

Tunaweza! (We can do it!)



It was the day following announcement of the Presidential election results in Kenya in 2007, and tensions were very high. Violence broke out sporadically around the country, but especially in Nairobi's slums.

I received a distressed call from a woman I didn't know, saying, "Madam, I need you...the women of my village need you!" I knew immediately that it was not the time to ask questions but get to the women as fast as possible. As I rode on the back of a 'bodaboda' (motorcycle taxi) and meandered the alleys of Nairobi's slums, I could see the distraction, feel the fear, and smell the violence.

When I reached my destination, a woman in her late thirties or early forties met me, and without even the traditional handshake she ushered me into a large hall that could seat 200 people. There were only a handful of women when I started speaking, and then more began coming into the hall. Within no time, 10 women became 30, then 60. Soon, all the seats were occupied and the hall was overflowing with women standing as well. They narrated personal ordeals of violence one after another, young and old, ranging from sexual and physical violence to displacement and harassment.

One woman in her seventies shared how she had been sexually violated by a group of young men her grandson's age. She felt ashamed and dirty, and as she narrated her story, I got sick to my stomach and became weak. I was speechless and my whole body became numb. The room that was full and well lit, suddenly felt empty and dark. I could see then why the women had called me. But I wondered to myself, "What I was going to do? What I could actually do?!"

I looked directly into the eyes of all the women in a moment of deafening silence, and then suddenly I knew what I needed to do. I needed to reassure them that their lives and wellbeing mattered, and that I was there because I cared. Slowly, the woman who called me stood up and started walking towards me with both hands raised and shouted 'Tunaweza!' (We can do it!)

One after another, the women each called out *Tunaweza!* and in no time, everyone was shouting *Tunaweza! ... Tunaweza!* Only at that point did it dawn on me that I was even there and that was what mattered! I stood up and followed suit, raising my hands and joining in the chorus of *Tunaweza!* Looking each woman in the eye, I saw a sudden sense of hope and determination to fight for one another. And with this, the *Tunaweza* Safe Space for Women by Women was born.

I rode *bodabodas* many times visiting this group and each time the group grew in numbers. Some men also joined in, all resolving to never again be divided because of a political process. The worst is not over and may never be over for women, but as I look back on this journey, my eyes tear up as I behold the power of women who have gone through hell, coming together and instead of only sympathising with each other, they also resolve to be front-liners in peacebuilding. I showed up for these women, and that is what mattered. You too can show up for your community ... *Tunaweza!*

*Betty Adera is a Kenyan peace and justice advocate, actively working with women and youth in creating awareness and reducing new incidences of gender-based violence. Through Betty Adera Foundation, she conducts mentorship and capacity building for survivors of violence and those at risk of violence, empowering them to bring in and seek solutions for people battling similar issues.*