



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY



Shukria Syed, UN Volunteer with UN Women, poses with women from South Sudan during International Women's Day event

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Closing the gender gap: five inspiring UN Volunteers

From economic empowerment in Burundi to positive masculinity in Madagascar, meet five UN Volunteers (women and men) breaking barriers, changing perceptions, and transforming the lives of women in the East and Southern African region.

Communicating for gender equality

Shukria Syed (UN Women, South Sudan) – *contributing to SDGs 3, 4, 5 & 17*

In South Sudan, Shukria Syed is applying her communications skills, as a UN Volunteer, to help tackle the pressing needs for gender equality in the country.

Her assignment with UN Women South Sudan has involved leveraging local means of communication to spread critical information. With her team, she has participated in messaging gender concerns via media platforms such as radio.

According to Shukria, communication is critical. To promote women's leadership and equality, she explains, we should focus on improving women's use of technology for communication, such as zoom meetings and social media platforms to voice women's concerns.

Like her fellow UN Volunteers through the region, she understands that gender equality is not an isolated goal. With the spread of COVID-19, Shukria has been supporting initiatives for public sensitisation on implications of the virus as well as conducting context analysis on the implications of COVID-19 on gender equality. The latter, she believes, is of great importance.

“ Facilitating regular surveys on the implications of COVID-19 on women, peace, and security is a key component to revealing gendered impact of the pandemic, Shukria says.

These five stories are just among countless from this region and beyond that emphasise how the path to dignified, inclusive, equitable treatment of women and girls is neither short nor smooth. At times, in fact, it may even feel hopeless. But with every sensitisation message spread, every economic opportunity opened, and every vote cast in support of women, we get a little bit closer to our common goal.

As we celebrate International Women's Day, may we keep the words of the late Wangari Maathai, Kenyan social, environmental, and political activist, and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, close to our hearts:

“ There are opportunities even in the most difficult moments.

Economic empowerment and protection for women during COVID-19

Sylvine Kahasha (UNDP, Burundi) – contributing to SDGs 1, 5, 8, 10, 16 & 17

Sylvine Kahasha is a trailblazer in more ways than one. Originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), she spent years actively advocating for the protection and participation of women, girls and indigenous people before relocating to Burundi for a UN Volunteer assignment with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2020.

In her new role, Sylvine was tasked with supporting women to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on their cross-border trading activities. Through the programme, a gift certificate system was introduced to financially sustain struggling women during the economic downturn brought on by the crisis.

“The programme was intended to help women recover economically and resume their commercial activities fairly quickly,” Sylvine says. “Indeed, following the closure of the borders, these women lost their livelihoods. They lost a lot,” UN Volunteer, Sylvine Kahasha adds.

“ For gender equality to be realised, it must be institutionalised. It is essential to advocate to get political authorities to pass laws and policies favorable to women's rights and gender equality. Beyond legislation, there is a need to popularise these inclusive laws for them to have meaningful impacts in the society, explains Sylvine.

Applying her experience defending the rights of indigenous people in the DR Congo, Sylvine also supports indigenous people from the Great Lakes region. For this year's International Women's Day, she is taking part in initiatives to engage the indigenous Batwa women and other vulnerable women in Burundi on strengthening their leadership and participation in local development.



UN Volunteer Sylvine Kahasha during a past community training on Integrity, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (UNV, 2020)

Linking gender equality, disability inclusion and justice

Gift Govere (UNDP, Zimbabwe) – *contributing to SDGs 5, 11, 10, 16 & 17*

Gender equality is not a single, isolated goal and therefore does not belong in a silo. Few people understand this better than Gift Govere. He has been serving through the UNV/UNDP's Talent Programme for Persons with Disabilities as a UN Volunteer with UNDP Zimbabwe for more than a year now. Gift's mission is at the intersection of gender equality, disability inclusion and justice.

“ While Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 particularly and primarily focuses on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, SDG 16 is also essential in the equation to ensure that women who encounter any violations are able to turn to inclusive, fair, effective institutions to access justice and essential services, Gift says.

Gift believes that we need to continue to invest in our institutions and undertake necessary policy reforms to create an enabling institutional and legislative environment that will effectively respond to gender inequalities and promote gender equality. "Long-term, transformative solutions require institutional and policy reforms. Institutions are the foundation on which governance operates, for better or for worse," he says.

With support from his colleagues at the Governance and Peace Building Unit at UNDP Zimbabwe, Gift has supported efforts to strengthen Zimbabwe's justice system so that women have the opportunity to lead, participate in and benefit equally. To achieve justice for all and gender equality, everyone needs to be involved. Gift believes that the effective participation of men is essential in fighting against gender-based violence and harmful stereotypes.

“ Together, men and women need to remove all the barriers and obstacles that are inhibiting women from fully and meaningfully participating across all sectors, and in all areas of life, says Gift.



Gift Govere (left) and other UN Volunteers during a capacity building training in Nairobi, Kenya (before the pandemic).

Helping close the gender gap in agricultural productivity

Valentine Waroga (UN Women ESARO) – *contributing to SDGs 1, 2, 5, 8, 15 & 17*)

Valentine Waroga always wanted to apply her passion and interest in women’s empowerment by serving the United Nations. Based in Kenya, she serves with UN Women as a UN Volunteer programme assistant for Women’s Economic Empowerment through Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA), at the East and Southern Africa Regional Office.

Valentine’s assignment centres around the gender gap in agricultural productivity. The programme tackles the lower rates of agricultural productivity for women farmers as compared to their male counterparts. This includes promoting appropriate policies, more effective tools and technologies, and supportive infrastructure and institutions for resilient green value chains.

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“UN Women focuses on Climate Smart Agriculture to empower women in farming to fully and equally participate in decision-making at all levels,” explains UN Volunteer Valentine Waroga.

Women’s empowerment affects every segment of society, which is why Valentine and her colleagues know that by working with women, they offer an opportunity to provide an integrated approach to increase the resilience of communities affected by climate change. Communities are also empowered through ensuring food security and an increased agricultural income while protecting the environment through mitigation measures.

The results are already evident. Women in the region have begun to close the agricultural productivity gap by shifting their focus to higher-value products, such as aquaculture in Uganda and groundnuts in Malawi—progress that Valentine can be proud of. “The passion to contribute to empowering women and girls within our communities is fulfilling. Whether it’s through volunteering with the UN or another route, I am happy to do it,” Valentine says.



Valentine Waroga, UN Volunteer with UN Women East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO), during a women's economic empowerment event

Promoting positive masculinity

Sederaniaina Lalason (UNICEF, Madagascar) – *contributing to SDGs 4, 5, 10 & 17)*



Positive masculinity training by UNICEF Madagascar in Fort-Dauphin, Madagascar in 2020

“ Fighting for gender equality is everyone’s matter. Engaging boys and men for women’s rights is a necessary component for a better world,” says Sederaniaina Lalason.

Before factors such as opportunities for education and work come into play, gender inequality begins to manifest itself early in the household. Sederaniaina has become familiar with this context in his role as a UN Volunteer with UNICEF Madagascar.

This UN Volunteer explains that "The common thread across the country is the persistence of a patriarchal system where most women and girls are mainly relegated to a supporting and reproductive role within the household. They are often not able to make strategic choices for their lives and for the well-being of their children. Girls are raised to conform to family decisions and existing social norms, and boys are socialized to dominate, provoking toxic masculinity in the household."

The bleak statistics speak for themselves when it comes to the violence endured by Malagasy women (UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2018):

- 32% of women reported having experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and in 88% of these cases the violence was perpetrated by current or previous partners
- 38% of Malagasy women had experienced physical or sexual violence

In order to get to the root cause of this violence – deeply ingrained gender socialization – Sederaniaina and his colleagues at UNICEF have taken a unique approach. Rather than zeroing in on empowering women through their own actions, UNICEF is championing positive masculinity, beginning in the southern part of Madagascar - the Anosy region. The programme is a partnership with the Malagasy Department of Reproductive Health and Youth Protection of the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

“Positive masculinity encourages men to be partners and allies of women,” says Sederaniaina. “The goal is, however, not for girls and women to compete with boys and men. It’s an honor to be part of this initiative.”

Positive masculinity intersects with almost every facet of daily life, from

education to nutrition to sexual and reproductive health. By training and engaging men in these areas, UNICEF aims to show them how they can contribute to a supportive, secure environment for their families, and consequently their communities.

UNV has achieved gender parity among our serving UN Volunteers, and is striving for gender parity among our volunteer candidates. If you are a female professional above 22 years of age, with at least two years of work experience and a higher technical diploma or beyond, register in our [Talent Pool](#).

This article was prepared with the kind support of Online Volunteer Grace Pettey.

 **East and Southern Africa**

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