



10 Years of Equipping the Defenders

Stories of bravery and courage from Human Rights Defenders.



National Coalition of
Human Rights Defenders
Kenya

Foreword



This handbook is a compilation of 10 impact stories from beneficiaries of the Human Rights Defenders Academy, put together by the Defenders Coalition.

Defenders Coalition is the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) established in 2007 and registered under Kenyan law as a Trust. The Coalition works primarily for the protection of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Kenya. Among others, the Defenders Coalition strengthens capacities of HRDs to work more effectively, besides advocating for favourable legal, policy and institutional environments in order to reduce their vulnerability to the risk of persecution and or harm.

Since 2016, Defenders Coalition has hosted the Annual Human Rights Defenders Academy (HRD Academy). This is a unique skill building opportunity that addresses the training needs of human rights defenders (HRDs) assessed throughout the year. Over 2000 HRDs have benefitted from the Academy and are confidently applying the skills in their work of championing for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Crucially, the Academy's strength lies in its HRD-centric approach: each year, HRDs gather at a General Assembly to collectively analyze their operating environment and prioritize self-protection and advocacy needs, collaboratively shaping the curriculum's relevance. The platform has continued to strengthen crucial networks, and share invaluable experiences and best practices, ensuring they are better equipped to continue their indispensable work.

We extend our sincere gratitude to all Human Rights Defenders who contributed their inspiring stories to this publication. Their experiences reflect the transformative impact of the HRD Academy and reaffirm the importance of equipping defenders with practical skills to advance their human rights work of promoting democracy, good governance, human rights in Kenya.

***Executive Director, Kamau Ngugi
Defenders Coalition***

98%

Evaluation: 98% of the participants reported to have applied Academy skills/strategies acquired from the HRD Academy in their HRD work.

82%

(82%) have indicated that they have started a new initiative, campaign, or project as a result of their participation in the HRD Academy



2,000

Total number of beneficiaries in the last 10 years

10

Number of annual HRD trainings held under the Academy since inception



• Right to Privacy



- Advocacy Strategies
- Financial Literacy
- Documentation of Violations for Targeted Intervention
- Psychosocial Wellbeing
- Environmental and Climate Justice

Key Training & Focus Areas



- Monitoring, Documentation & Reporting of Human Rights Violations (MDR)
- Security Management Training (Physical and Digital)
- Economic Wellness



- Cyber Hygiene
- Carbon Credit Mechanisms and Ecological Justice
- Digital Security, Data Protection & Emerging Technologies



- Civic Space
- Public Benefit Organizations (PBO) Act 2013
- Community Groups Registration Act 2022
- Financial Compliance for Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)
- First Aid



Paul Mwang'at

(2017, West Pokot)

From a Father's Legacy to a Movement

"The HRD Academy turned a solitary struggle into a shared journey, and that is a gift I will always carry forward."

When we sat down with Paul Mwang'at, a passionate advocate from West Pokot, he shared with Defenders Coalition a story rooted in legacy and community. "I grew up watching advocacy unfold," Paul began. "My late father would gather people to talk about justice in West Pokot." His father, once employed by the World Bank, turned to civil society work after losing his job, dedicating his life to empowering others. "I walked beside him," Paul recalled, "learning that speaking up for our community was both a duty and a legacy."

That early exposure would later shape Paul's own path. He traced his formal entry into advocacy back to 2010, during Kenya's constitutional referendum.

saw how illiteracy allowed budgets to be twisted and misused," he told Defenders Coalition. Standing alongside his father, Paul helped demystify governance and amplify the voices of ordinary citizens who had long been ignored. "That experience planted the seed that has grown into the work I do today," he reflected.

Though his current professional life is rooted in animal welfare, Paul says human rights have always remained at the center of his journey. Before joining the Human Rights Defenders (HRD) Academy in 2017, his work in advocacy often felt scattered and lonely. Intimidation, threats, and isolation were part of the struggle.

"When I joined the HRD Academy, everything changed," he said. "It equipped me in ways I had not imagined." Paul spoke about learning digital and physical security, data management, and documentation techniques; skills that transformed his ability to protect himself and others.

"I still remember the thrill of being taught how to detect if a device had been compromised," he shared, "and how to secure information safely." Beyond the technical lessons, what stayed with Paul most was the sense of community the Academy fostered. "It was transformative," he said. "Engaging with other HRDs expanded my network and gave me the courage to return home and mentor others." Today, he proudly notes that more HRDs in West Pokot are active and unafraid, a testament to the ripple effect of that training. Some memories from the Academy, Paul told Defenders Coalition, remain etched in his heart: witnessing the Sengwer community win a landmark ruling, listening to Okiya Omtatah speak in person after only seeing him on TV, and learning the importance of self-care. "Even defenders must pause, breathe, and heal," he emphasized. Paul Mwang'at's story reminds us that advocacy begins with community and grows through solidarity.



Omare Samuel

(2018, Nairobi County)

Art is the most powerful weapon a person can have.

When Defenders Coalition met Omare Samuel, it was clear that his passion for human rights was as bold and expressive as his art. “Art is the most powerful weapon a person can have,” he said, his voice steady with conviction.

Omare describes himself as a human rights defender, artist, family man, and community organizer from Kayole, Nairobi. His journey into activism, he told Defenders Coalition, was shaped by two key experiences: the absence of strong voices speaking on human rights issues in his community, and the tragic Garissa University attack, where he was studying analytics. “Those moments changed everything,” he said. “I realized silence was no longer an option, even though I was timid and often

intimidated by both community pressures and the police.”

In 2018, while still a student, Omare joined the Human Rights Defenders (HRD) Academy. That same year, he participated in the Emerging Voices Leadership Program and was nominated for the Upcoming Human Rights Defender of the Year award. “The academy gave me knowledge, confidence, and courage,” he told Defenders Coalition. “I learned about physical and digital security, psycho-social support, mentorship, and the strength that comes from connecting with other HRDs.”

He credits the Academy for reshaping his approach to activism and giving him the confidence to stand firm against intimidation. “It helped me grow resilient,” he said.

With the foundation built at the Academy, Omare went on to establish the Wahenga Youth Group, a community-based organization dedicated to promoting human rights. Through the group, he began channeling his creativity into advocacy, using art to confront social injustices. “Together with other young people, we turned neglected public spaces into vibrant, green areas where art became a language of dialogue and change,” he shared.

“Art is the most powerful weapon a person can have. Together with other young people, we turned neglected public spaces into vibrant, green areas where art became a language of dialogue and change.”

The digital security lessons he gained have also had a lasting impact. “I now know how to recognize suspicious calls and links, and I practice safe communication online,” he said. “These are simple but vital practices I had never considered before.” Before ending the conversation, Omare offered heartfelt advice to upcoming defenders:

“If anyone gets the opportunity to attend the HRD Academy, I urge them to embrace it fully. It offers not only practical skills but also growth, resilience, and clarity of purpose. You leave equipped and empowered to make real change.” Through both his words and his art, Omare Samuel continues to prove that creativity and courage can together paint a powerful picture of justice and transformation.

Mohamed Hassan Omar

(2018, Marsabit County)



'As for me, I am still here. I am not going anywhere'

The calm in Mohamed Hassan Omar's voice hides the storms he has survived. "As for me, I am still here. I am not going anywhere," he said, his words carrying the quiet defiance of someone who has faced danger and refused to back down.

Mohamed describes Marsabit as a place where being a human rights defender means "expecting threats from every direction, community members, political leaders, security agencies, even peers." He told Defenders Coalition of a time when he and another defender had to flee the county for nine days after receiving credible threats to their lives. "We were exposed, vulnerable, and completely on our own," he said, "but I wouldn't quit my advocacy work." Advocacy, for Mohamed, is more than a calling; it is who he is. He is the founder and a member of the Northern Frontiers District Counties Human Rights Defenders, an accredited mediator, and the leader of the Centre for Research, Rights and Development (CRRD). Since 2019, he has also served as the chairperson of the Marsabit County Human Rights Defenders Network, which he established shortly after attending the HRD Academy in 2018.

Before joining the academy, Mohamed's work was mainly focused on peacebuilding and humanitarian

service. "I did not fully recognize it as human rights work," he told Defenders Coalition. "The HRD Academy gave structure to my experiences, opened my eyes to the broader ecosystem of HRDs across the country, and provided me with tools to survive and thrive in a hostile environment." He added that the sessions on safety, security, and well-being came at a critical time, as his personal security was constantly under threat.

After receiving further training on social accountability, Mohamed became deeply invested in using legal tools to expose the misuse of public resources. "I have submitted reports to oversight bodies on politically sensitive cases," he said. "I know this attracts pressure and intimidation, but with the knowledge I gained, how to handle sensitive information, protect my communication, and move discreetly, I have managed to sustain my work."

The ripple effects of his leadership have reached far beyond Marsabit. Through the county network, he has helped coordinate activities across northern counties and built strong collaborations with other defenders. As a member of the Court Users Committee, representing community and human rights organizations, Mohamed successfully pushed

for four mobile courts, the ongoing construction of a High Court in Marsabit, and several other justice sector reforms.

Still, challenges persist. "The greatest barrier for defenders in this region is lack of resources," he said. After the academy's training on financial well-being and sustainability, Mohamed developed business plans for projects like a water scheme and a fuel station. "But without funding, they remain only on paper. This is a frustration many defenders share," he told Defenders Coalition.

Even so, his resolve remains unshaken. "We are not fighting the system; we are holding it accountable," he said. "We are challenging historical injustices, corruption, and impunity, even with limited support." Looking back, Mohamed said what stands out most from his time at the academy is the reminder that he is not alone. "There is a network of defenders across the country pushing back against injustice," he said. Through his words and work, Mohamed Hassan Omar embodies the resilience of Kenya's human rights defenders; steadfast, unyielding, and ever present.



Hunielle Nelly Chivatsi (2018, Kilifi County)

Finding Strength in Visibility

"I am proud to be intersex."

Those were the first words Hunielle Nelly Chivatsi said as they began to share their story, a statement that carried both power and peace, shaped by years of silence and survival.

Hunielle is now the Executive Coordinator at Intersex Rights Initiative Coast Kenya, Co-Chair of Intersex Consortium Kenya, and Founder and Co-Chair of Grant Plus Kenya, where they also sit on the board. Their leadership journey also includes time with Boma Kenya and other organizations across the country. But as they recall, their first steps in advocacy began at Pema Kenya, where they found their footing as a human rights defender.

Growing up, being intersex in their community meant constant judgment and misunderstanding. "Abuse, intimidation, and threats were constant," they said.

"There were moments I almost gave up."

Their turning point came in 2018. "Just when I was close to breaking, I received an invitation to the HRD Academy," they remembered. "I didn't know it then, but that invitation would change everything."

At the academy, Hunielle learned about personal and digital security, from using VPNs to enabling two-factor authentication, simple tools that transformed

their sense of safety. "For the first time, I realized I didn't have to live exposed to threats," they said. They also found healing. Through mentorship and wellness sessions, they began to understand the importance of caring for themselves as they cared for others. "If I cannot defend myself, I cannot defend anyone else," they told Defenders Coalition. "At the academy, I was able to let go of years of silence, listen, and be heard. It was the first time I felt truly seen."

Since then, self-care has become part of their advocacy. They practice yoga to reflect, stay calm, and think clearly. "When backlash comes, I no longer break down," they said. "I respond with clarity and often with a smile."

Their calm confidence has begun to influence those around them. "By engaging openly, I've seen people slowly shift their perceptions," they explained. "They start to see us as people deserving of dignity." Looking back, Hunielle calls their transformation proof that change is possible.

"I am living proof, and the HRD Academy played a huge role in that transformation."

Janet Nandwa Ongoli (2019 Baringo County)



I am a Woman Warrior

Janet Nandwa Ongoli describes herself as a woman warrior, and it is easy to see why. Her voice carries both calm conviction and quiet fire, the kind that comes from years of standing firm in the face of resistance.

"I was raised in Baringo County," she began, "and that place shaped me into the advocate I am today." Janet leads Active Citizen Initiative Africa, a women-led organization she founded in 2023 to champion the inclusion of women and persons with disabilities in governance and budgeting. She also serves as the Communications Officer at the Baringo Civil Society Organization Forum, continuing her mission to ensure that every voice is heard.

Her leadership journey began much earlier, back in 2007, when she was still in high school. A planned student strike was about to turn destructive, but Janet stepped in and stopped her classmates from damaging school property.

Ironically, her bravery earned her suspension after police called her "a big influence." "It was painful," she said, "but it also taught me what leadership really means, taking responsibility, even when it costs you." That same year, she began volunteering with the Red Cross, and her path of service took root.

When Defenders Coalition asked about her experience before joining the HRD Academy, Janet laughed softly. "I knew nothing about security," she admitted. "Not physical, not digital. I was exposing myself to danger every day without even realizing it."

The HRD Academy changed that. Janet learned how to safeguard her data, care for her mental health, and connect with defenders across the country. But what stayed with her most was the diversity of people she met. "It was my first time meeting members of the queer community and sex workers," she said. "Listening to their stories, I saw courage in a new light. I became their ally, even when others disapproved. The academy reshaped how I see the world."

Since graduating, Janet has led groundbreaking initiatives, including the first women-only budget

forum in her constituency. The result was a gender-sensitive budget that finally reflected women's priorities. "Today, women in my constituency have a real voice in how money is spent," she said proudly.

"The HRD Academy doesn't just teach you skills," she told Defenders Coalition. "It changes you. You walk in one person and leave another, stronger, more connected, and ready to challenge injustice at its roots."





Tom Onzere (2020 Vihiga County)

Justice Begins Where We Stand

Tom Onzere has spent years doing what few are willing to, standing between ordinary citizens and systems that often fail them. Calm, thoughtful, and deeply grounded, Tom's voice carries the quiet authority of someone who has fought many small, unseen battles and still believes in the power of justice.

For years, Tom has worked on access to justice, gender rights, and community advocacy. As a member of the Vihiga Court Users Committee, he has become a key link between local communities and justice institutions, a role that demands patience, diplomacy, and a deep understanding of the law. But as he admits, this clarity came after a long journey. "Before the HRD Academy, I worked from instinct," Tom shared. "I had the passion but lacked a full grasp of the legal and policy frameworks that guided our work."

That changed when he joined the Human Rights Defenders Academy. The training gave him more than just information; it gave him structure and confidence. "The Academy

helped me understand how national, regional, and international mechanisms all connect," he said. "From Kenya's Constitution to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, even to UN mechanisms, I saw where my work fits in the larger picture."

The lessons on security management, both physical and digital, were equally transformative. "You cannot defend others if you're constantly unsafe," he reflected. With those insights, he began to strengthen not only his own safety protocols but also those of his colleagues and community partners.

One of Tom's proudest moments came when his advocacy led to a partnership with the Vihiga County Assembly to map and profile widows facing eviction and disinheritance. That partnership has since evolved into efforts toward a Widow Protection Bill, which he hopes will soon be tabled before the Assembly. "The knowledge and networks I built through Defenders Coalition were vital in making that happen," he said.

His connection with Defenders Coalition runs deep. From solidarity during difficult times, including when he lost his daughter, to medical support and bail assistance, the Coalition has been a constant ally.

"Their interventions, whether through the Academy or otherwise, have made me stronger, safer, and more recognized as a grassroots defender," he said. Tom continues to champion human rights quietly but persistently, reminding others that real change often begins at the community level. "The Academy gave me visibility, networks, and courage," he said. "But above all, it reminded me that defenders are not alone, we are part of something much bigger."



Everlyn Prech

(2021 West Pokot)



The HRD Academy Changed My Experience for the Better

When Everlyn Prech speaks about her work, her voice carries a mix of gentleness and resolve, the sound of someone who has seen pain up close but refuses to let it define her.

As the eldest of eight daughters in West Pokot, Everlyn grew up witnessing the harm caused by female genital mutilation and early marriage. "I founded the Center for Indigenous Child Rights out of necessity," she said. "I wanted to protect girls and women from cultural practices that robbed them of choice and dignity. I vowed to break the cycle."

Her activism, however, has come at a price. "I've been called a troublemaker, an opposer of culture," she told Defenders Coalition. "I've faced harassment, intimidation, and ridicule. Even my family asked me to stop. By 2016, I was tired. I almost gave up."

That turning point came when she joined the Human Rights Defenders Academy. "The HRD Academy changed my experience for the better," she said. "It wasn't just

training; it was healing." Through lessons on digital and physical security, psychosocial support, and self-care, Everlyn found new strength. "Listening to other defenders share their stories reminded me that my struggles were not mine alone," she explained. "I left the academy re-energized and ready to continue." Today, Everlyn leads her work with renewed clarity. She is cautious about her safety, online, physically, and emotionally, but her focus has expanded beyond herself. "I now mentor upcoming HRDs in my community," she said. "The knowledge I gained is not for me alone. It's for everyone who dares to speak up."

Everlyn believes the HRD Academy did more than equip her with tools; it restored her faith in the power of solidarity. "Because of the academy," she said, "I found the strength to keep defending human rights, even when it feels like the world is against me."



Sharon Obilo

(2022 Western/Nyanza Region)

The HRD Academy Was My Place of Empowerment

The first thing you notice about Sharon Obilo is her conviction. Every word she speaks feels deliberate, like someone who has learned the power of standing firm. “It is better to die standing than to live constantly on your knees,” she told Defenders Coalition. “Now is the time to stand up and speak out so that we can build a peaceful society that promotes the well-being of everyone.”

Born and raised in Kisumu County, Sharon’s journey as a human rights defender began early. Losing her parents at a young age and facing trauma in childhood, she found healing through action. “That pain became my fire,” she said. “It pushed me to speak for those who couldn’t.” Her advocacy started in primary school through a Health Club and has since evolved into a powerful mission rooted in justice and equality.



At the heart of her work is the fight for women’s land and property rights, protection from gender-based violence, and the freedom to protest without fear. Yet, even with passion and purpose, the work came with heavy emotional costs. “Before the HRD Academy, I often felt isolated and overwhelmed,” she admitted. Joining the Human Rights Defenders Academy in 2022 changed that. “The academy gave me more than training,” Sharon said. “It gave me a community.” She learned practical tools, digital and physical security, financial literacy, documentation, and psychosocial support, all of which reshaped how she approached her activism. “Those lessons helped me support GBV survivors, document extrajudicial killings, and help create safe spaces in my community.”

For Sharon, the Academy’s greatest gift was connection. “It reminded me that I’m not alone,” she shared. “Many defenders face burnout, broken relationships, and loss. Having a safe space to learn, reflect, and heal made all the difference.”

Looking back, Sharon sees the Academy as a defining chapter in her journey. “It was my place of empowerment,” she said. “It sharpened my voice, strengthened my courage, and reminded me that

my story has power, power to inspire others to rise and defend human rights without fear.”





Winnie Tuitoek

(2023, Baringo County)

The HRD Academy stopped me from giving up on Advocacy

When journalist Winnie Tuitoek picked up her camera and notebook to tell the stories of Baringo South, she never imagined she would one day become part of those same stories. “At first, I thought I was only documenting other people’s struggles,” she said. “But then I realized, my own community needed someone to stand for them too.” That realization changed everything. What began as reporting evolved into advocacy. Today, Winnie leads The Voice Network of Indigenous Endorois Women and Youths, an organization she founded to champion women’s rights, youth empowerment, climate justice, and land rights among the Endorois people. But the journey to leadership was not without fear. Suspicious calls, online surveillance, and open threats once made her question whether the work was worth the risk. “I was close to giving up,” she recalled. “Then, in 2023, I was invited to join

the Human Rights Defenders Academy, and that invitation came just in time.” At the Academy, Winnie found both safety and strength. “I realized my voice could do more than tell stories. It could move people to act,” she told Defenders Coalition. Through the sessions, she learned how to secure her data, protect herself from physical threats, and manage the emotional toll of advocacy. Equally transformative were the discussions on climate change. “As a member of a pastoralist community, I finally saw how our lived experiences are connected to global conversations,” she said. Those lessons inspired her to formalize The Voice Network soon after completing the Academy, creating a space where her people’s stories would be told from within — by those living them. “The HRD Academy stopped me from walking away from advocacy,” she reflected. “It gave me the tools to stand firm, even when fear tried to silence me.” Today, Winnie continues to tell stories, not just through journalism, but through action. With renewed confidence and stronger networks, she leads her community with purpose, proving that the courage to speak can be the first step toward lasting change.



Stanley Munge

(2024, Nakuru County)

I Stand for the Silenced

For Stanley Munge, speaking up has never been a choice; it has always been a calling. As a student leader, he witnessed how queer students were denied their right to education and dignity, some unable to sit exams or access basic services. "I couldn't stay silent," he said. "I knew my voice had to count for something."

In 2022, he joined KYDESA Homeless Youth Initiative, an organization championing the rights of queer youth. There, Stanley became deeply involved in grassroots organizing, working closely with vulnerable groups to ensure no one was left unseen or unheard.

His advocacy reached a turning point in 2024 when he joined the Human Rights Defenders Academy. "The Academy changed how I approach everything," he told Defenders Coalition. "Before, I didn't realize how exposed I was. Now I know how to protect myself physically, digitally, and emotionally." The training, he said, gave him the tools to defend both himself and his community more effectively.



Beyond the technical lessons, the Academy also offered healing. "The psychosocial and wellness sessions allowed me to breathe again," he shared. "It reminded me that strength also means knowing when to take care of yourself." Surrounded by other defenders, Stanley found solidarity and renewed purpose.

After the Academy, he expanded his impact by joining the Equity Group Foundation, where he supports scholarships for G+ youth and mentors them in leadership, resilience, and education. At the same time, he began a new journey in climate justice, launching a community-based initiative that raises awareness about carbon credits and ecological fairness. Working with local activists, he has reached more than 700 people through forums that promote transparency, equity, and protection of Indigenous and land-dependent communities. "The road has not been smooth," Stanley said, adding that he has faced harassment, intimidation, and even arbitrary arrests targeting his organization. Yet, he remains unshaken. "This is what I know best," he said simply. "Standing for those who have been silenced."

Today, Stanley is seen as a mentor and a pillar of support for other human rights defenders. "The HRD Academy positioned me to lead with knowledge,



courage, and compassion," he reflected. "It gave me more than skills, it gave me a network of people who believe, just like I do, in justice for all."





-  @DefendersKE
-  @defenderske
-  Defenders Coalition
-  @defenderscoalition



DEFENDERS
COALITION

*National Coalition of
Human Rights Defenders
Kenya*