

GLOBAL CHANGE LEADERS CASE STUDY



Kakenya Ntaiya

Empowering Maasai Girls in Kenya

Pauline Achola

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP
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April 2012

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Kakenya Ntaiya

Empowering Maasai Girls in Kenya

Introduction

Kakenya Ntaiya turned 33, had her second child and completed her Ph.D—all in 2011. A visionary leader and perpetual multi-tasker, she is the founder and president of Kakenya's Dream, a non-profit organization registered in the U.S. Still a student in the United States, she plays an active role in the running and operation of the Kakenya Centre for Excellence (KCE), a girls' school that she founded in Enoosaen, her home village in Kenya. From her base in the United States, Kakenya is also overseeing the building of a learning centre in the village, which will provide community members with access to computers and various training opportunities, including micro-enterprise development.

A tireless activist, Kakenya has been an avid advocate of girls' education and an outspoken critic of child marriages and female genital mutilation (FGM), both of which are still widely practiced in her ethnic Maasai community. Her goal is to end these practices and to promote discussion on, and dissemination of, messages on pertinent issues in the community such as child marriages, FGM, teen pregnancy and school dropouts, starting in her community in Enoosaen. Her open criticism and personal stand against such long-held traditions are causing ripples in a community where these practices are often unquestioned, and where girls are not expected to speak publicly.

Kakenya's activism has been widely recognized through numerous awards, including a Rising Voices Award, conferred on her by the Vital Voices Global Partnership; a National Geographic Emerging Leader Award; and a Woman to Watch Award. Her efforts have led her to rub shoulders with the likes of Hillary Clinton and Kofi Annan, and to lobby the U.S. government to take actions that would end practices like child marriages. Even Kenya, her own country, recognized her efforts, honouring her as the Kenyan Diaspora Person of the Year in 2009.

Yet she has bigger dreams, since she plans to expand her hybrid school model – which incorporates aspects of public and private school methods - into more communities in Kenya, to implement a mentoring program that links professional women in Kenya with disadvantaged schoolgirls, and to take on a leadership role within the Ministry of Education throughout Kenya to implement what she considers necessary changes to the education system.

This case study, based on interviews conducted in 2011, reveals that she is just starting out on her mission to expand educational opportunities for disadvantaged girls in her community and Kenya, and to advocate against harmful traditional practices that negatively impact on girls' opportunities to get an education.

Context

Kakenya was born in 1978 and grew up on a homestead in Enoosaen in southwestern Kenya in the heart of Maasailand in the Great Rift Valley. The nearest town is a two-hour drive away. The Enoosaen market centre has electricity and some piped water, but the adjacent homesteads, including Kakenya's home, has neither. Kakenya is from a semi-nomadic pastoralist tribe – the Maasai – who live in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. In Kenya, their total population is 841,622 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The Maasai are a strongly patriarchal society; men own everything, including their wives. Livestock, especially cattle, are a primary source of food and income for the Maasai, whose measure of a man's wealth is in the numbers of his cattle and children. Child marriage is a common practice, with girls as young as twelve often married off to much older men, sometimes as second, third or fourth wives. Livestock are traded or sold to buy necessary products, and since dowries are measured in cattle, herds are increased when girls are withdrawn from schools for marriage (Kosimbei & Ngware, 2006).

The Maasai have many ceremonies and rituals, but among the most important is the coming-of-age ritual called Emuratta. This involves circumcision of boys and excision of girls (being 'cut'), also referred to as female genital mutilation. These practices are widespread around the world, with an estimated 100 to 140 million girls and women worldwide, most of whom are in Africa, having undergone some form of FGM. In 2008-2009, it was estimated that there was a 27.1% prevalence of FGM in Kenya (WHO, 2011). Among the Maasai, circumcision marks boys' new roles as warriors, responsible for the security of their households, livestock and communities. For girls, there is a similar transition into womanhood and readiness for getting married and starting families. Excision, therefore, often means the end of a girls' education, as many get married within two to 12 months after the ritual.

Traditionally, the Maasai did not value formal education, as they were nomadic pastoralists who moved north and south of the Kenya-Tanzania border following seasonal rains and pasture for their animals. As with many minority groups, schools were seen as institutions that would strip their young people of their language, traditions and beliefs. They resisted British colonialists' attempts to get them to adopt sedentary lifestyles, take up agriculture and send their children to school. However, with increased urbanization encroaching upon them, and much of their grazing lands designated as wildlife reserves or taken up by large ranches, many Maasai have been forced, gradually, to settle permanently on limited areas of land, resulting in reduced herds and less sustainable livelihoods.

Settling has also led to more Maasai sending their children to school, with increasing numbers attending school since Kenya introduced free compulsory primary education in 2003. In Enoosaen primary school, Kakenya's alma mater, enrolment rose by 25% in just a few months following the introduction of free primary education (Argetsinger, 2003). This reflected a general upward trend in attendance of primary education in Kenya. In 2004, it was estimated that Kenya's total primary school enrolment was nearly 7.4 million, compared to less than 6 million in 2000, partly a result of the introduction of free compulsory primary education in January 2003. Analysts note that Kenya is among the few African countries where a greater proportion of all school-aged girls, 73 percent enroll in primary education than do boys, 71 percent of whom attend classes (Fleshman, 2005). The latter statistic, however, is only true up to a certain point within Maasai communities in Kenya.

The Maasai still see girls' education as a wasted investment as girls get married and move to live with their husbands' families. This reticence to send girls to school is reflected in education statistics in Kenya. Factors such as distance to school, adequate sanitary facilities and school security combined with high poverty rates, early marriage and the need for household labour, contribute to higher dropout rates among older girls. While a greater percentage of boys drop out of school in the equivalent of grades 1–5, girls are more likely to leave in grades 6–8 (Fleshman, 2005).

Early Influences

The first of eight children, Kakenya was expected to help raise her younger siblings and assist her mother around the house. She also tended to their livestock, a job traditionally done by male children. Her mother expected all her children to go to school. Her father worked as a policeman in Nairobi, an eight-hour trip by road, and came back to Enoosaen infrequently. She reflects that this was a good thing: every time he came home, he would beat her mother, sell cattle from their herd and use the money to drink. They were not wealthy. Kakenya walked the 30 minutes to school, barefoot, from a home that had no electricity or running water, and often there were days when they went without food. She did her homework at school because by the time she got home, there would be too many chores, including caring for the cows and getting water from the stream. Sometimes there was no kerosene for the lamp, so she could not do any schoolwork. Her family members often performed casual labour like planting sugarcane or weeding shambas (farms) in order to earn money. She recalls a task that she particularly disliked: walking to a large town to purchase bananas, which she would bring back on her head to sell in Enoosaen. It took a whole day to walk to the town and back. Other girls laughed at her for doing this, something that no self-respecting Maasai girl would do. Kakenya's mother, pressured to provide for the children with nearly non-existent support from her city-dwelling husband, took up agriculture, a practice that the proud pastoralist tribe shunned. She was the first woman in her community to do so. Kakenya can recall the ridicule she endured from her schoolmates for working on the shamba, a task often left to hired Luo and Kisii farmhands, since they were from tribes that practiced agriculture. In retrospect, Kakenya is able to appreciate her mother's strength, endurance and ability to raise and provide for her children through much hardship.

Kakenya can trace her value of education from her mother's side of the family. Her maternal grandfather, a man she believes was progressive for his time, was educated and worked for the government. He ensured that his children, including girls, went to school at a time when Maasai families rarely sent their girls to school. Kakenya's mother voluntarily dropped out of school at about grade four in order to marry, but her subsequent disillusionment with her marriage and regrets about her status in life drove her to push her children to get an education. Seeing the accomplished lives of others made her realize that she could have done much better in life had she stayed in school; she once bitterly reflected to Kakenya that she had been smarter than a well-known politician who was once her classmate. With a shake of her head, Kakenya recalls the beatings she and her sisters endured from a mother who was determined to make them focus on their education. Her mother's regrets had a lasting impact, especially her warning: "I don't want you to live the life I am living."

The message got through; Kakenya was determined not to end up like her mother. As she progressed beyond the fourth grade, she saw increasingly higher numbers of female classmates drop out of school to get married soon after they were cut. Even then, she knew deep down that there was something wrong with the early marriages she witnessed. She thinks that this was partly because she had internalized the idea of going to college, and marriage would have stood in the way of those plans. She felt particularly lonely when her best friend dropped out in grade six to get married. By the time she reached the eighth grade – the final grade before secondary school – she was one of only two girls left in her class. She wanted to complete school and join a teachers' training college, since her role models were teachers. They had nice clothes and shoes, and spoke well and with authority. They were in control, had their own money, and could do anything they wanted—or at least, this is how they appeared to the young Kakenya. With the goal of teaching, she was able to brush off the tremendous peer pressure to get cut.

For a girl who was engaged to a neighbour's son at the tender age of five, it was unusual that Kakenya was still uncut by grade eight. Both Kakenya and her mother were determined to keep her uncut, as cutting would spell immediate marriage and the end of school. However, they had no say in this matter. The men in the family decided when it was time for a girl to be cut. Potential suitors came forward at the time of the ceremony to express their wish to marry the girl. The girl's father had to be present during and after the ceremony to approve a suitable man to marry his daughter. In Kakenya's case, her father's long absences were crucial to her remaining uncut, and therefore unmarried, as long as she did. Had he lived at home, it is possible that her life would have taken a very different direction.

Whenever her father visited and suggested that it was time for her to be cut, Kakenya convinced him to let her finish primary school. Just the act of speaking to her father about this was highly unusual in the Maasai culture. Girls rarely speak to their fathers; communication is relayed through their mothers. Negotiating with fathers was unthinkable. However, Kakenya knew that if she asked her mother to speak to her father about delaying her cutting ceremony, he would beat her mother. A critical point came when she reached the eighth grade, or as she delicately puts it, the 'cut-off': any girl not cut by the time she completed eighth grade was subjected to ridicule and shame, as was her family. Kakenya needed to make a convincing case to delay her ceremony. Once more, she approached her father during one of his visits and decided to negotiate, requesting that he wait until after her eighth grade results were out; if she failed, she said, then she could be cut and married off. She suspected that he did not have much confidence in her passing the exams, and so he agreed to this plan.

The results, when they eventually came, showed that Kakenya had done well in her exams, scoring higher than many of the boys in her class. Her father came home to visit, and she shared the good news excitedly, expressing her interest in continuing on to secondary school. He took her exam marks and said that he would find her a school in Nairobi, but weeks went by with no word from him and attempts to reach him were unsuccessful. As other students started reporting to secondary school, it was clear that he had never intended to find her a place. Her mother and an uncle scrambled to secure her a place at a local secondary school, convincing school authorities to accept a hand-written results' slip from her primary school as her father had the original document. He was livid when he returned for a visit in April and found that she was in secondary school: "Why did you go to school? Who told you to go to school?" He declared that she must be cut immediately,

even though it was not the season. Kakenya knew what his intentions were, as cutting meant that marriage would follow shortly thereafter. She agreed to be cut, but desperate to continue school, threatened that she would run away if he tried to marry her off after the ceremony. As she observes, “Education was the path to my empowerment and freedom.”

Kakenya had always had what would be considered lofty ambitions, including studying at a teachers college. She hadn’t been in secondary school long before she set her sights on an even loftier goal. By the end of her second year, she decided that she wanted to go to America; she knew of boys from Enosaen who had gone to the U.S. and India to study and wondered if she could do the same. “I saw a picture of people there (in the U.S.), and it seemed like paradise.”

As a teacher in Kenya, she would be able to help her mother and siblings, yet if she went to America, she might become wealthy and help the whole community. As she approached the final year of secondary school, she contacted a man from the community who had helped boys get admission into American colleges. He instructed her on procedures, arranged a TOEFL test and obtained application forms for some colleges in the U.S. She had to learn to use a computer and a mouse to complete her TOEFL test. It was easier to write her application essays by hand. Kakenya wondered whether the man really believed that she would ever go abroad or if he was only humouring her. He knew, after all, that her parents did not have the means to support such an education; he also knew that the community would never contribute the funds required to send a girl to an American college as they had done for several boys.

Kakenya’s father was now permanently at home in Enosaen; he had fallen seriously ill and was paralyzed. The young man in the village to whom she was betrothed was still waiting patiently to marry her. Worse, when the community heard that she wanted to go to the U.S. and would need their support, there was immediate resistance. They would rather have supported a boy. They told her to ask her mother to sell her farm to raise the money. Kakenya realized that she would need to negotiate with the community, as she had with her father, to win support. She began a strategic campaign, starting with the elders; if they agreed to support her, it would only be a matter of time until the men, the decision-makers, came along. She was relentless, knocking on doors first thing in the morning to make her case. She had her mother invite her women’s group to their home so she could seek their support. She made the case that none of the boys that the community had sent overseas for education had ever come back and helped the community. She would. Pulling out a notebook and pen, she asked them to tell her everything that they needed in the community; she would come back and help them get these. Clinic. Clean water. Girls’ school. Electricity. Assistance to help start small businesses. The list went on, and Kakenya wrote everything down, convinced that she would be able to help with all these if only she went to America. In retrospect, she realized how naïve she had been at the time to think that she could accomplish all of this. The community, however, was convinced at the time, largely because she believed she could do it. They raised funds; not as much as would have been raised if she were a boy, but enough to get her to America. Her promises would later weigh heavily on her heart throughout her years in the U.S., keeping her awake many nights as she pondered how she could help the community whose members had rallied together to support her.

Kakenya completed and passed her final-year exams, gaining admission into a Kenyan teacher’s training college, as well as into Randolph-Macon, a small private liberal arts and sciences women’s college in Lynchburg, Virginia (in July 2007, it became co-educational and was renamed Randolph

College). Deciding between the two was easy; she wanted to fulfill her dream and go to America. However, getting the means to do so was not: “Coming here (to the U.S.) was the hardest part of my life.”

Kakenya’s personal story of overcoming incalculable odds to get to America soon captivated the local community as she told her story in school-organized events and fundraisers. Her ethnic background – the fact that she was Maasai – gave her exotic appeal, which quickly garnered her the kind of attention for which companies and agencies would give their eyeteeth (Argetsinger, 2003). Soon, offers came in that enabled her college to provide her with scholarships to complete her education. A four-part series on her story ran in the Washington Post in December 2003, further stoking widespread interest in her. This resulted in numerous invitations around the U.S. for her to speak at events and conferences, to advocate on behalf of agencies fighting issues like child marriages and FGM, and to assist those supporting girls’ education programs. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) recruited her as their first youth advisor, dispatching her to colleges around the country to tell her story. The BBC produced a documentary on her and several magazine articles followed.

Through all this, Kakenya never forgot her promises to Enoosaen. She shared her dream to help her community in Kenya with mentors, advisors, friends and supporters in the U.S. Her priority was to build a girls’ school. Hundreds of girls were getting cut and married, and losing their opportunities to get an education and to achieve their full potential. After months of discussion and deliberation, her friends and advisors offered to register a non-profit organization in the U.S. – Kakenya’s Dream – on her behalf. The organization’s legal status would allow her to raise funds for the project and to accept the offers for help from supporters. In 2007, Vital Voices, a women’s leadership organization, offered to incubate Kakenya’s Dream while she sought registration and worked on her mission and plan.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Kakenya recalls that receiving the Rising Voices Global Leadership Award from Vital Voices in 2008, presented by Hillary Clinton, increased her exposure, but also the pressure she felt to do something in her community. She had been talking about her vision to build a girls’ school, although she had not yet taken action. In 2006, in a visit to Enoosaen close to six years after first going to Virginia, she approached local community members to let them know she needed their help to build a girls’ school. The men in the community wanted to help, but wanted a school for boys. She told them that she would build a school for girls and that they should approach the boys they had sent overseas to build a school for boys. Two years later, in 2008, she returned to Enoosaen. Community members, convinced by her commitment, generously offered a piece of land adjacent to an existing school. She returned to the U.S. heartened by this support and was determined to raise the funds to build the school.

She asked the community members to elect a committee that would work with her to build the school. The first committee that was elected consisted mainly of men. She had them re-elect a committee that was more gender-representative, insisting that at least three to four members of the seven-person committee had to be women. The same year, she broke ground on the community-donated land, and by 2009, she had built one classroom, purchased furniture, hired teachers and

enrolled 30 girls into grade four. Today, KCE has 94 girls enrolled in grades four, five and six. The girls board at the school, though most are from Enosaen or nearby communities. They are taught a lot of things that one might not see in other schools. For example, while Maasai girls are taught not to look at those older than themselves when talking with them, Kakenya is teaching her girls to look up when speaking. They are also taught to speak to both sets of parents, breaking with a culture that prevents girls from talking to their fathers. The girls receive a five-day leadership training session during the holidays. They are taught hygiene lessons and how to take care of their bodies. As well, girls are encouraged to take part in all kinds of sports, including soccer.

Kakenya conducted informal research to assess how these 'radical' ideas were being received by the parents. The girls' parents are from her generation, and are not as traditional as their own parents were. The feedback, particularly from the fathers, was that they liked it when their daughters spoke to them directly. She is not sure if they were telling her this just to please her. However, one assumes this is true; theirs is a more progressive and better-educated generation, with wider exposure to the world around them, compared to their more isolated and traditional parents and grandparents.

Resistance to her radical ideas came from another quarter. The problems started when she went to register the one-room school with government officials, who restricted registration to a completed, multi-classroom structure. Since Kakenya did not have the resources for this, she had to fight the government to get the school registered. She also had very clear ideas about school furnishings, including tables organized so the girls could sit in groups rather than the standard single or double-seater desks used in public schools. As well, she wanted a teacher-pupil ratio that was far lower than the government ratio of 1:31, and hired additional teachers privately to bring the ratio down, which led to the government pulling out their teachers. These differences created much friction with the Ministry of Education, but Kakenya continues to remain firm.

Since some parents start to cut their children around the time they are in grade four, Kakenya established school entry at that grade; students board at the school as a precaution against cutting and child marriage. Further, Kakenya knew that young girls are always in danger of sexual abuse, having witnessed this while growing up. Worldwide, it is estimated that between 40 – 47% of sexual assaults are perpetrated against girls 15 years of age or younger (Heise, 1993). However, while the boarding of students reduces the opportunities for cutting and sexual abuse, it cannot completely prevent them. Sadly, this was proven when a ten-year-old girl who had joined the school just three months earlier was raped when she went to visit her sister on a weekend. As is often the case, the girl did not talk about it, but teachers noticed that she was very quiet; gentle questioning brought this incident to light. Furious, Kakenya did something that no one had ever done in the community, insisting that the perpetrator be brought to justice. Some members of the community and even some local officials tried to dissuade her, but she knew that it was time to stand up for victimized girls and send a message to the community. The perpetrator was arrested, tried, and eventually jailed. During the court case, she had to intervene again to ask the court not to request the presence of the victim, which would re-traumatize the girl. She challenged an injustice often unacknowledged in the community.

As if this were not enough, shortly afterwards Kakenya was contacted by a distraught pupil whose parents had decided that she would be cut that December, though she wanted to stay in school. Despite the fact she was not in Kenya at the time, Kakenya sprang into action, calling on

local officials to enforce a directive issued in 2001 by then-president, Daniel Moi, which stated that excision of girls under 16 was a crime punishable by a jail term of at least one year. (It only became legally banned in September 2011, with the passing of a law making it illegal to practice or procure FGM, or to take someone out of the country for cutting. The law also prohibits making derogatory remarks about women who have not undergone FGM (Boseley, 2011). Kakenya encountered a problem that plagues all countries that have legally banned the practice; often, those entrusted with enforcing this law are from the same communities that espouse the practice. Frustrated and desperate, she called every official who might help, moving up the ladder of seniority from government officials to the head of the police, asking each of them to remove the girl from the home to prevent her parents from cutting her. Her efforts finally paid off and the girl was re-located for the duration of the cutting season, about a month-and-a-half in November through December. Kakenya knew the problem would begin again the following year, and that the next time, it might involve more than one girl. Shortly after this, she spoke with the local chief who, to his credit, instituted a pact that all parents enrolling their children at KCE must sign, promising that they will not cut their daughters. Kakenya realizes that protecting only her students is not enough; starting in Enoosaen, she would like to see all parents give up the practice of FGM and child marriages. She is currently working on a plan to accomplish this, enlisting the help of identified community leaders who are openly fighting to stop the practice.

One challenge in particular left her depressed for a period of time. She uncovered evidence of corruption within the community-elected committee, members of which she had trusted completely. To add insult to injury, a few women on the committee were instigators. While she later learned that the women's husbands influenced and directed the dishonesty from behind the scenes, this did not lessen the anger, hurt and deep sense of betrayal. She rationalizes that the women were not empowered enough to stand up to and resist their husbands. Since the committee members had been elected by the community, she sought the advice of three wise elders on how to hold the women accountable. The women ignored all summons to meet with the rest of the committee, Kakenya and the elders to discuss the issue, and ultimately, the women's husbands subjected Kakenya to insults and threats. This led to the involvement of local government and security officers. She called it the hardest year of her life.

She encountered another difficulty when she tried to implement a mentoring program in Enoosaen to pair local high school girls with local women leaders, including businesswomen, officials, teachers and pastors' wives. The experiment was a disaster, since the older women had never been mentored and did not understand their roles and boundaries. They criticized, judged and gossiped about the girls. She is now trying a peer-to-peer mentoring approach. Because Kenya does not have a culture of mentoring, other problems surface, such as insufficient time and commitment provided by mentors, cultural barriers and issues of trust and discretion. She is convinced that job shadowing, coupled with mentoring, could have a powerful impact on young girls, particularly those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Today, Kakenya is quite philosophical about the lessons she learned in the process of building her dream. Discovering widespread corruption within her community-based board made her re-examine her belief in those working for a project designed to empower their own children and to improve their own community. She has also learned that while trust is important, having checks and balances is even more important.

Critical Enabling Factors

Kakenya is a great believer in the value of mentorship, as her own mentors supported her dreams and helped her bring them to reality. Though she did not have a mentor when growing up, today she has three mentors in Kenya: all elderly men from the community. She also mentors a number of young people, some at great distances. She says distance mentoring is more challenging, but is possible. She has two other mentors she greatly admires, each of whom supports her in different ways. She says that although one of her mentors is a public personality, she is like a mother and a friend; this 'primary' mentor was also Kakenya's rock during the difficult year of challenges besetting her project in Kenya. Kakenya believes that true women leaders genuinely want to help others and to empower them: "Women don't look at themselves, they look outward."

Inner resources allow outward-looking women to flourish. A combination of resources helped pull Kakenya out of her depression during the difficult year in Kenya, including prayer and support from her primary mentor and her family. In challenging times, Kakenya, who is deeply spiritual, prays a lot. Her husband and family are very supportive; she also seeks the advice of her mother, sisters and brothers. She also loves nature; walking in the woods revives her. In Kenya, she goes up on a hill on her mother's land where the only thing to be seen are the cows. In the U.S., she goes trail running, something she did a lot during her 'difficult year'. Running helps to clear her head: "It helps me to start connecting dots – no computers, no phones – it is your own space, you can think." She also writes, and keeps a notebook and pen by her bed for ideas that come in the night. Her favourite way to re-energize, however, is to be with the girls in the school. She loves spending time and speaking with them. This also revitalizes her vision and strengthens her resolve to ensure that they have the opportunity to reach their full potential and achieve their dreams.

Kakenya ranks communication as the most critical skill that an emerging woman leader can possess. As the leader of Kakenya's Dream, she has to communicate all the time with various groups, including the girls, supporters, parents and individual supporters: "You have to know how to deliver your message, how to talk, how to present yourself, how to say exactly what you are doing and what you want to do." Related to the ability to communicate is the capacity to listen. With a laugh and hinting at herself, she says that people with passion can cause problems, as they are often so focused on what they want to do. She has to listen her girls, teachers, board members and community members, because they inform her vision. Besides communicating and listening, she points out that it is helpful to have certain business skills like strategic planning, budgeting and business planning. She believes that a leader should understand some of the basic business principles behind these topics; for instance, if a funder has specific questions related to a project's cost effectiveness.

Occasionally, Kakenya has to resist those who stand in the way of her dream. She confesses that there are instances when she has to force her will on her Kenyan and U.S. boards. She gives an example of some struggles faced with her community-elected board in Enoosaen, where infighting and personal interests have often bogged down progress on building her girls' school, the Kakenya Centre for Excellence. Situations like these are trying for even the most facilitative leaders, who realize that consensus is not always best for making certain kinds of decisions: "I want people to have

a voice. However, there are times when I need to put my foot down – you are with me or not with me. Sometimes it is the only way we can move forward.”

Her own ability to envision continues to be an enabling factor. She tells new leaders not to be afraid to be visionary, and to share their vision with others. Her advice to them is to initiate a project, and not try to figure out everything before acting. She warns young leaders to guard against rationalizing, which happens a lot with maturity and which can prevent them from acting on their dreams. A leader is one who sees a need and acts upon it:

My story tells you that I didn't have the perfect education, the perfect job. I'm not qualified to do what I am doing. But taking that step of faith [is important]. I could have waited to work for the UN and then [waited to] build the school—when would that have been? When you are young, you just do it. If I knew then what I know now, I probably would not have even started at all. I had to believe in myself. People ask how they can do something. I tell them, 'Just do it!'

She encourages them to use whatever recognition or awards they have received to rally for their causes: “People will rally around your vision, and resources will come, and the right people will be sent to you.” This piece of advice, more than any other, encapsulates her experience. Kakenya started on her dream without resources, with just a firm belief in her ability to accomplish her vision. So strong was her belief that she broke ground on the community-donated land without first securing funds to build the school. When she started raising money, she only had enough to build one room; she hired teachers and enrolled 33 children, believing that the necessary funds would follow. The school, and now the community centre, are all evidence of her continuing belief and pursuit of a vision that only continues to grow.

Kakenya's unwavering determination played a crucial role in her ability to achieve her dreams. She was able to ignore pressure to be cut and to get married, negotiated several times with her father to enable her to complete school, and was tenacious in her efforts to get the community to support her financially to go to the U.S. for her education. As she acknowledges, her mother was her biggest ally in her success, having determined from the beginning that she wanted her children to get an education. Her support, coupled with her daughter's perseverance, proved to be the perfect combination that contributed much to Kakenya's success in her early years.

The people of Enosaen were also supportive. The community's donation of a tract of land to build the girls' school was critical. There is no question that she was given aid when she asked for it. As well, her efforts to end FGM in her area were timely, matched by growing resistance to the cutting of girls throughout the country. Her campaign to eliminate the retrogressive practice in Enosaen has been bolstered by the messages of non-profits, faith-based groups, women's rights organizations and even the former President of Kenya, Daniel Moi.

Perspectives on Leadership

Kakenya's Leadership Style

Kakenya's personality is key to her success and the attraction and influence that she enjoys. Her engaging and positive personality makes her an irresistible person to be around. Her optimistic outlook enables her to look beyond day-to-day challenges and focus on the future. Kakenya has big dreams, and is not shy to share her vision with anyone who will listen. Yet she comes across as sincere, and not at all arrogant in her desire to influence positive change in her community and country.

Kakenya sees her role in Kakenya's Dream as inspiring others – supporters, donors, parents and community members – to buy into her vision of empowering girls. As head of Kakenya's Dream, she inspires members of her U.S. board by outlining the vision clearly, and guiding and directing them to achieve the vision. This board works with her on her initiatives, refines them and raises funds and generates other project resources (e.g. volunteers for the school) for implementation of the initiatives.

Her board in Kenya is charged with overseeing practical implementation of projects in Enoosaen. She similarly sees her role on this board as inspiring the members to first believe in, and buy into, the dream and to believe in her values, which include girls' education and a complete stop to FGM. It is also clear that she sees herself as part of a team. She constantly refers to "we" as she animatedly describes what Kakenya's Dream has accomplished to date, the future plans for Kakenya's Centre for Excellence and plans to expand services in Enoosaen. When asked who the 'we' are, Kakenya says that it is the team that has supported, guided, and brought the dream to reality alongside her. Members of the team include her board in the U.S., her community-based board in Enoosaen, her mentors, and advisors. Even her financial supporters are part of her team. This is because Kakenya does not believe in simply asking people for money: "I hate asking for money." She prefers to build relationships, share her story and encourage people to visit the school in Kenya. Often, interested individuals become long-term supporters, giving substantial gifts once they appreciate the vision and experience the reality on the ground. She tries to help them see what she sees: "A lot of people come to support me, but before they catch on the vision... before they can fully help me, they have to be excited about what we are doing."

Kakenya embodies a leadership style commonly found among women; an approach that seeks and embraces the support of others in achieving goals, encourages them to provide leadership in various skill areas and openly acknowledges their contributions. For example, she says that she is not much of a planner, and does not know much about finances or budgeting, but she has members in her board who are skilled in these areas and who lend their expertise. She also depends on them to critique her ideas: "I tell people what I want and ask them to critique it... how do we make this better?"

Nonetheless, she still has a difficult time accepting that she is a leader. She admits that her memories of leaders are of corrupt individuals in Kenya who were not good role models. "I am just me," she insists, and concludes, "If *that* me is a leader, then that is who I am." And she is still surprised that people listen to her when she talks: "In my village, I am a young girl and people don't listen to young girls. So when I ask the Member of Parliament to do something and he does,

it is still surprising to me.” It is this modest, yet unquestioningly confident character that makes Kakenya so intriguing. She takes pleasure in little things like going shopping for school uniforms for the pupils—‘her girls’. Yet she is also comfortable mingling with personalities like Kofi Annan and picking up the phone to call local parliamentarians and senior government officials in Kenya to deal with issues in her project in Ensoosaen. When she goes to her mother’s home, she chooses to live in the hut in which she grew up, cooking outside on the traditional fireplace and sharing sleeping quarters with her sisters and mother. When in Ensoosaen, she rides boda-boda - local bicycle or motorcycle transportation that costs a fraction of what it would take to hire a taxi or rent a car, even though she can afford to pay. She says that living as she always had while in Ensoosaen keeps her grounded. It is also important to her that local community members can still relate to the girl who grew up in the community.

Kakenya has found the most difficult part of being a leader is the inability to do all the things that she wants to do: “I have so many dreams and hopes, but I am limited – I can only do so much... I get frustrated when I can’t do a lot more.” When in Kenya, a lot of community members come to her with requests for help and to seek advice: “As a leader, people look up to you and think you have the answers and the money. When I turn them down, it breaks my heart. Sometimes I hide because I don’t want to know their issues, because I cannot help. It bothers me a lot... it’s a big challenge.”

Not surprisingly, she finds the most satisfying part of being a leader the moments when she accomplishes something. And for her, building the school and having the girls in it is one of the most satisfying things in her life. She finds great joy in knowing that she is influencing and making a positive difference in the lives of the girls.

Kakenya admires Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, president of Liberia, of whom she observes, “She strikes me as a no-nonsense person who can get things done, can help people. I like her spirit.” She also thinks that President Sirleaf is a person who can make a difference, and who can turn her country into ‘something’. Her admiration is easy to appreciate. After a run-off presidential election, President Sirleaf was declared the winner and became President of Liberia in November 2011, barely a month after being announced as one of three women jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2011 for their work on peace and democracy.

I envision a world where women, girls, boys, men - all are equal - and a place where all are valued and respected; where girls can achieve and have opportunity to excel in life. I’d like to see peace and everyone achieving their dreams and potential. All have dreams. Even the poorest slum dwelling kids have dreams. All should have opportunity to achieve their dream. I’d like to create that level playing field to enable them to achieve their dreams.

Kakenya Ntaiya

Kakenya’s Vision

Kakenya has a vision, and it is squarely centred in Ensoosaen, where she was born. She refers to Ensoosaen as the beginning point: “If I can’t help my neighbour, I can’t help a stranger on the street.”

Kakenya’s vision is to empower girls and to provide them with the opportunities to excel and to reach their full potential. Her belief in the importance of education is evident in her own life; at the time that she was interviewed for this case study, she was in the process of completing her dis-

sertation towards earning a Ph.D. in Education. She plans to start schools like the Kakenya Centre for Excellence in other parts of Kenya. A dream that she had nurtured for a long time, the school opened in 2009 with a single classroom and 33 students. As of 2011, it had expanded to three grades with 93 enrolled pupils, additional teachers and a boarding facility for the girls. In her opinion, education is the most important investment that one can make in children, particularly girls: “Girls’ education is very important because women play a central role in all essential aspects of society, from food production to health care to childbearing” (Ntaiya, speech at the Centre for American Progress, 2004).

So important is education to Kakenya, that her long-term vision is to lead the Education Ministry in Kenya one day. She wishes to influence changes in the system that would lead to a more holistic education experience for students, including addressing girls’ self-esteem through empowerment. This would involve the inclusion of aspects such as mentoring by, and job shadowing of, successful women leaders. She is realistic, aware that changes at the top may not always be implemented on the ground where they are most needed. However, since she has built a school – literally – from the ground up, one has to concede that this practical experience will serve her well and inform her decisions should she get the opportunity to head the Education portfolio. Her dreams go beyond this: in a moment of pure, unhesitating candour, she reveals that she looks forward to being the president of Kenya one day. Kakenya moved her family back to Kenya permanently in November 2011, an important first step in working towards her long-term vision.

Final Message

Reflecting back to the promises she made to her community, Kakenya knows that there are only so many things she can do. She has focused her vision on what is closest to her heart: empowering young girls through education, preventing them from being married off early and fighting to stop the practice of FGM. Essentially, she has offered opportunities for girls to excel and realize their full potential. She knows that there are institutions like the government that will meet other needs in the community. Since she left home, the government has expanded the level of health care services available in Enoosaen, provided electricity in the market centre and increased the availability of piped water. There are even a few other projects in Enoosaen implemented by boys that the community sent overseas for studies.

She also reflects that the impact she is having is currently limited to the girls and to a certain extent, their families. She knows that she can only claim success in her mission when everyone in the community, and those beyond it, support the end of practices such as FGM and child marriages, and understand the importance of girls’ education.

Kakenya’s goals are expanding, and she believes that she will need to be in Kenya in order to implement them. She intends to work more closely with communities in Kenya to expand her hybrid private-public school model embodied in the Kakenya Centre for Excellence, to more parts of Kenya. Currently, parents that enroll girls into the KCE have to sign a contract that they will not cut their girls. With expansion of the model into other communities, she knows that she will have bigger challenges with other communities that still support FGM, without the benefit of ‘hometown’ recognition and support that she had in Enoosaen. She also wants to implement a mentoring program that will link professional women in Kenya with disadvantaged girls from poor and

remote communities. She will face an uphill battle as mentoring is still a foreign concept in Kenya, evidenced by the disastrous experiment in Enoosaen.

These plans and initiatives mean that Kakenya's Dream will have to seek more funds to make it all happen. Given the ever-tightening competition for donors and projects, she will need to engage Kenyan supporters and funders to achieve her goals. Her challenge will be to convince Kenyans why they should fund and support her projects, out of the many worthy projects also competing for funding. She also realizes that she will need to have a strong Kenyan board – with more influence and wider reach than her Enoosaen-based Board – to work with her locally to accomplish these goals; she is already thinking about the constitution of such a board.

Given what she has accomplished thus far, the author believes that we are witnessing the emergence of a leader whose trajectory indicates greater things to come.

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