



Indigenous  
Women  
Council

**10<sup>TH</sup>**  
**ANNIVERSARY**

**Stories of  
Love, Strength,  
and Solidarity.**

## A decade of courage: The story of indigenous women and girls rising

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Ten years ago, a quiet fire began to burn - not in the halls of power, but in the hearts of women from the shrublands of Isiolo, the savannah grasslands of Laikipia, the plains of Samburu, the drylands of Marsabit, the woodlands of the Mau Forest, the coastal forests of the Mijikenda, and the Elmolo along the shores of Lake Turkana. These were not women born of privilege or power, but of pain, purpose, and promise. They carried with them stories their mothers whispered under the stars - stories of survival, of dignity robbed and reclaimed, of voices once silenced now echoing across valleys and borders.

Today, as we mark a decade of the Indigenous Women's struggles, we do more than celebrate an event - we honor a **movement**. A movement led by barefoot girls who walked miles to school with hope in their hands. By mothers who said *no more* to child beading, to female genital mutilation, to early marriages that stole futures. By grandmothers who guarded sacred knowledge and kept it alive through song, ceremony, and spirit.

The struggle has not been easy. We have fought battles invisible to many - against cultural erasure, gender-based violence, climate injustice, land dispossession, and systemic exclusion. But with every injustice, we rose - stronger, louder, and more united. We carried the weight of our communities on our backs and still made room to carry each other. Our wounds did not weaken us; they became maps guiding us toward freedom.



We stood at global stages - at the United Nations, the African Union, international climate summits - not asking for permission, but claiming our space. We spoke in tongues inherited from ancestors and in languages written in policy, demanding inclusion, recognition, and justice. And we did not walk alone. We walked together - as sisters, mothers, daughters, and warriors.

This decade has seen miracles born of resistance - safe homes for girls escaping harmful practices, Indigenous women-led forests reclaiming degraded land, councils of elder women holding peace talks, and new leaders rising from communities once silenced by fear. We have turned trauma into testimony, and silence into song.

**And yet, we are not done.**

We carry forward the light of every girl who still walks to school under threat. Of every woman whose story is yet to be told. Of every community still battling invisibility in national policy. To them, we say: *You are not forgotten*. You are not alone.

We are the daughters of the earth - rooted, resilient, and rising. Our bodies are not battlegrounds; they are vessels of creation. Our land is not for sale; it is the memory of our people. Our voice is not weak; it is thunder calling the world to listen.

As we celebrate 10 years of the impactful journey of Indigenous women and girls - stories of **love**, **strength**, and **solidarity** - may our stories continue to sow courage in those who doubt their strength. May our journey inspire the next generation to lead with love, with truth, and with fire in their hearts.

This is a story of **love**.  
A story of **strength**.  
A story of **solidarity**.

**This is our story.**

**And we are just getting started.**



## The power of youth in indigenous movements

### Silvana Lesuuda, Samburu County

Silvana Lesuuda, an Indigenous youth from Samburu County, Kenya, is a leading voice in the movement for gender equality and youth empowerment. She is the founder and Executive Director of the Network for Empowering Samburu Transformation (NEST), a youth-led organization that works to uplift and advocate for young people - especially young women - from Indigenous communities. Silvana also serves as the chair of young women within the Indigenous Women Council (IWC), a platform that brings together women leaders across generations to promote equity and justice.

In her advocacy, Silvana highlights a persistent issue: the marginalization of young Indigenous women in critical conversations and decision-making processes that shape their lives and futures. For generations, patriarchal norms have silenced or overlooked the voices of young women, particularly in pastoralist and Indigenous communities like Samburu. These women, despite being directly affected by social, economic, and political decisions, often find their perspectives dismissed or undervalued. They are rarely encouraged to seek out leadership roles, especially in elective politics.

During one leadership training hosted by the Women's Caucus, Stacey Nareyo - a Special Elect Member of the County Assembly of Samburu - offered a stark reflection of this reality. Stacey shared that her biggest challenge in the County Assembly is patriarchy. She is frequently told she is too young, and when important decisions are being made, she is excluded.

"They often tell you to wait," she explained, "because you have a long way to go." Her experience mirrors that of many other young Indigenous women who face discrimination not just for being women, but for being young as well. This dual bias systematically restricts their access to spaces where they could otherwise contribute meaningfully.



For Silvana, becoming involved in the Indigenous women's movement has been nothing short of transformative. The movement has provided her - and many other young women - with a vital platform to raise their voices, advocate for their rights, and engage meaningfully in leadership. Through her work with IWC and NEST, she has received mentorship from experienced Indigenous women, gained hands-on experience in community-based advocacy, and developed the confidence needed to step into leadership roles that were once deemed out of reach.

What makes this movement especially powerful is its intergenerational nature. Older women leaders pass on their knowledge and experience, while younger women and girls bring fresh energy, new perspectives, and digital-savvy advocacy. This exchange not only builds confidence and skills but also equips young women to challenge the oppressive systems that have long silenced them.

Moreover, the inclusion of young women in the day-to-day operations and governance of the movement helps ensure its sustainability. Through the support of the Indigenous Women's Council, youth-led organizations like NEST are receiving training in leadership, resource mobilization, organizational development, and advocacy. These efforts are building a strong foundation for lasting change - within communities and at regional, national, and even international levels.

Silvana believes deeply in the power of self-representation. "We are the only ones who can speak for ourselves - in the true spirit of 'leave no one behind,'" she says. Her words serve as both a declaration and a call to action: to create space for young Indigenous women to lead, to speak, and to shape the future of their communities on their own terms.



## A beacon of leadership, minorities community in the Borana indigenous community

### Nuria Gollo H.S.C.

Born in the heart of Marsabit County, Northern Kenya, Nuria Gollo Halake, H.S.C, emerged from a deeply patriarchal society and a conservative Muslim background where the voices of women and girls were rarely heard - let alone championed. Against these odds, Nuria rose to become a fearless leader and a transformative figure, standing at the forefront of advocating for women's rights and spearheading community development through her role as the Chief Executive Officer of the Marsabit Women Advocacy and Development Organization (MWADO).

Nuria's leadership journey began in the classroom, where she spent over fifteen years as an educator nurturing young minds. It was here that her passion for the welfare of children first took root. But her vision extended far beyond the school walls - she saw the need to protect, empower, and uplift women and girls whose struggles were too often silenced. Fueled by her unwavering conviction, Nuria transitioned from education to grassroots activism, where her leadership would shine even brighter.

As a senior human rights activist, Nuria demonstrated her bold and resilient leadership by fearlessly confronting issues that many in her community hesitated to even discuss - from gender-based violence to harmful traditional practices like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). She did not merely speak up; she acted, dedicating her time, resources, and strategic skills to shield women and girls from violence and outdated cultural practices. Through MWADO, she cultivated safe spaces and pathways for justice, becoming a trusted voice and an inspiring example to countless women who found hope through her leadership.



Nuria's influence did not stop at the local level. Her exceptional ability to navigate both governmental and non-governmental spheres amplified her impact across regional and national platforms. Her deep understanding of the intersectionality of women's rights with broader social, economic, and environmental issues enabled her to tackle complex challenges like conflict and insecurity, disaster risk reduction, and violent extremism with remarkable foresight and courage.

Her leadership has earned her accolades that testify to her enduring impact. She was honored with the prestigious Hero's Award for three consecutive years (2013, 2014, and 2016), celebrated as the Inspirational Woman of the Year in Marsabit County in 2015, and awarded the Head of State Commendation (HSC) on the 12th of December 2017 - with further recognition by the state in 2022 for her outstanding efforts in eliminating FGM.

Beyond formal recognition, Nuria's voice and leadership have reached international audiences. Her work has been featured in renowned outlets such as America Magazine and The Guardian, and her insights have resonated on CBC (Canada) Radio during global broadcasts. These platforms have amplified her message, inspiring not only her community but also the world.

Further exemplifying her powerful leadership, Nuria serves as the Leadership Lead in the Indigenous Women Council, where she continues to mentor, guide, and mobilize women in one of the most significant grassroots movements for indigenous women's rights. In this capacity, she brings together diverse voices, fostering solidarity and championing collective action for lasting change.

Today, Nuria Gollo H.S.C story is not just about advocacy; it is a testament to extraordinary leadership forged through resilience, courage, and an unwavering commitment to a better, for transformative leadership that more equitable future for women and girls. Her journey is a beacon of hope and a blueprint leaves no one behind.



## PWDs representative in the movement

### Florence Ntisiai

Florence Ntisiai, is a proud Indigenous woman with disability from the Samburu community in Samburu County, Kenya. Her journey in the Indigenous Women Council (IWC) movement began when she was a young woman searching for identity, belonging, and purpose.

At that time, the space for young women with disabilities was almost non-existent. They faced multiple layers of exclusion - from cultural stigma to inaccessibility, from being silenced to being underestimated. As a young indigenous woman with disability, she knew she had a voice, but she wasn't sure where or how it could be heard.

Then she found IWC - and her life changed.

The Indigenous Women Council shaped her into the woman she is today. It gave her space, strength, and sisterhood. It taught her that disability is not a barrier to leadership, and that her story, her experiences, and her voice mattered. IWC helped her rise from the margins and step into leadership with confidence.

Because of that empowerment, she took the bold step to register the Kimunyak Differently Able Initiative (KDAI) - an organization rooted in inclusion, rights, and dignity for persons with disabilities, especially indigenous women and girls.

Today, she serves as the Executive Director of KDAI, and through our work, she carries forward the values and vision she learned from IWC. We educate, we advocate, we train, and we mobilize. We work to ensure that no one - regardless of ability - is left behind.

"My story is living proof that when young Indigenous women with disabilities are empowered, we don't just rise - we empower others. I am not just part of this movement. I am a product of it." She said.



## Representing grassroots women in the movement

### Salante Lebulkash, 'Ambassador of Change'

Salante Lebulkash commonly known as Mama Vincent and widely recognized as an Ambassador of Change, is a remarkable 65-year-old woman from Narasha village in Isiolo County, Kenya. For nearly a decade, Salante has been a beacon of hope and resilience for indigenous women in her community. Her journey began when she was identified for her leadership potential and offered an initial seeding grant by SWT, despite never having received any other form of funding before. With this support, she mobilized other indigenous women in her village and together they formed an umbrella body registered as a community-based organization - a milestone that marked a turning point for women's voices in her area.

Through her tireless advocacy, Salante has become known for championing women's rights, particularly in the context of land ownership and community development. Her work has seen her actively participate in leadership bootcamps, where she learned about her rights and gained the confidence to speak up on critical issues affecting her community. Under the Community Land Act, Salante's dedication was recognized when she was elected as a member of the Community Land Management Committee at Narasha community land - a role that solidified her position as a trusted leader and decision-maker.

Salante's influence goes far beyond land rights. She has fearlessly challenged harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and early forced marriage. She works relentlessly to rescue girls from these practices, ensuring they have the opportunity to continue their education and lead empowered lives.



Understanding that true empowerment is holistic, Salante has also focused on women's economic independence. She has led initiatives to develop ecotourism manyattas (traditional homes) that generate income for women, and has strengthened women's social networks through solidarity manyatta banks - community savings groups that uplift families economically and socially. Through her leadership, she guides a battalion of over 300 indigenous women, nurturing wellbeing, preserving indigenous wisdom, and promoting solidarity among women.

Salante's courage is matched by her ability to dismantle stigma. As a single mother, she overcame societal judgment to become a respected voice at tables of influence, mentoring other women to follow her path in entrepreneurship and leadership. In a deeply patriarchal society, she has earned the respect of her male counterparts, who now embrace her leadership and wisdom.

Through her indigenous knowledge and unwavering resolve, Salante Lebulkash continues to redefine what is possible for grassroots women leaders. She is, indeed, a tower of strength and a shining star for voices that were once forgotten, and her story reminds us that true change begins with those brave enough to stand up and lead their communities forward.



## A beacon of hope and resilience

### Naramat Indigenous Women Arboretum

The Naramat Indigenous Women Arboretum is a remarkable beacon of hope and resilience, established in early 2023 at the heart of Kipsing, Oldonyiro Ward, Isiolo County - one of Kenya's remotest and most vulnerable indigenous landscapes. Its birth came at a time of great crisis, following a prolonged and devastating drought that wiped out more than 95% of the livestock, including goats, sheep, cattle, and camels. This tragedy left the Samburu and Turkana pastoralist communities grappling with despair, their livelihoods shattered and families driven deeper into poverty. The consequences were severe: children were forced out of school, and incidences of gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, surged alarmingly. In the midst of these harsh realities, women bore the greatest burden.

Recognizing this urgent need for hope and dignity, the Samburu Women Trust (SWT) stepped forward with a vision to transform the crisis into an opportunity for recovery and empowerment. Thus, the Arboretum was founded - not merely as a space for planting trees, but as a living, breathing solution to climate change, economic recovery, and the empowerment of indigenous women.

At its core, the Arboretum aims to promote nature-based solutions that address climate change, create alternative livelihoods, empower indigenous women, and revitalize cultural and traditional knowledge. To bring this vision to life, it has implemented a diverse range of sustainable, culturally rooted programs. These include the cultivation of indigenous medicinal and cultural plants, kitchen gardening to improve household nutrition and income, and gum Arabic and resin harvesting. Community members also engage in beekeeping and honey production, collection and sale of Acacia pods and natural salt licks, and beadwork value addition and training, all of which provide women with new skills and economic opportunities.



Since its inception, the Arboretum has transformed both lives and landscapes across Kipsing and beyond. It has planted over 3,000 plant species, including 1,500 indigenous medicinal and cultural plants, directly contributing to the restoration of biodiversity. It has connected more than 5,000 households to a reliable water system, an achievement that has rippled through the community, improving daily life and productivity. The Arboretum employs seven local full-time staff members and has created opportunities for over 500 casual workers through its various programs.

Further demonstrating its commitment to community empowerment, the Arboretum has constructed a Youth Tech Hub that houses fifteen desktop computers, providing free Wi-Fi for learning, research, and remote work. This hub serves as a gateway for the community to connect with the wider world. Additionally, the Arboretum built an Indigenous Women's Hall capable of accommodating more than 150 women for empowerment forums, dialogues, and training sessions.

Support and training have been extended to seven women-led groups, equipping them with materials, skills, and crucial market linkages. Over 250 women have received training in beadwork, complete with tools and materials to expand their craft, while more than 300 women have been trained in quality gum Arabic and resin harvesting practices, supported with the necessary equipment. Kitchen gardening has enabled over 500 households to grow their own food for security and supplemental income, and the community beehives have already yielded more than 100 kilograms of natural honey.

Education and cultural revival are at the heart of the Arboretum's mission. More than 3,000 students have used the space as a learning hub for environmental conservation and indigenous plant knowledge, while over 5,000 community members have benefited from access to medicinal plants that support traditional healing practices and cultural continuity.



Ultimately, the Naramat Indigenous Women Arboretum stands as far more than a green space - it is a powerful symbol of community resilience, cultural revival, and women's leadership in climate action. It showcases how indigenous knowledge and environmental stewardship can work hand-in-hand to build sustainable futures, offering a living model for community-led climate adaptation and recovery.









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## **IWC @10 YEARS 2014 - 2024**

A decade of courage. 10 years of raising voices, claiming space, and creating opportunities for Indigenous women.

From ancestral roots to daughters' dreams, we've walked together - restoring dignity, hope, and justice.

This is more than a celebration. It's a legacy of resilience - and a promise for the future.

**With Love, Strength, and Solidarity.**

