

Acceptance Speech by Salome Nduta during the inaugural Scottish Bar Human Rights Award in Edinburg Scotland

Lord Bonomy, Dean of Faculty, my Lords, ladies and gentlemen.

I am honored to be standing here today to receive this inaugural Scottish Bar International award. Thank you so much to the entire team at the Faculty of Advocates for recognizing me with this incredible award. I am overwhelmed to have won this prestigious Inaugural Scottish International Bar Human Rights Award. This goes to affirm the words of the South African Civil Rights Activist, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that **"It means a great deal to those who are oppressed to know that they are not alone. Never let anyone tell you that what you are doing is insignificant."** As a defender, I know that the work I do is not insignificant and that there are many people out there who will stand by me in good and bad times.

I wish to thank all my family members who have stood by me through the bad and good times of my activism work. Special thanks to my late mum (who is the first woman human rights defender that I dedicate this award to) who supported my work even when she did not understand it and whom every time I stepped out to go for a demo, her words of caution would be "If you come back here having been beaten, I will beat you more and if you are arrested, no one will get you out. These words made me very careful out on the streets and as expected of any parent, the first time I was arrested, she literally sent my sisters to bail me out and the second time I was arrested she took care of my son for the whole week I stayed in police cells as fellow HRDs worked to get me out.

Thirdly allow me to thank all Human rights defenders in Kenya and elsewhere who have played different roles in shaping me to the person I am today either as mentors or supporters of my work. I thank in a special way the current generation of HRDs who despite giving me sleepless nights wondering what they may be up to next and how I should respond to their ambitious expectations have taught me new and creative forms of activism and have given me hope that there is a generation that is ready to pick the mantle and steer the movement to the next level when my bones will no longer allow me to run in the streets like I used to.

In the words of Joyce Meyer, **"Teachers can change lives with just the right mix of chalk and challenges."** Allow me to paraphrase and state that HRDs can change lives with the right

mix of attitude and challenges. So as HRDs I want to urge all of us to maintain the right attitude towards our work and the challenges we face will decimate.

My employer the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders- Kenya (NCHRD-K), deserves recognition and accolade for giving me the space and opportunities for growth and sharpening my skills to do what I love doing most, supporting human rights defenders. To my colleagues, Board of Trustees and members of NCHRD-K, this recognition is not mine alone, but an affirmation of the good work that this team continues to do and now more than ever before, we should re-dedicate our energies to serve humanity. I can't express enough how grateful I am for all of my amazing colleagues.

To the many legal fraternity members who have taught me that the law will always get you what you want, as long as you learn to use it to your advantage. I want to say thank you. Specifically let me acknowledge lawyers Mbugua Murithi, Suiyanka Lempaa, Leah Gikonyo, Charles Onyango, Waikwa Wanyoike and Otieno Aluoka for your dedication to HRDs work. I know you're at my beck and call!!! Many are the times when you rush to court simply because I called you to bail out a HRD not because you expect to be paid after the service. You are my pillar of strength especially when I know I do not have a legal kitty to respond to legal needs of HRDs, I sleep comfortably knowing that I have a dedicated team of lawyers who are driven by passion and not pay.

Moments in the life of a HRD and not just challenges:

My activism life is a journey of moments and not just challenges, moments of falling, waking up, dusting yourself and keeping on walking, some moments are sad and some are joyous even if its when you are inhaling tear gas from canisters thrown by police. In each of these moments, one constant factor remains, **CHANGE DOES OCCUR!** and it is this change that keeps human rights defenders going. At times, it is difficult to see the change with our naked eyes but faith makes us believe that change has occurred or will occur however long it takes and that for me and other HRDs is sufficient. We are all blessed with characteristics that best describe us; patience, focus and dedication to the cause.

My name is **Ms. Salome Nduta Mbugua-Gachie**, a WHRD, a community Organizer, a paralegal, a social worker and the convenor of Women InPower Kenya chapter. I was born and brought up in one of the informal settlements of Nairobi-Korogocho. I grew up of a single parent with four other siblings. I experienced first hand, deprivation and lack of necessities as a child. As I grew up, I saw the struggles of a single mother eking for her children surrounded by poverty and human rights violation by both state and non-state actors

in Korogocho and its environs. It is this kind of environment that lay the basis of my activism work. My journey of activism has been full of experiential moments that have continued to push me to the next level. In all these moments, the legal fraternity has walked with me side by side up to this moment when I stand here to receive this award. In Korogocho, Kituo Cha Sheria which is a legal advice centre first trained me as a paralegal and walked with me through my journey of campaign against forceful evictions and demolitions of informal settlements and open air markets and which saw me arrested a number of times for standing up against oppression, but of course which gave me energy to continue with the right to housing campaign.

Korogocho and other informal settlements do still exist but there is now in place clear eviction and resettlement guideline, a housing Act and article 43 of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 on social economic rights as a result of the work of HRDs

Allow me to take you through moments in my work as a defender and with human rights defenders that have led to my appreciating why HRDs play a pivotal role in bringing and sustaining change. The year is 2000, month September, date 22 day on a Friday, in a place called Wote which is in a county whose governor was among the then luminaries of Civil Society in Kenya- Kivutha Kibwana. Together with five other men, the late Nichodemus Muteti, Mutuku, Fredrick Odhiambo Ayieko, Boaz Atanga Waruku, John Nzioka Sila and Bernard Gachie Mugo (My husband) and myself were arrested for conducting civic education through theatre and detained for two days at Wote police station, presented in court in Makindu law courts on 25th September, 2000 and charged with two counts of unlawful assembly contrary to section 79 of the penal code and offensive conduct conducive to breach of peace contrary to section 94 (i) of the penal code. After two years of faithful court attendance, we were acquitted under section 210 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) on 11th January, 2002. Fast forward, eighteen years later, in 2018, I went for my certificate of good conduct and I found I have a pending court matter which I was acquitted in 2002. This experience has made me embark on a journey of working towards ensuring that all the 1990s cases of HRDs are completely brought to a closure, pending warrants of arrests (and they are many I can assure) are dispensed off with and sensitizing HRDs on the need to demand for certified copies of judgments whether rulings are made in their favour or not. This I call on you to offer support.

As a protection officer at NCHRD-K, my daily tasks entail, responding to distress calls from targeted HRDs day and night- targeted by both state and non state actors, assessing their cases and advising on best suited intervention including legal, medical, psychosocial and relocation. The environment which HRDs operate in within the country cannot be described as entirely safe. Depending on where you operate from, the issues you are advocating for and whose toes you are stepping on, you may find your environment filled with serpents and crocodiles (which are ready to devour you for life) and more so for women human rights defenders (WHRDS). One such woman is Ann Resiano. Anne is a teacher by profession but advocates for girl's rights in her community which is keen on maintaining cultural and traditional practices. Anne's case first came to my attention in 2012 at a time when together with her colleague they highlighted violations meted on girls by a church elder in a place called Doldol in Laikipia county. This first run-in saw her being ex-communicated from the church and thrown out of the church compound where she was being housed. She secured a transfer to a different school where she was also promoted to be a head teacher. In 2015, a girl was impregnated by a male teacher in her school and as is the case, Ann took up the matter, reported the case to the teacher service commission, the teacher was summoned and before he could be interdicted, the community members took up the matter, demonstrated to the school compound, beat Ann, threw her and her children out of the compound and marched to the education offices demanding that she be transferred. Ann's case goes to show that WHRDs are at more risk because of who they are and what they do – I dedicate this award to them!! All HRDs in Kenya and other parts of Africa!

I draw my strength and the urge to move forward from them, I get satisfaction and strength when HRDs come and say your intervention has brought me this far. On 8th January, 2016, Nathan Chumba, a human rights defender based in Nakuru County was sleeping in his house with his ten-year-old son Ainea, seven months old daughter and his wife. A petrol bomb was thrown into their house by arsonists and it was by sheer luck that Ainea was still awake. He woke his parents. They safely got out of the burning house however everything else was burnt to ashes apart from Nathan's will to continue fighting for rights. On 9th January, 2016, when I received a call from Nakuru HRDs to relay what had happened, I realised this was not going to be easy. This was the first time I was dealing with a case where children were involved.

Their journey towards complete healing from the trauma for Nathan and family took one year having temporarily relocated them, secured a counsellor to work with them, and for Nathan to

participate in the shelter cities program for rest and recuperation where he shared on his work. An international protection mechanism agreed to support Nathan rebuild his life by buying a piece of land for him where he put up a permanent structure. In August, 2018 his family invited us for the official house opening ceremony and I could not contain my emotions when I heard Ainea who is now twelve years old and his sister who is now three and a half years old tell me thank you for the support accorded to their family. It was there and then that Ainea declared that he will support his father in his work (which is human rights defence of course) as long as God gives him strength. For me this was a major change, winning a young boy into activism because he has seen it, lived it and emerged out victorious.

My passion is to give life to **Chapter 4 of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010**, where humanity is respected not just in rhetoric's but in words and deeds. This award reaffirms my conviction, that I, together with other HRDs and with the support from organisations like NCHRD-K are in the right path, it's going to reenergize us moving forward.

Finally, I come from a family of friends and close relatives, my spouse and two teenagers, they have been my pillar in times of my low moments and its where I take refuge to when I need self care.....to you I also dedicate this award- it's not in vain the hours we stay together arguing and laughing.

Lastly I wish to thank all of you who are gathered here today to witness my getting this award. Your presence is a sure mark of how much you value our work as defenders of human rights. We urge that you continue supporting us in whichever way possible including standing in solidarity with us when the environment becomes unbearable and recognising our work when others fail to see the value it brings to humanity in general. I promise to continue with my work with renewed gusto and vow to live by the values and principles that this award and my work espouses! Thank you!

God bless you!