Report from Umoja

In July 2025, Ulrike Stutz and Nathalie Oberthür visited Umoja to learn more about the village, the women and the projects supported by Freundeskreis Umoja e. V. (Friends of Umoja). They met Antonia Kipainoi, chairwoman of our partner association Zinduka e.V., in Nairobi and spent a few days with Tom and Rebecca Lolosoli in Umoja.





- Challenges -

Thirtyfive years after foundation, the women's village of Umoja is now established. However, the urgent need for a safe space for women and girls has not changed since then. The women who live permanently in the village don't only create a space of relative safety for themselves, but also offer it to other women and girls in need of temporary or permanent protection from domestic violence, genital mutilation or forced marriage. Family structures in Kenya continue to be characterized by violence against women; the stories of the women and girls, some of whom travel hundreds of kilometers to seek protection in Umoja, impressively demonstrate this.

Domestic violence against women remains widespread in Kenya. Girls are taught to accept it and visible signs of abuse are ignored by society. Girls who are married as second or third wives, which is legally permitted, may also be subject to violent attacks by the other wives fearing for their influence on their husband. Despite being prohibited by law, the "ritual" of genital mutilation is also deeply entrenched in Samburu culture. Genital mutilation is seen as a sign that girls are ready for marriage and childbearing; it is often performed at the age of 12–14, but also on eight-year-olds. It is not uncommon for girls to be married off against their will to men aged 60 or 70. Men often refuse to marry a woman who has not been circumcised. Children born before genital mutilation has been performed on the (often underaged and abused) mother may be considered unclean and killed by the family; for example, fatal poisoning can be caused by giving tobacco.

Not only tradition and culture keep women and girls trapped in these structures, but also economic reasons. There is often no money available for girls' nutrition and education. When girls are married off, this burden is removed and the family receives a bride price, often in form of goats and cows. However, if a woman withdraws from marriage, the bride price must be returned, whereas after periods of drought and hunger, the animals have often already died. These disputes can place a massive strain on entire families.





The women in Umoja offer women and girls fleeing these structures protection and take them into the community of women. They accompany pregnant girls until they give birth and ensure that the newborn receives a birth certificate, which is a prerequisite for later access to school education. If women and girls return to their families with their children, the women keep in touch as far as possible and monitor whether the women and children remain healthy. If the children fall ill, they try to arrange a medical examination to rule out any third-party involvement.





The women must take care of their own protection. The village is accessible from the outside, making it possible for husbands or families to forcibly abduct women. would they flee abduction, they would be exposed to the danger of firearms, which is why some of the women have equipped their traditionally built huts with stone walls and lockable steel doors so that women at risk can find protection there. The adult sons of the women from Umoja also help to protect the women. In addition, the women rely on specifically addressing perpetrators and consistently prosecuting crimes by filing complaints and persistently demanding protection from the authorities.

- Livelihood -

The women of Umoja earn their own living and also support those who seek refuge in the village. Freundeskreis Umoja e. V. supports the women in developing and expanding sustainable sources of income wherever possible, with also the projects launched in 2024 now well established:

Jewelry production: The women in Umoja value and honor their Samburu tradition. Making traditional beaded jewelry is one of the women's favorite activities, which they manufacture together in the group, and it is also their most important source of income. The women sell the jewelry to tourists visiting the village or landing at Kalama Airstrip. Women new in the village receive a basic supply of beads from the Umoja women so that they can produce their own jewelry. There is also a revolving loan system ("merry-go-round") within the village community: women use the credit to buy beads and repay the credit after selling the jewelry. However, the success of the Umoja women in selling jewelry has attracted imitators; other villages are trying to market themselves as genuine "Umoja villages" and attract tourists. This is supported by tour guides in boycott with Umoja because the Umoja women refuse to give the tour guides a share of the sales income – up to 75% is demanded – in return for recommending them to tourists. Consideration is therefore being given to opening up selling opportunities beyond local offerings, for example through online shops or selling cooperations.











- **Agriculture**: In 2024 the women have again intensified their agricultural activities. They grow a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, including corn, bananas, spinach, sukuma, and pumpkin. The nearby river provides watering for the garden, but the soil is not particularly nutrient-rich. In addition, the harvest also attracts uninvited guests: elephants sometimes visit the village and destroy the crops; there is also an acute threat from porcupines, which attack the crops in large numbers. Attempts to scare away the porcupines with lighting have proven counterproductive; now a dog is to be purchased and kept in the gardens to chase away the porcupines.









Dairy farming: In addition to sheep and goats, the Samburu also keep cows for milk production. Last year, with the support of the Friends of Umoja organisation, the women purchased two European dairy cows to supplement their small herd of local dairy cows with the aim of increasing milk output. The cows are kept in the barn to protect them from theft, which means that a lot of effort has to be put into feeding them; in addition to straw and grass, the cows are given nutrients to increase milk production. So far, however, the outcome has been low, at around 5 liters per cow per day, so the plan to sell spare milk to the Muehlbauer Academy has not yet been realized. The women and their children themselves however benefit from the nutritious milk. They have also purchased a bull calf, which will be raised and used to inseminate the cows in the future; artificial insemination of the cows with veterinary assistance has proven to be too expensive and too uncertain in terms of success.





- **Poultry farming**: With the support of the Friends of Umoja organisation, the women have built a large facility for keeping chickens. The chickens produce around 1,000 eggs per month, which are sold to the Umoja Camp.





- **Umoja Camp Site:** Over the years, the women have built a campsite on their land, where small huts ("bandas") have been erected in addition to tent sites. However, equipping and managing the campsite to a standard that is attractive to tourists has proven difficult.





The women have therefore entered into a partnership with a tenant who operates the camp site on the basis of a long-term agreement and invests in the construction of new tent houses and community facilities. At the end of the partnership, the buildings will remain the property of the women, who will be able to continue running the camp in their own responsibility.









The camp manager is a woman, and the Umoja women have also retained control over key decisions regarding the camp and the income from the former bandas. A woman from the village, Christine, works as a staff member at the camp and, in Rebecca's absence, also acts as the village's ambassador to tourists. Visitors to the camp are mainly Kenyans; building more comfortable accommodation units could significantly increase its appeal to international tourists.



- Water management: The women and the Muehlbauer Academy obtain the water they need not only from the river, but also from the well located directly on the premises. The water is pumped using a solar-powered pump; by expanding the solar station, a larger pump could be purchased and the amount of water pumped could be significantly increased. However, the water is salty and unpleasant to taste due to sediment deposits from the soil, which is why a desalination plant was installed. The plant is of good technical quality, but has been damaged due to incorrect operation and has not been operational for about a year.





Repairing and maintaining the system would significantly improve water quality; expanding water production would also enable women to develop an additional source of income by selling fresh water.

- School education -

The women of Umoja recognized early that education is necessary to improve the lives of the people of Samburu, especially women and girls. Education opens employment opportunities and at the same time offers a chance to protect girls from forced and early marriage and genital mutilation.

- Umoja Muelhbauer Academy (UMA): The Muehlbauer Academy was built on the grounds of Umoja in 2013 with the support of sponsors and later expanded by the Freundeskreis Umoja e. V. with support of the Ministry of Development







UMA is a private school educating both boys and girls. Since the school system in Kenya has been reformed, UMA is providing six years of primary school and three years of junior secondary school. The remaining three years of senior secondary school ("high school") can only be completed at secondary schools, being run as boarding schools. The school is now at full capacity with 332 students, 69% of whom are girls. A total of 173 students (166 of whom are girls) are supported by the P+7 sponsorship program; the P+7 sponsors cover the school costs for children (mostly girls) out of impoverished families from the surrounding area whose parents cannot afford the school fees; in return, the parents commit to not subjecting the girls to genital mutilation or marriage. The Friends of Umoja organisation also covers the costs of teachers' salaries and general school maintenance as well as school meals for all children. UMA is a private school, but thanks to the support of the Friends of Umoja organisation, the school fees are much less expensice than other schools' fees.



UMA organizes workshops against genital mutilation in cooperation with the Umoja women. Education in schools and FGM workshops are urgently needed to raise awareness that violence against women is unacceptable. The workshops are held in the surrounding villages and UMA students - both boys and girls - are taught in workshops during the holidays. This counteracts the widespread practice of circumcising girls during the holidays ("cutting season"), as the injuries can heal by the end of the holidays. In addition, the children also receive school meals during the holidays, whereas at home they often cannot be adequately fed and have to go hungry during the holidays.





Pre-Primary School: The women have set up their own pre-primary school on the village grounds, where preschool children from the village and surrounding area receive three years of free education. Two teachers are employed by the pre-primary school; one teacher is paid by the government on the initiative of the Umoja women, the second teacher is paid by the Umoja women.





The children are taught basic lessons in Kiswahili and English. In addition, the children receive a warm meal at preprimary school, which is a major reason for parents to send their children to school in the first place. The women are currently planning to purchase mats for the children to take their afternoon nap; at present, the children sleep sitting at their school desks because there is no suitable place for them to lie down.





UMA is a very successful school facility. However, despite its good basic equipment, considerable investment will be necessary in the near future. For example, due to the expansion of the junior secondary school from eight to nine grades, one or two new classrooms will be needed. A large multi-purpose hall would be desirable, not only for school assemblies but also for the children to eat their meals; currently, the children eat their meals outdoors, which is unfavorable for hygienic reasons – rats, sand. To improve education, it would also be helpful to set up a laboratory and a computer room.

During our visit, the school gathered in the schoolyard and the children were delighted to receive the leather soccer balls we brought with us.





Afterwards we organized a virtual exchange between the fourth grade classes at UMA and Welchenberg Elementary School in Grevenbroich Neuenhausen. The children sang songs together and established an initial direct connection. The intention is to stay in touch and to rerun this exchange regularly at the beginning and end of the fourth school year in order to strengthen the connection between the schools. The connection can be maintained via a laptop provided to Tom Lolosoli, who coordinates UMA, by the Friends oj Umoja organisation.





- Future projects -

The women's village of Umoja is a success story for women and children in Samburu County and has the potential to bring positive change for an entire community. However, the challenges remain serious. Two projects in particular are close to the hearts of the women and the Freundeskreis Umoja e. V. organisation and are to be implemented as soon as possible, provided the necessary funds can be raised:

- "School instead of genital mutilation" - Sponsorship for senior secondary school -

The girls from the P+7 sponsorship program, whose first class of 19 ninth-grade girls will graduate from junior secondary school at the end of 2025, are to receive further support. The girls are now 14 - 15 years old; if they have to leave school, there is a risk that their families will see no alternative to genital mutilation and marriage for the girls – poverty remains high in Samburu County. With a continuing sponsorship program until the end of 12th grade, we seek to give these girls the chance to complete their school education. This will not only provide them with further protection, but also with an education and the chance to lead a self-determined life in which they can earn their own living. Without a secondary school diploma, there is no realistic possibility for the girls to obtain qualified vocational training; not only university education, also vocational training requires a school diploma.

The costs of accommodation, transportation, personal equipment (mattress and bedding, hygiene supplies), school equipment (school uniforms, textbooks, and learning materials), and school fees cannot be covered by the girls and their families. Approximately € 725 per child is needed for initial personal equipment, as well as a budget of approximately €1,800 for each school year.

- Umoja Rescue Center -

On the land of Umoja Village, near the pre-primary school, there is a previously undeveloped area that is open to the public and mainly used for sports and leisure activities. The Archer's Post community is seeking to claim this area for municipal purposes; in order to prevent possible expropriation, it is necessary for Umoja to secure the area and manage it sustainably by themselves. Currently, plans are being considered to fence off and secure the area. In mid-term, it is planned to build a rescue center on the site, where women and girls, especially expectant mothers, can be safely accommodated and receive medical care in a dedicated gynecological ward.

- Commemoration -

The women of Umoja stand close to the Freundeskreis Umoja e. V. They erected a memorial stone for lse Stockums, founder and former chairwoman of the organisation, and named the green space sheltering the memorial "Ise's Garden." We planted four trees in memory of Ise and said a prayer together with the entire school.







- Outlook -

The women in Umoja are a great source of hope for women worldwide; they work with perseverance, courage and great personal dignity to improve living conditions for women and children. The success of their village also has the potential to break down structures beeing hostile to women and girls to contribute lasting changes in society without losing sight of the traditional way of life in Samburu County.



P.S. Miriam Keilbach, responsible editor for Africa at Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland (Editorial Network Germany), visited in Umoja at the same time and wrote a very captivating report with a wide reach - gladly feel free to share it!

https://www.rnd.de/panorama/frauendorf-in-kenia-in-umoja-sind-keine-maenner-erlaubt-I6TX47FYENHEFPDVTAT-VYSGYJA.html