 'I want to change their lives and empower the community.'

The extended family

Besides bringing up their own children, all the women were in some way directly involved in the upbringing of other young people, such as stepchildren or half brothers and sisters, or children of family members who had died. Some women had also 'picked up' young women outside their family who were in need of practical help to enable them to continue their schooling. For example, Lucy who continually offers shelter, food and love to women who are struggling.

Working with particular communities

Many of the women were dedicated to assisting and helping other women overcome hurdles which they themselves had experienced as they grew up in particularly disadvantaged areas. Some worked in culturally specific areas and campaigned for female education in places where there have been serious obstacles. For example, Carolyn, Maria and Esther campaign on behalf of girls' education amongst the Maasai. Farah is a shining example of a young woman who benefitted from the FAWE scholarship scheme in secondary school. She is grateful to FAWE and campaigns on their behalf. It enabled her to continue her secondary education. Beatrice set up an NGO called the Big Sister's Network to mentor girls in high school. "We just go and share our lives with them, we just tell them that we made it" A major focus is to give girls a second chance. Mentoring was a key activity for almost all the women. Similarly, another participant runs a foundation to empower young girls by running a mentoring programme that matches young girls with successful women. Her foundation supports girls who have fallen pregnant while in school by helping them to continue and complete their schooling. Some of the girls have ended up as doctors, successful media personalities, and in other high-powered careers. In addition the foundation sponsors very poor families led by single mothers by helping families to support themselves. Further her foundation also helps young female professionals by arranging motivational speakers to talk to these young women as well as provide guidance. Other practical initiatives and tutorials have been set up to help women in areas of finance and banking. Susan is an advocate in her community, which is still hostile towards female education; she tries to empower girls and their mothers and to encourage them to stay in school.

Challenges facing young women today

The women participants identified several challenges that young women in contemporary Kenyan society experience. However, the analysis shows that the challenges presented were often particular to the community or region of the participant's origin. In some instances it was particular to a social class. Few of them talked of challenges that they felt were national and affected young girls in the country in general. One of the challenges was sexual molestation and the silence that greets this violation against young women. Other challenges were the lack of information and knowledge available, preference for boys'

education over girls', dowries, menstruation, poverty, peer pressure, lack of self belief, and significantly, the lack of role models for young woman.

Conclusion

The 20 women role models who took part in this research are remarkable women. Each has a unique, personal narrative to share, and this short report not only highlights the factors that have enabled the women to deal with their challenges but also to achieve 'against the odds.' It depicts the key characteristics of a good role model and identifies the courage, determination, confidence, resilience and self-belief needed to succeed. However, it also shows that the odds are still stacked high against women and why, in the words of one participant, women role models are hard to come by.

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