

believes that they too can follow in her footsteps and succeed. All they need is take a step of faith, believe in themselves and fight for the right to make a choice in life.

She has had to rise above how her culture and religion to tackle the issue of female leadership. "At times I am forced to stand in front of the district administration and community elders, among them my own dad, and give advice or deliberate on the way forward for peace in Marsabit. This in itself is against my society's cultural norms. Islamic on the other hand, does not allow women to address men. Women can only be seen and not heard. This is a big challenge, which made my work difficult in the beginning. Currently the people are coming to terms with the fact that I have to do what I am doing."

Having disobeyed culture

and chosen education over early marriage, Fatuma emerged the first female lawyer in her community. This does not however elicit the expected celebration it would ordinarily. "My community considered law a preserve for men but I took it anyway. I broke down in tears when I graduated. I had accomplished one dream in my life. Never in my entire college life had I thought I would complete my studies and become who I am today: a role model not only to girls in Marsabit, but in the entire eastern Kenya and southern Ethiopia." Because of her being in the public's eye, Fatuma's unmarried status is one other issue she has to explain daily. "Most girls my age got married at a very tender age, mostly against their will. Education for girls is seen as a waste of resources, and taking a girl to university is simply absurd." This journey has made Fatuma, an alumnus of the United States International Visitor Leadership Programme (IVLP), overcome fear. She knows too well that women from northern Kenya can make it as professionals and above all, exercise choice. The choice she made by rejecting early marriage, a brave stab at culture, to better herself first. "I am proud to be single and able

to challenge society from within. I live amongst my people and work with them to change the situation of the poor and marginalised women," she emphasises.

A thirty-year-old woman with the kind of education and exposure Fatuma has would easily live a comfortable professional life in any city in the world. One wonders why she chose to return to work from her semi arid home. She states her answer simply; "I am committed to my community. This is the life I chose; if this life of sacrifice

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helps save one girl's life, then so be it." HODI operates from a small room and not the large glamorous office one would expect of a lawyer or an NGO for that matter. "Greatness does not drive me. What drives me is what I do and how it impacts the lives of women and children impoverished by war and drought. It is more than just work; it is a passion or calling beyond my professional line of duty to see and influence change in northern Kenya."

Although her work is beneficial to the community, Fatuma has to contend with constant threats and sabotage, even when creating awareness on benefits of devolved funds. "Threats and protests often slow down my work, but I have never given up my search for justice and fairness. I have been threatened with death in my search for peace but I am not about to give up for as long as women and children continue to die. One way or another we have to find a way of living together in our society."

Cases of defilement and rape scare Fatuma. "The community exercises bias and injustice on cases of sexual abuse. A defiled girl is bought a dress then forced to marry the rapist without any exchange of dowry. You can imagine the kind of torture the girl undergoes..." Fatuma desires a justice system. She

believes such practices strengthen the poverty cycle since uneducated young brides cannot do much but live a life of limitations. "Their options to survive include selling firewood or *miraa*, burning charcoal and even brewing and selling *chang'aa*. When pushed beyond limit, they turn to illicit sexual practices for money or gifts to help feed their children," she explains.

Northern Kenya women and children are used to settle tribal wars. "Culturally men battle it out with other men at war but war currently has a different

meaning to my people. Women and children are killed to instigate more pain and suffering to the warriors in the community. When a woman or child is killed the community is compensated at half the price of men, so it is cheaper to

kill more women and children than men." Women's woes do not end at marriage, in the case of a husband's death, a wife, considered part of his wealth, gets inherited alongside other property.

Fatuma believes only education for girls, can address the challenges women in her community endure. Education will broaden their perspective of issues, especially gender based discrimination, and enable them stand up for their rights. She says, "women have to stand up and speak out about issues affecting them, and until the silence is broken, change cannot and will not be effected."

Women continue to suffer in northern Kenya because the country's laws are not uniformly applicable. As a result, legal responsibilities and liberties do not trickle down to the *mwananchi* in some rural areas. "The other step that can hopefully put an end to all this suffering is to have professional women from the region reach out to younger ones to mould and mentor them. Building bridges not walls will enable them reach out and influence change in the lives of suffering women of northern Kenya," concludes Fatuma. ●