

It's a pity men feel threatened by women

As we gear up to mark International Women's Day on Tuesday, it is time to appreciate personalities that fight for the recognition and appreciation of women's rights. From the time she was a young woman, **NAOMI WAGEREKA** has been passionate about helping poor women access justice, and as the chairperson of Fida-Kenya, she has her work cut out. She spoke to **NJOKI CHEGE**

I joined the Federation of Women Lawyers - Kenya (Fida-Kenya) 14 years ago. I will admit that in the beginning, I also had the notion that it was an organisation of 'hard-headed' women, but the more I worked there, the more I felt like it was a family. I got to understand the core of Fida's existence, which is to make justice accessible to all women.

Fida-Kenya began as a group of women lawyers who wanted to help poor women who could not afford legal fees, let alone access a lawyer. In the beginning, they would walk up to the court corridors and help any woman who looked lost or stranded.

Women have always had issues of succession, divorce, child custody, maintenance, spousal abuse and inheritance among other matters, but many find themselves stuck in the corridors of justice without anyone to cry out to for help. That is why Fida exists, and it has been doing a great job representing women for the past 25 years.

Two years ago, I was appointed the chairperson of Fida-Kenya after serving as a council member for two years and treasurer for another two years. Being the chairperson has been quite a challenge considering we live in a patriarchal society where women have to liter-



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ally fight for their equal space in society. It's a pity men feel threatened by women; even educated men feel threatened by educated women!

GREAT OPPOSITION

When Fida-Kenya began, the greatest opposition came from male lawyers. If you look around in our country, all the

MY EARLY YEARS

For my primary school, I went to Kisili and I lived with my relatives. For my 'O' levels, I attended Ogande Girls' High School in South Nyaaza, which was in a hardship area. One of the memories I have of the school is fetching water from the nearby Ongaki Limbe River. That was difficult.

However, the fondest memory I have of my youthful years was winning the coveted 'Letter Writing Competition' organised by the Postal Corporation of Kenya. I wrote a letter titled 'A day in a postmaster's life', and it won me a trip to Nairobi to pick my award. I went with our headmistress.

Later, I joined Limuru Girls' High School for my 'A' levels. I passed and joined the University of Nairobi to pursue a Bachelors degree in Law. I must say our class was one of a kind, and I'm proud of the fact that I was in the same class with some of the greatest legal minds of today, such as Njoki Ndungu, Wilfred Nderitu and Jane Onyango among others.

I graduated in 1989 and was admitted to the bar shortly afterwards. I enrolled as an Advocate of the High Court in December, 1989 and started practising law in 1990.

I worked at the Attorney General's office as a State Counsel in the Public Trustee Department for two years, after which I moved to Kimani Kairu and Co Advocates and later to Waki and Company Advocates until 1996.

When I left them, I started my own firm, Wageroka N N & Company Advocates, and it still runs to date.

top jobs are reserved for men.

You will see this at the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (this has since changed), Interim Independent Electoral Commission, Interim Independent Boundaries Review Commission, the National Commission on Integration and Cohesion, the Waki Commission, the Ndungu Commission,

My son is the apple of my eye

In the 1990s, I met a man I thought I would grow old with. He was Vincent Emuru, a 30-something Ugandan lawyer. We dated for a while and I fell in love with him.

In 2000, we were blessed with a son. We planned to officiate our union two years later. In 2002, we set the date, booked the location, printed the cards, booked my wedding gown and the maids' outfits, and chose the wedding cake. I was so excited as I was going to marry the man of my dreams.

But just before we could walk down the aisle together, Vincent got sick and died. It was heartbreaking. I had built my world with him. With time, however, my pain was eased by the fact that he had left me with our son, Ken Michael, who is the apple of my eye.

My son is now eleven years old and we are very close. He is a mummy's boy. He is an incredibly brilliant young man. Somehow he knows I work for Fida-Kenya and he is very proud of the work I am doing. This inspires me to do my work with gusto because he has seen my efforts pay off.

VALUE SYSTEMS

From when he was very young, I have instilled in him the values of equality, and drummed into his mind the fact that girls and boys are equal.

I was born 46 years ago and brought up in Elburgon in Nakuru District. I'm the sixth born in a family of 12 children and both my parents were small-scale farmers.

I admire my mother's sheer strength and resilience, particularly after my father's death. She single-handedly managed to keep our family together and educate all my younger siblings after his death, which I consider a great achievement. It was from her that I got my value systems and integrity, which is key in my line of work.

I am currently not dating anyone, but I'd like to meet someone really special for companionship and a deep partnership, but not for marriage.

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Naomi with Gichugu MP during a past Fida-Kenya event. [PHOTOS: JONAH ONYANGO /STANDARD]

“I want women to get their rightful place in society and access justice any time, anywhere” (NAOMI WANGEREKA)

tion governance is equality, but that was not the case.

I believe women deserve these positions, not for the mere reason of gender balance, but because we are as qualified and as experienced as the men.

Men and women are both equal before the law, and I believe women deserve to be given a fair playing ground along with their male counterparts.

For instance, deserving women to the Chief Justice and or Attorney General's positions include Mary Anag'wa, Jane Onyango, Joyce Majiwa, Martha Koome and Dr Elizabeth Muli, among many others.

I sit in the advocates disciplinary committee and I can confidently say these women are of good conduct and worthy of the seats.

As a country, we have come far as far as women's representation is concerned, but we still have a long way to go because there are some harmful cultural practices that continue to prevail in this country.

There is female genital mutilation, women being widowed as a result of extra-judicial killings, spousal abuse, wid-

ow inheritance and girls being denied education.

My vision as Fida-Kenya's chairperson is that we totally emancipate women from the claws of injustice and gender inequality. I want women to get their rightful place in society and access justice any time, anywhere.

I also hope to have a Fida-Kenya office in every county so that women from Mandera and Wajir will not have to travel all the way to Nairobi to get justice.

SELFLESS LEADERS

I'm very excited about the new Constitution. Besides putting both men and women at par when it comes to equality, the Constitution offers a myriad of opportunities for people who would like to serve this country in various ways. The Nakuru County seems very promising for me and I'm seriously considering serving this county as governor.

Though the present leadership of this country may lack selfless leaders, I believe not all is lost. We need leaders with ideology and values, those who will take this country to the next level, and I remain hopeful.



and many others. It is a monopoly.

I look forward to the day when a woman will head a commission right from the beginning. For instance, we could have a female Attorney General or Chief Justice; or better yet, a woman president!

THE MINORITY

What men fail to realise is that women have been around for as long as they have, and women have proved to be worth their salt, but we are always left reeling in gender-based questions whenever a commission is set up and women are in the minority.

Even when the coalition government was formed, we hoped for a female vice-president or deputy prime minister, as we believed the core business of coal-