# **HUMAN SECURITY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CONTEXT OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY**

Haki Yetu is a human rights organization, founded in 2008 in Mombasa’s Bangladesh Slums. The organization, registered as a Charitable Trust, has offices in Mombasa (Star of the Sea Primary), Kilifi (Malindi) and Kwale. Haki Yetu’s core mandate is to amplify voices of the vulnerable and neglected members of the society, through legal representation, research and documentation, awareness creation, capacity building, and building strategic partnerships. Haki Yetu is currently working on four thematic areas: Land and Housing rights; Gender and Law; Governance and Accountability; and Cohesion and Transformation.

Haki Yetu’s goal is to address the realization of Human Rights and the insurance of access to justice for everybody, the transparent performance of accountable institutions, and the empowerment of communities to pro-actively take action and upholding values of integration and cohesion. Our main activities are the provision of capacity building, the mobilization, representation and advice of and for communities, facilitation of mediation- and dialogue processes, advocacy and sensitization.

The organization has successfully defended and protected communities from eminent evictions in Mombasa including at Kibarani, Bangladesh, Vikobani, Owino-uhuru among other settlements through legal representation. Through gender and law programme, the organization has assisted many survivors of Sexual and Gender Based Violence get justice, with upto 4 convictions of perpetrators of gender violence recorded in 2022 alone. We have supported the strengthening of governance and accountability structures in Kilifi, Kwale and Mombasa, by supporting the development of public participation frameworks, advocating for open governance and access to information.

Haki Yetu is guided by the values of Humility, Accountability, Restorative Justice and Collaboration.

This writeup looks at various dynamics of how poverty and inequality play a major role on human security of women and girls especially at the coast region of Kenya.

Kenya’s Coast region formerly the Coast province is divided into 6 counties. 5 of these counties share a coastline known for its beautiful sandy beaches. The region boasts a rich and diverse culture, and is home to over 4.5 million Kenyans. Despite its rich potential in natural resources, the region is one of the poorest. Wealth seems to be concentrated along the coastline, a majority of its residents living in beyond the 10-mile coastal strip live in abject poverty. Low literacy levels, drought/climate change, historical marginalization and retrogressive cultural practices have contributed to the high poverty levels experienced. A spiraling global economy occasioned by the impact of the Covid19 pandemic, the Ukraine/Russia way as well as impact of climate change has further impoverished residents of the coast region.

Women and Girls at the Coast, face a myriad of challenges, chief among them being discrimination, exposure to gender violence, early marriage, female genital mutilation, wife inheritance, child sex tourism etc. These issues pose a major challenge to their security and well-being.

Our organization has been in the forefront in addressing these inequalities amongst our women and girls when it comes to human security. We have created platform of engagement to address these gaps that exist and worked with the multisectoral approach and agencies.

## Causes of structural discrimination in the realization of human rights

Article 13 of ***The Maputo protocol*** adopted during the second ordinary session of the African Union Assembly of 11th July 2003, of the African charter on human and people’s rights on the rights of women in Africa, emphasizes on the Economic and social welfare rights of women. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is part of the International Human Rights Laws which aims to curb discrimination against women.[[1]](#footnote-1)

However, women and girls are still subject to a range of discriminatory laws which are open to discriminatory application, a situation which has only recently begun to change with the introduction of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010.

For the longest time women in Kenya particularly the coast region were not entitled to inheritance. Even though the constitution of Kenya 2010 and other laws have been amended to provide equal rights to inheritance, it is our view that the damage had been done and as such created and contributed to the gap in social-economic inequality.

It is next to impossible to discuss causes of structural discrimination without discussing poverty and primitive cultural practices especially in the coast region. This is because the scale of their impact as distinct causes of discrimination, and because of their impact results in multiple discrimination for many of those suffering disadvantage because of another aspect of their identity.

It is surprising that in this 21st century, people believe that educating girls and women is a waste of time and would rather prefer them being married off instead. This is still a strong primitive belief and is practiced in most remote interior parts of Kilifi and Kwale Counties. Most of the said regions still hold the belief that the role of a girl and woman is in the kitchen or *shamba* or married off to a man who will take care of their economic needs.

A 2006 report by UNDP explicitly linked Kenya’s weak progress against poverty reduction targets with income inequality, stating that reducing such inequalities would cut the time for the median household to pass the poverty line by 17 years, bringing “the country within touching distance of an otherwise unattainable Millennium Development Goal target of halving income poverty”

In the past Kenya compared to other nations there was still a high level of inequality towards women due to the gender gap but currently the state is slightly improving. In 2014/2015 financial year, approximately Kshs. 9.2 billion were executed out of Kshs. 17 billion representing 54.18%. This amount had benefited 1,896 youth, 2,313 women and 162 PWDs entrepreneurs.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Another cause of Discrimination rampant along the coast is on Grounds of Religion or Belief.

According to figures collected in the 2019 Census, 1 in 10 Kenyans identify as Muslim. The majority of this population reside in Coast and North Eastern Provinces which are home to Kenyan Somalis and a number of indigenous communities vulnerable to ethno-regional discrimination. These provinces are amongst the poorest and most vulnerable to famine, meaning that these communities are vulnerable to poverty and deprivation. Statics collected from among Somali Muslims in Isiolo, Mombasa and Wajir did not identify cases of discrimination on grounds of their religion, as opposed to their ethnicity.

## Implications for women’s and girls’ multiple human insecurities and vulnerability to experiencing human rights abuses

One of the main impacts of women and girls’ human insecurities is that it causes a cycle of marginalization in the generation to come. For instance, when a girl/woman is denied the opportunity to education, the likelihood for their children suffering the same fate is next to 100%. This creates a cycle of multiplication of all adversities created as a result of human insecurities.

To expand the discussion further take an instance of poverty, inequality and discrimination most women/girls in the coast region are subjected to within their tribes and communities. Poverty is often a cause of discrimination, with the most economically disadvantaged experiencing discrimination, disadvantage and inequality of access to basic amenities and public services on grounds of their poverty alone. On the other hand, poverty is also often a consequence of discrimination, with a range of groups, including women, persons with disabilities and indigenous communities falling into poverty as a consequence of the status-based discrimination they suffer.[[3]](#footnote-3) Finally, poverty can act as an aggravating factor, increasing the exposure to discrimination of persons already vulnerable because of an aspect of their identity. Women perform 66% of the world’s work, and produce 50% of the food, yet earn only 10% of the income and own 1% of the property. Whether the issue is improving education in the developing world, or fighting global climate change, or addressing nearly any other challenge we face, empowering women is a critical part of the equation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

## 3. Opportunities for strengthening women’s and girls’ human security and socioeconomic equality

Kenya adopted a new constitution 12 years ago. The constitution provides for gender equity in appointive and elective positions. While this principle is practiced substantially in appointive situations, it is yet to be fully embraced in elective positions. This is an opportunity that can be tapped to improved human security for women and girls.

Devolution of resources to the county level means women can access opportunities available and closer to them. There is improved service delivery as a result of devolution meaning women can access education and other services essential to human security.

Affirmative action: The constitution has provided for deliberate measures to improve the welfare of women. This includes the creation of the position of Women Representatives in the National Assembly, as well as the creation of funds, available to women and women groups for empowerment.

**Workshops and forums to facilitate participation of women in economic decision making and ensuring inclusion of women in decision making**

Women participation in decision making is not just a right, but also key to sustainable development. In a democracy, it is important that every part of the population is equally represented. Having both men and women involved in decision-making broadens the perspectives, increases creativity and innovation, diversifies the pool of talents and competences, reduces conflicts, and improves the process of decision-making. Indeed, women’s participation in decision making in general has benefits not only to women but to the general society as a whole. If we empower a woman, we empower the whole world, therefore there is need to promote unity amongst our women especially in working promoting co-existence amongst themselves.

**Policies and projects that facilitate women access to resources.**

More equitable access to assets and services - land, water, technology, innovation and credit, banking and financial services - will strengthen women’s rights, increase agricultural productivity, reduce hunger and promote economic growth. Infrastructure programmes should be designed to maximize poor women’s and girl’s access to the benefits of roads, transportation services, telecommunications, energy and water.

## 4. Recommendations for promoting and protecting women’s and girls’ human security, through addressing their condition of poverty and socioeconomic inequality due to systemic gender-based discrimination.

There is need for women economic empowerment strategies to enable women be independent and earn a living. Empowering women economically will enable women and girls to contribute to social, economic and political activities for holistic development.

There is also need for stakeholders from international, regional and national level to sensitize, build capacity amongst women for the achievement of their economic empowerment.

Enactment of policies to facilitate the application laws. E.g., women rights in land as embedded in the constitution.

Integrate and place institutions in the society for young teenage and adolescent mothers so that they may not be left out in education, social aspects of the society with the peers.

1. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women#:~:text=On%2018%20December%201979%2C%20the,twentieth%20country%20had%20ratified%20it>. Accessed 20th October, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://gender.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Women-Economic-Empowerment-Strategy-2020-2025-REVISED-10th-march.pdf> accessed 21st October, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Gender/Voice_and_agency_LOWRES.pdf> accessed 20th October, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Former President Bill Clinton addressing the annual meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative (September 2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)