

# Betty Okero: We must fight femicide, State abductions and police brutality

Betty Okero is the Executive Director of the Civil Society Organization Network (CSO) in Kisumu. She recently spoke with **JAEL MUSUMBA** about her journey, the challenges of serving humanity, and her insights into the rising cases of gender-based violence.

**T**ell us about yourself and what inspired your journey into human rights advocacy and democratic governance.

I wear many hats: daughter, wife, mother, aunt, sister, friend, colleague, and ally. These roles have shaped my life and guided me in becoming a human rights advocate—not in the legal sense, but through my work promoting, protecting, and defending human rights. My journey into advocacy stems from my upbringing and the belief in the inherent dignity of every individual.

My grandmother, a firm believer in helping the less fortunate, instilled in me the values of sharing, giving, and keeping doors open for those in need. While I didn't fully understand it then, I now see how this philosophy laid the foundation for my commitment to human dignity.

The post-election violence of 2008 solidified my path in human rights work. Supporting survivors and demanding justice and accountability opened my eyes to the sacred covenant between the State and citizens. Working with women survivors during that time inspired me to dedicate my career to empowering women and girls to reclaim their voices and fight for justice.

**What initiatives are in place during this year's 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence?**

This year, our organisation continues to provide platforms for engagement with duty bearers to review and strengthen the delivery of justice for GBV survivors. We are engaging with multi-stakeholder platforms, such as Court Users Committees and Gender Sector Working Groups, to address challenges victims face, whether they involve sexual, economic, or social violence.

Recognising the link between poverty and GBV, we've organised community dialogues to discuss triggers of violence and conflict. We've also been instrumental in the launch of the Vihiga County Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Policy—a legal framework addressing GBV.

Our initiatives include capacity building for duty bearers like police officers, investigators, prosecutors,

and county officials in health, gender, and budget departments. These activities focus on improving protection, prevention, response, and management of GBV cases.

**What are your thoughts on the rise in femicide cases?**

The rise in femicide is alarming. It reflects an extreme form of GBV, often accompanied by victim shaming. This normalisation is dangerous and fosters impunity. Addressing femicide requires acknowledging its cultural, economic, and social underpinnings, which perpetuate toxic relationships and silence victims.

Femicide is predominantly carried out by intimate or known partners. Many victims endure long-term abuse in silence, often feeling unsupported. The lack of convictions emboldens perpetrators and discourages victims from reporting abuse.

Thanks to women's movements, awareness of femicide is growing. Male allies are increasingly joining the fight, challenging harmful cultural practices and promoting healthier relationships. We are seeing our brothers, sons and partners walking by our side in unity, protesting against femicide, jointly working to challenge culture and change perceptions and attitude. This collective effort is vital in eradicating femicide.

**A member of the Court Users Committee who is also a child protection officer in Kakamega County says there has been a rise in gender-based violence in Western, especially child abuse. What**

**could be the cause and what are you doing to ensure the situation is controlled and victims get justice?**

Child abuse, particularly defilement, has risen due to cultural norms, economic vulnerability, and poverty. In many cases, violations are settled out of court through financial arrangements, often under pressure from family members.

Through collaboration with organisations like Rising to Greatness and MeTa, supported by partners like the Embassy of the Netherlands and UNDP, CSO Network is amplifying cases and providing support to

ensure justice in Kakamega. Our approach includes education, advocacy, and partnerships with the Judiciary, police, and health centres to enhance the justice process. Community members and the media also play a critical role in raising visibility and supporting survivors.

**Has the government done enough to protect women and children from violence?**

Nobody who has died because of violence asked for it, neither do they plan or encourage death on themselves. As a county we should be committed to eradicating violence and I believe it is possible that both national and county governments do more to protect women and girls.

We must invest in community awareness programmes to address the social and cultural norms that promote GBV and help women and girls have greater access to quality health care responses, expedite cases filed in court, more provision for economic programmes leading to financial independence, safe spaces, shelters, provision of psycho-social support and regular media advocacy and demand for accountability about femicide. We, as a country, need to be so indignant about any death and refuse to tolerate what some of us consider a pass due to inaction.

While Kenya has strong legal frameworks for GBV prevention, protection, and response, there is a significant gap in implementation and enforcement. Greater investment is needed in community awareness,

expedited court cases, safe spaces, shelters, psycho-social support, and economic empowerment programmes.

The recent pledge by the President to address femicide is a positive step, but we must hold the government accountable to ensure these promises translate into action.

**What are the most pressing human rights issues in Kenya today, and how can they be addressed?**

The connection between what we have witnessed as human rights violation and the political, social and economic connection requires

that a number of interventions will have to be instituted. From reforming our institutions, to promoting transparency, holding people accountable and demanding justice. However, I would like to dial back to the Gen Z movement and the shocking display of police brutality, blatant abduction, killings, torture and disappearance of Kenyans, especially the youth. These abuses undermine democracy and human rights.

Then there is Gender-based violence which seem to be normalised in many communities. And finally land rights violations: Women face displacement and dispossession, which exacerbates poverty and insecurity.

Addressing these issues requires institutional reforms, increased budget allocations, stronger enforcement of laws, and community-driven initiatives that prioritise the most vulnerable.

**How do human rights and democratic governance intersect?**

Human rights underpin democracy, which relies on governance structures that protect these rights. Kenya's Constitution provides a robust framework for safeguarding individual freedoms and ensuring accountability. However, when the government fails to uphold these rights, it erodes its legitimacy and risks instability.

**What role do international organisations and civil society play in this space?**

Civil society and international organisations are vital in promoting accountability, defending rights, and advocating for institutional reforms. They also act as watchdogs against State overreach and empower citizens to demand transparency and justice.

**What advice would you give to young people interested in human rights advocacy?**

Young people are already demonstrating their commitment to shaping Kenya's future. My advice to them is to build strong movements, forge partnerships, and write their own story based on equality, fairness, and justice. They have the power to create a more equitable and democratic Kenya.

**How can individuals and communities support human rights and democracy?**

By standing in solidarity with victims, amplifying their voices, and challenging harmful norms, individuals and communities can become powerful advocates for change. Let us refuse to normalise injustice and instead work collectively to uphold the dignity and rights of all.



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Betty Okero, Executive Director CSO