

AFRICAN EXAMPLES

Blazing the trail of world leadership

By David Ohito



Kanyoro at an international conference

After almost 10 years at the helm of one of the world's largest and oldest women's organisation, Dr Musimbi Kanyoro is passing on the mantle with a broad smile.

As the first general secretary of the World Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), she is proud of her service to

women and girls of the world.

In September Kanyoro will take over as the director of the population programme at The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. The foundation is a private initiative that provides grants to non-profit making organisations dealing with conservation, science, population, children, family and community issues.

Earlier, she was the first African global executive director of the women's division of Lutheran World Federation.

Yet she speaks modestly of her achievement. "I am not extraordinary. The only difference is that I accepted the opportunity to care for young women," she says. Passionate about women empowerment Kanyoro, 51, has always been a first among equals since she graduated from University of Nairobi (UoN). Her dream is to make women leadership visible and valuable.

Time to change the patriarchal lines

During her tenure at the YWCA, Kanyoro steered the organisation to develop and adopt a global strategic plan to strengthen relationships with other international non-governmental organisations, the private sector, UN agencies, the World Bank, and faith-based organisations to leverage resources to improve the lives of women globally and to prioritise women's reproductive health and rights and HIV/Aids. It involved extensive work in 70 countries.

The YWCA empowers women and girls to lead social groups around the world. "It is time to change the patriarchal lines of leadership," says Kanyoro.

As general secretary, Kanyoro made it her duty to ensure that more women are involved in decision-making. She believes this is the only way to influence policies that have blocked the improvement of the lives of young women.

With offices in 122 countries YWCA assists more than 25 million women and girls annually.

Kanyoro has been involved in gender issues and human rights advocacy in all regions of the world. Living in Africa, the United States, and Europe has made her view herself differently. "Working and living abroad has made me more conscious of being African and Kenyan," she says.

She empathises with marginalised women. "Kenya has many skilled women who are as capable as men but they have not been given chance to develop their talents," she says.

She says women are carers and nurturers but they do not have equal leadership opportunities.

The issue of women and leadership will be on the agenda at the World Young Christian Women's Association conference to be held in Nairobi in July.

Kanyoro got involved with the YWCA when she was a teenager. She attended youth camps where she was given duties and taught importance of responsibility.

Today Kanyoro and her husband, Mr Muhungi Kanyoro, live in Geneva, Switzerland, with their two children. She has instilled the same sense of responsibilities on her children. They are involved in various clubs. "I believe it is important for young people to get involved in social activities beyond academics," she says.

After her primary education Kanyoro went to Alliance Girls' High School. On completing her 'A' level she went to UoN where she studied linguistics, philosophy and religious studies.

She later went to University of Texas in Austin, US, for postgraduate studies in linguistics. While there she received the Best Student Award, in Humanities. Earlier the Kenya chapter of the United Nations Student Movement gave her a Youth Award.

Kanyoro went to San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, California, where she attained a doctorate degree in Theology.

Gender roles can be changed



At the World Council of Churches Assembly with Kanyoro

She is a staunch Christian and theologian and draws inspiration from the Bible. As she speaks, she punctuates her conversation with verses from the Bible. "Then justice will dwell in the wilderness and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the fruit of righteousness will be peace and the result of righteousness, undisturbed security for ever," she

quotes Isaiah 32: 16-17.

She says the key words of this prophetic vision include the search for a new world order that is based on righteousness, justice, peace and undisturbed security. "A just society is one where men and women are united in their daily struggles and in the rewards too," Kanyoro says.

"Gender roles can be changed to suit the needs of the community," she says.

She says gender is culturally governed and believes cultural practices that discriminate against women should be eradicated. "What is this litany of the sorry state of African women? Are the women of Africa just sitting there waiting for a handout?" she poses.

Kanyoro argues that leadership is about creating change through individuals initiatives or collectively.

"For collective leadership to emerge, there are individuals who visualise, mobilise, invite others and manage diversity that results when more than one person is involved in something," she says. "Elected people have power because they have the trust of those who elected them."

African women want to come out of bondage

She believes leadership does not happen in a vacuum. "People need opportunities to exercise their leadership. They need community to make visible their leadership," she says.

Kaanyoro believes women's leadership over the centuries has been invisible because leadership is viewed from a gender-biased

point of view. She dismisses the myth that women are not good leaders. "Women ensure families function well and have the necessities for development."

She says women run the "caring industry". "They care for the sick, children and the elderly."

She believes women are good at resolving conflict and finding solutions to community problems — including such basic needs as fetching clean water in the village or getting a streetlight fixed in our estates.

"Throughout history women have been prioritising, budgeting, and developing action plans . We must make women's leadership visible by expanding the recognition of their contribution to leadership to cover both the so-called private and public spheres," Kanyoro says.

The award winning women's leader and gender activist believes that far from being helpless victims of hunger, disease and exploitation, as often portrayed, African women are simply searching for ways to come out of bondage.

Awards

Kanyoro won the 2006 Women, Leadership, and Human Dignity Award from Birmingham Southern College, in Alabama, US, for making a significant contribution to the advancement of human dignity.

Two years ago she was awarded the Presidential Award — The Head of State commendation. That same year she received three awards, including the Women of Substance Award from the African Women's Development Fund in Ghana and the World Vision and International Aids Trust's Global Leadership Award. She was also among 1,000 women nominees for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize. In 2003 she was awarded the Doctor of Humanities (Honoris Causa) by Philippine Christian University in Manila in recognition of distinguished accomplishments as theologian, church leader, civic worker, linguist and author.

In 2000 Kanyoro received the Wittenberg Award from US' Luther Institute for outstanding service to church and society.

She has also been awarded the Church Women United's Human Rights Award in recognition of commitment and dedication to women's rights and the Lutheran School of Theology Community Award in recognition of global service within the Lutheran World Federation.

With more than 100 published articles and books to her name, Kanyoro believes the best time for a country to reflect on leadership is just before elections. As Kenya heads for the General Election, she reminds voters that leadership is intricately connected to their ability to use their votes to influence change.

"People have different powers so that they can mobilise collective power throughout the world to invest in the future of girls," she says.

"The surest way to develop people is to include them in the practice of leadership where there is mentoring and learning," she says. This is an area where Kenyan political class have failed."

She says Kenyan leaders do not give others an opportunity. "Leadership is recycled. Political leaders go in to stay; they do not realise they have given birth to children who need to come into the next generation of leadership," she says.

Among the books she has written or edited are *Great Circle of Sisters*, *Grant Me Justice: HIV/Aids and Gender Reading of The Bible*, *Claiming the Promise: Africa Churches Speak*, and *Girls on Track: A Parent's Guide To Inspiring Our Daughters To Achieve*.

Prior to joining the Lutheran World Federation in Switzerland, Kanyoro taught at the UoN and worked as a linguistic consultant for the United Nations. She was the first woman translations consultant with the United Bible Societies, Africa Region.

Women will triumph

She is fluent in seven languages and has a working knowledge of several others.

She is a founding member of the Global Coalition on Women on Aids and is the president and board chair of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). She also serves on the board of the African Population and Health Research Centre.

She is a founding member of the Global Coalition on Women and Aids, an alliance of international youth organisations working to empower the youth against Aids and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.

She has contributed in the establishment of Aids programmes in 67 countries.

Kanyoro has also participated in a high level think tanks to map 'Scenarios for the Future' of Aids in Africa, and served as an

adviser in the Youth and HIV/Aids study of the Alan Guttmacher Institute and the Gender, Faith and HIV/Aids Initiative of Yale Divinity School.

She received Head of State Commendation in 2005 in recognition of international leadership, and the Global Leadership Award on HIV and Aids from the World Vision and International Aids Trust.

Kanyoro is also a member of Mandela Thinkers Forum, which reports to the Tony Blair Commission for Africa. The forum examines Africa's past present and future with a view to developing effective policies for Africa's development — including gender and Hiv/Aids, Governance and democracy, human rights, debt relief among others.

She believes women will soon triumph against discrimination. She says negotiating to ensure that women are represented at every level of public governance begins from kindergarten through parliaments, to businesses all the way to the United Nations.

Kanyoro says advocacy must show that women and men can come together for the common good. She says women's empowerment comes through working with international instruments developed at the UN and conceptualising them for use at local level.

Source: EASTANDARD