

# #CHOOSE TO CHALLENGE



World Relief 

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Over the last 12 months, our sense of stability and security was challenged again and again, and the hardships and insecurities faced by millions of people in our nation and our world were exposed — especially those faced by women.

Research shows that women and girls have [disproportionately](#) experienced the consequences of COVID-19. Young women and girls living in poverty, with disabilities or in rural, isolated locations are more likely to be pulled out of school first to compensate for increased care and domestic work at home. Overburdened healthcare systems have disrupted health services unique to the well-being of women and girls. And female migrant workers, often the most likely group to hold insecure jobs, have been excluded from social protections, leading to a loss of income and jobs; their health, safety and well-being often ignored. These are just a few of the dire consequences of the pandemic on women.

*This reality has been hard-felt.*

*And its exposure has challenged us to change.*

As this time has awakened us to the collective change we want and need to see take place, we've begun to realize our individual responsibility to become active participants in the transformation of our world.

We join with millions of others around the world in celebration of women everywhere who are challenging their communities to change, even through their suffering.

Their leadership is challenging gender norms, changing beliefs, shifting systems and combating systemic injustice. They are strong, beautiful, courageous women whose stories are worthy of honor and celebration. They inspire us, lift us up and push us to lean into change, even when we'd rather walk away. They challenge us to dig deeper, push harder and speak louder.

**Dive into these stories. Place yourself in women's shoes. May you leave inspired, encouraged and challenged to create lasting change right where you are.**



# NEEMA'S PLIGHT

BY ANN WANJIKU & DANA NORTH

In an area known as Mile 46 in the Kajiado District of Kenya, the Elangata Wuas Primary School sits beside a grove of trees. On a seemingly ordinary Friday in July, the whole school — boys and girls, teachers and the headmaster — leave their lessons and gather to welcome visitors outside in the schoolyard. The students, dressed in blue uniforms, fill rows of wooden chairs; girls on the left, and boys on the right.

After a warm welcome and a short introduction, the students stand in groups to present short speeches, dances and poems they had prepared for the visitors. A group of girls perform a traditional dance, some students sing a song, and then Ann Wanjiku stands to present an original poem.

Her words are powerful, her cry sincere. May her voice ring in your ears and move your heart. May you, like me, be changed.



[CLICK HERE TO WATCH](#)



We celebrate millions of girls like Ann, boldly speaking up and advocating for a future where they have the agency and opportunity to reach their God-given potential — who have the courage to

[#choosetochallenge](#)

## *Neema's Plight*

*by Ann Wanjiku*

*In front of you is Ann Wanjiku,  
ready to present a poem entitled, Neema's Plight.  
Sit back, relax and enjoy.*

*Birth of a baby, must be a blessing event,  
But hers was nothing short of a curse,  
Culture, gender, count them all.*

*A girl is not as welcome as a baby boy,  
at thirteen she has to face the worst.*

*A knife cut across her genital,  
a midwife circumcised and stitched her,  
she now has a black scar.*

*Why is it this kind of pain?*

*This pain of primitive culture?*

*Dear mankind!*

*wherever you are!*

*is she not a human being? (sobs)*

*As if that is not enough*

*"14 years is perfect real wife,"*

*her father said,*

*As he expected cold cash,*

*from a 40-year old man,*

*Killing her dreams, education and childhood,*

*But marriage was done,*

*the dowry was paid,*

*Injecting the title of wife into her bloodstream.*

*Dear mankind!*

*wherever you are!*

*is she not a human being? (sobs)*

*Thank you.*



# TOWARD A VISION FOR GENDER EQUALITY

## IN KAJIADO, KENYA BY AMANDA PATTERSON

At the southern edge of the former Rift Valley province, just south of the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, lies Kajiado, a mountainous region with vast valleys of open space where zebra, giraffe and wildebeest roam. Spread throughout the diverse countryside are communities of the Maasai people — a people known for their brightly colored clothing and the multi-colored, beaded jewelry they wear around their necks and arms. Although they're widely celebrated for honoring and maintaining their way of life, the Maasai people aren't without challenges.

World Relief began working in Kajiado in 2018, and it wasn't long before we came to understand the hard truths of life for people living in this community. 57% of children are under-vaccinated against common yet life-threatening diseases. 10% of children under the age of five are malnourished. 45% of all households experience stress related to food security, meaning either there is lack of food or enough money to buy food for the household. And the rates of preventable diseases are very high due to unclean drinking water and poor hygiene practices.

These numbers alone are difficult to comprehend. And yet, the situation in Kajiado is even more dire for girls and women. Harmful cultural beliefs and traditional practices strip opportunity from thousands of young girls and women and prevent them from achieving their God-given potential, condemning them to a life that is anything but equal.

Among the Maasai tribespeople living in Kajiado today, 78% of all girls undergo female genital mutilation (FGM) — a harmful practice that involves either the partial or total removal of external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs, for non-medical [reasons](#). FGM typically takes place between infancy and the age of 15 and can result in serious, life-long health consequences such as severe bleeding, life-threatening infection, complications in childbirth and increased risk of newborn deaths.

Today, more than 200 million women and girls living around the world have undergone this brutal practice, and the [WHO](#) now classifies FGM as a human rights violation.

FGM, however, is just one way gender injustice manifests itself in Kajiado. Only 10% of young girls attend secondary school due to early teenage marriage and/or unexpected pregnancies. In a community that values men as warriors and chiefs, girls and women are given little to no opportunity to break out of the age-old mold and shape their own futures.

### *And yet, change is beginning to take root.*

With the help of 184 local church partners, World Relief is changing hearts and minds through Bible study, behavior-change workshops and vision casting seminars. Implemented through local churches, these programs teach basic biblical definitions of marriage, friendship and equality. Little by little, women and men of God are embracing the concept of Imago Dei and are beginning to speak out against harmful cultural beliefs — in particular, those that harm or marginalize young girls and women.

Remarkably, not all advocates for gender equality are women. Sabore is one of the last [laibons](#) in his community — the highest of chiefs in a Maasai tribe and a role that passes on from father to son. A Laibon acts as a ritual leader and has authority over all political and military decisions. Yet Sabore's testimony is about more than just his generational status. It's of his status as a follower of Christ. He now speaks out about a hope that far outshines his role and has become a prominent church leader in the community, advocating for the most vulnerable, including many of the young women in his community.

**There is still much work to be done in the Maasai community of Kajiado, but we are seeing change take root, and we are committed to continuing the journey and #choosetochallenge, wherever it takes us.**



## CONNECTING COMMUNITIES BY SARAH BARNETT & BAILEY CLARK

World Relief Memphis has several Community Ambassadors in the city of Memphis. These bilingual ambassadors were hired to connect community members with resources in their languages during the COVID pandemic. Diana Sanchez is one of these community ambassadors.

Diana, herself a refugee from Venezuela, knows what it's like to be without family and a sense of home. Her family, now scattered across the Western Hemisphere, fled Venezuela when political and economic [instability](#) forced them to leave.

Yet despite the thousands of miles separating her from her family, Diana has learned that there is another type of family — one found in the community surrounding her. Not knowing English, Diana found Memphis's [Connect Language Center](#) and became a student.

As Diana and the other students shared about their lives while practicing vocabulary and doing class activities, they began to form friendships with one another, encouraging each other on their journeys to rebuild their lives. And Diana began to build community — and a family.

Over time, Diana became one of the family leaders for this community within Memphis. She began sharing resources she knew about with others in need, starting with language resources.

When the pandemic struck and World Relief began looking for community ambassadors, Diana saw another opportunity to give back to her community.

She became a Community Ambassador, and through her commitment, many families have been made aware of ways to improve their physical and mental health during the pandemic. Diana has helped share information about food banks, school materials, flu shots, free COVID testing, mental health resources and more.

Diana, who had previously been forced to leave her home and was left with little but her own resolve to make a new life, has now challenged her own circumstances and paved the way for others in her Memphis family to experience change as well. By connecting people to tools and resources during a pandemic and beyond, she has helped to ensure their future success.

Diana dreams of developing a hairstylist business in order to further help her family and others in her community. In the meantime, she continues to improve her English and connect World Relief's resources to those who are in need of extra support.

*Diana is a teacher and entrepreneur. She's an innovator, nurturer and warrior. She's a leader. And she chooses to challenge to bring change.*



# OVERCOMING

Seivhorn Khun knows what it feels like to not fit in. As a 24-year-old woman with disabilities, as well as a professing Christian living in a country that is 97% Buddhist, Seivhorn was accustomed to being different. And this reality hasn't been easy for her.

Seivhorn wasn't born with a disability, her pronounced hunchback is the result of childhood abuse she suffered at the hands of her father. The abuse affected Seivhorn's physical growth, and throughout her life she was mocked and ridiculed by friends and neighbors. Years of this kind of treatment left her feeling alone and depressed.

Thankfully, when she was 12 years old, Seivhorn was invited to join a World Relief Kids Club. It was there she first heard the good news that Jesus loved her. Recalling her time in the Kids Club, Seivhorn said with a smiling face,

***"I really enjoyed watching the puppet shows and listening to what the World Relief staff taught. I felt good and happy when I heard about Jesus. The staff always gave me encouraging words and cared about me. I wished to be like them as a children's teacher."***

Then, two years ago, a World Relief staff member asked Seivhorn to be a Kid's Club volunteer. She immediately declined the offer, believing her disability made her unable to lead. She had tried before to get a job in the community, but had always been turned down because of her disability. How could she possibly have anything to offer?

But the World Relief staff member gently encouraged Seivhorn, and she remembered the longing God had placed in her heart all those years ago when she was in the Kids Clubs. Seivhorn accepted the invitation, saying, "I believed God called me and that He would strengthen me to serve and help my community."

Seivhorn underwent volunteer training through World Relief and now leads a Kids Club of 25 children at her house with another volunteer. She says she feels so proud of herself, knowing she is helping children learn social skills, understand and apply health messages, learn to recognize and avoid child traffickers and especially to hear about Jesus. Despite a predominantly Buddhist environment, parents are allowing their children to come to the Kids Club, recognizing the positive impact the group is having on their children and throughout the community.

Seivhorn is the first to admit it's not always easy work. But "even though I get busy or a bit frustrated sometimes, I always try to keep my joy with the children in the Kids Club. I want to see them become good people, good citizens in the future."

The challenge to change is not easy. Obstacles seem unending. Yet, through resilience and courage people like Seivhorn are restoring dignity, agency and opportunity for millions of women and girls around the world by seeing the change in themselves first.

***"My body was disabled, but my spiritual flame overcame it."***





# FOR THE WOMEN BY AMENA BROWN



[CLICK HERE TO LISTEN](#)

*We carry water on our heads  
Babies on our backs  
Joy in our hips  
We till the fertile ground  
In our garden  
In our soul  
In our children  
We bear fruit  
We grow  
We watch things grow  
We yield fruit in season  
We stand in front of fire  
On the front lines  
In front of desk  
Behind camera  
Behind pulpit  
In the face of war*

*We face evil  
We face violence  
We face obstacles  
We stare struggle in the eyes and dare  
struggle to stare back  
We take the last bit of flour  
Add water  
Make tortillas  
Make porridge  
Make naan  
Make dumplings  
Make biscuits  
Make do*

*With hands that knead the dough  
And build the bricks  
And raise the babies  
And teach the children  
And fight poverty  
We carry community in our wombs  
In our arms  
On our backs  
In our chests*

*We gather our words like so many  
sticks until they ignite  
We build fire*

*And around that fire we sing  
We sing because a song always gives birth  
We sing because a song knows where the soul is  
wounded  
We sing because a song reminds us that we are  
always home  
In this body, in this skin  
And around that fire we dance  
We dance to the tune of liberation  
We dance for justice, for the women who are no  
longer here, who cannot speak  
We dance because we fight until every woman is free*

*Hear the drums in the rhythm we walk  
The dance in our mother tongue  
As we say the prayers of our mothers' tongues  
We find our language in banana leaves and avocado  
In mango and rice and yams and seaweed  
Tell our stories while braiding the hair of our  
daughters  
While standing at the front of a boardroom  
While leading the way in protest  
While frying chicken  
While building a business  
While attending school  
While performing surgery  
Because nobody needs to tell our stories for us  
Because our stories belong to us  
Because we belong to each other*

*We raise our hands  
We raise our voices  
We raise the next generation  
We pioneer  
We invent  
We create  
We look ahead  
We know the way  
We see no path  
We use our feet to build one  
For the ones who will come after us  
We leave a legacy in the sound of our laughter  
Everyday we build a world*

**Thank God for women**

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