



A small women's group in the heart of Kenya is saying the unsayable and acting as a forceful lobby for change at national level



## AFRICAN QUEENS

### RACHEL ELLISON

A rusting ferry boat creaks and hauls its cargo of trucks, bicycles, bananas and people across the bay to Likoni near Mombasa. Hawkers shout above the din of diesel engines, honking car horns and the clattering chaos of market day. The sun beats down on Kenya's east coastal trading hub. It's a hot and humid 36°C.

In a sleepy village behind the market, it's a different story. A clutch of red-earth wattle-and-daub houses creates a respite of shaded cool. Children giggle and chase each other around. I can hear singing: "Women don't sleep... It's time to show your true colours... Women are leaders... the mirror of life and the backbone of families..."

As I turn the corner, the pulsing harmony becomes louder. A group of 40 or so women sway and clap to the rhythm, others sit on the ground suckling babies at the breast or adjusting their brightly coloured headscarves.

I've come to visit the Sauti women's network. Sauti means voices in Swahili. It's a self-empowerment group sponsored by the international development aid charity ActionAid. Sauti members meet once a month under a tree or in someone's courtyard to talk about the issues that affect women's lives the most: women's rights, domestic violence, girls' education, forced marriage, land rights for widows and HIV/Aids.

Through talking, they learn, and through this learning, women of all ages are changing their lives for the better. "HIV rates in our village have gone down because of the Sauti women's group," says Binti Ali Kiza, a women's rights activist and mother of three, who's leading today's discussion. "Today we're telling women to insist that their husbands are tested for HIV/Aids. And if their husband takes a new wife, we say, make sure she's tested too."

According to the Kenyan government, two out of every three cases of HIV/Aids are among women, with teenage women accounting for half of all new HIV infections. So preventing early marriage, teenage pregnancy and the higher risk of maternal mortality are also hot topics at Sauti meetings.

As with coaching conversations, where clients say the unsayable, so too with the Sauti women's network. It's challenging social taboos and ancient customs.

Nearly all the Sauti women I met are illiterate. Yet they represent a forceful collective lobby, changing attitudes in Kenyan families, their own behaviour, even Kenyan law.

Through the power of conversation, the Sauti women's groups have created a network of peer learning and solution-focused thinking. As a coach, I'm struck by the pureness and value of a conversation built on empathy and trust. I'm once again convinced of the positive transformation that can happen when there is high challenge and high support to go with it.

The packed-earth floor is a long way from the ice cool, grey carpeted boardrooms of the world's financial capitals. Yet some of the principles of the human spirit are just the same. The shift from defeated passivity to energised and confident; how some of the most powerful lessons come from the pupils themselves.

I'm struck by how human kindness and robust thinking can transfer across cultures and achieve such a variety of outcomes. And how groups can have many leaders and flexible hierarchies, in service of desired goals.

Being included in a Sauti meeting was humbling and uplifting, a reminder of the power of connection, of not only speaking but feeling heard, and of your words making a difference. ■

Rachel Ellison coaches high-potential talent and senior leaders in multinational organisations in the corporate and public sectors. She was a BBC news correspondent and international project director and was awarded an MBE for her work with women in Afghanistan.  
[www.rachelellison.com](http://www.rachelellison.com)  
 07710 361160  
[www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)