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For Responsible Leadership

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Breaking the Cycle: Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya's Leadership in Leveraging Education to Empower Girls and Transform Communities

Executive Summary

Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya is a pioneering Kenyan leader, educator, activist, and social entrepreneur who has dedicated her life to advocating for the empowerment of girls in rural Kenya. In the Maasai region of Kenya, 80 per cent of girls undergo female genital mutilation (FGM) at puberty, 50 per cent are married before the age of 19, and only 17 per cent complete primary school.[1] Dr. Ntaiya recognizes that education for girls is the key to breaking the vicious cycle of harm and limited opportunity and can thus create lasting change. In 2008, Dr. Ntaiya founded Kakenya's Dream Foundation, an international nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting girls' education and challenging detrimental traditional practices such as FGM and child marriage. In 2009, she opened the Kakenya's Center for Excellence (KCE) to provide a safe and supportive environment for girls to learn and thrive during their formative years. Kakenya's Dream has served more than 8,000 youth through its three multipronged programs: the all-girls Center for Excellence boarding schools, Health and Leadership Trainings for community members, and the Network for Excellence, which supports the boarding school alumnae as they pursue higher education.

Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya's unique leadership is characterized by her open and positive communication style, patience, flexibility, and problem-solving skills. She has inspired and mobilized others in her community and beyond to support her cause and has remained resilient and committed to her goals despite facing opposition and setbacks. She strongly believes that education will empower young girls to advocate for themselves and become agents of change in their families, communities, and country.



Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya

is a world-renowned advocate for girls' health and human rights across the globe, and founder and president of Kakenya's Dream.



Empowerment Theory

Empowerment within the context of gender and development is best understood as a continually evolving, context-specific process, rather than a static end product. [2] It assumes distinct forms in various settings, influenced by both individual and environmental factors. Through empowerment, individuals, organizations, and communities gain mastery and control over their lives, eventually becoming active agents in shaping their environment. Empowerment represents a “lifelong and intergenerational process” for families, with social programs serving as only a stable starting point.[3] Empowerment and social change are intrinsically tied to the community. The concept of “interdependent self-sufficiency” underscores that isolation is neither possible nor desirable; individuals’ empowerment depends on a collaborative blend of self-accountability and communal support.[3] Child development research further underscores the importance of intangible services, such as empathetic relationships and a strengths-based approach, in empowerment strategies. These intangible services play a vital role in fostering a holistic view of empowerment, extending beyond economic self-sufficiency, and enhancing the overall quality of life, especially when material resources are limited.[3, p. 36]

Notably, international actors such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also recognize the value of community engagement and social behavior change, which empower individuals to protect their rights. This involves dialogues on social norms, working with various stakeholders, and fostering inclusive societies with people-centered decision-making and protective practices.[4]

Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya's empowerment initiatives and their transformative outcomes highlight the unique challenges inherent in effecting change within communities, as well as the opportunities they present. She is cognizant of the evolving, lifelong nature of the empowerment process and approaches it with adaptive goals and patience. Dr. Ntaiya recognizes that community support is at the heart of lasting change, and she effectively employs an open, positive communication style and flexibility to bridge the gap between her vision and the realities of her community.

Background

Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya's early life was marked by the overwhelming challenges of growing up as a girl in a traditional Maasai village in Kenya. At the age of five, she was promised to an older man for marriage, and by 13, she was expected to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM). Determined to pursue an education, she negotiated a deal with her father.[5] She agreed to submit to the cutting ceremony on the condition that she would be allowed to return to school. At a young age, Dr. Ntaiya possessed a remarkable sense of vision and agency. She could leverage her nuanced understanding of her culture: she knew that her father would prefer her to continue with her education rather than run away, which would have caused lifelong stigma from his community.

Leading up to this pivotal "deal," Dr. Ntaiya says that she reflected on two pictures, two possibilities.[6] The first was of her mother, who had to work tirelessly and face constant hardship to support her family. The second was of her female teachers at school, who embodied hope and empowerment; this was the image Dr. Ntaiya wanted to pursue. Her mother, who herself had to navigate and overcome oppressive gender norms, was a "strong female figure" in Dr. Ntaiya's life. Her mother grew up with brothers who had access to education, while she was denied it. Experiences of ridicule from men in the community pushed her to ensure that her daughters would live her dream, that they would not be "put in their place" but would be respected as equal members of the community. Dr. Ntaiya internalized her mother's belief that education is essential to achieving equality and she serves as a role model to inspire other girls.

Years later, Dr. Ntaiya once again did something unprecedented for a girl from her community. She negotiated to leave the village to attend college abroad, promising to use her education to benefit the village. She received a scholarship to Randolph-Macon College in Virginia and went on to receive her PhD in Education from the University of Pittsburgh in 2011.[7] During her time in college in the United States, her dream evolved from wanting to be a teacher in a classroom to wanting to invest in transformative education. In an interview with the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, Dr. Ntaiya explains how "the world opened up" to her.[8] She took classes in political science and international relations, learning about FGM, gender-based violence (GBV), and human rights, including the universal right to education. [8] Realizing that her own community was deeply afflicted by these issues, she knew that she had to return to make a difference. Dr. Ntaiya became the first youth advisor to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), yet, she says, "At some point, I thought well, I'm just talking and nothing is changing. So, I went back to my village to create a school for girls." [9]

Dr. Ntaiya has additionally used her platform to raise awareness about the



importance of girls' education globally. She has spoken at international forums such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the Clinton Global Initiative and has been recognized as a leading advocate for gender equality. Dr. Ntaiya was honored with the Vital Voices Global Leadership Award in 2008 and as a National Geographic Emerging Explorer in 2010. She was counted among one of Newsweek's "150 Women Who Shake the World" in 2011 and was named a Top Ten CNN Hero in 2013. She was also featured in Bill Gates' Heroes in the Field series in 2022 and Melinda French Gates' book, *The Moment of Lift*.



Kakenya's Dream

"An educated mind and a healthy body and soul are all necessary to truly empower a girl."

Kakenya's Dream has empowered thousands of girls and transformed rural communities through its programs focused on health, education, and leadership, which are aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

SDG #3 Good Health and Well-being

Kakenya's Dream provides comprehensive health education, youth-friendly sexual and reproductive care, and stigma-free mental health support to promote girls' overall well-being.

SDG #4 Quality Education

By offering educational opportunities to girls in marginalized communities, Kakenya's Dream encourages lifelong learning and enhances the prospects for their future success.

SDG #5 Gender Equality

Through holistic education, leadership training, and mentorship programs, Kakenya's Dream empowers students to become change agents in their communities, promoting gender equality and breaking down gender-based barriers.

The Kakenya Centers for Excellence (KCE I & II) boarding schools are one of the Foundation's key programs. They have been successful in reducing FGM and child marriage rates in the Maasai community, becoming a model for other communities in Kenya. The over 380 students that are currently enrolled are provided with safe dormitories, uniforms, books, and high-quality instruction in five core areas: languages, math, science, technical skills, and humanities.[10] In exchange, parents commit to not marrying off or subjecting their daughters to genital cutting while they are in school. Students are also encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities, including sports, debate, choir, and volunteer work. Between 2010 and 2017, KCE I was further expanded to offer art and science facilities, a multipurpose hall, and a library.[10] Furthermore, in 2022, the Center was ranked among the top 3 performing high schools in the sub-county on the national exam.[10]

Kakenya's Dream also runs Health and Leadership Training programs, called Jijiue ("know yourself"), training both boys and girls. The programs provide them with information about their bodies, health, legal rights, and life skills. These sessions cover gender equality, FGM, child marriage, sexual violence, reproductive and menstrual health, and self-defense, and have been held in over 162 schools.

The goals of the program are to increase awareness among children about their rights, including bodily integrity and freedom from violence, and to promote changes in social norms related to the human rights of girls and young women. Including boys in training programs is a valuable way for boys to learn about their own rights and health issues such as HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

According to Dr. Ntaiya, boys are also often unaware of the barriers faced by their female peers because these topics are considered “taboo” and not openly discussed in school or at home. Initiatives for Maasai boys and community members educate them on how child marriage and genital cutting harm girls as well as their entire community. By learning how gender challenges affect societies, boys can learn how female empowerment is a catalyst for broad community transformations, including economic growth that benefits all. Dr. Ntaiya emphasizes that educating boys is crucial for gender justice because boys become men, and training the next generation of men can help create spaces where women are truly accepted and trusted to lead.



Leadership Skills

Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya sat down for a conversation with a University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA) student, Aakriti Bikash Kumar, and Professor Julia Santucci, Director of the Johnson Institute for Responsible Leadership at GSPIA. The following section aims to underscore four critical skills that have shaped Dr. Ntaiya’s unique leadership style in driving community transformation by educating and empowering girls:

Open & Positive Communication
Patience
Flexibility
Problem-Solving

Open & Positive Communication

“There is a lot of education you have to do, and you have to be patient, and you have to accept that they [the community] are not going to change all the time, and I allow for that.” Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya values patience, empathy, and understanding when initiating dialogue as sustainable change comes from within a community, not without. She believes that her program for education and transformation thrives because the community owns and supports it. Indeed, the inaugural Kakenya Center for

Education (KCE) was built on land generously donated by the village elders, in Enoosaen in 2009.[10] When engaging with her community, Dr. Ntaiya acknowledges that her first attempt at dialogue may not resolve any issues or bring about tangible change; however, it is a crucial first step. She walks into every conversation with an open mind, knowing that she is there to understand the other party, not to impose immediate

transformations. By doing so, she creates an environment where all parties can voice their thoughts and opinions freely, leading to constructive dialogue and opportunities for mutual understanding.

Dr. Ntaiya adopts a 'positive' or 'strengths-based' approach to communication as she focuses on the positive outcomes, empowering individuals to forgo harmful community practices. Positive communication emphasizes the benefits and rewards of taking a particular action rather than dwelling on the negative consequences of not taking that action. This instills a sense of possibility and hope, shifting the focus to what can be achieved rather than what cannot. One of the most challenging issues Dr. Ntaiya has faced in her work is the deeply rooted cultural practice of FGM. She refrains from outright dismissal of community beliefs. Instead, Dr. Ntaiya asks questions that encourage introspection, such as, "Where does FGM come from? Why do we practice it?" By doing so, she challenges the community to reflect on, examine, and scrutinize their own beliefs and confront the root causes of the problem. Although initial resistance is common, Dr. Ntaiya's words often leave a lasting impact. Moreover, by emphasizing the deleterious impact of such practices on their own daughters, she personalizes the conversation, effortlessly transitioning from the "general" to the "personal." This allows for a more meaningful dialogue and paves the way for a deeper understanding and, eventually, change at the individual level. Consequently, community members take ownership of her message and further promote it. Dr. Ntaiya's communication style is a reminder of the importance of initiating dialogue, actively listening, demonstrating patience, and empathizing within leadership. These skills are especially indispensable when engaging in cross-cultural and inter-generational dialogue and negotiation, fostering cooperation and understanding among diverse groups.

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Patience

"At least we [girls] are going to school, at least women can have jobs. We are making strides, but it is a slow process. It takes generations." Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya understands that progress toward gender equality and women's rights in her community is a slow process that requires persistent effort and dialogue. At the outset of her work, Dr. Ntaiya encountered significant resistance and challenges, including the initial lack of interest and participation from the mothers in her meetings. Undeterred, she was determined to involve them in her initiatives, employing innovative strategies to gradually overcome the barriers that hindered their involvement. Dr. Ntaiya recounts how it took countless meetings and conversations with the community, the chief, and the men, before any consensus could be reached on a single request. Even now, she explains, despite the advancements made in promoting girls' education, retrogressive cultural norms still impede their progress. While the community may acknowledge the importance of education and job opportunities for women, it simultaneously expects them to conform to traditional roles of marriage and motherhood. Challenging these biases and stereotypes about the role of women in Maasai society necessitates a long-term commitment marked by patience and perseverance.

Dr. Ntaiya exemplifies patience in her approach to language and communication. She has consistently pushed for open and inclusive conversations, bringing both men and women into the fold to address gender-related issues. For instance, in tackling the complex issue of unplanned teen pregnancies, she identified the strong stigma around the concept of “birth control” and the prevalent narrative of “abstinence.” In many cases, however, these pregnancies were the result of sexual violence and limited access to contraception. Understanding this gap, Dr. Ntaiya engaged in extended dialogue with her community. She respects cultural sensitivities, approaches conversations with empathy, and gradually introduces alternative perspectives without causing resistance or backlash. Ultimately, Dr. Ntaiya trusts in the ripple effect of her efforts, she realizes that shifting the mindset of one person can have a cascading positive impact on others. Through accessible education and schooling for girls, she has shown the community that girls perform well, disproving myths that restrict their potential.



As Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya demonstrates, patience allows leaders to build trust and strong relationships within their team or community. By listening, understanding concerns, and engaging in dialogue, leaders can establish connections and build credibility, which is essential for influencing perspectives.

This facilitates collaboration and consensus-building as leaders can patiently work with stakeholders, encourage diverse views, and work towards finding common ground, thereby fostering a sense of collective ownership and responsibility. Patient leaders are able to celebrate small victories and incremental progress, understanding that each positive change contributes to the larger transformation they seek, while also, maintaining focus on the long-term vision to sustain their efforts over an extended period, against all odds.

Flexibility

Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya consistently demonstrates flexibility and adaptability in navigating societal norms that have historically limited the roles and aspirations of women. For many Maasai women themselves, the notion of a woman’s place being solely in the kitchen and tending to her husband is greatly entrenched. Since Dr. Ntaiya started pursuing her project, a new hurdle emerged: mothers who have never experienced having an adult daughter living in their home. Accustomed to the norm of child marriage and sending their daughters away at a young age, these mothers struggle to relate to an educated university-going woman who continues to live at home. Dr. Ntaiya has adapted her approach to accommodate such instances of evolving familial and community dynamics. She actively works with both the girls and their families, diligently striving for their empowerment while emphasizing the need for “trading off” or mutual concessions. She helps her students to develop effective and respectful strategies for approaching and engaging their parents. She firmly believes that her efforts as an educator cannot be fully realized within the confines of the classroom; she follows her girls’ entire empowerment journey, including their evolving relationships with their families as well as the wider community. When dealing with changing problems, leaders must be open

to new ideas and perspectives. Adaptability allows leaders to embrace innovation and creativity, exploring unconventional solutions and thinking beyond traditional boundaries. This flexibility in adapting strategies to fit new contexts and circumstances enables leaders to stay ahead and effectively lead through uncertainty. Dr. Ntaiya argues against siloing oneself into a singular role in a leadership capacity, as she traverses various roles from educator to confidant, and more.

“I have been fortunate because I grew up in the community. I know that I can decide to be [like] a woman who has never gone to school if I want to and I can be a woman who went to school. I can play with those roles because I have lived in those roles.”

Dr. Ntaiya is always mindful of the age and background of the other party, and she finds inventive ways to communicate and relate with mothers, grandmothers, and fathers, alike. By **leveraging her identity** as a Maasai woman who has experienced both traditional and modern roles firsthand, Dr. Ntaiya demonstrates deep consideration of cultural nuances and communicates in a way that promotes dialogue rather than condemnation. She consciously maintains her connection to the Maasai language, understanding that embracing her cultural roots and not appearing prideful is pivotal to successfully engaging with her community. Throughout her interactions with male leaders and village elders, Dr. Ntaiya has also observed the intrinsic desire for power and recognition. She acknowledges this and often allows them to take charge of meetings and

programs as long as it encourages ownership and contribution to the success of her initiatives. Flexibility allows leaders to adapt their leadership style to different individuals and circumstances. Recognizing that not everyone responds the same way, flexible leaders can tailor their communication, motivation, and problem-solving approaches to meet the diverse needs of their team or community. This fosters inclusivity and encourages individuals to participate in finding solutions.

Problem-Solving

Strong problem-solving skills enable leaders to identify, analyze, and evaluate the root cause of issues, and to develop effective solutions to overcome or mitigate them. Reflecting on the situation in her village in Kenya, Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya discovered that the government's existing scheme for free and compulsory primary education was inadequate, forgoing the quality of education. The classrooms were overcrowded, with one teacher for every 70 students, and there was a dearth of learning materials.

Girls were particularly marginalized in these large classes and were ultimately excluded from the education system. Dr. Ntaiya pursued a Ph.D. in Education to better understand how to create and implement policies and programs that



effectively encourage the learning and growth of girls in the classroom. The Centers for Excellence, KCE I and KCE II, have the lowest teacher-to-student ratios in the region, at 1:20 and 1:12 respectively. [10] Initially, Dr. Ntaiya faced numerous obstacles in setting up the Kakenya Center for Excellence (KCE), but her adaptive approach allowed her to transform these hurdles into opportunities for assessment and re-assessment, ensuring the evolving needs of her students were consistently met. She realized that education goes beyond academics, and that true empowerment requires a **holistic program** that addresses various aspects of a girl's life. To this end, Dr. Ntaiya established boarding facilities to address the issue of long distances between home and school, which was resulting in poor performance and retention rates. The boarding school further affirms these girls' very childhood: away from responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning for the family before coming to school. KCE provides food and medical check-ups to ensure that the girls are well-nourished and healthy, vital for attentiveness in class. KCE also advocates for skills such as self-defense training and for every girl to have a teacher who believes in her and encourages her to pursue her dreams.

In addition to providing the core academic curriculum, the schools offer peer mentorship, leadership and life-skills training, and education on legal rights, empowering girls to advocate for themselves. Dr. Ntaiya's holistic program also emphasizes nurturing a strong cultural connection with Maasai heritage, incorporating Maasai beadwork, farming techniques, music, and dance. Recognizing that girls need support throughout their educational journey, Dr. Ntaiya established the Network for Excellence program in 2014. This program provides counseling, career guidance, scholarships, and financial aid to KCE alumni making the

critical transition to secondary and tertiary education. As a result of these efforts, there is a 100% transition rate from primary to secondary education, and an 87% transition rate from secondary to tertiary education.[10]



With the launch of the Health and Leadership Training programs, too, Dr. Ntaiya faced challenges: inadequate time per lesson, large class sizes, and varying age compositions. In response, she sought additional time from school administrators, divided students into smaller groups, and adapted age-appropriate material to deliver the best training possible.[11] These efforts demonstrate her dedication to finding tailored solutions to the ever-evolving demands of effective programming in her community. Dr. Ntaiya's adaptive approach and problem-solving skills are also evident in her timely response to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and protracted school closures, which resulted in an uptick in unintended teen pregnancies in her county. The county's rate of teen pregnancy was already the highest in Kenya, standing at 40 per cent before the onset of the pandemic. She launched the Linda Dada Campaign ("protect a sister") to provide in-depth education and raise awareness about the issue, forging cross-sectoral partnerships with communities, government officials, religious leaders, parents, and the youth. [12] The Campaign also partnered with local media to disseminate this information via radio and television messaging to drive

behavior change within the adolescent community. Furthermore, following the temporary closure of the KCE boarding schools, Dr. Ntaiya took proactive measures by initiating the Angaza Project, an emergency response program aimed at addressing the immediate needs of the students during their time away from the school's support system. The project involved regular wellness checks to ensure the well-being of the girls, and over 3,000 monthly care packages were distributed to provide essential items that the girls lacked at home. [13] These included menstrual hygiene products, food provisions for the girls and their families, solar lights and radios, and academic materials to support their continued education.



Conclusion

For Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya, the ultimate goal is “total liberation” for girls and women everywhere. Her leadership is distinguished by her open and positive communication style, unwavering patience, remarkable flexibility, and problem-solving skills. These qualities greatly contribute to the effectiveness of her work. Her ability to analyze and address challenges, engage in meaningful dialogue, and adapt her approach ensures that her initiatives have a lasting impact on the lives of girls in her community. As a leader, Dr. Ntaiya recognizes the challenges that women face in a society where restrictive traditional norms have existed for generations. Despite these challenges, she remains focused on her goal of creating space for women and breaking down the barriers that prevent them from being fully accepted as leaders. Through her efforts, she hopes to “plant seeds of change” that will continue to grow and flourish in the years to come. While there is still much work to be done, Dr. Ntaiya's work with Kakenya's Dream is a testament to her leadership and her dedication to empowering girls to succeed.

Discussion Questions

- **Besides the leadership skills highlighted in this case, can you identify any additional skills that could prove beneficial in navigating cross-cultural settings?**
- **What steps can leaders and organizations take steps to bridge the gap and establish stronger connections with the communities they aim to bring about change within?**
- **What social issues are you passionate about? How would you apply Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya's skills and approaches to your specific case, especially when addressing community resistance to change?**

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