

A Tapestry of Girl-Led Stories

Testimonies of Courage, Advocacy, and Transformation



Terre des
Hommes
Netherlands

She
LEADS

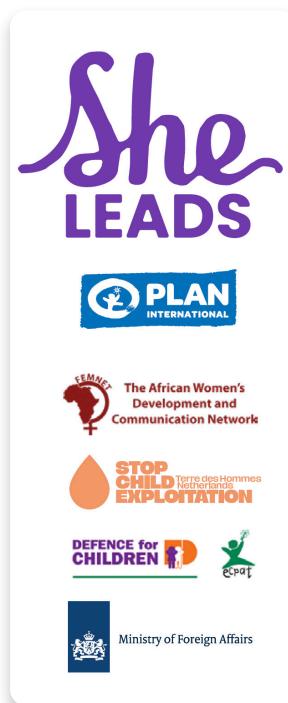
20
Years
of Impact

This Anthology is a publication of the Network for Adolescent and Youth of Africa (NAYA) under the She Leads Programme Funded by Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH-NL).

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Acknowledgement

This anthology lives because of the courage of girls, young women, and community champions who chose to share their journeys. Your voices are the threads that bind this tapestry together, woven with resilience, change, transformation, and the power to lead.

We extend our gratitude to Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH-NL), under the leadership of Magdalene Wanza (Country Director), Caroline Parmet (Programme Manager), and Dennis Ratemo (Former Programme Manager), whose funding and support for the She Leads Programme enabled NAYA to amplify the voices reflected in these pages and drive meaningful change in Kwale.

Our appreciation also goes to NAYA's Executive Director, Victor Rasugu, and Head of Programmes, Robert Aseda, whose support and leadership were instrumental in the successful implementation of the She Leads Project.

To the dedicated Kwale staff, Sophie Safari, Esther Ndinya, Everlyne Mumo, and Dorcas Mwachi (former NAYA staff) who walked alongside the girls and young women, and to the Chief Editor Brian Alili who shaped these pages, we extend our heartfelt appreciation. Together, they have transformed the stories into a movement, and a movement into lasting change.

Dear Reader,

It would appear that society has stumbled upon a most exquisite creation: a tapestry of girl-led stories. Woven with threads of courage, conviction, and unyielding hope, the She Leads programme has rolled out not merely as an initiative, but as a movement one that dares to place girls and young women where they have always belonged: at the very heart of decision-making.

Over the past five years, this tapestry has grown richer, nurturing girl-led advocacy, stitching together alliances with government and civil society, and embroidering safer, more inclusive spaces where girls' voices shine brightly.

In Kenya, the programme rolled out across six vibrant counties Nairobi, Kajiado, Homabay, Kisumu, Mombasa, and Kwale brought forth by the deft hands of Plan International Netherlands, Defence for Children - ECPAT Netherlands (DCI-ECPAT), FEMNET, and Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH-NL), in strategic partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands under the Power of Voices Framework (2021-2025) and Equal Measures 2030 as a technical partner

And in Kwale County, the tapestry grew even more intricate, with the Network of Adolescents and Youth of Africa, supported by Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH-NL) Kenya, taking up the loom and weaving in local voices that now find a permanent place in this anthology.

Entitled; *"A Tapestry of Girl-Led Stories,"* this collection is no idle gossip. Rather, it is a testimony of courage, advocacy, and transformation. Like threads woven into a grand design, each story is unique yet inseparable from the whole together forming a picture of a future where girls' voices are not merely heard but revered.

Take heed, gentle reader: when girls lead, the future is rewritten, and society itself must rise to meet them.

Now, I bid you read on. But beware once you turn these pages, you may find yourself unable to remain a mere spectator.

And with that, the quill rests (for now)... until the next whisper of change reaches my ears!

I Took the Voices of My Fellow Girls to Geneva

By Mwanaisha Omar, 27



Mwanaisha Omar joined the She Leads programme, implemented by NAYA and it remained a decision she has never come to regret. She is grateful for the great lessons and beautiful experiences she gained.

But what was it like growing up in a place where culture, traditions and even religion had a role in muzzling the voices of its women and girls?

As I stood in Geneva to represent Kenyan girls at the 49th UPR Session, I experienced fear and pride. A few years before, representing my

peers on an international stage would have seemed impossible. Growing up in a culture that silenced women, speaking up seemed disrespectful, questioning elders was off-limits, and expressing opinions felt forbidden. Fear was woven into our everyday lives, and I carried that fear, too.

But I also carried a vision. I wanted things to be different—not just for me, but for my generation. I wanted girls like me to know that our voices mattered. That hope became real when I joined the She Leads programme by NAYA in June 2021.

“ I’m glad I represented young people. I took the voices of my fellow GYWs to Geneva. Among the issues we proposed were meaningful youth and women’s engagement in dialogues that affect them.



Through the programme, I gained knowledge, skills, and confidence. I learnt about mobilising support, leading community initiatives, and advocating for women's and girls' participation in decision-making. I also learned valuable lessons on dealing with cultural norms: talking to community elders and religious leaders about women's rights helped ensure the changes we wanted were understood and honoured.

My breakthrough came when I stood before community leaders and fellow girls to speak about our rights. My voice trembled, but I pushed through—and when I was heard, I realised courage grows when you dare to use it. That moment marked the shift from being silent to becoming a leader.

The She Leads programme also opened the door to professional growth. I secured an internship at NAYA, gaining hands-on experience in advocacy, programme coordination, and community engagement. For the first time, I applied my skills, contributed to projects, and took on responsibilities that built my confidence as a young leader. That internship was not just work but empowerment in action, showing me that my knowledge and voice had real value.

I submitted a fact sheet to the February 2025 Universal Periodic Review pre-session in Geneva,

highlighting urgent issues for women and girls in Kenya, such as their participation in decision-making and the need to recognise femicide as a national crisis. Standing in a room full of policymakers and international delegates, I was the only young person present. At first, the pressure was intense, but once I laid out the facts and my ideas, I saw that courage builds up when you aim for some change. That moment showed me that a girl from a small community could rise to influence conversations on the world stage.

That experience was transformative. It confirmed that the voice of a young woman, when empowered, can reach far beyond her community. In Kwale, over 1,500 girls and women have benefited from the She Leads training, with many now in leadership roles, managing community projects, and advocating for their rights. The ripple effect of empowerment continues to grow.

I envision a future where Kenyan girls and women have equal representation in decision-making, culture doesn't silence us, and every young woman recognises that her voice has power. Presenting the fact sheet at the UPR was a significant milestone, marking the start of my ongoing work. Because I have learned this: when girls are empowered, communities change, and the world listens.



Finding My Voice Through the She Leads Journey

By Elinah Mruche, 25, Jiamini Self-help Group, Mwangulu



The She Leads programme provided a safe space for women and girls to unite, learn, and grow. Through the programme, girls formed the **Nipo Nisikike Movement**, which empowered them to become economically independent and vocal in their communities.

The movement has made significant steps in breaking down stereotypes and cultural barriers, with many girls now serving on boards and committees.

The programme has transformed the lives of its participants, including Elinah Mruche, who now serves as a secretary to their area MCA and helps others discover their voices.

Growing up in rural Kwale, life often felt like a series of closed doors. In our village, poverty loomed large, and as a girl in a boy-preferred culture, my dreams felt insignificant and my voice quiet. I was shy, unaware of my rights, and unsure of what I could achieve economically.



Through She Leads, our challenges fostered unity, and our shared aspirations will keep us resilient. We see ourselves as the future leaders and role models for the next generation of girls from Kwale.

Everything began to change in 2021 when I joined the She Leads programme. Through mentorship and training, I started to see possibilities I had never imagined. The programme helped me step out of my comfort zone, discover my strengths, and take on new opportunities. It was the first time I felt that my voice mattered.

I started as a quiet member of the Jiamini Self-Help Group, hesitant and unsure, but I slowly grew. With each training session and mentorship meeting, I gained confidence.

I began my leadership journey as chairperson of the group, then became the Nipo Nisikike Sub-County Lead for Lungalunga. Now I'm the Vice President of the Nipo Nisikike Movement.

In addition to my other roles, I am the secretary for our area Member of County Assembly, connecting with the community to promote girls' and young women's issues and partaking in policy dialogues.

She Leads did more than nurture leadership; it opened doors to economic independence. My peers and I were trained to see opportunities where we had once seen none. We tried ventures we had once dismissed.

Gradually, they began to succeed. For the first time, I earned my own income, and with it came a newfound sense of pride and independence.

Our growth did not stop at personal gains. We became a force in our community, presenting memorandums to the county government, some of which have been implemented. We found creative ways to challenge stereotypes and cultural barriers. The annual "Legball" tournament highlights our talents and encourages collaboration for girls' and young women's issues.

Looking back, the transformation is remarkable. From a shy girl whose voice felt small, I have become part of a movement of young women leading change in Kwale.

The She Leads programme has not just given me a platform—it has given me a purpose. I assist others in finding their voices, creating a future where girls are visible, audible, and empowered.

Through She Leads, I have learned that change begins with belief in oneself. I found my voice; now, I help others find theirs, too.



From Antagonist to Champion

By Alice Peter, 26, Juakali CBO



“ Beyond making money, She Leads shaped me into a confident leader and I gained powerful leadership skills too. I’m not just a co-leader in my family, but also a leader in my community. I’m also a chairlady in our Juakali CBO.



I lived in silence for a long time, carrying a voice that was never heard. I married at eighteen, not by choice but because life forced me to mature fast. By the time I welcomed my first child at twenty, I felt as though I had already lost pieces of who I was meant to become.

The place I was meant to call home did not nurture me; instead, it became a source of pain long before it could offer me pride. I relied on my husband to decide everything, including movement and engagements.

Even the small gift I carried in my hands, the skill of braiding hair, was locked away behind his refusals. Clients would call, opportunities would knock, but his word was final each time, No!

That was when She Leads emerged. I heard about it in a neighbouring village in June 2021, and it caught my attention.

When I asked my husband if I could join, he gave me the silent treatment.

But this time, I refused to be quiet.

I contacted the village community champion the same month and joined the programme without his approval.

That small act of rebellion became my first step toward freedom. At She Leads, I uncovered strength. I learned that I had rights. That I could speak. The power to choose is in my hands. I no longer sought permission to exist; I started telling my husband what I was doing, and he eventually accepted it.

She Leads gave us confidence and knowledge about opportunities for young people and guidance on applying for funds to start our own businesses. The programme team emphasised that the savings culture must begin from within, so we established table banking for individual savings within the group. We saved as little as KSh. 100 per week. After four months, these could be given as loans.

Our income-generating activities grew, prompting us to apply for the Uwezo Fund, and we received a KSh 100,000 loan.

We split the loan among our six group members, and I decided to buy a cow with my share. The cow is now pregnant, and soon enough, it will bring us additional income from the increased milk supply.

It was a small win, but it felt like owning the world

Beyond making money, She Leads shaped me into a confident leader, and I gained powerful leadership skills too. I'm not just a co-leader in my family, but also a leader in my community. I hold the position of chairlady within our Juakali Community-Based Organisation.

I now hold peer-to-peer sessions on leadership, health, and economic empowerment with boys and girls. At Juakali CBO, we have community meetings, involve key stakeholders to address harmful cultural practices, advocate against teenage pregnancies, promote education, and empower boys and girls.

I'm doing all this because I want my children and the coming generation to have a better life. I envision a world where all children can access quality and affordable education. I want them to dream out loud.

I was lucky to be part of the She Leads programme, but my real hope is that my children will appreciate it when they see its benefits.

I've endured hunger, dealt with being ignored, and faced rejection. Yet, I have also experienced the essence of courage. Marriage is not the enemy, but dependence is.

I tell every girl: Take time to build yourself. Be strong. Keep learning and never lose sight of who you are.



The Best of Me is Still Unfolding

By Hope Esther Aywa, 27



I grew up in Kwale and always had something to say. For a long time, though, I kept that voice to myself. I was a passionate young woman who visited clinics and villages to support girls and tackle sexual and reproductive health challenges. I really wanted to do more, reach more girls and change more lives.

Then in 2022, I got a real opportunity when I joined the She Leads programme with the Tuimarike Girls' Group in Mwakamba village. These young moms were courageous, and their strength really inspired me. They talked about things like policies,

governance, budgets, and writing memos like it was nothing. They were given knowledge that empowered them, and that sparked something in me.

But there was still a missing piece. They were confident in governance but lacked information on sexual and reproductive health and rights. As young moms, this was super important for them. That's where I came in. I started training them on things like abstinence, HIV prevention, family planning, and how to make informed choices in life.

“ To every girl out there: don't give up. Speak. Seek. Rise. Because one day, your voice will be the reason someone else finds theirs. I am not done yet, and the best of Esther is still unfolding



She Leads was also teaching me! I learned to write and submit memos, speak confidently in public, and advocate for beneficial budgets for girls in my community. I remember my first time presenting a memo at a ward meeting. My hands shook, but everyone applauded when I finished. That moment made me realise I wasn't meant to be a bystander; I was right where I needed to be—in the thick of things.

Not long after, I trained the Msambweni Queens, a girls-led movement. I was paid to share my knowledge for the first time. The amount seemed small to some, but to me, it was a big deal. I could buy things I needed, pitch in at home, and most importantly, say no to stuff that didn't benefit me. That's what authentic empowerment looks like.

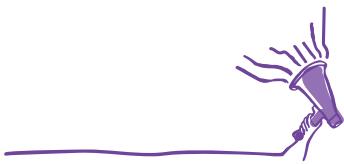
The effects of this work spread way beyond me. The young mothers I trained embraced family planning services with newfound confidence. Some even started small businesses with the budgeting skills they learned, and others became mentors in their

villages. Every girl I reached carried the message onward, and together we sparked a chain of change.

Now, when I stroll into a village, girls listen to me. They call me "Madam," but I always smile and say, "Just call me Hope." Because that's what I am—a walking hope. I'm a mentor, a sister, and a safe space for them. Girls trust me, moms rely on me, and boys respect me. I carry the lessons from She Leads everywhere I go.

Thinking back, it's amazing to see how far I've come. I've connected with over 1,500 girls, visited once unreachable villages, and found myself in unexpected places. If it were not for She Leads, I might still be quietly lingering on the sidelines. But now, I stand firm at the centre—confident, resilient, and proud of my worth.

But I know my journey isn't finished yet. There's so much more to come. I dream of reaching even more girls and changing lives, taking this hope to places far beyond Kwale. Because one day, I want my voice to help another girl find hers.



I Speak Against Patriarchy

By **Mariam Suleiman, 22 Maweni, Ukunda**



“ She Leads opened the door for me to begin social work in my community and to build networks across the county. By the time I joined university, I was clear about the path I wanted to pursue.



Mariam Suleiman, who hails from Maweni in Ukunda, Kwale County, underwent a significant change thanks to the She Leads programme when she was just 16 and still in high school.

Growing up, I always heard that girls should be quiet and that questioning adults was strictly forbidden. As the youngest in my family, I had to keep my head down and follow the rules. But joining the She Leads programme, implemented by NAYA, flipped the script for me.

It allowed girls like me to share our thoughts, discover what we are capable of, and push back against the societal norms that held us back.

I have always been curious, so I wondered why girls could not make their own choices. Then it hit me: I had to step outside my comfort zone. At first, talking about my school choices, dreams, and what I wanted to do at home was awkward. My family often took it wrong and thought I was disrespectful. When I'd bring things up with my brothers or mom, they'd

say, "You are rude. You've changed." But thanks to my sister, I realised that standing up for myself and sharing my thoughts was not rude; it was all about growing. I was taking charge of my life and pushing back against outdated expectations.

Bit by bit, my family started to notice the new me—someone who was bold, clear in my thoughts, and determined. I took that energy into my community, too. She Leads came along at a crucial time when I was wrapping up high school and feeling lost about my future. Engaging with the team and other girls gave me a direction, purpose, and the guts to stand against unfair cultural norms.

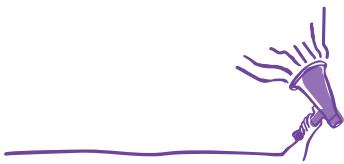
Through She Leads, I learned more than just skills; I found hope, confidence, and a vision for my future. It was not just another school programme—it set me up for real life. Learning about mobilising resources and exploring business ideas opened my eyes to the possibility of being financially independent early on. I

found my voice and learned to make it heard, whether speaking in front of my community, leaders, or peers—spaces where girls often feel invisible.

The She Leads programme also helped me kickstart my social work in my community, and I got to connect with others across the county. When it came time to head to university, I knew exactly what I wanted to study. I picked Social Work and Community Development, which really reflected the growth I experienced through She Leads.

Even as the She Leads programme wraps up, I have gained valuable experiences and have stepped into spaces I once thought were beyond my reach. I have become someone people can look up to, a role model, a voice, and a story of hope. I did not just find my voice; I learned how to use it to tackle patriarchy and inspire change.

I see myself as a leader shaped by fire, faith, and a strong belief in who I am—this is just the start of my journey.



I Stepped Out, and I Can't Look Back

By Peninah Yawa, 30, New Life CBO, Bwiti



At her age, Peninah has five children. She jokes about it now, but that was not the case when she was a stay-at-home mother. All she had was a fire in her soul that was just a flicker.

But how does a woman go from silence to leadership, from hiding in the shadows to standing tall in rooms full of people?

I'm now the Chairperson of the New Life Group in Bwiti, there was a time I couldn't even raise my voice, let alone lead a room full of people.

Back then, I had no job, no freedom, and no space to breathe. Everything I was to do had to go through my husband.

I wasn't allowed to make decisions. Even if I had ideas, they didn't matter because I was just a woman. It wasn't easy, but something in me refused to stay small.

Through our community activists, I came across NAYA and the She Leads programme.

For the first time, I did not even ask my husband for permission. I just registered, then told him later. Despite his consistent opposition, I made the decision to go. It was a necessity, not

for him, but for my own sake, for my future, and for the sake of my children.

Through She Leads, I rediscovered my essence. Confidence? I claimed it. A voice? I unearthed it. Power? I reclaimed it.

Today, the woman once considered "weak" now serves as a community health promoter, visiting homes in my area and promoting healthy living. I also check on sick people and refer them to the hospital whenever necessary. Many view me as the "village doctor," called in for emergencies because of my numerous responsibilities.

I'm also a board member of a school in my village, where we manage the affairs of the school. New Life, a girl-led group, empowers our community by organising football matches for women and girls.

That represents something much greater than change. It signifies a profound transformation.

There was a time I used to be afraid to speak. Now I speak for my people and for my community. I've been in community dialogues, health training, and even led forums. I can confidently address large audiences without feeling nervous.

“ One of the most important lessons I've learned and applied in my business is financial management: understanding budgeting, profits, and losses. I'm very intentional about tracking my business progress, and I also share this knowledge with others. I believe what I know isn't meant to be kept to myself.

Thanks to the economic empowerment training, I now run a small grocery store that supports my livelihood. I'm now a trainer, teaching fellow women and girls in my group about women's empowerment.

One important lesson I learnt and take seriously in my business is budgeting, losses and profits in business, and how to manage finances. I'm very deliberate in measuring the growth of my business as I teach others, too.

I now mentor young people in my village. I'm a firm believer that true



leadership is about lifting others as you rise.

Today, my husband is not the same person. He still questions things sometimes, but now he sees the change. The respect. The impact I have created.

I want to inspire other women to rise alongside me. My message to them is clear: Don't be afraid. Embrace the unknown. Educate yourselves. Be courageous. Life becomes infinitely richer when you take a stand for it.



Turning Broken Dreams to New Beginnings

By Risper Mwaka, Uongozi Bora CBO



Have you ever felt like your life ended before it even began? That was me in 2016, a 16-year-old girl from Ukunda, carrying dreams that suddenly felt too heavy. I had just finished Class Eight and should have been thinking about high school. But instead, I found myself pregnant.

In that moment, everything shifted. My dreams collapsed. My heart broke—not just from the pregnancy, but from the whispers, the rejection, and the shame. People laughed, pointed fingers, and said I had no future. Slowly, I began to believe them.

Then, in 2021, a community activist invited me to a She Leads Girls Dialogue Forum. I didn't have energy or hope, but something inside whispered, "Go."

At the first meeting, I barely spoke. I just listened. Later, we discussed self-confidence, leadership, and dreaming again. Something stirred inside me: maybe my dreams were not dead. The She Leads programme staff said, "It doesn't matter if you dropped out. It doesn't matter if you are a teenage mother. You still have a chance." Those words pierced my hopelessness. They were medicine for my wounded heart.

She Leads did not just give hope—

they gave skills. We learned how to apply for opportunities, write grant proposals, draft memorandums, and influence policies. Most importantly, we learned how to dream again and work toward those dreams.

I became hungry for opportunity. I did not know how to use a computer, but I showed up, asked questions, and refused to let my past define me.

My breakthrough came in 2022 when I received hairdressing training under the Kenya Youth Employment and Opportunities Project (KYEOP). Being accepted proved that my life was not over. After completing my training, I applied for a grant and received Ksh 40,000. With the first half, I bought salon equipment. My salon is running today, and I am proud to employ other young women from my community. It is proof that dreams can become reality when pursued with determination.

Sometimes I ask myself: what if I had refused that first She Leads meeting? I would still be struggling to survive. Instead, one "yes" opened a thousand doors.

The most unimaginable moment came in 2023, when I represented the Kwale youth at the Youth Connect

Summit in Nairobi. I arrived feeling small among graduates and PhD holders. But I remembered She Leads. I spoke in Swahili—in a room full of English speakers—and presented our memorandum on behalf of the Kwale youth. At that moment, I realised that education is important, but confidence and courage are equally life-changing.

Since then, I have spoken in rooms I never dreamed of entering and stood beside leaders I once admired from afar. Today, I serve on Diani's Peace and Security Committee, representing youth voices. And I have not given up on education—I hope to return to school one day and continue where I

left off, proving that it's never too late to learn.

To every young girl who feels broken, to every mother who thinks her dreams are gone: your story is still being written. One mistake does not define you—it may just be the fire that shapes you into steel.

I am proof. Proof that you can rise from rejection. Proof that confidence can be rebuilt. Proof that from the ashes of shame, you can shine again.

She Leads was my smelter. They didn't just polish me—they melted away my fear and moulded me into gold.

“ The most unimaginable thing happened not long after. I was selected to represent the youth of Kwale at the National Youth Summit in Nairobi.



My Joy Comes from Seeing Girls Financially Empowered

By Riziki Mabruki, Msambweni



“The programme didn’t just teach them about money, it opened their eyes to opportunities. Many received grants and loans to expand their businesses, opportunities they searched for themselves and She Leads provided guidance on how to do it.



Throughout the years, I've seen many things, politicians come and go, but their promises often remain unfulfilled. But what truly warms my heart is witnessing a change right here in Msambweni. Amidst all this, what truly touches my heart is seeing real change here among our girls.

I'm proud that some girls in our community received various learning opportunities. They not only learned new skills but also took action with those lessons. Today, they stand on their own two feet, no longer relying on their parents or husbands. Their growing confidence to speak up and question the status quo is

unbelievable. That independence is a victory I cherish deeply.

Growing up in Kwale, girls and women in Mijikenda communities had to stay quiet around men and elders. We were told, “don’t ask questions,” or “you’re too loud,” or “that’s a man’s job.” These words were drilled into us so often that we began to believe them. It was not only men who perpetuated these narratives, even fellow women. They would echo these ideas, like we were trapped in a cycle of silence and limitation.

But everything changed when I started working in the community. I realised

that most of those old stories weren't true, they were just beliefs passed down through generations, not facts. I decided to challenge those norms, to break the cycle that kept women from reaching their full potential.

That's how I got involved with NAYA's She Leads programme, working as a community activist for Msambweni Sub-county. When I was asked to bring girls into the programme, I accepted, it was tough at first. Some girls hesitated, and others faced opposition from their parents. The community, especially the elders, thought that we wanted to mislead their daughters with false information. But I didn't give up. I managed to convince a few, and together they formed groups; they became the core of our efforts. These groups became gathering points for training, discussions and support.

Word spread fast, and more girls started streaming in. Girls who once felt shy, who couldn't even look you in the eye, began to speak confidently. They started asking questions, challenging injustices, and standing up for themselves. I watched them change from reserved girls into daring women who were determined to understand and change their world.

One of the most inspiring parts? These girls began to uplift one another by pooling their resources through table banking. They pooled their savings, took out small loans, and started small businesses. Each of our girls now runs her own business, and their discipline with money amazes me. They follow

their own rules of saving, investing, and growing.

The programme did not just teach them about money, it opened their eyes to opportunities. Many received grants and loans to grow their businesses, which they sought out themselves, while the She Leads project only provided guidance. The influence goes far beyond mere financial gain; these girls have emerged as leaders. Some serve on local boards and meet national leaders in large boardrooms, or represent their communities on national and international stages. They've gained confidence, leadership skills, and respect, not just from us, but from their communities and the counties in general.

As a woman and a mother, my greatest joy is seeing these girls stand tall, socially and economically. Their growth is a source of immense pride for me. Thanks to NAYA and She Leads, they're no longer just girls; they're women with dreams, power, and the ability to shape their own futures.

Even as the programme wraps up, these girls will carry the torch. They've learned to push themselves, to believe in their worth, and to chase after what they want in life. And that, to me, is the true victory.



My Life Now Has a Meaning

By Mercy Kisuki, 21



At her age, many might see Mercy Kisuki's face as one filled with hope and faith. You might also see some strands of a smile. But behind the smile lies a story of survival, strength, and the power of second chances.

My story is not one of defeat, but of rising when life tried to silence me. At seventeen, I struggled with pregnancy and shame as the world turned away from me. I felt isolated, convinced that my future had been stolen before it even began.

Then came the She Leads programme in 2021, a space that welcomed all girls without judgment, no matter our backgrounds. This is how I became a member of the Upendo Young Mothers' Group. For the first time, I realised I was not alone, there were other girls carrying invisible battles just like mine. Nothing is more powerful than knowing that someone understands you.

What stood out most was how the programme responded to our immediate needs. I participated in a training on entrepreneurship that highlighted practical tools for starting and running a business effectively. I was eager to act on their teachings, yet I had nothing to start with. It would

have been easy to give up. Instead, I remembered their words: Do not wait for perfect conditions; begin where you are, begin where you are. With determination, I started small, making simple brooms and selling them in my community.

Those brooms were more than products; each one felt like weaving strands of hope. The first time I sold one, I felt a spark of pride, proof that my hands could create a way forward. I managed to set aside my meagre earnings with our group Sacco, and this journey ultimately introduced me to a table banking group. Slowly, coins became savings, and savings became stability. That small act of courage grew into a business that not only sustained my daughter but restored my dignity.

As I managed life as a young mother, I was also learning financial discipline and resilience. Along the way, other girls began to look at me not with pity, but with admiration. Some even asked me how they could start small and save. I discovered that by taking risks, I had become a leader, showing what can happen when courage meets opportunity.

This journey carried me to university, where I am now pursuing a bachelor's

degree in education. Walking through campus, I carry more than books; I carry proof that courage can rewrite destiny. For me, education is a responsibility, guiding girls through academics and vital life lessons such as resilience and hope.

The She Leads programme saw my potential even when no one else did. Because of that, I now believe in myself and in others. To the visionaries behind it, I say, keep lifting girls, because there are thousands still waiting for a hand to pull them up.

“ It’s through that business that I was able to save, at the same time provide for my daughter without major challenges. She Leads made me realise that making and selling brooms was not just a way to get a little money for her upkeep, but an opportunity to turn it into a thriving business.



From the Courtroom of Stigma to the Table of Leadership

By Sikudhani Alphonse, 25



In my community, when a girl becomes pregnant, people often say, "It's the end of life." I grew up watching other girls become the center of whispers, ridicule, and judgment. Never did I imagine that one day, I would be the subject of such scrutiny.

I dreamed of being financially independent and breaking my family's cycle of poverty. Growing up with a single mother, I longed for a future I could shape with my own hands," I recall, with emotion.

All my life, I had envisioned a clear path: studying, thriving, achieving independence. But in 2022, shortly after joining college, I discovered I was pregnant. I was just beginning the life I had worked for when I had to make a tough choice. I chose to drop out to concentrate on my pregnancy.

Returning home felt like stepping into a courtroom. Every fleeting moment, every hushed word reminded me of my failure. I fell into a deep depression. I felt the kind of loneliness



that wraps itself around your mind and squeezes until you can't breathe. I believed my dreams were over.

In 2023, I found She Leads, a programme by NAYA that is funded by Terre des Hommes Netherlands. She Leads was more than a support programme; it became my lifeline. Through mentorship, skills training, and empowerment workshops, I rediscovered my strengths. I realised I wasn't alone; there were other young mothers navigating similar challenges, and together we could rebuild our lives.

Thanks to She Leads, I began to reclaim my dreams. I learned new skills, received guidance, and gradually stepped into community advocacy.

Today, I stand tall and serve on leadership boards I never imagined I would access. I advocate for my community, fight for land rights, and work to resolve disputes both within and across borders.

Currently, I am the Secretary of the Shika-Adabu Cross-Border Land Board, where I help protect our lands and promote cohesion among communities. I mediate conflicts, advocate for fair land use, and work to unite people across borders.

Who would have thought that the girl once despised would one day lead?

As She Leads concludes its operation in Kwale, I am reminded that hope can be reignited. Young girls in my community, especially those facing challenges like mine, might not realise the impact of this programme, but I can attest to it. I am here because She Leads gave me a second chance, and I am a testament to the power of giving yourself one, too.

To every girl and woman who feels trapped by circumstances, remember: your story doesn't have to end here. You, too, can rise, lead, and reclaim your dreams.



Tenga: The Power of Stories to Transform a Village

By Mwinyi Haji Ali Tenga, 48, Matuga



Edutainment is not just acting—it is transformation.

In Matuga, 48-year-old Mwinyi Haji Ali Tenga is celebrated not for titles, but for his actions that have transformed lives. His entire life, Ali has never needed a spotlight because, in his community, his work shines loud enough.

Since 2002, he has walked the path of impact, long before terms like “community activist” became fashionable. His path started out with no cash and no fame at all.

“My journey began when my brother and aunt welcomed me back home.

I decided I would not just live in Matuga, but I would serve it.”

He decided to step into the tough trenches of drug abuse, HIV stigma, and malaria prevention.

He took the initiative without waiting for anyone’s approval. He became a voice, then a leader.

Not just any leader, but the kind who gets called upon in moments of need.

The kind who isn’t afraid to speak, or listen, or walk house-to-house if it means one more child gets saved.

“ I always believed that when my team and I took the stage, we don’t just perform. We provoke thoughts. We bring the village together to hold a mirror to itself.

“People in my community knew me before I arrived because my reputation arrived ahead of me. I have led forums, discussions and even rescue missions.”

He fought ignorance with knowledge and silence with storytelling.

He found that healing, teaching, and transforming were best done through entertaining skits, not dull speeches.

Dramatising real-life situations made people laugh, cry, reflect, and change.

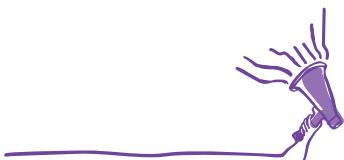
“I always believed that when my team and I took the stage, we don’t just perform. We provoke thoughts. We bring the village together to hold a mirror to itself.”

Due to his strong voice and ability to address important issues through skits, Tenga was called upon to help She Leads share its message through performing arts. His role as a community activist was mainly to mobilise girls and women who would take part in the She Leads programme.



They would dramatise the topics according to their advocacy agenda, which they would then present during community dialogues or meetings.

“One thing about skits, you are able to grab the attention of your viewers from the beginning to the end. You’re assured that they would see, listen and understand whatever you’re dramatising. Edutainment is one way of successfully passing a message.”



Through this form, Tenga and his group have managed not only to change the perspectives of the women targeted by the She Leads initiative, but they have also changed how their community perceive women, their leadership and empowerment.

“There was a time, women could not speak when we men are around. They could not take any leadership roles. But it’s through sensitisation that we managed to change these notions to a point we now have a female governor. This would not have happened were it not for initiatives like She Leads and others that have pitched camp here in Kwale.”

“Remember the era when conversations about HIV were shunned by communities? Young girls were subjected to mockery, and silence was the norm. However, we refused to back down. We unleashed skits rich in raw emotion that effectively challenged and dismantled taboos.”

Slowly, things shifted. Girls, once silenced and hushed, started going to school. Boys stopped laughing at them. Fathers, once hesitant, now stood proud beside their daughters.

Tenga taught his people that protecting girls wasn’t dishonourable; it was powerful.

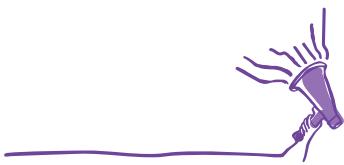
He has tackled cultural barriers, faced rejection, and still pressed forward, turning wounds into wisdom.

He watched girls who once couldn’t raise their eyes now standing before elders, telling stories that needed to be said.

He has seen men change. He has made the invisible visible.

Yet, even after all this, he is still asking, not for applause, but for more platforms and more chances.

“There are still places in Kwale where outdated traditions hold people back. They need support to grow and learn. Programmes like She Leads can really help change the way people think and move forward.”



A Teen Mum's Journey to Rise Again

By Asia, 30 years



“Today, the community sees me differently. The names they once called me have been replaced with respect. People point at me and say, “Look at her. She made it.” I am no longer invisible. I am Asia.

In 2013, I was 18, in Form Two, with dreams as big as the ocean. I wanted to finish school, join college, and lift my mother out of poverty. But life had other plans.

My childhood was full of struggle. My mother worked tirelessly to provide for us, but basic needs like sanitary pads were sometimes a luxury. During my periods, I would skip school to avoid embarrassment, falling behind in lessons and hope.

In my vulnerability, I fell into the hands of a boda boda rider. I confused his

attention for love, but beneath it all, it was abuse masquerading as care. Before long, I became pregnant. When I told him, he said, “Deal with it.” My mother’s disappointment cut deep; she told me I was no longer her responsibility. I was a child carrying a child, completely alone.

The only thing left for me was to fight for my survival. I turned to commercial sex work. Every second of it was painful, but diapers, milk, and food had to come from somewhere. At night, I cried into my pillow, drowning in shame and judgment.

In 2021, I joined She Leads after being part of the Girls Advocacy Alliance programme, which ended in 2020. At first, I hesitated, fearing judgment. But the Girls and Young Women I met saw me as human, not a mistake. For the first time in years, I felt seen and valued. That was the beginning of my healing.

She Leads taught us some really useful skills. I discovered beadwork, stringing tiny beads into jewellery to sell and feed my child. In 2022, I was awarded a KYEOP grant of KSh 40,000, which I used to start a small grocery and clothing business. Slowly, I began to rebuild my life.

A few young mothers noticed what I was doing and came to join me. We formed Hazina Youth Group — a circle of strength. Nearly 30 girls shared opportunities and supported one another. We learned financial literacy, business planning, and resource mobilisation.

Today, each of us runs a successful small business and has a voice in the community.

Beyond just business, She Leads has profoundly influenced my leadership journey. As chairwoman of Hazina Youth Group, I guide others and participate in community dialogues on social issues. I mentor young girls to help them make better choices, drawing from my experience as a teenage mother.

Today, the community sees me differently. The names they once called me have been replaced with respect. People say, "Look at her, she made it." I am no longer invisible. I am Asia—a mother, a leader, a woman who rose from shadows to strength.

She Leads gave me a second chance. They gave me my name, my confidence, and my purpose.

They taught my community that a young girl who becomes a mother isn't failing; she has potential and deserves support, education, and opportunities.



Teenage Pregnancy Didn't Define My Future, She Leads Did

By Jennifer Awino Juma, 19



At just 19, Jennifer Awino Juma carries the story of someone who has walked through fire and refused to burn.

Jennifer was born in a small village in Msambweni, Kwale County. She grew up in extreme poverty, where even buying soap felt like a luxury. After her parents died, her grandmother raised her and often walked to school barefoot, studying by a dim kerosene lamp.

After receiving a scholarship from a local school, she felt she had a second chance at life and worked hard to finish Class Eight, seeing education as her only way forward.

But at 15, while in Grade Eight, Jennifer discovered she was pregnant. With no support system and little guidance, she entered into marriage too young. Life became a daily struggle for survival, compounded by the stigma of being a teenage mother.

"Some days," she recalls, "all we had was the determination to get through."

Hope returned when she met Madam Riziki, a community leader who encouraged her to join a safe space for teenage mothers. Through the group, Jennifer learnt about the She Leads programme and became one of the beneficiaries.

“I speak for the girls who feel voiceless, because she's lived their story. I believe that one day, my wings will fly high and I'll represent the women of Kwale as their women role model.



“The programme completely reshaped my outlook. I didn’t just learn to raise my voice; I learned that my voice could shape decisions in my community,”

Through training in advocacy, leadership, financial literacy, and gender equality, Jennifer rebuilt her confidence. She began saving small amounts through table-banking and started a business selling mabuyu, groundnuts, and sunflower seeds. With her income, she was able to support her child and bravely report her husband’s abuse.

“That was the moment I realised empowerment is not just words; it gave me the strength to stand tall.”

Today, Jennifer leads her group, Amkeni Gazi Girls, in discussions about gender equality, health issues,

and climate change. She plays a key role in village barazas and community discussions, ensuring that girls’ perspectives shape essential decisions. She recently organised young mothers to participate in a county dialogue on youth health services, influencing recommendations for better reproductive care.

Beyond advocacy, Jennifer mentors other teenage mothers, encouraging them to pursue education and small businesses.

“When they see me balancing motherhood, business, and leadership, they believe they can do it too,” she explains.

She aims to be a political leader, advocating for the women of Kwale and creating policies to support girls and young mothers.



The Girl I Chose to Become

By Mwanarusi Mwatabu, 29



She Leads provided leadership skills as well as a path to healing. Through counseling and safe spaces, I confronted past wounds, forgave, and embraced wholeness.

The woman I am becoming is shaped by my experiences in the She Leads programme. It is more than a programme, it is a chapter of my life that changed my direction and restored my voice.

My childhood was not difficult, but it was far from what I wished for. My siblings and I grew up under stringent parents who forbade us from playing outside. While other children ran freely through the village paths, I remained indoors, silenced and withdrawn. Over time, I became shy, insecure, and doubtful of my worth.

The rules were not the only challenge. The constant arguments between my parents have left lasting emotional wounds. I still remember the terrifying day my father nearly harmed my mother. That fear weighed on me for years, unspoken and unresolved. Outwardly, I appeared fine, even

admired. Inwardly, I carried wounds too heavy for a child.

My college years brought forth an unforeseen source of light. I found joy in being around children, listening, playing, and laughing in ways my younger self never could. The community began to notice my gift with children and encouraged me to lead. Yet, I struggled to believe in myself, still feeling like the timid girl who feared speaking out.

Everything shifted in 2020 when my mother, for the first time, encouraged me to embrace this path. I joined Heri Girls, which later became one of the GYW groups supported by the She Leads Programme.

I received leadership training, mentorship, and advocacy skills through She Leads. I also learnt about proposal writing, public speaking, and how to engage decision-makers. These were not just technical skills; they rebuilt my confidence and gave me recognition in spaces I never imagined entering.

I was elected as the lead leader of Matuga Sub-county and later appointed to represent women and

girls on the ward's Gender and Social Development Committee.

I have advocated for safer schools, raised awareness about reproductive health, implemented policies for gender-based violence prevention, and promoted meaningful youth involvement in development.

My proud moment was when Heri Girls successfully advocated for sanitary pads in our schools. Seeing young girls attend classes without interruption reminded me that change is possible when voices are amplified.

She Leads provided leadership skills as well as a path to healing. Through counselling and safe spaces, I confronted past wounds, forgave, and embraced wholeness. For the first time, I began speaking from strength rather than brokenness.

Today, I am a role model in my community. I mentor girls, share my story in schools and forums, and remind them that while wounds may shape us, healing gives us power. I envision spaces that empower girls to become leaders by turning fears into sources of strength.

The Power of My Voice

By Susan Kombo, 30, Amani CBO



“ So here I stand today: not just a mother of four, but a leader. A woman who speaks, not because fear has disappeared, but because I now understand that silence costs more than courage ever will.

For years, fear controlled my life. The kind of fear that rises in your throat, ties your tongue, and abandons you when you need words most. Each time I tried to speak, silence betrayed me. That was not a one-time struggle; it became a pattern, something I almost accepted as part of who I was.

The thought of facing people made my palms sweat, my knees weak, and my heart pound like it wanted to escape. I avoided eye contact as though it burned, terrified that someone would notice me.

I hid at the back of gatherings, praying not to be called. Even saying my own name felt like climbing a mountain. For a while, that strategy worked.



But silence, I later learned, is not peace; it is a prison. The longer I kept quiet, the smaller I felt. I started to accept the beliefs I learned in childhood: that women should follow instead of leading, that our voices are just for decoration, and that girls should be seen but not heard.

I carried those beliefs for years. Everything changed with the launch of the She Leads programme.

When the programme kicked off in our village in June 2021, the team noticed something I did not see in myself. They started with the simplest thing: "Hey,

can you tell us your name?" At first, it came out as a whisper. Next time, I said it louder. Then, stronger. Step by step, the grip of fear loosened. I figured out that confidence isn't just given to you. You work on it piece by piece, like stacking bricks.

That is how I transformed from "the silent one" into someone who could speak, share, and lead. Being part of the Amani group, the She Leads programme taught us key leadership skills and how to speak confidently. That bravery helped me step into my first leadership gig as a school matron, where I had to chat with children and adults daily. It became my proof: I had overcome fear.

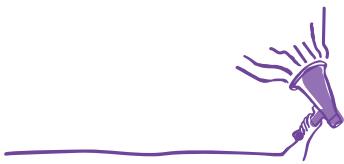
Today, I am a board member at Mteza Primary School in Kwale, focusing on children's rights and gender equality. I ensure girls' concerns are not

dismissed, because their voices matter as much as anyone else's.

Beyond this role, I was nominated by my village elders to the position of a balozi (mzee wa nyumba kumi), one that was reserved for men for a long time.

As a balozi, I supervise households, participate in security meetings, mediate minor disputes, and act as the initial contact before escalating issues to the chairman or authorities.

I stand here as a leader, not holding back anymore because I know silence costs more than courage ever will.



We Use Arts to Speak for Girls

By Florence, 20, Mamboleo Arts Group

“ We are rewriting the story. We are stepping out of our comfort zones, earning our own money, raising our voices, and leading change!

I was quiet and withdrawn for a long time, afraid to speak in class or look people in the eye, unsure of my dreams. Survival was the only word I knew.

In 2020, during COVID-19, I dropped out of school in Form Two, not because of pregnancy or marriage, but because my younger brother was considered more “worthy” of an education. For a while, I thought my dreams had ended. I nearly became just another girl in Makongeni, overlooked while boys were given education opportunities.

Then, in 2021, I joined She Leads, a programme under NAYA, and became part of the Mamboleo Arts Group. It was a space where young people could use art not just to perform,



but to challenge norms, raise their voices, and tell stories that mattered. I joined with my experiences and a determination to use art as a tool for change.

I learned to write a mission and vision, manage finances, plan strategically, and lead confidently through She Leads’ training. Words that once felt too “bougie”, like strategic planning and financial policies, became part of my everyday life. We do not just know these things; we live them. Our group is run like a proper organisation because we are one.

In 2022, we took a bold step and submitted a proposal to NAYA through She Leads. We were very excited to get funding of Ksh 83,000. The support

we received provided us with clarity and instilled a sense of confidence. We began as just a small arts group, and now we've become a community-based organisation with art-focused and economic projects that keep us afloat. I discovered that my voice mattered, that I could dream, and that I had the power to take action.

Thanks to their support, I returned to school in 2023 and completed Form Four in 2024. Today, I am pursuing ICT in college while serving my community through Mamboleo Arts.

Using dance, drama, poetry, and storytelling, we highlight issues like gender inequality, teenage pregnancies, education, and girls' right to dream. We perform in schools, churches, and madrasas, reaching hundreds of young people in Makongeni and beyond. Our message is simple but powerful: "Women and girls' voices matter too."

In addition to our performances, we're into table banking and group farming

as a team. When we harvest, we save together; when one of us needs a loan, the savings kit will lift her.

I manage a small kitchen garden with vegetables on my table and extra money in my pocket. It may not be much, but every green leaf reminds me that empowerment begins right at home.

For a girl born in Kwale, this life would have felt like a distant dream just a few years ago. Here, girls were raised to believe their destiny was marriage, while boys carried the promise of education. But not anymore.

We are rewriting the story. We are stepping out of our comfort zones, earning money, raising our voices, and leading change.

Because when one girl rises, she lifts others with her, and together we rise higher.



Hadija: A Girl With Courage Will Always Rise

By Hajida Hamadi, 25, Manufaa Youth Group, Lungalunga



“ She Leads taught me that no matter how heavy the challenges, a girl with courage will always rise.

In 2021, as the world began to recover from the pandemic, I felt restless, uncertain, and needed direction. When our community champion asked me to join this girls' group, the Manufaa Youth Group.

She mentioned an empowerment programme called She Leads, set to begin in June, would benefit girls in the Manufaa youth group. I did not fully grasp what it entailed, but I knew one thing: I was searching for meaning. So, I said yes.

That one simple word turned out to be the gateway to something really different.

The She Leads programme taught me a lot about being a leader, how to be economically empowered, and, most importantly, I became aware of my rights as a young woman. For the first time, I discovered the strength of my own voice. It was as though someone had lit a flame inside me.

But life is rarely straightforward. Later that same year, I became pregnant just after completing Form Four. In an instant, my dreams of advancing to college seemed to vanish.

My mother's words still echo: "You went looking for trouble, now sit down and be a mother." Her disappointment

was heavy, and I carried it alongside my growing fears.

In July 2022, I felt my resolve tested as Madam Tima announced a scholarship opportunity in Nyeri. The offer sounded almost unreal, a fully sponsored college programme for girls like me. But my mother rejected the idea immediately.

At seven months along, she was convinced that my journey was already written and that going back to school was out of the question.

Yet She Leads had already sown a deeper seed within me: courage. I realised that if I let this chance slip away, I might never reclaim my dreams. So, against doubt and disapproval, I chose to fight for my future. I packed my bag, steadied my heart, and enrolled for a Diploma course in Surveying.

Balancing school and motherhood felt like a constant struggle. I left my baby at daycare, attended classes, and returned to nurse him. I cried from exhaustion every evening, but I learned that resilience develops over time.

Eventually, I graduated in April 2025 with a certificate and a transformed sense of self. I had learned that mistakes or circumstances do not define me, but by the strength to rise above them.

While I seek employment and face doubts about my education's worth, I view setbacks as opportunities for growth. I know this truth deeply: no matter how fierce the storm is, a girl with courage will always rise.

Stories Edited by Brian Alili and Malemba Mkongo

