EDUCATION AN EMPOWERING TOOL:

By Magdalene Gathoni

As a child, I did not join formal school because my parents did not see the importance of educating a girl-child. Like many other girls of my age, I was discriminated against and effectively denied a very basic human right: Education.

I was not deterred from continuing with my education. However, I feel that my dream is far from being achieved. I want to see many more like myself who will ensure that no child is denied a chance to education; and no person remains illiterate. I believe that, being illiterate is like being imprisoned in oneself and worse still, being a slave of society. I believe that illiteracy, poverty and underdevelopment go hand-in hand. This chain can be broken through education. Having tasted its sweet fruits, I am determined to go all the way to University.
My youth

I grew up in a small village in the then Kiambu District (now the village is in Thika District). At the time of my birth, my parents were peasant farmers growing subsistence crops and keeping farm animals. Later, my parents began to grow coffee and cash crops. Neither of my parents was ever formally employed. I was born in a large polygamous family; my father had three wives, who all lived in the same compound. Altogether he had sixteen children, I was the first born of my mother.

The focal point of my family was my father who was strict yet loving towards his children. (The foregoing represents normal childhood experiences of many rural children of my time). However, this experience made it painfully difficult for me to express myself as a result of my shyness and quiet nature. People, including my mother, interpreted my shyness to be a mental deficiency, because I remember my mother sometimes would say “better to be born a thief than a stupid child like you.” This was an advantage to my siblings who would make a mistake and I would be reprimanded for their mistakes.

Besides working on the farms, my sisters and I had to assist our mothers with all household chores such as fetching water and firewood, cooking, cleaning, taking care of young siblings and running errands. My brothers mainly looked after domestic animals although occasionally girls would go herding especially when there was a need for greener pastures.

In the village, I had one girlfriend who I used to play and go to church with. My parents were not church-goers therefore my mother would not allow me to regularly go to church because she wanted me to help her in the house and the farm. I loved praying to God all the time. I would sneak and go to church when I had an opportunity and could not annoy my parents because we were taught in the church that parents should be respected.

I was always thinking of my future. I wanted to become a nun.
but it was not easy as one had to be educated. I used to attend many meetings to learn the word of God because I felt inspired by God's teaching. I was a Catholic because that was only the church in our area. I enjoyed singing in Latin though I could not understand the meaning.

My girlfriend went to school and I was left home alone. I was disturbed a lot and asked God to help me in my future so that my life would not end up like my elder sisters’.

**Breaking the Barriers**

I was born in a society and age when marriage not schooling and career, were perceived to be the destiny for all girls and my older stepsisters were not educated.

However, few of the parents in the village had broken the barriers and were sending their daughters to school. Some of the girls were in secondary boarding schools, and would come home only during holidays, during which time they would be the focus of the whole village. They dressed better and looked smarter than most people. I longed to be just like them.

Because I felt that I was too old to go to school, I vowed that my children would have the opportunities that I had missed.

After my friend completed school and got employed, she came back home with her fiancée and sent someone to call me so that I meet her husband-to-be. I felt embarrassed because I looked dirty as I used to have one dress that I had to wash at night, dry and wear the following morning!

After her wedding, she came home and asked me to visit her in the city but my parents were reluctant, only to yield in later. She talked to my mother who sold her only sheep to buy me a new dress.

The turning point for me came on my first to visit to Nairobi at the age of eighteen.

When I arrived in Nairobi as an adult, I got a job as a cleaner in one of the medical schools in the city. I was staying in the hostel
with nurses who were kind to me. One of the nurses showed me where the literacy class was because I asked her to teach me how to read and write.

I joined literacy class in 1970 and dropped six months later after getting married. My husband was a Pastor, a carpenter, and had little education too. Both of us had a good relationship with God but we were materially poor.

We had children who needed to be cared for, so I started a small business so that we could have enough food. The business did not do well because keeping records was very hard for me.

I decided to go back to literacy class and by this time my children had started school too. I had forgotten what I learnt six months earlier and I had to start again as a new learner. This time I could not drop out of literacy class again because I thought only education could change my life as well as my family. Additionally, at the medical school where I worked, there was an imminent promotion of the staff members and the main criteria for this promotion were academic qualifications and work experience, of which I had neither. Without a promotion, it meant that my life and family in the city would be affected greatly. I discussed with the college principal to be allowed to continue learning and he was sympathetic in my need to get education. He helped me by giving me a flexible shift where I would work in the morning and attend classes in the afternoons.

This time I decided to work hard to bring others to join Literacy classes. I kept discussing with the people around my home about literacy and most of them joined my class. I enjoyed being in that class because we were many with one vision to eliminate illiteracy.

In 1986, I did my primary and secondary education exams and passed. I thought the time had come to help other women who did not know about literacy programs especially in rural areas. I always thought about the problems these women went through and I
decided to visit and discuss with them the importance of education.

While mobilising other adults to enrol into literacy classes I continued with my learning. Many of them joined literacy classes, which was an impressive move in my work. I continued studying computer courses and other management skills.

In October 1990, I was able to bring together 22 learners from eight Kenyan provinces to discuss the problems facing adult learners. The learners supported my idea of forming a learners’ association. The Kenya Adult Learners’ Association was then formed as a step forward for learners to map strategies for changing their lives. This gave me opportunity to be able do more in mobilising learners because I managed to reach all the Districts in the country where it was very hard to reach and met with many adults and youth who could not go to school and now thousands of learners have benefited from my work.

Towards the end of 1990, I presented the Learners’ Voices’ to the then United Nations Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, at a colourful event held at United Nations Plaza in New York. I was also given the opportunity to speak on behalf of adult learners globally. These events motivated me and gave me power when I recognised that my work is important to both the educators and the illiterate.

The media giving me a platform to express the importance of education for the development of individuals and the nation at large covered all my experiences as an adult learner. My efforts have been recognized at the national and international levels. My family has been supportive in my endeavours acknowledging the economic and social benefits they have derived.

The government of Kenya as well as local organizations have also appreciated my efforts in promoting adult education. At the international level UNESCO presented KALA, under my
leadership, with a NOMA Award in 1992, in recognition of my contribution to the adult education movement in Africa. My success at both local and international levels has inspired me to work very hard to improve the participation of adult learners, especially women. I have participated in the 5th African Conference on Women in Dakar, Senegal in 1994, the 4th UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in 1995, where I gave a presentation on Empowerment of Women through Literacy and also in various workshops and conferences in other countries.

The Kenya Adult Learners Association has been used as a model by other countries such Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Ghana and Zimbabwe and Canada.

I have travelled all over the world because of education, which has greatly changed my life. At 60, I’m still determined to help the unreached get education and overcome the challenges they face. With a strong will power and God’s guidance, I will overcome and reach my vision of changing Kenyans from poverty and illiteracy to empowerment.

(My principle has always been dreams will remain dreams, if we do not act in order to actualize them.)