

Prof Norah Khadzini Olembo

Despite having spent most of the night marking university examination papers, Prof Norah Khadzini Olembo was vivacious and jovial as she ushered us into her lavishly furnished house in Lavington.

"Graduation is around the corner and I have to hand in the results early," she says.

But she is not complaining. The scholar, who cherishes hard work, is upbeat. Olembo never rests unless she has accomplished all her tasks. "This interview will allow me to relax," she says, as she sinks into a settee.

Beneath Olembo's modesty lies a scholar of international repute with penchant for details.

She is a professor, mother and activist fondly referred to as 'mama'.

Besides teaching, Olembo is the executive director of the African Biotechnology Stakeholders Forum (ABSF), a non-governmental organisation that provides a platform for sharing, debating and understanding issues pertaining to biotechnology agriculture, health, industry and environment.

"We are a very effective forum," she says.

The organisation has more than 80 individual members in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria.

"In Kenya we have been at the forefront lobbying for a biotechnology policy and we expect it to form part of the debate when Parliament resumes," she says.

"Kenya is among the first countries in Africa to develop such a policy," she says.

"The forum has also been at the forefront in the organisation of conferences and workshops for journalists, farmers, consumers and manufacturers to help in the free flow of correct and balanced information," Olembo says.

She says if used correctly, biotechnology is a formidable tool in addressing food insecurity, disease, environmental pollution and poverty.

"The result is that we have better and accurate coverage of biotechnological news and this has helped in disseminating the correct information," she says.

The forum has been involved in enlightening farmers about genetically modified crops. "We have not been able to do much in terms of education because what is going on is still in the research phase," she says.

Olembo says Kenya has made great strides in genetically modified foods.

"We have come from far and we won't have to wait for long," she says.

Olembo is best remembered for her efforts as the director of Kenya Industrial Property Organisation (Kipo) — from 1992 to 2002 — where she raised the profile of the hitherto unknown organisation both locally and internationally.

Kipo was renamed Kenya Industrial Property Institute (Kipi) in 2002 and she served as the executive director for another year. The organisation is charged with protecting property rights or patents. Olembo vividly recalls the events of mid-1992 that led to her appointment as the director of Kipo. As the head of the Bio-Chemistry Department at University of Nairobi she organised a Unesco seminar where the Minister for Science and Technology was the chief guest.

"After the function the minister asked her to establish a patent office," she says.

At first she was undecided and confused on whether to accept the Government invitation.

"It was my third year as the head of the department and I had grand plans for it," she says. "My office was in a mess, with books strewn everywhere. I remember breaking down in tears."

Despite her apprehension she quickly settled in her new role with gusto.

Born to religious parents, Benjamin and Berita Ngaira, in Kaimosi, Olembo was brought up in a family of 11 children. Olembo's early inspiration was her brother.

"My eldest brother, Dr Benyaya Masiju, was a geneticist who was instrumental in the growth and expansion of Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (Kari). He was the first director of the institution following the break-up of East African Community," she says.

Growing up in a Christian setting, she learnt early in life the value of humility and the importance of living in harmony with other people. "My parents were committed Quakers and they shielded me from many things," she says.

Her father served as the chairman of Friends Church East Africa. From a tender age, Olembo spent most of her time in a Christian environment. As a daughter of a church elder, she was expected to lead a life beyond reproach.

"Though this was very demanding it taught me how to relate to other people," she says.

Olembo's dream was to become a doctor. Throughout her education both at Kaimosi Primary School and Butere Girls' High School, she excelled in sciences.

"I chose Butere Girls' High School because it offered pure sciences," she says.

After completing her 'O' level education at the age of 18, Olembo was sponsored by Friends Church Kaimosi to pursue her 'A' level education at Mount School York in Yorkshire, United Kingdom.

She only stayed in the United Kingdom for two years because she was home sick.

When Olembo returned to Kenya she was among the first women to join the University of Nairobi. This marked the beginning of a warm relationship with the institution she serves to-date.

At the university, Olembo was taught by some of the best scholars in Africa including the late Prof Thomas Odhiambo, who was the founder of the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (Icipe), with whom she later worked.

"After my undergraduate studies, Odhiambo took me under his wings as a graduate research assistant between 1968 and 1970," she says.

She graduated with a Master of Science in Zoology in 1972. Thirsty for more knowledge, she returned to the university where she earned her doctorate in Biochemistry. She crowned her education with a post-doctoral degree in Molecular Biology, from University of London.

At Kipo, the Olembo had the daunting task of selling the patenting concept to Kenyans.

"Many people, including scholars, were ignorant about patents," she says. "We had to make them understand that we were out to protect their creativity, the property of their mind."

Kipo strove to promote inventions by getting involved in intellectual property matters. As an institution, the organisation was determined to protect intellectual property holders against infringement through counterfeits.

"I recruited enthusiastic young university graduates," she says. Together they moved around institutions lecturing on the benefits of patenting to preserve the creativity of people, especially those in the developing countries.

"We organised debates, seminars and workshops at various places," she says. Her goal was to upgrade the local Kipo office to international standards.

"We received many invitations from other countries and participated in many international forums," she says.

After a short while, Kipo became the largest patent centre in Africa. To help in the dissemination of information, Kipo published a newsletter — The Inventor. At international conferences on life-form patents, many of which she chaired, Olembo did not shy away from defending Third World countries. Her work bore fruits when she was appointed the chairperson of the governing committee of World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo) for two years.

When Olembo left the organisation in 2003, she went back to teach at the University of Nairobi. She received two presidential awards — Moran of the Burning Spear and

Order of the Golden Warrior.

Other than teaching, Olembo has been involved in many national and international assignments. Currently she is a consultant with Food and Agricultural Organisation where she is helping with the establishment and co-ordination of a website on Agricultural Biotechnology Network in Africa.

She served as a consultant at the Commonwealth Secretariat and as a member of the steering committee of the International Food Policy Research Institute on Biotechnology.

Other organisations that Olembo has worked with include United Nations Environmental Programme, International Service for National Agricultural Research, and International Centre for Research in Semi Arid Tropics and International Centre for Maize Research.

Despite her international acclaim, Olembo identifies with the ordinary people, especially poor women who she refers to as "the wretched of the earth".

"When I wake up every day, I ask myself 'how can I help my sisters today?'" she says.

The lecturer belongs to a number of women's organisations, especially those working in Vihiga and Emuhaya in Western Province. She believes given the right environment and support, women can make a difference in the society.

"Look at Prof Ruth Oniang'o, Dr Julia Ojiambo and Mrs Charity Ngilu and their contributions in Parliament," she says. "They are perfect examples of women who have prospered."

Though she acknowledges the lives of women has improved, she says there is room for improvement.

"At least the traditions and myths that were used against women's advancement are on the decline," she says. "We need to move faster and build on the gains we have had so far."

The widowed mother of four — three daughters and a son — owes much to her family.

"I teach my children to be the best that they can be in whatever fields they are in," she says.

Olembo says she prays to God to guide them so that whatever they do promotes human rights and dignity. Her late husband, Prof Reuben J Olembo, was very supportive of her endeavours.

"We had a beautiful marriage. He was the pillar of my life," she says.

Olembo believes that with right leadership, the economic status of many Kenyans languishing in poverty can be improved greatly.

"Due to corruption, resources are not distributed equally," she says.

This, she says, retards economic development. Recently, the globetrotting scholar was in Ottawa where she attended a board meeting of the International Development Research Centre.

"We were given a report on a new bracket of developing countries known as Bricks — Brazil, India, China, South Korea and Singapore."

She says Kenya would have been in this bracket had it not been for corruption. "Look at Kenya going to beg from the Chinese and allowing them to dump their products here," she says.

The Government, Olembo believes, can do better in terms of wealth distribution and planning. "Why do we have floods and drought being declared as national disasters each year?" she asks.

Though Olembo believes politics can be a vehicle for development, she is non-committal about her political ambitions.

"Anything can happen," she says with a laugh.

Despite a demanding daily schedule, she finds time for herself and the family. "I love reading and tending to my gardens," she says while taking us on a tour of her flower garden.

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