

Women's Struggles, Resilience and Power during **COVID-19** Pandemic in Kenya

Stories of courage and resilience from
Grassroots Women Human Rights
Defenders and Feminists in the face of
the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Foreword

This hand book is a compilation of stories put together through enormous team efforts. Coalition for Grassroots Human Rights Defenders Kenya (CGHRD-K) is sincerely grateful to all the Grassroots Women human rights defenders, our feminists sisters, community women leaders and women community organizers who have made the publishing of this handbook possible. We are grateful to the powerful grassroots women from Mathare, Kibra, Kangemi and Kayole informal settlements in Nairobi, who were courageous enough to share their experiences during this pandemic period, recommending solutions to realize Gender equality, Human Rights, Social justice, Peace and Security and highlighting the crucial role grassroots women human rights defenders, Feminist Activists, women community organizers and mobilizers played in supporting and responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We intent for this book to speak to a wide range of audiences including fellow activists, feminists, scholars, civil society organizations, policy makers, donors and governments. We hope that this handbook clearly illustrates the role played by grassroots women rights defenders, Feminists Activists and community mobilizers, that it will inspire and at the same time, challenge different stakeholders to invest more on Grassroots women human rights defenders, Grassroots Feminists and their work within their grassroots communities and Kenya. ■

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge and appreciate the women in the grassroots for their courage and resilience in defending human rights in the face of COVID-19 pandemic. Your contributions and interventions have touched the lives of many in the informal settlements in our community. We also thank the team of photographers for their excellent work in capturing these stories of resilience.

Much gratitude to our sister, mentor and transformation leader Ms Mildred Ngesa for walking with us throughout this project. Special appreciation to James Chunguli for bringing this document to life through his creative design and layout.

To our Founder and Convener Ms Rachael Mwikali, we affirm you and thank you for all the effort you have put into making this project a success.

Lastly, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung we cannot thank you enough for your support and faith in our course.

In Solidarity and Revolutionary Love.

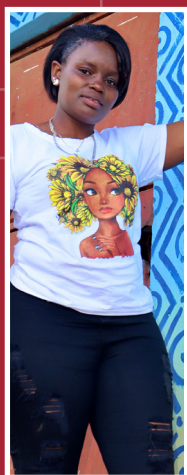
Asante Sana

Aluta continua!!!!



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Stories of courage and resilience from Grassroots Women Human Rights Defenders and Feminists in the face of the COVID-19 Pandemic.





1.

Strengthening grassroots networks to combat the COVID-19 Pandemic

My name is Jacinta Agunja.

I am the Finance Officer, Coalition for Grassroots for Human Rights Defenders Kenya. We are a social movement of grassroots activists, feminists and community organizers. Mostly we defend human rights, women, children and girls rights. We specified our focus because in our community we found out that women and girls are more vulnerable to violence, rape and defilement. So we were forced to bring them on board at least to prevent that challenge from affecting them.

COVID-19 made life tough. Money reduced because everybody was affected. No one had money at that time. The biggest challenge during COVID-19 was the burden from the community. They see us like their 'saviours' while we are also struggling for donations to distribute food to them. For example, we used to distribute food and we are not funded, but through the support of friends and well wishers, both local and globally, we were able to support our communities as Coalition for Grassroots Human Rights Defenders Kenya.

The challenges have been immense. Every group member who had a friend used to call and ask "Hello can you save me?" then they could give things like sanitary pads. We then collected them together before we could distribute to the community. Fundraising was the biggest challenge, because we had no formal capacity on how to do it. It is not easy



to convince people to give when they too are struggling within a pandemic.

The other thing we noticed during COVID-19 was a rise in domestic violence. On a daily basis we used to get these cases. We could hear someone has beaten or hurt their partner. Even parents neglected their children. Women who used to go to places like Eastleigh to do manual labour, also stopped when the government imposed lockdown. Most people were laid off so both parents in most families became jobless. That meant that no one had food to feed their children. They were just there, helplessly looking at each other. There is a sad case we came across during our project tour. We found a mother had locked herself up with her children waiting for them to die because she totally had nothing. The children were malnourished. She did not want her children to get out begging for food. The same day we found another woman who broke into someone's house only to steal food nothing else. She stole a bag of maize flour.

Amidst the misery we had success stories too. Looking back now, we fed over five thousand families within Mathare and the surrounding areas. The other success we had was we gave people hand washing containers which we made ourselves. We bought containers and fixed taps on them. We then connected them before distribution to various households. We gave almost two thousand containers. Donors also supported us with more containers which we added to ours and gave out. Another

success is we formed a network of allies in that when we called our friends, they also reached out to their friends to fundraise and that is how our network grew. We are still reaching out and fundraising to help families that still do not have food. The little money we got we decided to convert to business after we realized it can save us. So we bought seats that we hire out to others. We also sell t-shirts; both these items generate us some income that continues to sustain our charity efforts in the community. Our consistent supporter or donor had been Jennifer Wynne and her team Changing Lences, Changing Lives.

The government should stand with its citizenry especially in times of challenges such as during this pandemic. We heard and saw media reports that there was so much money and material support coming into the informal settlements such as Mathare but here we saw nothing of it. For us, only human rights defenders were helping people with food donations and other basic needs. It is imperative for the government to

create jobs and alternative ways of income generation for especially the people in the informal sector because we still have COVID-19. Most people in the informal settlements seek jobs from the middle and high class areas but like now they are not allowed in because of the restrictions on social distancing. These are the areas where most people get to do domestic chores to support their families. The government should think of how people staying in informal settlements can get jobs that will help them feed their families. ■

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2.

Financial literacy as a survival tactic for the COVID-19 Pandemic

My name is Susan Owiti, a member of Kenya Peasants League (KPL)

Kenya Peasants League is a social movement. Our aim is to encourage small farmers to go back to the indigenous ways of farming. We have so many collectives but I am more on the women's and human rights collective. It was formed in 2016 and the women collective became active in 2018.

KPL is a member of *La via campesina*. We grow our own food and the surplus we find ways of utilizing through other people. With the new land that we purchased, we are trying to develop some plants to try new seedlings especially the ones from Poland.

I had just given birth when the first case of

Cont'd on page 12





From page 11

COVID-19 pandemic struck in Kenya. My son was only two months old. Being an activist, I noticed that the biggest challenge girls were facing at that particular time in my area was lack of sanitary pads. I was still weak and delicate after giving birth and I could not move outside the house but at the back of my mind I knew I had to definitely do something. I quickly resorted to mobilizing my own resources and also through friends we managed to raise sanitary pads for girls. With only my phone, I pulled together some girls together knowing that if this is not done then something not pleasing might happen to the ladies. Oftentimes, they will resort to sex work just to get money to purchase pads and the result is usually unwanted pregnancies, diseases and dropping out of school. Girls are most vulnerable when they lack basic needs like sanitary pads. I solely called the girls in my house and distributed the pads to them as I talked to them about the current situations and telling them how to handle themselves with dignity and respect.

As an organization, we responded to the pandemic where we got a small grant that enabled us to purchase food for our members back in Nairobi. Life became too hard and since we have our farmers in the rural areas, we bought food from them and sent it to Nairobi County not only to our members but also for the larger community. We did not discriminate; we gave food to even non KPL members.

On women groups, it was very difficult raising funds because of the pandemic. There were women who could not support themselves and they had pre-existing loans hence they could not get other loans. We supported them with small amounts of money to enable them

start a business or something to sustain them.

Access to resources was the biggest challenge I faced during the pandemic. As a business lady, accessing clothes to sell as *mitumba* (second-hand clothes) was a problem and the little you got was very costly. I strained so much even to support my little one. Even now, girls and women still come for sanitary pads in my house and I really struggle to make them available for them because I know they cannot get them from anywhere else. In the process of issuing pads, I also advise them and this has made them to really trust me. What I have gained

during this pandemic is trust from parents of teenagers. This is mainly because I deal with women and also teenagers and I know how to handle them appropriately. Whenever a parent has a sensitive issue to discuss with their daughters they will always come to me to help them talk to them.

There is also the fatigue that comes with the work we do because you give too much and expect little in return. As an activist, people think you always have every answer to their problem not

remembering that you could be having your own burden as well. People judge activists very harshly sometimes. I could be doing something right but not everyone will see it that way. This diminishes my morale at times.

I encourage women to adjust to living with the pandemic and advise them to look for alternative sources of income. A great lesson that COVID-19 has taught me is to be self-independent in that I don't have to depend on anyone for finances. In the findings of our research, we found out that women took loans even without knowing the interest rates. More training needs to be given on financial literacy. This knowledge is what is going to liberate women to be financially independent. ■

I encourage women to adjust to living with the pandemic and advise them to look for alternative sources of income. A great lesson that COVID-19 has taught me is to be self-independent...





3.

Rising above depression & frustrations for the safety of women and girls in the COVID-19 pandemic

My name is Editar Adhiambo Ochieng

I am a young mother and woman rights defender from Kibera slums. I am the founder and the CEO of Feminist for Peace, Rights and Justice Center (FPRJC) located in the heart of Kibera slums Kisumu Ndogo village. The FPRJC is a Feminist oriented organization that focuses on the proactive leadership of young women in the society in addressing issues on sexual and gender based violence.

Our organization helps women realize their full potential and also get fair justice and equal opportunities in the society. People who have suffered the most in the community are women. They experience violence, depression and other abuses on a daily basis. It is a persisting challenge that we must address and totally eradicate.

During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was forced to work for long hours in the community to ensure the safety for women and girls. This meant I had to be away from my family and children for endless hours. It was a challenging time. We were dealing with a strange pandemic with catastrophic consequences. We just did not know how bad the devastating impact was going to be on our lives and livelihood but we had to keep going.





When I realized that the ravages of COVID-19 were going to last longer than anticipated through the regular information provided by the ministry of health, I was overcome with fear. The future of my work and service to the community of Kibera now looked uncertain and grim.

As a young fiery human rights defender who has diverse stripes as a voice for the voiceless in the community, I could not just sit there and do nothing. I took it upon myself to mobilize my team of community human rights defenders for some much-needed interventions amidst the pandemic. This meant that I had to stay away from my family and my two children. I had to plough all my efforts into ensuring women and girls in Kibera still get the provisions and support they needed.

I stayed for about sixty days without seeing my children and family which led me into depression. I stayed away from home because as I worked with the community I was afraid I would infect my children and family with the disease in case I contracted it.

I worked for over two months straight when COVID-19 was announced by the Ministry of Health without seeing my children and family. We had to organize to get food and medical supplies out to the most vulnerable in the community. We were also confronted by the

reality of the rising cases of domestic violence in homes as the lockdown regulations were implemented. I was interacting with almost everyone in my community and I felt like I was so vulnerable to the disease. I had to take my

children away from Kibera because I felt like I would be affecting them every day in a different way since I was dealing with so many different situations at a go. I was also afraid that I could expose them to the disease even though I was using my protective gears to protect myself. I felt that my children would be safer being away from me for some time.

During this period I was not mentally stable and I went into depression for a period of time because I was missing my children and also because it was hard to make them understand what was really happening. The only thing that gave her hope was the constant phone communication with my children, family and close friends. My 11 year old daughter kept on encouraging me and that gave me the motivation I needed and strengthened my resilience. When you are drowning in difficulties

and a child tells you “be strong mama, it will be ok” then this is the best motivation you need”.

COVID-19 has affected me and my community very negatively because of how I saw women and girls going through domestic violence; how young girls were being raped by their relatives and strangers; how some women desperately

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had to seek unsafe abortions; how boys were being sodomized by strangers and relative and how people from different parts of the world went through police brutality which lead to so many deaths.

During this period I have been so heartbroken because of how I have seen people from my community suffer. Most hospital facilities were closed and many girls and women could not access contraceptives that led to so many unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions that made many young women develop complications and others lost their lives in the process. Other women have developed complication during delivery since they could not access proper maternity services. A lot of women experienced domestic violence that led to so many broken families, others developed complications and some lost their lives in the process.

In our office we have a small space called safe house where we host young women and

girls in distress who have been through rape and domestic violence as we try to solve the matter with the authorities. Some women end up leaving their matrimonial homes due to domestic violence and that leads to the increase of broken families in the community. During this period, this small space was full throughout. We could barely manage it. The job however, had to be done.

Being an activist and a human rights defender in a community that is so vulnerable to all kinds of abuse is not easy because not everyone will accept and appreciate what you do. You must persist nonetheless to focus on the goal of offering service to the well-being of women and girls.

This pandemic has really taught me a lot. For instance, I have learned that not everyone will be happy when your purpose in life is to help others and ensure their wellbeing. For us as a foundation every time and anytime is **women power!** ■



4.

Threatened for my COVID-19 Interventions

My name is Habu Dorcas

I am a member of the Kenya Peasants League (KPL) Kangemi cluster. I am in charge of fundraising and coordination of KPL activities within Kangemi. I live in dam area, a slum section in Kangemi. This Covid-19 period has been quite a challenge especially for us slum dwellers. Majority of people within my community lost their sources of income as most of them survive on menial jobs.

When the pandemic hit, life in the community became very difficult. Most families not knowing what to do next. One of my realizations was that children around the community were left unattended to as their parents struggled to look for means to sustain their families. The parents had lost their jobs that were their source of livelihood. This resulted in increased crime rates within the area. There were cases of children as young as ten years engaging in crime or resorting to becoming street children just to get something to eat.

As human rights defenders, this situation was very challenging for us. We decided to mobilize the little resources we had amongst ourselves and we started making free meals for children in my area. We cooked and fed children in *Kibagare, Kaptagat* and *Dam* slums.

We also realized that access to sanitary towels for girls in our area was another problem. I had to mobilize again for menstrual hygiene materials that we would distribute to our girls. We managed to visit 200 girls from *Kibagare, Kaptagat, Dam, Dumboini, Mwimuto* and *Buffalo* informal settlements. We also took the

opportunity to talk to these girls on Sexual and Reproductive Health issues, especially now that they were at home and with minimal supervision from their parents and guardians.

Due to the congestion in slum areas, we knew we were at a higher risk of getting COVID. As an organization, we also tasked ourselves with providing hand washing stations in our community. We used to make our own soap and set up hand washing stations in different sections that people would access for free.

One of the biggest challenges we had was resource mobilization for the interventions we took up in the community. Contributing from the little we had was not easy. Some of us even ended up lacking completely because we had given out all we had.

Sustainability for our projects was a major problem. The feeding initiative collapsed almost immediately because we did not have the money to sustain it. We also had problems getting girls to come out for sensitization. Most of them expected to at least get some money to go



back home with but we did not provide this.

There was also *Kazi kwa Vijana* initiative that was happening in the community. I rallied youth to apply for these jobs so they could at least have a source of income. The recruitment process was very corrupt with the local administration selecting their preferred people. As a known human rights defender, some of these youths came to me with their grievances. I took the matter up with our chief and he was not happy being challenged by a young woman. He made it very clear that I was a very small problem that he can deal with. This issue was brought home to my father who also supported the local authority. My own father threatened to kill me if the local administration could not do it. He ended up chasing me away from home because of the work I do defending youth and women in the community.

Being chased away from home was a big blow but did not deter me from doing the right thing. I still pursued the *Kazi kwa Vijana* recruitment issue and since our local authority was not responsive, I took it up to the district office in Westlands. The chief was summoned and had to redo the recruitment. In the second round, I was given the opportunity to recommend a number of youth for the jobs.

One of my biggest success stories is getting a number of youth into the *Kazi kwa Vijana* initiative. We also got some youth in Kibagare area into a hygiene program. About 60 youth got into this project titled **"Crime Si Paa"** (Crime is not cool). The mentorship program saw some of these youths start businesses from the funds they were able to save from the project. As KPL, we also got to support two women start small businesses to support their families. ■





5.

Fighting for the plight of domestic workers in the COVID-19 Pandemic

My name is Emily Kwamboka.

I am a human rights defender and I have been doing this work for ten years. I defend mostly the rights of domestic workers. I am the Founder and Executive Director Domestic workers Right Spaces. I usually organize meetings which they come and share their experiences.

During this COVID-19 season, the cases we are tackling are mostly to do with mental issues. When the President announced that we were working from home, this affected the domestic workers almost immediately.

Most of these women have to go out to work for their money on a daily basis. There is usually a base where we sit and clients come to pick us up for work. But when COVID-19 hit, we could not even access that area because of the lockdown and social distancing restrictions. Most of the women stopped going to work. There were very few clients willing to give us work. For those that got work to wash clothes, they would have dirty laundry thrown at them through the windows so they could wash them.





The women were being treated as if they are contagious just by the mere fact that they are domestic house helps.

Another situation that challenged us is that we would go to wash clothes and these clothes most of the time had spittle on them or other discharges that exposed us more to COVID-19 than those who employed us. But because of the challenges of life and fighting to put food on the table, we had to wash the clothes whether they had spittle on them or not. This traumatized our members. They also experienced a lot of verbal abuse.

Our members were also challenged in terms of food. Because there was no work it meant they did not have any other means of income to feed their families. So as an organization we teamed up with a colleague ,a human rights defender Rachael Mwikali and Coalition for Grassroots Human rights defenders (CGHRD-Kenya) who helped us by mobilizing for food donations for distribution to the most vulnerable. This was extended to the domestic workers and their families. It really helped a lot during this time of difficulty.

I can say that the stigma issue that the domestic workers experienced was the biggest challenge. It is ironic to imagine that people would not want to come near you or even touch you yet they need you to wash their clothes, clean their homes, take care of


their children and even cook for them. There was also a rise in domestic violence especially with our members who are married. The situation would arise since the children want food and both parents are jobless owing to COVID-19. Most of the people here do menial

jobs which came to a halt during the pandemic. But what really worried me was when a man who lives here committed suicide when he lost his job. According to the family, he felt life was not worth living anymore because he had failed to provide for his family.

When it comes to cases of domestic violence and abuse, we have learnt to follow procedure when we get cases of domestic violence because we get threatened a lot. We first take the survivor to hospital then to the police station to report. But the challenge we go through is that a lot of survivors of gender based violence do not usually want to report. They are conflicted in their situations of dependency and also fear retaliation from their abusers. Sometimes we have to let the cases drop because without evidence, the cases have no legitimacy. Other times, the couple opts to settle their

dispute out of court. Sometimes though, the situation gets even more difficult when the abused woman has no place to go and I end up hosting them in my house with my own resources. This comes about when there is no

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available center to host them. This is becomes a risky issue for me because I end up getting threats from some of their abusers, husbands and boyfriends, who threaten me for “inciting” their wives and girlfriends against them.

One of the biggest successes we experienced during this pandemic is that the partners we work with came through for us financially and in kind. Additionally, as residents of Mathare, we worked hand in hand to help each other through the pandemic. We shared and continue to share food with each other.

The government has not done much for us. If there was any food supposedly released to us, we did not get it. We depended on ourselves

because we knew we had only ourselves. I would urge all human rights defenders to work together because we have no one else to support us. We must work together.

It would be good for us to be taught how to fundraise. We came to know it was a challenge during COVID-19 when we needed to raise funds to help our community. We are looking on not only on relying on donors but to start a feminist economy campaign where our members have their own businesses. We want our Human Rights Defenders to be financially stable and always ready for any eventuality. What kept me going was the support and solidarity amongst ourselves as women activists. ■





A woman with short dark hair, wearing a green and brown camouflage long-sleeved shirt, is smiling and raising her right fist. The background is a blurred wall with abstract blue and yellow patterns.

6.

Pushing on for dignity in the COVID-19 Pandemic

**My name is Maryanne
Mutheu Kasina**

I am the co-founder of Kayole Community Justice Center and Convener of the Women in the social justice centers. I fight for women's rights and at the center level. I deal with issues of gender based violence and police violence. I have been doing this for the last three years.

What gives me the morale to continue every day is the fact that I am moved by women who raise alarms about the injustices they face.

I believe that no woman is free until all women are free. Women must be liberated from the injustices they face.

Before COVID-19 got here, we had project partners who were willing to come and start working with us. For example PAWA254 had agreed to come in to do a project on journalism, public litigation and activism. This project was meant to be held here in Kayole but because of the pandemic it was done on Zoom. In my opinion it did not have the kind of impact that was expected.




COVID-19 has also affected our catering business. We have a catering business that ensures we have our bills paid. That business has been put on hold because of the pandemic. Things have become worse. Most of the women in this area have lost their jobs and they are single mothers. Most of them have ended up in sex work which is still not helping them. The ones who were doing domestic chores of washing clothes and cleaning homes no longer get the jobs like they used to. People are skeptical about contracting the disease. Married women and those staying with spouses have been experiencing rising cases of domestic violence in our area. They say it has to do with a lack of money because the men in their frustrations are venting out on their wives and partners. Children have also been hurt in the process by this pandemic because they have had to experience this same violence within their homes. They are also going on one meal a day or sometimes even no meals at all.

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Children have also been hurt in the process by this pandemic because they have had to experience this same violence within their homes.

When schools went online, this area was highly disadvantaged. This is an informal settlement. Most of the women we help earn a dollar a day. When they get their little money they prefer to buy food as opposed to paying for internet for the child to be able to access their classes online. Most homes do not even have the computers or phones to facilitate online learning. It has been a great challenge.





When it comes to menstrual products, the girls have been going through a lot. Since their families already live on a dollar a day, pads are not an option. Pads are too expensive for their families to afford. Because we know that menstrual cycles never stop even with a pandemic, these girls are then forced to go out and look for sanitary provisions and this is where they get sexually preyed upon and exploited. Many have become pregnant in this way during this period. I am challenging the government to make sure that menstrual products are free especially for girls in the informal settlements. The challenge has been that some organizations have been circulating them in schools. But since the schools are closed, these girls find themselves missing out on them.

Kayole has a huge challenge of access to clean water. The residents here keep buying water which is also becoming an expensive affair. During this pandemic how do the families take care of themselves with no water? Even the girls experience a challenge during their

menses because of lack of water. Hygiene becomes a major issue both within the homes and around the community. The government keeps insisting on washing our hands but where is the water coming from? Sanitizers are even too expensive for the communities to comprehend.

The government should implement article 43 of the Constitution of Kenya that gives us the right to our basic needs like water, education, housing and food. During the pandemic, the government allocated resources to help us but we do not know where the resources went because we are yet to receive any help. I feel the looting of resources because of the high levels of corruption leads to poverty which in turn leads to violence which makes the work of human rights defenders very difficult. I wish to see the government provide basic needs for every household so as to enable them to live a dignified life. To my colleagues in the human rights world, let's continue fighting until everyone lives in a place that has dignity, equal rights and justice for everyone. I know it is not an easy task but let us keep pushing on. ■



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7.

Beating the odds of COVID-19 with counselling and hope



My names is Kamene Muthoka

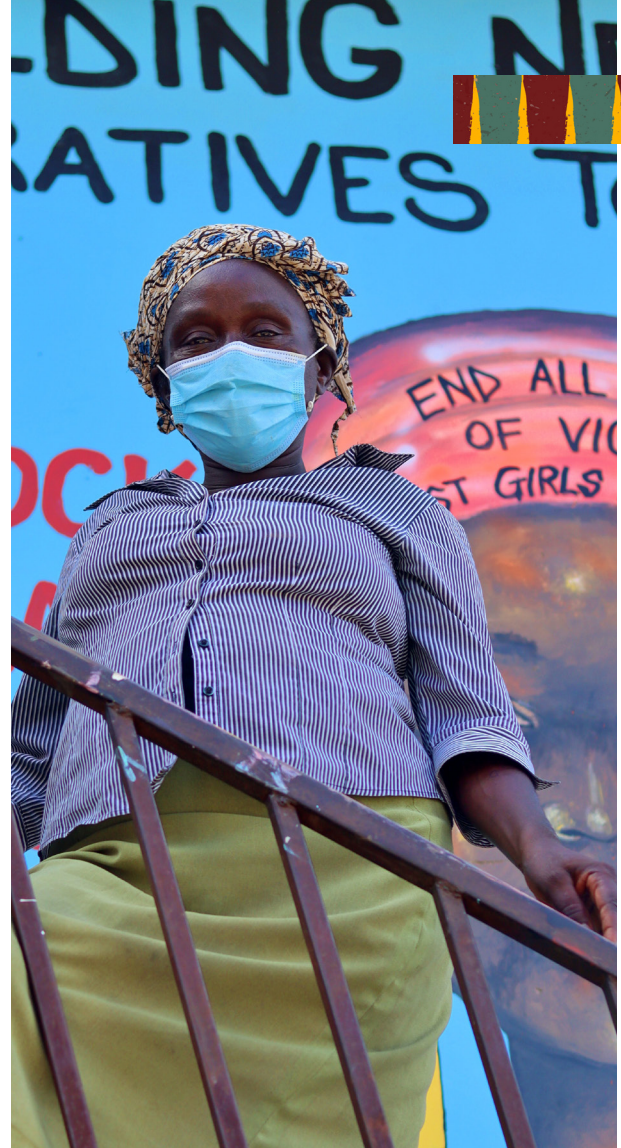
I am a Community health Worker with City Council. My work involves visiting households and referring them to hospital or other appropriate places they can get help. If I find malnourished children or lactating mothers that need help, I find help for them. If I visit a resident and they need counseling do that. I have been counseling people in Mathare for the last ten years. My joy is when someone who had given up on life is willing to try again. People need a lot of encouragement in this area. Most of my patients during COVID-19 have been those living With HIV/AIDS. Some of whom are my colleagues. Their appearance is very poor because of lack of food which is a result of losing jobs during this season of COVID-19.

I have experienced cases of domestic violence that have become normalized during this season. These cases used to be there but now, they are very high. The men were mostly in the house having lost their jobs. The women would go out and do menial jobs before there was a lockdown. Even after the lockdowns were lifted, some men haven't gone back to work especially those in construction. The women go out and do menial jobs like washing clothes for their clients in Eastleigh. We have noticed that when the woman is the breadwinner, a lot of quarrels and fights arise because the men feel they are being disrespected. Love seems to have left these homes.

What has touched me the most during this season is that children get abused in the process of trying to get food for their families. Most of these children end up exchanging sexual favors for food. When I go to homes where children have been forced to get involved in sex work so as to get food I have to counsel them. I talk to the families to find out what can be done. If it is beyond counseling, I usually refer them to my colleagues who are human rights defenders. I work closely with Human Rights Defenders because of the cases we encounter in the field.

But counseling families during the pandemic has been challenging. We find other residents of Mathare who are very bitter because they feel COVID-19 has put a stop to their businesses. Recently, as we were carrying out a sensitization on Corona Virus, we visited a home where the man of the house kept saying he did not want to listen to what we had to say. As my colleagues stepped out and I was left there talking to the wife the man who had left us in the living room came back from the bedroom with a *panga* ready to attack me. I literally ran for my life. This pandemic has really affected people psychologically.

I would encourage those that are doing volunteer work here in Mathare not to be



discouraged no matter what. God will reward us. **These people need us. There are things that encourage me like how we rescued a malnourished child and had her taken to hospital in an ambulance. Her whole family had stayed hungry for days. We gave them the food we could get but the same story is sad.** This is because one of her sisters who did not seem as badly off died the following day. We sadly later found out it was a case of malnourishment. Even with COVID-19, parents need to be very sensitive with the young ones so as not lose them. Cases this only make me want to help the community more because the more the information is out there on how to stay safe during COVID-19, the safer we are.

My strength that kept me going was support from my comrades from coalition for grassroots human rights defenders Kenya, with the love, support and solidarity that they showed me. ■



8.

Spreading hope and Global Solidarity in times of the COVID-19 Pandemic

**My name is Joshine Achieng
popularly known as Dani**

I am a 24 year old young woman living with HIV. I was born and raised in Mathare informal settlement, currently I am the chairperson of Mathare Roots Initiative. I am very passionate about working with young girls and women in matters related to menstrual health hygiene, mental well Being and especially fighting for the rights of women and young girls living with HIV and AIDs. I want to be a mirror for them to be able to see that being HIV positive is not the end of the world. I study at Kisii University, during COVID-19. I had to come back home as the campus was shut down. This was the period when I had just found out about my HIV status. Finding out about my status was an eye opener to me, I knew I wanted to put more focus into being a source of hope and inspiration to girls and women in similar situation especially during COVID-19 Pandemic.

During this period of COVID-19, Mathare Roots Initiative was fortunate to get grants to support about 47 women. This was a project that we collaborated with Coalition For Grassroots Human Rights Defenders Kenya (CGHRDs Kenya) and One Vibe Africa, they each got Kshs10,000 as a booster



to support those women who had businesses that had been affected by the pandemic. This was quite a booster for their businesses.

Our Organization has several projects, local Football team, tree planting, menstrual education, Sauti TV, Human Rights work and We also do activism by putting murals that speak against domestic violence, issues like stopping COVID-19 and police brutality especially when it comes to extrajudicial killings.

The biggest challenge during COVID-19 has been that women approach you for financial support and yet you do not have any funds to offer them. This can be discouraging. Emotionally, I can support them but financially, it is too tasking since the work we do it on voluntary bases..

The government needs to provide opportunities for both women and girls in this area. They must be economically empowered. At least COVID-19 showed us that there is a huge gap in social economic Rights. The government support never reached us here. The little we got is what we shared

with the women and girls. In my opinion, the government should surely do better!

During this period, there were many cases that were shocking but those that really touched me were the ones on domestic violence. This vice increased in this area. Lack of livelihoods that families were experiencing resulted to partners becoming more abusive as a means of venting out their frustrations. When women who have been abused come to us, we try to help them but it also sometimes puts us in danger. To some of the men, we are misunderstood as being the ones “inciting” their women against them. Luckily we are in partnership with CGHRDs Kenya who are our reference point. Anyone who comes to our offices with such cases to our offices we refer them to Rachael Mwikali and her team. Her team has capacity to deal with them and the kind of challenges that arise from such cases. What kept me going to keep on the fight was my personal struggle based on my health and I felt that I have the responsibility to fight for more women and girls living with HIV/AIDs to have dignity and Respect. ■



Since the jobs are scarce and during my free time I have been able to learn how to make soap using different chemicals...

9.

Empowering the community to think positively through COVID-19

My name is Beryl Anyango

I was born and raised in Kibera slums. I have been through a lot since COVID-19 started. My parents lost their jobs as casual laborers in Nairobi when the pandemic started and they could no longer get their basic needs like putting food on the table and also paying for school fees.

I started doing casual jobs so that I could provide for the family since it was very difficult for me to get a decent job and everyone was afraid of the disease. Also many employers had shut down their businesses and so the options were very few.

I therefore started doing casual jobs like laundry around different homes and any other available jobs so that I could help to provide for the family.

On a good day I could make up to one thousand shillings which is equivalent to \$10 and that is able to sustain my family with food for at least for one week. It is not a lot of money but as a family we try to use the money available well.

Sometimes it is hard for me to get a job since I am not welcomed to many homes to work as a cleaner because of the fear of COVID-19. When I get a client, they end up paying me half for the services or very little because they too have been affected by the pandemic in terms of their livelihoods.

The few jobs I have been able to secure have helped me support my family financially and also sustain my basic needs albeit with a lot of difficulties.

Since the jobs are scarce and during my free time I have been able to learn how to make soap using different chemicals at the Feminist for Peace Rights and Justice Center (FPRJC). Through this initiative, I have been able to make some extra cash to support my family.

As a foundation we started making soap and selling to the people within the community to get funds that could sustain the organization and us as well. My colleagues and I came up with the initiative since soap was on demand and we thought that when we make soap we could make more money both for ourselves and the foundation.

During this period I have realized that many young women and girls were being abused at home. Because of this I decided to use my free time to stay at the foundation's office educating young girls who were at risk on how to make face masks and to make soap so that they could earn themselves a living. At this time, I also educated them about staying safe and how to detect and deal with abuse and violence at home. I encouraged them to come

to the foundation and keep themselves busy reading different books that we have.

Our greatest joy as an organization is when we put a smile on people's faces in the community and give them hope for a better tomorrow. The pandemic has made us restore back our love with the people around us and also within ourselves.

As a feminist, this pandemic has rendered the girl-child most vulnerable since most of them are in high school and now that schools are closed, they are capable of engaging and being sexually exploited in prostitution and hence at greater risk of unwanted pregnancies and contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

We help women realize their full potential by encouraging them to always speak out every time they are abused; ensuring they are confident enough and they can fight for their own rights without the

fear of being intimidated by men and other women. This is the best part of our work; to empower women to be able to be strong enough to speak out for themselves.

During this pandemic, I have realized that no woman is limited and one can only exercise their full potential when they keep trying hence the resilience spirit that keeps me pushing harder every day without the fear of retaliation.

COVID-19 is not the end of the world. We should take the disease as a challenge and focus more on self-love and development for our own wellbeing and our communities as well. ■





10.

Keeping communal sharing alive in the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

My name is Evelyne Ados

I live in Mathare, Mabatini. I am a human rights defender, a feminist and a member of Coalition for Grassroots Human Rights Defenders Kenya. This to me is a calling. I found myself defending my neighbors especially women who were constantly facing domestic violence. I have a passion to make sure women and girls are safe. It hurts me whenever I hear of a woman being violated.

I have been doing this for about eight years now. The biggest challenge has been especially with cases we take to the Huruma Police Station in Mathare. The perpetrator sometimes goes and lies about the case. In a lot of these cases the witnesses do not want to testify because they fear reprisals. It makes our work very complicated.

We had so many problems when COVID-19 hit and there were lockdowns. Most of the women that live in this area of Mathare wash clothes for a living. They usually wash for the Somali community in Eastleigh which is our neighboring estate. The women here lost their laundry washing jobs. There is a place where they usually sit so that clients are able to call them but even that was a

place they were barred from. They ended up with no money in their pockets and consequently, no food for their families.

As human rights defenders, we decided to fundraise for both food and money to help these families. Once we got the food we would go and distribute to every household we could.

But for me the saddest case that stood out for me was one where we were giving one loaf of bread to each household. In this particular house, I knocked a child who was about ten years opened the door. I gave the loaf of bread and I moved on with my friends to the next house to give to more families. On our way back I thought to myself, let me just confirm that I actually gave to each house. So I knocked the door and again the child opened. Only this time a scene that brought tears to my eyes met me at the door. It seems immediately I gave the child the loaf of bread, she called her two other siblings who are six and two years of age. They had literally sat down and eaten the loaf of bread with water. They had nothing else. I called a fellow human rights defender and told her of

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the case. A neighbor who was watching us then jumped in and said that the children had lost their mum. Their father, the only surviving parent always left at 4am to go look for menial jobs at construction sites. He always left them with either very little food or no food at all. My team and I were so moved that the remaining loaves of bread were taken to that house. The very next day when we supplied food to the area, that family was top on our list. We left a message for their father not to beat up

the children thinking they went to borrow food from outsiders.

COVID-19 pandemic had a good side to it. We as Mathare residents became like one big family. Before COVID-19, neighbors never cared for each other. When COVID-19 hit us, we started worrying about each other. If for example I cook food I share it with my neighbor. Mathare became a team and we spoke in one voice. We also thank our partners



and supporters, e.g. Embassy of Belgium in Nairobi through our Diplomatic Pussy Power Convenor Noëmi Ral, Our friends from Sweden, Changing lenses Changing Lives, Jeniffer Wynne and the Public for their support and contribution to our work as Coalition For Grassroots Human Rights Defenders Kenya .

My message to the government is that it needs to get to the grassroots. There is

so much desperation here. We need help. Most of these residents began to see us as the answer to their problems but we could only do so much because we are also fundraising from our friends. We felt forgotten by the government. To my fellow human rights defenders, I would like to urge you to continue with that spirit of helping our community. ■

COVID-19 pandemic had a good side to it. We as Mathare residents became like one big family. Before COVID-19, neighbors never cared for each other. When COVID-19 hit us, we started worrying about each other.





11.

Surviving COVID one initiative at a time

My name is Annette Kendi

I am a member of Kenya Peasants League, Kangemi cluster.

I am a student at Kangemi Vocational Training Centre. This COVID period had been really tough, especially for young women like myself who depend on a single parent for support.

As a student, my first thought when COVID hit was how to support school going children. With the introduction of online classes, it was a challenge for most slum children to access these classes. I mobilized a group of older students who would work as volunteer teachers to the younger children. We contributed money and bought reading materials and exam papers that we distributed to the children for free. This initiative kept the children busy, since most of them were always unattended to as their parents went out to look for work.

We also came together as a group of youth and started a car wash that would at least be an income-generating project for us. Unfortunately this did not materialize, as we did not have the financial capacity to sustain it.

My biggest challenge was getting support to sustain the free lessons to children in the community. Some of the volunteer teachers I worked with dropped off because they wanted compensation for their time, something we could not afford. It is hard to work *pro bono* when you have mouths to feed.

We at some point started charging the children twenty shillings (\$2) for the learning materials. This was also a big issue, as most of the children could not afford the amount. Some children were also not able to attend the lessons as they were left in charge of their younger siblings as their parents went out in search for work.

We experienced a lot of conflict between children and their parents especially single mothers. Most of these women conducted small businesses that were adversely affected by the COVID pandemic. It is hard to feed a family during a pandemic and without any definite source of income. Children easily get into crime or illicit sex trade. I witnessed first-hand the struggles my mother went through trying to provide for me during this COVID period. I had to sit her down and discuss saving ideas for the future from the little income she was getting.

We also mobilized resources as a community and started a shoe selling business that is at least putting food on the table for a few youth. Even though our voluntary classes did not flourish as we wanted, there are number of children who picked the learning momentum and always reached out to us for guidance and help.

We were also able to act as mediators between parents and children who were in conflict. We offered counseling to children by either reaching out to them directly or through their parents. It has been a busy and transforming experience for me. ■



12.

Everyone needs to live in a just and dignified world” even during the COVID-19 Pandemic

My name is Domitilah Guala Wairimu

I am a human rights defender based in Mathare. I have been doing this job since 2016. I do this because I do not like to see injustice and I like helping my community. I deal mostly with the girl child and more specifically cases of gender based violence (GBV).

When COVID-19 was declared in Kenya and lockdowns were issued, GBV cases shot up. This was because of lack of jobs which also exacerbated the poverty that has been ongoing. There are cases in the community that have stayed engraved in my mind during this pandemic period. One is where we had a case of a lady who was

HIV+ but could not take her Anti-Retroviral drugs because she had no food in the house. We found her in a weak state. We had to find food for her and fundraised to have her house rent paid for a few months. We are still supporting her.

Another case that I had to deal with is one that broke my heart. A 21-year-old man raped four girls, two were eight years and the other two were six years. The worst thing is that this man is HIV+. He lured the children into his place and carried out the crime. He is currently in prison custody. We are closely following up on this case.



A lot of families have broken up during this season. Some women move out with the children when they see the man is not providing. The men are also leaving their families and co-habiting with women they feel have money. The women who are left alone begin to do anything to survive. In desperation, this includes working as commercial sex workers and domestic house-helpers.

When I get a case of domestic violence I first listen to both sides separately to determine what the facts are. This is because they come with a lot of emotions but as you question them on the case you get to know what is happening. It sometimes gets to go to the police station. If the Officer in Charge of the Station (OCS) feels the case can be handled by the local chief, he sends the couple there or even to the elders of the community.

The biggest cases I handle are on rape and defilement and those have sharply increased during this period of COVID-19. I deal a lot with the Community health volunteers. When they point out a case to me I go and pick up the minor and take them to hospital at MSF-Doctors without Borders located within Mathare. Once the minor is examined and treated the man is also tested to either certify that he is the offender or to clear his name. Then the police come in at this point and the

case goes into court.

One of our major challenges is dealing with the Borana community who like to have their community elders solve their problems and cases as opposed to going to court. Often most of their deliberations and decisions on cases of sexual abuse end-up being much more detrimental to the victim than helpful. In a case of defilement, they (Borana Community) kill a lamb and have the man who defiled the child marry off the minor. In other words, we have to still deal with issues of child marriage even during this pandemic!

When it comes to the police violence, we usually report cases to Independent Policing Oversight Authority, IPOA, but if there is a problem and we can't get help, we go to Vigilante House where we push for police action. There are three groups of people that have suffered a lot during this pandemic. The first group is that of single mothers. We have had to support single mothers with what we get because most of them lost their menial jobs when COVID-19 was declared. The other groups are People Living with Disabilities and those living with HIV/AIDS. In my opinion, these groups get rejected a lot. We are dealing with a lot of cases that are coming from these groups. These groups had challenges before COVID-19 but after the pandemic, their problems seem to have worsened. They need a lot of support.

We need the government to support us by enacting laws that work for us here in the grassroots. When it comes to PWDs, the government needs to carry out an awareness campaign. Most people here don't know that the government supports PWDs.

My message to my fellow colleagues in the human rights arena; let's not select which cases we will deal with. If you can't handle a case, refer it to someone who can handle the case instead of dropping it. This person needs justice. Everyone deserves to live in a just world. ■



13.

Making Soap to wash away the devastation of COVID-19

My name is Flavian Anyango

I am a mother of one from the informal settlements of Kibera in Nairobi. I am a member of the Feminist for Peace Rights and Justice Center (FPRJC), a feminist organization that mobilizes efforts

against sexual abuse and violence of women and girls.

When the pandemic started I was very scared because I had an infant who was still attending



his monthly clinics but due to the restrictions applied on movements within the lockdown I could no longer take him to the hospital. Most facilities around my area closed down due to the restrictions. When the hospitals resumed duties only a limited number of people could visit the facility at a given time hence exposing my son to more risks of contracting other diseases.

As a second hand clothes vendor, it was difficult for me to put food on the table for my son because the government had ordered a ban on the importation of second-hand clothes. This was yet another devastating impact on my business which was my sole means of livelihood.

I stayed at home for some time without

anything to do and it was too tough. There was no money hence no food to even feed the family and we had to rely on donations which were uncertain. I decided to stay at home but it was too tough on my side since I was not used to staying at home without working, I decided to create covid-19 awareness within the community.

In my community, people did not know much about COVID-19. After going through different trainings on the disease I started teaching people how to wash their hands, how to wear face-masks and how to sanitize their hands. I also emphasized to them the importance of social distancing as well as highlighting the main symptoms of infection.

During this period, I encountered ignorance and/or lack of information amongst the people in the community. Some people did not want to use face-masks because they believed that as Africans they could not be infected because COVID-19 was a “White Man’s disease”. Others believed that only the cursed ones could contract the disease because it was a punishment from God. This was such a sad and reckless way to look at it.

Due to the poverty levels in the community many people could not afford the basic safety gears to protect themselves from COVID-19 and that exposed them to greater risks of getting infected by the disease. Necessities such as face masks, sanitizers, soap and regular access to water is almost a luxury in the slums. Our FPJRC foundation was able to receive few donations from well-wishers to help the most vulnerable families.

In the foundation people have different skills that they have learned throughout the year

Our founder, Ms. Editar Ochieng came up with an idea to use our skills to help the community and this is how our soap-making project came about. Soap was and continues to be critical for hygiene during this COVID time. We started teaching people how to make soap in the community so that they could earn

a living from it and also cut down costs. This way they could have enough for themselves and for the community as a whole. This idea came in handy and since it made young girls and women become busy it helped them gain a livelihood and also to keep them away from vices and threatening situations.

The soap business was very good since it was on demand and almost everyone needed it. We made some good money from it and we used the money to support the community by buying them food and other basic things like sanitary towels for girls. This intervention however also came with challenges. Once I almost gave up during this project because of the negative feedback I was getting from some

people in the community while distributing food to vulnerable families. Even though we were trying our best to reach the most vulnerable of the people in the community, others felt we were being biased in our distribution and so they started insulting me and my colleagues.

This really affected me psychologically because I felt like I was not doing enough to help my community and also felt that the community was not appreciative enough of all our efforts.

With time however, I have learnt how to deal with different people in the community and have been able to overcome challenges as they come. The goal is to focus on helping the community as much as possible during this devastating time of the COVID-19 pandemic. ■





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