

When **WOMEN** Hold the Land,
The **STORY** Changes.



The 10th Anniversary of the Indigenous Women's Council (IWC) was not just a celebration, it was a living archive of courage, resilience, and transformation. Over the last decade, the Council has become a formidable voice for indigenous women across East Africa; defending land, culture, and identity while shaping national and global advocacy spaces.

Hosted by Samburu Women Trust under the visionary leadership of Jane Meriwas, this milestone gathering drew women and allies from across Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. For five unforgettable days, the quiet hills of Nanyuki came alive with colour, chants, storytelling, and strategy, each moment affirming a truth that resounded through every session: "When indigenous women rise, they raise entire communities."

For CIVFUND, participation through the Zishaye Grassroots Fund was an opportunity to reflect, learn, and reaffirm commitment to community-led movements advancing land, water, and climate justice. The convening underscored that real change thrives when communities hold both the pen to write their stories and the power to implement their solutions.

More than 400 participants, elders, youth, activists, and male allies converged to mark this decade of progress. Representing the Pokot, Samburu, Turkana, Maasai, Somali, and Ankole tribes, the gathering became a vibrant mosaic of heritage and solidarity. The opening ceremony dazzled with regalia and rhythm, beadwork glinting under the sun, fabrics swirling to ancestral songs, and ululations filling the air.

The Ankole cultural dance from Uganda drew thunderous applause as Kenyan sisters joined in, symbolizing cross-border kinship and unity that transcends borders. Every chant, drumbeat, and dance carried stories of resistance and survival, proof that indigenous identity remains unbroken in a world that often seeks to silence it.

Throughout the sessions, one theme echoed: empowerment rooted in mutual respect and shared progress. Delegates emphasized that women's empowerment is not men's disempowerment, but rather a collective journey toward equality, respect, and voice. The call was clear: uplift both girls and boys to build balanced, thriving communities.

Education emerged as the foundation of empowerment. Participants called for scholarships for indigenous girls, investment in vocational training, and support for women-led enterprises. The convening also celebrated indigenous women as custodians of the earth. Their traditional knowledge in sustainable land use, climate adaptation, and conservation was recognized as vital to environmental resilience. Governments pledged to recognize indigenous women as essential actors in climate policy. This resonated deeply with CIVFUND's Zishaye Grassroots Fund, which champions women-led climate justice and conservation initiatives.

Delegates united against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and gender-based violence, emphasizing

dialogue, education, and community leadership as powerful tools for cultural change. A defining moment came with the declaration:

“We're not victims of our history, we are authors of our future.”

Women were urged to reclaim their stories in research, media, and policy spaces, ensuring that indigenous voices shape the narratives that define them.

Stories of change brought these themes to life. One woman, once silenced by child marriage and FGM, shared how she reclaimed her voice. With grassroots support, she returned to school, earned her degree, and now leads anti-FGM campaigns, alongside her husband, who now stands as her ally. An elder spoke passionately about land and climate. Using traditional ecological knowledge, she trains young women in tree planting, sustainable grazing, and water harvesting, declaring, “Our land is our mother; we must keep her alive for our daughters.” One man shared how he persuaded his family to abandon FGM for his sister, proving that male allies are key to building safer, more just communities.

From the convening, the following key recommendations emerged:

1. Prioritize Indigenous Girls' Education & Economic Empowerment, through scholarships, mentorship, and entrepreneurship.
2. Protect Land Rights & Cultural Heritage; secure land registration and preserve sacred sites.
3. Integrate Indigenous Knowledge in Education; embed history, language, and traditions in national curricula.
4. End Harmful Practices; amplify community-led advocacy to eliminate FGM and GBV.
5. Strengthen Legal Protection & Survivor Support; invest in rescue centres and legal aid.
6. Sustain Women-Led Grassroots Initiatives; ensure long-term, flexible funding.
7. Engage Men & Boys as Allies; foster inclusive advocacy.
8. Influence Global Narratives, position indigenous women at the heart of policy dialogue.



CIVFUND remains steadfast in its mission to strengthen grassroots women-led climate justice initiatives through the Zishaye Grassroots Fund, resourcing and scaling indigenous women's innovations; to deepen partnerships with Samburu Women Trust and other women-led networks advancing land and water justice; and to promote cross-border solidarity and shared learning across Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, ensuring that strategies born in community spaces reach regional and global platforms.

The **10th Anniversary** of the Indigenous Women's Council was more than a milestone; it was a movement rekindled. It reminded all who attended that the path to justice and equality begins at the community level, with women who dare to dream, organize, and lead. As CIVFUND learned once again under the Zishaye Grassroots Fund, transformation happens when communities hold both the voice and the power to act.



When indigenous women rise, they raise entire communities.