

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## FEATURE

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### Human rights education changes lives in Africa

When her husband died, Alice Beti and her two children almost became homeless.

Her in-laws had taken over all of her late husband's property and were threatening to evict them from their house in Kenya.

But one day, Alice, a community health worker, went to a meeting organized by local activists where she learned about her right to inherit part of her husband's property under the country's family laws. She understood that her rights had been violated and that she could do something about it.

She took her case to the tribal Paramount Chief's court, where she challenged her in-laws and won.

The health worker now lives with her two children in their home in Shinyalu and heads Shinyalu Widows' Group, an organization that helps other women to navigate the local judicial system.

Alice's story is representative of the experiences of the hundreds of women who have taken part in a Human Rights Education micro-project organized by Amnesty International and community-based organization, the Shinyalu Central and West Self-help Group in Kenya since 2009.

During the workshops, specially trained community members lead sessions on issues such as rape, incest and eviction of widows – describing how victims can seek redress.

The trainings are attended by community members, teachers, social workers, local government officials and local chiefs. The community leaders usually speak out in favour of holding perpetrators accountable, which gives women like Alice the confidence to take their cases forward.

#### **Participation and education**

Since Amnesty International began the wider Human Rights Education project in 2008 with the support of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) under the Governance and Transparency Fund, the organization has teamed up with local groups and human rights activists in countries including Mali, Benin, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Senegal, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and Uganda to deliver dozens of human rights education workshops.

Aminatou Sar, who leads the project, says that "participatory learning" are the key words, meaning affected individuals and communities are in charge of their own lives.

For each micro-project, communities in isolated areas across Africa decide what issues they want to address and how they would like to be trained. Workshops are specially designed and delivered to groups that bring together victims of human rights abuses and those with the power to bring about justice and change.

"Human rights education has been too elitist. In the past, people have been working more with schools and professionals, focusing on governments and high-profile people, so this project has been really instrumental in bringing in voices from the community level, involving communities in claiming their rights," explains Aminatou.

“We work for people to familiarize themselves with laws protecting women and young girls and to change behaviour in communities, particularly amongst chiefs who are in charge of making decisions. For example when women are accused by the community of being witches; it would be the chiefs who would take the decision to ban them from the community, so it was important to talk to them. In Burkina Faso, for example, we were very successful and some of the chiefs even brought back to the villages some of the women who had been banished years ago.”

Once a workshop has been designed, project participants use art, music, theatre and other participatory methods to start discussions on human rights abuses and ways for victims to get justice and redress.

“The project has been really successful and interesting because it has brought real participation of women who wouldn’t usually speak out publicly because of the male authorities in the communities – but by playing the role in a play it gives them a platform for expression,” says Aminatou.

### **African good news**

So far, Amnesty International’s Africa Human Rights Education Project has particularly focused on tackling perceptions about women and the acceptance of gender-based violence.

In Burkina Faso, for example, local activists have worked with traditional leaders in Pabré, a village located 20 kilometres from the capital city, Ouagadougou, which is known as one of the “epicentres” of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the West African country.

During the workshops, facilitators looked to sensitize community chiefs on how some of the false ideas justifying FGM were having a negative impact on women’s rights – in a country where nearly half the women suffer the abusive practice, according to the *Comité National de Lutte contre la Pratique de l’Excision*.

More than 300 community members have participated in the sessions, which so far have helped change perceptions on FGM.

Also as a result of the project, local leaders have set up “Alert Units” in the 22 villages of Pabré. These units aim to inform the police of any attempt to practice FGM in their villages, which has resulted in a significant decrease in its use.

Aminatou knows human rights education alone will not change the situation in the whole of Africa, but she is convinced it is a good place to start.

“I’m very moved every time I go to a community and see that even though the situation is very bad there are powerful women, men and young people doing things with the minimum means – and sometimes no means at all – but always pushing things forward. That’s very inspirational.”