

MY STORY: Building a world free from gender-based violence

After suffering from a lack of support and post-rape care, Wangu Kanja started the Wangu Kanja Foundation to help other survivors access adequate help.

Wangu Kanja was raped in 2002 after a carjacking incident. "I was with my two male friends. It was 10p.m," she remembers. "The four, male carjackers ambushed us at our gate. They had guns. They took our valuables then drove around with us for a while until we got to City Stadium roundabout. Two remained behind as the other two went to the ATM with our cards. They let my friends go. One of the men I was left with raped me." Wangu rubs the ring on the middle finger of her left hand as she speaks.

"Everything went pitch black. It was around 6a.m by the time the other two men returned. They gave me 100 bob to take a *matatu* home. I was numb."

Wangu met two policemen in their patrol car when she got off the *matatu*. "I reported it to them. They told me I must have been drunk when it happened. In the OB [Occurrence Book] at the police station, they recorded it as robbery with violence." Wangu's sister helped her in the early hours after the ordeal: "She took me to hospital. I knew I had to get a post-rape exam within 72 hours. Later, at around noon, I met with my aunt who connected me to a counsellor for a session. I bought ARVs and other drugs then returned to my house. I wanted to feel safe. I took two months off from work."

Wangu didn't know how to cope with the trauma. She sunk into depression and became an alcoholic. "Everything fell apart. I was very angry. I went through the motions of work-bar-home, work-bar-home for two years."

Then it struck her that she could use her experience to help other people in similar position. "I registered Wangu Kanja Foundation in 2005, juggling it with my day job. I got a diploma in counselling, and trained on how to run a non-profit. I went through a restoration program in 2012 that finally helped me deal with the anger."

Wangu insists to leave the rape ordeal in the past. She now moves forward and into the future – she uses the Foundation to give support to other survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Support she didn't receive. "We reach out to men, women, boys and girls of any age, and their families – any survivor who has been raped, defiled, battered, threatened, neglected, forced into marriage, undergone an unsafe abortion."

One of Wangu's top agendas for the Foundation is to create sustainable measures that will prevent sexual and gender-based violence. "The Foundation is here for several reasons: to give survivors a safe haven; to give them emotional support through counselling; to create awareness of this violation; to help survivors get legal redress against the perpetrator; to empower them with business knowhow. What I want is to make the community safe for men and women, boys and girls. A community free from all forms of violence.

“There is a huge financial burden that comes with sexual and gender-based violence,” Wangu continues. “And not just the direct costs that affect the survivor and their immediate family; there are other indirect costs that affect the entire community. There was a study done last year that quantified these costs: There are the medically related expenses, mostly drugs and medical attention. There are the costs of reporting to the community and police. There’s the loss of productivity that comes with the injuries. The total economic burden to the economy annually is Shs46 billion.”

Wangu’s vision for her Foundation is to go to the root cause of sexual and gender-based violence, and slash this figure significantly. “Prevention,” she emphasises.

“To date,” says Wangu, “the Foundation has reached about 20,000 people directly and indirectly. We’ve offered comprehensive care and support to 277 survivors. We work directly with 100 women now, 10 of these women have been taught how to make and sell peanut butter.” I later see their shop and buy a tub.

Catherine Kamau has worked at the Foundation for two years. “I handle finance, admin and any other duties to support Wangu,” she says. “I am one of the three permanent employees here, together with Anastasia and Joshua.” Catherine manages the backend of their SMS-hotline platform, has trained as a paralegal and is one of the first points of contact when survivors walk through their doors. I ask Catherine where she draws the strength to continue in this cause. She underscores Wangu’s sentiments: “It’s when one of our survivors tells us we helped them. Some don’t even have to tell us – sometimes they return here a few months after their ordeal and you can see for yourself the change in their face. This keeps me going.”

The original version of this article first run in the Saturday Nation Magazine on 4 March 2017. The article was written by Florence Bett.