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## Judith Neilson Foundation Team Meets Women from Baringo County to Evaluate Impact of African Women Voices for Peace Project



Titus Gwemende, Program Director for East Africa at the Judith Neilson Foundation, engages women from Baringo County in a thought-provoking discussion on the impact of the African Women Voices for Peace Project.

On February 26th, a team from the Judith Neilson Foundation, led by Titus Gwemende, Program Director for East Africa, and Jade Thinault, Program Officer for East Africa, met with a group of women from Baringo County at the ActionAid Kenya Global Platforms to assess the progress of the African Women Voices for Peace Project being implemented by ActionAid Kenya. The project, supported by the Foundation, focuses on strengthening women's leadership in peace and security in a region affected by ongoing insecurity.

During the meeting, the women shared their experiences and insights on the impact of the project, highlighting how it has empowered them to play a stronger role in peace-building efforts within their community. The African Women Voices for Peace Project has focused on improving women's access to vital services, enhancing their advocacy skills, and amplifying their voices in both national and international peace processes.





Judith Neilson Foundation's East Africa team, led by Program Director Titus Gwemende and Program Officer Jade Thinault, meets with women in Baringo County to assess the impact of the African Women Voices for Peace Project on local peacebuilding efforts.

The Judith Neilson Foundation's support has been key to the project's success, providing the necessary resources to help women in Baringo County develop their leadership capacities and take an active role in shaping peace initiatives. Through various workshops, training programs, and community engagements, the project has contributed to increasing women's confidence and their ability to influence decisions in local and national peace processes.

The meeting offered a valuable opportunity for the Foundation's team to hear directly from the women who have been impacted by the project, gaining deeper insights into the challenges and successes they have encountered. Local participants expressed gratitude for the training and resources provided, noting how the project has enabled them to advocate for their communities and engage in critical peace-building conversations.

"The support we've received has given us the skills and the courage to speak up for peace," said one of the participants. "This project has created a platform for us to be heard, and that has made a real difference in our lives."

Titus Gwemende, Program Director for East Africa at the Judith Neilson Foundation, shared his thoughts on the project's significance.

"Our support for the African Women Voices for Peace Project is rooted in our belief that women are essential leaders in peace and security," Gwemende said. "



Titus Gwemende, Program Director for East Africa, and Jade Thinault, Program Officer for East Africa,

The testimonies from women in Baringo County through this initiative reflect a transformation; women are not only participating in peace building, but they are leading the charge. The impact of this project is profound, and we are proud to be part of such a powerful movement for change.”

In support of the project, ActionAid Kenya’s Executive Director, Susan Otieno, emphasized the importance of empowering women in conflict-prone areas.

“The African Women Voices for Peace Project is a vital initiative in Baringo County and across the region,” Susan said. “When women are equipped with the tools to lead and advocate for peace, they become key agents of change

This partnership not only strengthens the women of Baringo but also contributes to the broader efforts of achieving long-lasting peace in East Africa.”



Susan Otieno, Executive Director ActionAid Kenya shares her remarks during the session.

The Judith Neilson Foundation’s continued partnership with ActionAid Kenya through the project highlights its commitment to advancing women’s leadership in peace and security. As the project moves forward, it remains dedicated to ensuring that women in Baringo County and across the region continue to play a pivotal role in promoting peace and stability in East Africa.



## A Force for Change: Women Rising in Marafa



The Amkeni Women's Group gathers for their Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) meeting, where they pool resources, invest in businesses, and secure their financial future.

In Marafa, Kilifi County, women are reclaiming their rights and economic independence, challenging long-standing patriarchal norms that have historically hindered their progress. With the support of ActionAid Kenya (AAIK), women in the Marafa Local Rights Program (LRP) are fostering resilience, securing financial stability, and shaping a future where they can thrive beyond societal limitations.

Many were confined to domestic roles, with their primary responsibilities revolving around childbearing, caregiving, and household maintenance. Economic opportunities were scarce, and the few that existed were often reserved for men. For widows, survival often depended on working in other people's fields for minimal wages, barely sufficient to sustain their families.

For generations, women in Marafa have faced systemic challenges, including gender-based violence, economic exclusion, and deeply entrenched cultural barriers.





Members of Amkeni Women's Group Walk across the one-acre parcel of land they collectively purchased, a symbol of their economic empowerment and commitment to sustainable agriculture.

A significant turning point came in 2019 when ActionAid organized a training session that brought together women from different communities to discuss economic empowerment. Among the attendees was a determined woman from Marafa who returned with a vision to transform the lives of fellow women. This marked the inception of the Amkeni Women's Group, a collective dedicated to dismantling harmful gender norms and fostering financial independence.

"Before ActionAid came to Marafa, life was extremely difficult for women. We lived in isolation, struggling to survive individually. Violence against women was rampant, and financial independence was unheard of. Girls' education was not valued; they were expected to stay at home while boys were given the opportunity to learn," shares Margaret Charo, the Amkeni Women's Group chairperson.

Initially, the group engaged in informal discussions about the challenges they faced. As solidarity strengthened, they transitioned into a savings and lending initiative, adopting the Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) model. Through this approach, members pooled financial resources, provided mutual support, and launched small businesses that significantly improved their livelihoods.

"In my home, I lacked respect because I had nothing to contribute financially. Now, I attend our weekly meetings and return home with essential household supplies. I borrowed money from the group to start a shop, and today, my husband has been inspired to form a men's savings group in our village," adds Margaret.



The Amkeni Women's Group gathers for their Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) meeting, where they pool resources, invest in businesses, and secure their financial future.

The impact of the Amkeni Women's Group has been transformative. What began as a simple savings initiative has evolved into an entrepreneurial movement. The group has established a community shop and a tent-and-chair hire business for events. In 2023, they achieved a historic milestone by collectively purchasing one acre of land, an unprecedented achievement for women in their community.

Christine Kazungu, another group member, reflects on her journey:

"In 2018, I relied on charcoal burning to make ends meet while my husband spent his days drinking. Paying school fees for my children was a constant struggle, and I endured domestic violence whenever I returned home late.

However, after joining Amkeni, my life changed significantly. Today, I operate a successful fish and vegetable business, ensuring my children's education remains uninterrupted. In our community, we have become role models for other women and young girls. Owning land was once unimaginable, but today, we stand proud."

The story of the Amkeni Women's Group serves as a compelling testament to the power of women's economic empowerment. Their journey underscores the need for sustained investment in women, the promotion of financial independence, and the creation of safe spaces where women's voices can be heard. By championing such initiatives, we can collectively build a future where every woman and girl has the opportunity to thrive.



## Voices Against FGM and Calls for Change Emerge from Garissa Boys' Forum



Jamil, alongside the Bura East Sub-County Education Director, Boys' Forum Patron, and his mother, celebrates his victory as the best debater during the inter-school debates. They are joined by Zamzam Hassan, the Project Coordinator of the TGG-ALM Programme.

In Garissa County, cultural heritage runs deep, and the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) has been prevalent for generations, affecting an alarming 83% (KDHS 2022) of girls in the region. With a literacy rate of only 41.7% in 2019, significantly lower than the national average of 78.41% (KIPPRA-The Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis), Garissa has faced substantial challenges in overcoming deeply ingrained traditions.

This low literacy rate has limited the youth's ability to critically assess and challenge harmful cultural practices like FGM, perpetuating cycles of ignorance and harmful customs. However, these very challenges have also created fertile ground for change, with young advocates like Jamil Salat rising to lead the charge against these practices.



Jamil receives his certificate after being recognized as the best debater.

Jamil, a 12-year-old Grade 7 pupil from Bura Primary School, is a prime example of how initiatives aimed at bridging the educational gap can spark transformative change. Through ActionAid Kenya's boys' and girls' forums in schools, designed to empower young people with the knowledge and leadership skills to speak out against FGM, Jamil has overcome the limitations imposed by the low literacy environment. These forums provide a platform for young people, particularly boys, to develop leadership abilities, build confidence, and become vocal advocates for change in their communities.

Jamil's involvement in school events, including closing ceremonies, inter-school debates, and the boy's and girls' forums, allowed him to challenge harmful cultural norms. The forums encouraged boys and girls to collaborate, breaking down the gender barriers that often exist in Garissa. Jamil found his voice and became a passionate advocate for the end of FGM. His advocacy resonated deeply with his peers, and he emerged as a powerful example of how young people can lead the charge against entrenched cultural practices.

In July 2024, Jamil's commitment to ending FGM and his leadership abilities earned him a spot as a representative for Garissa County in the Kenya Children's Assembly. This assembly, which brings together children from all 47 counties to discuss issues affecting them, has become a key platform for young leaders to voice their concerns.

Jamil, determined to make an impact, decided to run for the position of Deputy Clerk in the Garissa County Children's Assembly. Despite the highly competitive nature of the elections, with most contestants coming from urban areas where access to education and platforms for public speaking were more readily available, Jamil's campaign resonated strongly with his peers.

During his campaign, Jamil passionately spoke about the need to end FGM and protect girls in his community. His message of empowerment and change was met with thunderous applause, and he successfully secured the position of Deputy Clerk.

This was my time for my voice to be heard beyond the walls of Bura Primary School," Jamil said. "I wanted the other students from the county to join our movement to end FGM and protect our girls."

In Garissa, where boys typically shy away from publicly advocating against FGM, Jamil's victory marked a significant shift. His success not only reflected his determination but also represented a cultural transformation in the region. The boys' and girls' forums have helped break down barriers, encouraging boys to speak out against harmful practices and promoting gender equality. Jamil's leadership within the Children's Assembly shows that, even in a community struggling with low literacy and high rates of FGM, change is possible when young people are empowered to lead.

Jamil's journey illustrates how, despite the challenges posed by Garissa's low literacy rate and the high prevalence of FGM, education and youth leadership can create lasting change. Through programmes like the boys' and girls' forums, Jamil and other young leaders are challenging harmful traditions and working toward a future where every girl can live free from practices like FGM. His story serves as an inspiring reminder that, even in the face of adversity, young people can break down barriers and lead the charge for a more equitable society.



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