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Florence Oloo: Recognized and awarded in Madrid for the 'Jakana Women Empowerment Program'

Florence Oloo, a Professor of Chemistry at the Technical University of Kenya (TUK) and a founding member of the Nano Medicine Platform at the Center for Research in Therapeutic Sciences (CREATES) has been awarded at the fourteenth edition of Harambee: The

African Woman Prize, for the Promotion and Equality of Women.

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Besides being an accomplished academic, Florence initiated the Jakana Women Empowerment Program in Kisumu County for which she received the *ONGD Harambee prize*. [Harambee is a Swahili word which means "all together"].

The program targets disadvantaged and vulnerable women in Kanyawegi, Kisumu County. These women are mentored and equipped with leadership and entrepreneurial skillsets to propel them towards economic self-sufficiency.

Most of the young women in the Kanyawegi area are unable to

transition to either secondary or tertiary education due to poverty. Consequently, they are exposed to early marriages, teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and gender based violence. These arise because parents easily let go of their daughters mostly to older men as second or third wives in order to get dowry, which temporarily settles the financial burdens in the homestead. Typically, such money is used to educate the boy child in the home besides catering for other expenses. Women in such marriages tend to be fully dependent on their husbands for their upkeep. In other situations, the young women are easily lured by moneyed men or boda boda riders (motorcycle transport providers) to engage in sexual relations in exchange for money that they use to cater for their basic needs.

Entrepreneurship and Self-Leadership

Through the Jakana Women Empowerment Program, which began in 2022, Florence and her colleagues impart self-leadership, entrepreneurship, bakery and pastry arts skills on the women enrolled in the program. These skills improve their professional qualifications, self-esteem and self-confidence. The program runs over a period of 3 months and each cohort consists of 25-30 women.

“A few weeks after starting the program, the girls already look happier and more confident. Some, who arrived on the first day with very little self-worth, already manifest a change not only in their appearance but in their attitudes within the first month,” Florence says. Although it is a slow task, Florence affirms that the positive outcomes of the program interventions are evident. For instance, a considerable number of

the young women began businesses within 6 weeks of the training program, subsequently contributing to the family income, while others grew their small-scale businesses. Notable improvements were also evident with regards to family and spousal relationships.

A member of Ethics committees that uphold human rights, health and safety protocols in Kenya

Another reason for which Florence was awarded the Harambee Prize is respect for dignity and human rights, practiced through different ethics committees she forms part of. These committees supervise and ensure that scientists involved in research in Kenya comply with the health and safety protocols.

The committees safeguard the rights of research participants in accordance with international standards, fight against scientific

corruption by deterring the falsification of data, ensuring participants' rights and privacy are respected and that the results of scientific research are genuine. Further, in cases where research participants are exploited, the committees have the power to terminate studies.

During her trip to Spain to receive the award, Florence had a meeting with the students of the Faculty of Medicine of the Catholic University in Valencia. She shared with them her academic and professional journey. She also had meetings with the President of the Association of Valencian Journalists, Héctor González, and journalists from different media houses. She ended her stay with a solidarity meeting with women entrepreneurs where she spoke about the *Jakana Women Empowerment Program*. The meeting was held at the Colegio Mayor

Saomar and among the attendees were the Senegalese Papa Balla Ndong, Director of MIRLAB and Vice President of SIETAR Spain and Rita Jacome, Director of IECO, Institute for Ethics and Communication in Organizations.

Florence stated that she will dedicate the Harambee award to the *Jakana Women Empowerment Program* to promote access to education for young women in the rural areas of Kisumu County.

Well-wishers can donate to the Jakana Women Empowerment Program on the details below:

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