

# Lone crusader fighting for women rights

By NGIGI KAMAU

**E**conomic empowerment is a viable solution to poverty or limited growth syndrome currently being experienced in Kenya. Women have been known to succumb to increased levels of poverty given their exposure to greater levels of discrimination. Women are seldom in a position to earn income and rely fully on their partners for financial support. Even presently, the reality is that women fear violence and will readily hand over any earnings when forced to.

"This accelerates denied access to financial resources in the household and subsequent lack of control on a large-scale and limited social and fiscal development on the other, thus escalating poverty among Kenyan women are the majority," says Lucy Odipo, director of Little Bees Primary School, Nairobi, and also a village elder.

For a long time Kenyans have been talking about their rights but none of them really knows what these rights are and where to seek redress when they are violated, laments Odipo. However, before giving their opinion, Kenyans should know exactly what human rights entail. Human rights can mean either natural or civil rights. Human rights are those basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity. To violate an individual's human right is to treat the person as though she or he is not a human being.

The right to property and freedom of religion, speech and movement, among other basic factors, encompasses the rights of a human being. She says a two-day conference held in Nairobi recently set the pace for the policy of human rights. The policy and action plan will improve protection of human rights and guide the implementation of human rights within Kenyan borders.

"The national policy and action plan for protection and promotion of human rights is a strategic document that will elaborate broad human rights principles and implementation plan that will give guidance to the Government and other actors in carrying programmes that enhance better realisation and enjoyment of human rights in Kenya," says Odipo.

Kenya has worked on the document for more than 10 years since it became a signatory to the Vienna declaration and programme of action on June 25, 1993, which required all states to fulfil their obligation to promote universal respect for and observance and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all in accordance with the charter of the United Nations.

Human rights and fundamental freedoms are the birthrights of all human beings, their protection and promotion is the first responsibility of governments. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Women are demanding that issues of injustice be addressed right from access to education to their sexuality and how it relates to society since the country is witnessing unprecedented levels of sexual violence.

One out of 12 women is forced out of employment after being sexually harassed. Odipo is all praises for nominated MP Njoki Nding'u who moved the Sexual Offences Bill and Justice minister Martha Karua who walked out of Parliament to protest remarks by one of the male MPs.

Odipo also praises the League of Kenyan Women Voters which has developed Kenya women's manifesto, which is spearheaded by Ida Odinga, Dr Julia Ojiambo just to mention a few.

In the year 2004 she rescued two children from a pastor who had locked them in the house for three months. In 2005 she rescued a two-year-old baby who had been stolen by a woman who was later arrested and charged in court. She said she took the children to Dagoretti Children's Home. Also in that year she



**Lucy Odipo with Peter Gichui whom she rescued after the boy was dumped by his aunt - NGIGI KAMAU**

rescued a woman who was raped by five men and seven girls who were defiled by a gang of men at Madoya slums, Huruma estate in Nairobi.

Last month, Odipo rescued a seven-year-old girl who was raped by unknown persons and dumped her by the riverside of Madoya bridge in Huruma estate. She took the girl to Mathare North dispensary and Nairobi Women's Hospital.

Last month, too, she led police officers who arrested a woman who was trafficking young girls to Mombasa for sexual exploitation. They managed to rescue three girls under 14 years; also she has managed to get a girl who got lost in 1997 in Huruma estate, Nairobi.

The girl was found in Kakamega town. Also in 1997, she managed to change the lives of 40 youth gangsters who later left the life of crime. She bought wheel barrows for them and now they are garbage collectors. Odipo has done a lot to improve the lives of Madoya people.

She cries for help from the Government and other senior women in the country so that she can reach her goal. Above all, she is the founder of the Little Bees Self-Help Project, a primary school that helps orphans and poor children get education. She says she has a number of

children who are affected by HIV/Aids.

"Key policy shift, for instance, enactment of the political parties Bill and Domestic Violence Bill, will definitely see more women ascend to key decision-making positions in the country," says Odipo. She is asking where the children lawyers are, since, she says, it is very hard for a child to win a case against an adult.

Also, she doesn't understand why the Government baits rapists, because he can kill the accuser to cover the crime.

She is calling for women to support her to pressure the Government to enact bills on domestic child labour and gender.

Adequate funds should be allocated towards looking into the issue of zero-tolerance to gender-based violence, including provision of women friendly services such as shelters and other support for girls and women subjected to violence.

There must be preventive measures that address men roles and legislative reforms and gender training for those who enforce the laws. Kenyans should understand that equality for women is the basis of advancing human rights.