

# AKIDWA 20TH ANNIVERSARY



# MEMOIR



# AkiDwA 20th Anniversary Memoir

As AkiDwA celebrates its 20th anniversary of activism and advocating for the rights of migrant women in Ireland, we thought what better way to commemorate this occasion than to publish a selection of memories and thoughts from those who have supported AkiDwA and worked closely with us over the years. These accounts capture the hard work and dedication of AkiDwA's members and the essence of what AkiDwA does. We hope you enjoy this memoir.



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# 1. 'Seed to Blossom' by Sr. Joan McManus

Have you ever fed a bonham or pet lamb on a bottle, lest it got squashed out by its greedy siblings? Have you ever experienced sheer delight, wonder, gratitude and pride watching a tiny seed that you had watered grow to full bloom? Those were my feelings recently as I took my place at the Mercy table in the Gresham Hotel Dublin. The occasion was the tenth anniversary celebratory dinner of AkiDwA, a network of African and migrant women now living in Ireland whose aim is to promote equality in Irish society. It was the night before Mercy Day.



For me it all began In August 2001 while working at the Catherine Mc Auley Centre Herbert Street off Baggot Street Dublin. One morning a letter came from a stranger, Salome Mbugua, a native Kenyan-cum-Irish citizen. She had got my name from Sr. Edel Bannon which is another interesting story.

Salome's dream was an Ireland where African women could live in an equitable society. This was and still is a long way off. The seed sown at the meeting between Salome and myself in the wake of the letter gave birth a month later to AkiDwA – an acronym in Swahili for Sisterhood of Africa. In the footsteps of Catherine, the centre bearing her name was in a position to nurture the seed by providing a room for African women to meet, talk, discuss ideas and make decisions. Before this they had been meeting in pubs or hotel foyers, not very conducive to focused conversation and not getting them far. To me it was one of those tricks of providence that had planted this seed on the very same site where Catherine had built her House of Mercy all those years ago. Salome's dream of empowering African women of the 21st century corresponded very closely to Catherine's dream for women and children of her time. Soon the small seedling needed another prop.



*Some Founding Members with Eric Byrne TD: Binta Obola, Nobuhle Nduka, Salome Mbugua, Alwiye Xuseyn, Tina Akinola Jund*

It's all very well talking about prayer doing more than all the money in the Bank of Ireland when you have money in the bank! When the infant AkidWa went, cap-in-hand, to open a bank-account it was another story. To apply for funding as a voluntary organization they needed a bank account number, to open a bank account they needed an address and some of the money they were making application for – a real catch 22 situation. Catherine's Centre took the gamble of backing and giving credibility to this fledgling organization. Can you imagine how she chuckled her approval as we headed down to the same Bank of Ireland that had managed her financial affairs nearly two centuries earlier? Now these women were themselves chuckling all the way to the bank, in a position to stand on their own feet and apply for funding in their own name. As it turned out they were often more successful in acquiring funding than the centre itself. The next hurdle, a year or two later, was to negotiate the legal steps that had to be taken in order to become a Charitable Company and enjoy the benefits such a move ensured. Once more Catherine's Centre came to their assistance and introduced them to Arthur O Hagan, Solicitors for the congregation since its foundation. By the way you may recall that Catherine's tin deed-box turned up recently in these same offices and was handed back to the congregation where it is now one of our treasured artefacts .



*Catherine McAuley on the Five Pound Note*

Catherine was dead for the tenth anniversary of the Congregation she founded. The seed she had sown in Baggot Street was already flowering and bearing fruit in a number of counties in Ireland and England and was being carried on the Atlantic waves to faraway Newfoundland. But Catherine did not live to see that day. At ten years of age AkiDwA was far from dead. The founding members and followers were very much alive, still overflowing with the zest and energy of their original charisma, as their recent anniversary celebrations demonstrated. Entitled 'AkiDwA: Transforming Ireland for a Decade', there were ten events in as many days – what a feat! I was lucky to be present at three of the four gatherings in Dublin – the other six were held in Galway, Cork, Waterford, Limerick, Sligo and Longford.



*Some of the women featured in the book*

One was a book-launch, held in Trinity College at the end of a day's conference on Racialization and Agency. The book *Home and Away*, launched by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Andrew Montague, is a collection of personal stories of migrant women as they journey to making Ireland their home. It also carries insights from friends of AkidWa and contains a chapter on those early days.



*Tom Montague Lord Mayor of Dublin blessed among migrant women at the book-launch*



The tenth anniversary celebratory fund-raising dinner on the 23rd September 2011 in the Gresham Hotel was the climax. Thanks to Srs. Coirle McCarthy (Congregational Leader) and Nellie McLaughlin (Provincial Leader, Northern Province), I was privileged to host a Mercy table of ten – guests included African and Philippine women as well as Sisters from three provinces of the congregation. There were about twenty round tables altogether in a spacious ball-room. Dazzling lights, spectacular décor, colourful people, a loud rhythmical beat to the music from around the world, all added to the ambience and party mood. Sound-proof ears would have been appreciated betimes! The meal was delicious and the entertainment which accompanied and followed it was multi-cultural and unique. We witnessed the top three scorers from the recent 'AkiDwA's Got Talent' contest, a Gospel Choir and many other performances. In true African style there were awards, a raffle and speeches.



*Kenyan Ambassador Catherine Muigai presenting an award to Sr. Joan*

The concluding event was a Thanksgiving Service in the Methodist Mission Church Abbey St. Dublin on Sunday 25th September, a fitting end to a wonderful two weeks of activities.

To remember is to be grateful in true eucharistic fashion. If I were to pick out one characteristic of AkiDwA it would have to be gratitude. Each time CEO Salome Mbugua refers to the origins of the organization she pays tribute to the Catherine Mc Auley Centre for the pivotal role it played in nurturing those early seeds, supporting the first stages of growth, empowering AkiDwA to take the steps needed to blossom and become the strong, yet struggling, vibrant, multi-cultural voice for migrant women which it is today. It is one of the few NGOs in that category to have survived the recession. For myself, I too am humbly grateful – for the providence to have been in the right place at the right time and in the right mood when I opened that auspicious envelope ten years ago. AkiDwa has opened doors and expanded horizons for me in ways I could never have imagined, ranging from the snazzy night-life of Dublin's Temple Bar to the challenge of justifying shoes to a class of small boys in stocking-feet at the Mosque at Clonskeagh, and all the stages in-between. You can read more in the 10th anniversary book : Home and Away – Migrant Women Transforming Ireland. The following few paragraphs from the chapter : 'Conception and Birth of AkiDwA' may whet your appetite:



To remember is to be grateful in true eucharistic fashion. If I were to pick out one characteristic of AkiDwa it would have to be gratitude. Each time CEO Salome Mbugua refers to the origins of the organization she pays tribute to the Catherine Mc Auley Centre for the pivotal role it played in nurturing those early seeds, supporting the first stages of growth, empowering AkiDwa to take the steps needed to blossom and become the strong, yet struggling, vibrant, multi-cultural voice for migrant women which it is today. It is one of the few NGOs in that category to have survived the recession. For myself, I too am humbly grateful – for the providence to have been in the right place at the right time and in the right mood when I opened that auspicious envelope ten years ago. AkiDwa has opened doors and expanded horizons for me in ways I could never have imagined, ranging from the snazzy night-life of Dublin's Temple Bar to the challenge of justifying shoes to a class of small boys in stocking-feet at the Mosque at Clonskeagh, and all the stages in-between. You can read more in the 10th anniversary book : Home and Away – Migrant Women Transforming Ireland.

One more seed of the flower that blooms in Baggot Street/Herbert Street for nearly 200 years is now bearing fruit across Ireland and scattering new seeds further afield through the African Sisterhood: AkidWa. 'Hurrah for Foundations! Makes the old young and the young merry' [Catherine Mc Auley]



*Sr Joan McManus*

## 2. Mick Rafferty & Patricia McCarthy – Partners in Catalyst

AkiDwA is a unique organisation which has portrayed a positive image of migrant women in Ireland at a local and national level. We have seen the organisation in action and it practices what it preaches. Its ethos is based on solid community development principles and puts respect for others at the centre of its operation.

Partners in Catalyst became involved with AkiDwA twenty years ago at Salome's invitation to work with groups of migrant women delivering training and empowerment. As an organisation working primarily in the inner city of Dublin, an area which very rapidly become a multicultural multi-ethnic community, we were delighted to accept the invitation and the challenge.

Over the past twenty years AkiDwA has been active at both national and community levels, putting the issues of migration, equality, and racism on the political agenda as well as building confidence and empowerment amongst migrant women in Ireland

We see the confidence building and support for migrant women taking up position in local authorities as councillors, running for national elections and involvement in local community organisations as one of the most important work AkiDwA has achieved. The key achievement has been to make immigrants visible and to give them a clear voice that contributes to a better Irish society.



Our fondest memory is of seeing groups of migrant women gaining in self-confidence and knowledge about how Ireland is run and how they can influence positive changes. We are lucky enough to see this process happening many times. Our visit to PayPal in Dundalk last year with six women living in the Direct Provision centre in Mosney is a very fond memory. They had a great day with mock interviews and advice on how to compile their CVs. This visit resulted in a mentoring programme by PayPal staff which is still in operation today, bringing hope and positivity to women in the direct provision centres throughout the country.



Our main recommendation is that AkiDwA are funded to expand their work throughout the country and that a similar programme be run for migrant men. We would also recommend closer relationships with local community projects to increase integration and mutual respect. It is striking how the new Irish are impacting the arts and sports and the professions. This is very welcome and indicative of a confidence that AkiDwA promotes. This creative side of the new Irish needs to be supported and published to encourage positive images of migrants. We think AkiDwA has an important role to play in this process particularly in encouraging the arts and its expression among the immigrant community. This new Irish identity needs exploration and expression and AkiDwA is well placed to facilitate this. A second recommendation would be to create a data base of all local authority councillors, TDs, and senators and to keep them informed at regular intervals of the work of AkiDwA and its key staff. This is one of the lessons of the last Senate elections. That is a need for a higher profile amongst public representatives of the issues AkiDwA tackles and its concrete creative positive response to these issues.



# 3. Amaka Okonkwo – Former Volunteer and Staff Member

AkiDwA is a great organization with excellent foresight to bring relief and a sense of belonging to migrant women in Ireland. I joined AkiDwA in 2010 as a volunteer following their advert on Metro Eireann. Within that same year a vacancy for Employment Officer came up. I applied and got the job. From then, I worked on various projects within the organisation up until 2017 with a few breaks.



AkiDwA has really done well, I must say. As an organization with so many internal and external challenges, they have succeeded in keeping their head above the waters. Marking 20 years of existence as an organization founded and led by a migrant woman, on it's own is a milestone.

Some people may not know it but AkiDwA actually started the awareness and campaign against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Ireland. Not only did the organization begin the campaign, they brought it to Europe for the whole world to know the dangers of FGM. Actually signing FGM into law in Ireland was the brain child of AkiDwA.

AkiDwA provided excellent outreach to migrant women facing all sorts of challenges. AkiDwA was and I think, still is a very strong and powerful voice for migrant women in Ireland.

The Employment Project was very successful and positively impacted a lot of migrant women and migrants as a whole. Their booklet, 'Access to Third Level Education and Employment for Migrants', was like a Bible then to every migrant. I travelled to almost all counties and cities in Ireland engaging with women with that booklet.



The Young Migrant Women Project was also phenomenal. AkiDwA was able to bring together over 60 young women from across the country who came from over 40 nationalities together as one big family. These young women had aspirations living in Ireland which they expressed in their book, BETWEEN TWO CULTURES. I managed this project and I can tell you it was one of the best. Today, most of those women are living up to their aspirations successfully.

AkiDwA's advocacy and outreach was second to none. Asylum seekers and refugees in different accommodation centres in Ireland benefited from AkiDwA's free trainings, court escorts and open door policy regime. Women who experienced domestic violence from their partners enjoyed super confidential support and counselling from AkiDwA. Families whose child/children were taken into state care were equally supported in so many uncountable ways. Volunteering and work placement opportunities were created for women to enhance their paid employment opportunities.

I will say that AkiDwA has done really well in all. Most significantly, is the fact that through my work with AkiDwA, I excelled in all that I did for them. While I was helping to build other women and the organization, the organization helped to build me and prepared me for who I am today. Thanks to Salome Mbugua (AkiDwA CEO) who observed my potential and supported me.

My recommendation for the organisation is to continue with the good work, create room for improvement, listen more and look for people who have a genuine interest in the organisation to form the board and staff team if possible. The management team should be encouraged to do the work. Bring back the good old days if possible to their new team!

# New online resource aims to bolster the battle against FGM

By Chinedu Onyejolu

THE FIGHT AGAINST female genital mutilation (FGM) would be boosted if the Government ratifies the Istanbul Convention.

That was the message from Salome Mbugua, president of the migrant women's network AkiDwA, who spoke at the recent launch of United to End FGM – an EU-funded online information and educational resource – held on Monday 6 February, the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM.

Mbugua said ratifying the Istanbul Convention would guarantee "prevention, protection, provision of services and promotion of organisations" working on issues related to FGM.

The Istanbul Convention is aimed at ending all forms of violence against women. The Council of Europe convention also compels all EU member states to take all available actions against such gender-based violence and ensure that victims are protected as perpetrators are prosecuted.

AkiDwA, which co-ordinates United to End FGM in



United to End FGM Ireland co-ordinator Amaka Okonkwo hailed the benefits of the new online platform for professionals in governance, media, healthcare and more

Ireland, is one of 16 organisations across the EU implementing the project.

The network estimates that some 3,780 women living in Ireland have been violated by FGM, based on the number of women who have immigrated here from countries where the practice has a high prevalence.

Mbugua's comments were echoed by Senator Alice Mary Higgins, who launched the

resource.

"The Government needs to allocate resources to meet their obligation under the Istanbul Convention," she said. "When that decision is made, the e-learning platform should be one of the initiatives that funding should be allocated to."

Higgins added that the new platform is vital helping GPs and maternity services

in Ireland dealing with FGM-related issues, and educating others to recognise the various signs and risks associated with FGM.

The senator also called on the media to be sensitive when covering the issue. "It is really important that the media do not stereotype cultural practices," she said.

"Initiatives to challenge FGM have come from migrant-led organisations and immigrants, and people could become silent if they think coverage is attacking their culture."

Higgins urged those working to eradicate FGM to intensify their efforts "at the community level".

United to End FGM's Ireland co-ordinator Amaka Okonkwo said the online platform includes country-specific information for 11 EU member states, an e-learning course in nine different languages, a live section with webinars and an online discussion forum geared towards a variety of professionals in the media, healthcare and social services, the legal field and rights activism, among others.

## 4. Dr. Caroline Munyi – Migrant Women's Health Co-Ordinator at AkiDwA



AkiDwA is the foremost organisation agitating for the rights of migrant women in Ireland. For the last 20 years, AkiDwA has been able to bring the voices of migrant women to various spaces. As a result, the organisation has been central in shaping policies to respond to the concerns and needs of the migrant woman. The organisation has also been key in creating awareness to migrant women about their rights.

I got involved with AkiDwA 12 years ago when I was very new in Ireland and still a student. I have carried out consultancies for the organisation as well as working as an intern and Community Health Ambassador. When the ambassador programme was started I was among the first cohort of CHAs. Currently, I am the organisation's Migrant Women's Health Coordinator.


AkiDwA has done a lot of good things in the last 20 years. What comes to mind is the fact that the organisation is well established in the minds and psyche of migrant women in the Ireland. That is not a small feat. This awareness about the existence and work of the organisation has made AkiDwA the go-to organisation for migrant women experiencing issues such as domestic violence, FGM, as well as women undergoing various forms of vulnerabilities whether settled in Ireland or in the Direct Provision Centres. AkiDwA has also become a go-to organisation for researchers and other organisations who want to gain various perspectives on migrant- related matters, including government bodies. AkiDwA has made a lot of difference in the Irish policy landscape. One which stands out for me right now is the realisation of FGM law in 2012.



The most important thing that AkiDwA has done and keeps on doing is bringing women together. Making this place a safe space for vulnerable migrant women is the most important thing the organisation has done and does.

I have many fond memories of AkiDwA but one stands out: one day women from the DP centre came to the office and all they wanted to do was to make me a cup of tea and to clean the office for free. That was before the right to work. In the future I see AkiDwA opening offices in other parts of Ireland to respond to demand by migrant women living far away from Dublin.

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Dr Caroline Munyi

There is concern that gains made in educating people about Female Genital Mutilation, may have been eroded during the pandemic.



# 5. Nusha Yonkova – Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

AkiDwA is a unique, modern and independent organisation that has established itself as an essential part of the civil society landscape. It has retained a brave focus on migrant women over the years, extending hand to some of the most marginalised female residents in Ireland. With the risk to be seen as gender biased, the organisation contributes to some of the most difficult debates and most troubling phenomena in contemporary Ireland, such as domestic violence against women in institutionalised migrant families (within Direct Provision), female genital mutilation of girls, misogynistic racism, and the sexual exploitation/prostitution of migrant women in Ireland. AkiDwA is a founder and a leading member of the EU-wide Network of Migrant Women (ENOMW).



My first contact and collaboration with AkiDwA were part of the triple initiative between – AkiDwA, Women's Aid and the Immigrant Council of Ireland on domestic violence against migrant women. Followed shortly after by the CADIC coalition advocacy, and the dedicated solicitor hosted by the Immigrant Council of Ireland – my place of work since 2004.

AkiDwA has successfully lobbied for legislation and awareness for the little-known crime of FGM. AkiDwA has worked in coalitions to ensure better immigration provisions to migrant victims of domestic violence, including policy responses within the direct provision system. AkiDwA is a co-founder of the initiative 'Migrant Women Na hEireann', bringing together migrant women and feminist organisations. AkiDwA is also a strong voice against sexist racism and against the exploitation of migrant women in the sex industry. In this regards, AkiDwA successfully campaigned with the Turn Off the Red Light coalition for a gender-specific model of prostitution regulation in Ireland based on decriminalising those who sell sex in Ireland (90% migrant women) and criminalising those who buy sex (almost exclusively local men). The most important things that AkiDwA has done are raising awareness on FGM and starting campaigns against racism and misogyny directed at migrant women, especially those affected by domestic violence and exploitation in the sex industry.

My fondest memory with AkiDwA is working with AkiDwA's founder Salome Mbugua on the ENOMW and Migrant Women na hEireann. Stay brave and focused. Ireland needs you. Migrant women in Ireland and in Europe need you.

## 6. Leina Ibnouf – International Development and Education Officer at AkiDwA



I see AkiDwA as a very essential organisation that provides a number of services to migrant women. I am grateful that AkiDwA is here for women who are from different walks of life. I joined AkiDwA in February 2021 as a Community Health Ambassador (CHA). In June 2019, I was looking for a job and one of my acquaintances told me about AkiDwA and gave me the website address of AkiDwA. I was in need of a job at the time. I was not in a good place. I searched about it on Google. I called them and our dear Caroline answered the phone and told me to come to the office. I attended the appointment with Caroline. She handled me with care and I really appreciated that. She told me to send my CV to her. And then she realised that I needed help in writing a CV and attending courses that train women to enter the workforce. After I attended that course with one of AkiDwA's partners, New Communities Partnership (MAP), I was able to apply for jobs and attend interviews. I was so desperate. I was looking everywhere for jobs. Because of my illness some organisations considered me under the disability criteria. However, my illness does not affect my performance.

Importantly, AkiDwa has worked hard for long time to stop FGM. Finally, AkiDwa was able to criminalise FGM in 2012. This is a life saver for girls growing up in Ireland and a great support and achievement for migrant women rights in Ireland. Also, AkiDwa was very successful in empowering many women through out the 20 years to enter the workforce and to be productive and be better citizens. My fondest memories of AkiDwa focus on the fact that its always there when women are in need of help. I recommend that AkiDwa should demand to be acknowledged as a mainstream service provider. It is a very dynamic multicultural organisation and this is a big merit. As migrants are increasing in Ireland, AkiDwa's services are much needed. This is a good time for AkiDwa to do commercial adds to attract the attention of mainstream services providers as well as migrants.

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A photograph showing two women in an office environment. One woman, wearing a red top, is seated at a desk in the background, working on a laptop. The other woman, wearing a yellow headscarf and a green top, is seated at a desk in the foreground, looking at a computer monitor. The office has a modern, clean look with a window in the background.

The offices at AkiDwa, who say the true figure of FGM instances here is double the reported figure

AkiDwa says 6,000 women in Ireland are known to have undergone FGM, but believes the true figure is more than double that.



# 7. Egide Dhala – IOM



For me, AkiDwA is a new paradigm that has influenced social change in a contemporary Ireland as a multicultural society. In 2007 I attended a workshop in Brussels with Salome and discussed with her how it was important for AkiDwA to work with men as well. However, prior to that I worked with AkiDwA on a partnership project to support the integration of migrants in the field of employment. In 2011, Salome invited me engage men in addressing SGBV as men are predominantly the perpetrators. I also carried out research for AkiDwA, on topics including the extent to which Irish GPs have a knowledge of FGM as well as the democratic participation of migrants. I also ran some education projects for AkiDwA with women in DP centres.

AkiDwA has championed work on FGM in Ireland and the law provision on this harmful practice is a great achievement for the organisation. Most importantly, the organisation stands as the voice of migrant women, addressing all the issues that affect them in this country. AkiDwA has run several advocacy campaigns that have had a real impact on the lives of migrant women, including the regularisation of the immigration status for Parents of Irish Born children, addressing racism, etc. In my opinion the most important work that AkiDwA has done is advocacy and direct (psycho)-social support to women by meeting their needs through education, etc.

My fondest memory with AkiDwA was the Passing of the Law on FGM in the Irish Parliament. In the future AkiDwA should work toward its mainstreaming by having a specific identity that is formally recognised by the government as unique and essential.



## 8. Cynthia Karanja – Community Health Ambassador at AkiDwA



To me AkiDwA is a source of hope. AkiDwA allows the community to work together to promote their civic goals, as well promote local initiatives in relation to identifying problems and solutions. I attended an event organized by AkiDwA. The meeting broadened my perspective and on that day I decided I want to be a part of this great movement. In the last 20 years AkiDwA have been a lighthouse to the migrant community. By teaching the members of society their rights and allowing the community to participate in matters that involve them. Everything that AkiDwA has achieved so far is important and the fact that AkiDwA continues to fight for the rights and voices of migrant community in my opinion is important.



Being a part of Youth End FGM is one of my fondest memories with the organisation. AkiDwA gave me the opportunity and platform to share my knowledge on FGM with my peers and create awareness in a creative and safe environment. My recommendation for AkiDwA would be to keep the vision and organisation's core values alive.



## 9. Alannah Owens – Former Staff Member at AkiDwA



I think that AkiDwA is a hugely important organisation with a unique and valuable contribution to offer Irish society. I started as an intern with AkiDwA in January 2021 and felt supported and empowered from day one. Salome's incredible leadership and the support of Caroline and the rest of the team helped me to find my feet, even working remotely during covid. I think that AkiDwA have not only empowered migrant women, through all their support and activities in the last 20 years, but have made valuable contributions to policies that help to protect and promote the rights and dignity of individuals and whole communities in Ireland.

AkiDwA has achieved an incredible feat in building such a strong a supportive network for migrant women in Ireland. Moreover, they have used this community to make important policy contributions - I believe that it is hugely important that they have helped to shape policies based on the experience of women who make up the network.

My fondest memory of AkiDwA is coming to the office for the first time and meeting Salome, Caroline and Paula, after months of working together from home. We were all different heights than what we expected - you can't tell on Zoom! However the smiles, warmth and welcome that met me were just the same. I felt more comfortable in the office than I could have wished for - it felt like slotting the final piece into a jigsaw puzzle! This is an organisation with important things to say - I think it would be great if AkiDwA continue to come up with new and innovative ways to communicate their message and portray the incredible work that that they do, to policy makers, potential funders and the general public at large.

# 10. Sharon Etokhana – Consultant and Researcher at AkiDwA



AkiDwA as an organization is a representation of what women can do when we stick together, not just for women but for the community at large. It enables the discourse of issues that are central to the wellbeing of migrant communities in Ireland. I became involved with AkiDwA as a Community Health Ambassador in 2019. My role has evolved as I now do consultancy research and project management.

In light of its humble beginnings, AkiDwA has certainly done very well in the last 20 years. Its position as a resource centre on FGM matters and is a testament to all it has achieved. In addition, its continued migrant-specific work on women's issue has evolved and by positioning itself so specifically there is an opportunity for continued valuable community work. In my opinion the most important thing that AkiDwA has done is that it has developed and honed in on an anti-FGM strategy and continues to work in line with its objectives.

My fondest memory of AkiDwA was a lovely dinner at the end of the training of the first Community Health Ambassadors. It was a fun evening at the Ballsbridge hotel with lots of laughter and activist enthusiasm. For the future I recommend AkiDwA does more to promote itself by putting efforts towards impactful and country-wide projects. This will increase the presence of the organisation in Ireland and potentially internationally, thereby positioning itself for opportunities to work with and work better for the community.





# 11. Dr. Sylvia Gavigan – Technical University Dublin

AkiDwA is the only organisation led by migrant women. It is well known to be supporting migrant women in emotional and psychological stress and social-economic stress. I have known AkiDwA since 2006 because of the great work they do for migrant women. AkiDwA supports women in reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion and equality through local and regional engagement and collaboration. AkiDwA improves the opportunities of those who are marginalized in society through teaching entrepreneurship, which is something I was involved in through the provision of training for migrant women.

The best programmes that AkiDwA has worked on in Ireland has been those concerning FGM and gender-based violence. AkiDwA has been a champion throughout the country in these very difficult areas for migrant women. The most important thing that AkiDwA has done, in my opinion, was the success of FGM becoming illegal in Ireland in 2012. They have worked very hard to support women who come from war zone countries too.

I hope that AkiDwA will continue to support migrant women's voices in Ireland and the equality for migrant women. They should also continue to support and bring together young migrant women and raise awareness for them to be part of political systems in Ireland.



# 12. Selema Paula Letsie – Women's Support Officer at AkiDwA

AkiDwA is a good organisation especially in terms of community work, women in Direct Provision and migrant women in Ireland. For me AkiDwA is a great organisation. I have been involved with AkiDwA since 2020. I met Dr. Caroline Munyi through a friend and then through her I came to know of the work that AkiDwA does.

I have not been with AkiDwA over the last 20 years but hearing and seeing all the stories I know that they have really done some great work over the years. Since I joined however, I think they really did well with things like the 'Door to Work' programme and their weekly Zoom meetings with migrant women and women in Direct Provision and reaching out to these communities.

I think the work AkiDwA has done with FGM is really important as well as the 'In from the Margin' project in which we reach out to elderly marginalised migrant women in DP who are good at crafts like sewing, embroidery, arts and using their own hands and we help them sell their crafts.





My fondest memory with AkiDWA was the 'Door to Work' project which I ran. During this project we partnered with PayPal to give women in DP work training. We provided them with tablets and internet and volunteers from PayPal offered them mentorship, CV workshops, mock interviews and training in computer skills in hopes to increase their employability.



# 13. Jules Buckley – Former Board Member of AkiDwA

AkiDwA is a very sound organisation who not only represent women from the continent of Africa but any woman who is migrant living in Ireland. Being a sister's keeper plays a huge role within the organisation as evidenced by how the organisation treats and looks after women whom they engage with at different and various levels irrespective of one's background.

I was introduced to AkiDwA by a mutual friend, more than a decade ago when I was going through some personal issues and she put me in touch with Dr. Salome Mbugua who helped me navigate life till I came out the other side. The main thing she taught me was no matter what I was going through I should always try and put on a good fight while I continue holding my head up high with pride and grace.

AkiDwA's consistency in all they do is something the organisation should be proud of. No matter how tough the going gets they continue to plough through till they get the desired results and if not they know they have tried and done their best. Also their ability to mobilize people for meetings/activities/events is amazing. All events I have been to have been well-attended, and then if there are any follow ups to be done from these activities they will always do so.

The fact that they have remained operational and providing services as a migrant led organisation long after some main stream/major organisations have closed shop because they couldn't sustain themselves is highly commendable. And this is with a very low funding income and in some cases with no funding at all. AkiDwA has excelled in their activities and become stronger and stronger too. Another thing is also the fact that they are and remain the champions in the anti-racism and equal opportunities industry.

Being a co-founder of AkiDwa's 'Brain Gain' together with Dr. Salome Mbugua has always been the highlight for me. My recommendation for AkiDwa would be to continue helping/dealing with migrant women which is its heart and core and continue being on the main stage. I would hope it will no longer be just a "Dublin-based organisation" but would have spread its wings to other counties because there definitely is a need for an AkiDwa hub/office in these counties. I'm happy that slowly but surely they are now engaging with our male counterparts too.

Wishing AkiDwa the very best next 20 years again.



# 14. Norah Mukassa – AkiDwA Service User

I think AkiDwA is a very good organisation especially to foreigners, asylum seekers and others who are just coming into the country because they introduce us to different organisations who can help us with different problems that we have. I learned about AkiDwA when I came here in 2008. I was staying in the hostel and I didn't know anything that was going on in the country, and didn't know how we could get out of the problems we faced. Then we were told that there is an organisation which can help you and will show you where to go and how to go about all of the problems you incur in the hostel.

AkiDwA has educated us in different ways and they have advocated for us to the higher authorities and now some of the problems have been solved by the authorities after having been advocated for by AkiDwA.

My favourite memory with AkiDwA is when I participated in a family planning workshop which helped us very much, although I'm now over age of bearing children I can help my children who are passing through. I also fondly remember the session about breast cancer awareness that I took part in as well.

I think AkiDwA can improve by collaborating with other organisations. AkiDwA has done great work and we really support them.



# 15. Catalina Arca Garcia – Communications Officer at AkiDwA

I think that AkiDwA is a solid and very well-known network in the island (and also in Europe), with a huge impact on the life of migrant women in Ireland, but also in the Irish society itself. Proof of this are all the achievements that the organisation has reached during this 20 years.

I started working as a volunteer in the Young Migrant Women, an AkiDwA daughter organisation. That was where I was acquainted with AkiDwA's work. As a migrant woman, I'm interested in getting involved and helping other migrant women in Ireland. I know how injustice and inequality can go across a women's life, and how those factors increase when you are not in your native country, and I found a place where I can help across the online content and by writing, which is what I like most.

AkiDwA has created a network that knows how to help and support migrant women in Ireland, no matter where they come from. They have created a network of necessary contacts that is useful for each situation and above all they have fought to make visible all the problems that a migrant woman can suffer and how to solve them or generate a better quality life for them. I think what the greatest impact AkiDwA has achieved has been the 2012 FGM Criminalisation Act and all the information and activities done related to End FGM. I think this achievements marks an impactful precedent in the island, and helps, supports and protects so many women.

My fondest memory with AkiDwA was the Talent Show that we organised with YMWN and AkiDwA for women living in Direct Provision. I think because it was a moment where I met a lot of people from around the world and was made aware of their struggles and strengths. Also, it was a great opportunity to enjoy time with very talented people.



As long as inequalities and lack of opportunities for migrant women continue, the organisation will continue growing. I wish those injustices would come to an end and we all can live in a safer and equal society.



# 16. Suleiman Abdulahi & Leila Hashim- HAPANI

Akina Dada Wa Africa (AkiDwA – African sisterhood in Swahili) has transformed many lives during the past twenty years, directly or indirectly. Now AkiDwA is a National network of migrant women living in Ireland who fight racism & discrimination and, promote equality and empower women in Ireland and beyond. I have known AkiDwA as an organisation since 2006 and have been networking since then in different capacities; finally, we initiated collaborations with several projects from 2019.

AkiDwA has directly transformed many lives during the past twenty years and has become a leading migrant women's network with visionary leadership. AkiDwA has been, and they are still the voices of migrant women in Ireland and beyond, addressing real issues affecting our society, particularly women and girls. The wisdom behind the organisation's creation and the relevance of migrant women's needs in this country and elsewhere in the world.

I know AkiDwA is already involved in most pressing issues, such as the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and human rights campaigns. I want to suggest the organisational policy transformation that equally serves both men and women and expand its geographical locations, for example, to open a new branch in Northern Ireland.





# 17. Hiba Awan – Policy Officer at AkiDwA

I think AkiDwA is a truly brilliant organisation which tries to empower migrants on every level. They are group of hard-working and passionate women (and men!) whose end goal has always been to enact positive transformative change for migrants in Ireland.

I came to know about AkiDwA through meeting Salome. I read about her online and invited her to be the keynote speaker during the launch of a feminist publication I edited during my time at Trinity College. I was so impressed the work herself and all the others at AkiDwA were doing and I really wanted to be part of it all. A couple of months later I emailed Salome asking if there was any way I could contribute and she invited me to join AkiDwA as an intern over the summer after I graduated from university. I then went on to work full time for AkiDwA as the Policy and Communications Officer which was an extremely challenging yet rewarding role.

For such a small organisation, AkiDwA has done the Lord's work for migrants in Ireland. From successfully campaigning against FGM, racism, and sexism to providing training to service providers and educating both migrants and the general public, the list goes on! Personally though, I found those AkiDwA projects most memorable in which there was a direct positive outcome for those involved. A great example of this was the 'Door to Work' project run by my colleague Paula Letsie in which AkiDwA partnered with PayPal to run employability workshops for women in Direct Provision. They were given CV workshops, mock interviews, mentorship and work placements. It resulted in 6 participants gaining long-term employment which was truly an amazing outcome!

My fondest memory with AkiDwA was definitely organising the 'Lifting the Stigma Against Migrant Women' conference in September 2021. It was incredibly inspiring to see so many intelligent, accomplished women discussing and devising solutions for the issues that migrant women continue to face. I felt really proud to be part of making something like that happen and for so many people to have tuned in!

My recommendations for AkiDwA going forward would be for the organisation to focus their efforts on fundraising and funding applications because they definitely need more money in order to execute all of their brilliant ideas. I would urge them to keep focusing on concrete and practical campaigns such as those surrounding employment, health services, language improvement and on educating migrants on Irish systems and culture as this is necessary for successful integration. It is also imperative for them to continue engaging with people on the ground e.g. those living in Direct Provision to gauge their needs and then work to represent them.

Overall, as an organisation AkiDwA is unparalleled and underrated in its excellence, hard work, and transformative action. I wish all the best to them for the next 20 years!



# 18. Patricia Acom – IDPAD

AkiDwA is doing a commendable job in sensitising, empowering and supporting migrant women in Ireland. The services it offers, including sexual and reproductive health, are crucial for their beneficiaries' wellbeing and so I give due credit to the organisation. I got involved with the organisation in January 2022 as I am hosted in its premises where I execute my duties as a project officer of the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent in Ireland.

While I only got involved recently I am sure the services offered to the migrant women in Ireland are in themselves exceptional.

The most important thing AkiDwA does is their advocacy. The organisation recently had a campaign against female genital mutilation which promotes sexual and reproductive health rights and human rights generally. AkiDwA has an amazing team that I am just getting to know. For the future I would recommend that they consider offering legal services to the clients.



# 19. Dr. David Nyaluke – UCD

I have known AkiDwA for over decade now. It is one organization that has been a consistent and unwavering voice for African and all migrant women in Ireland. As an organization that is in the forefront of African and migrant women and African and diaspora issues in Ireland, I have been working with AkiDwA in many issues concerning the African Diaspora in Ireland in the last decade. Since 2019 with AkiDwA representatives we have been advocating for the United Nations Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024) in Ireland in Ireland's National Steering Committee

AkiDwA has done very well, firstly to survive as an organization, secondly and more importantly to keep focused on representing African women, migrant women, and African and general diaspora issues. AkiDwA is a voice for African and migrant women in Ireland. It has done very well in last 20 years.

My fondest memory of AkiDwA was the AkiDwA 10th anniversary event which brought together many people that were involved and have been supporting AkiDwA. My recommendation for the future would be to keep consistent to relevant original objectives whilst adapting to address new challenges facing your constituents.



## 20. 'Striving for Equality: Two Decades of Building Resilience' by Dr. Salome Mbugua – CEO and Founder of AkiDwA



Migration is an individual's decision to leave their comfort zone for an unfamiliar life. Success for each person that migrates depends a lot on how they settle into the new “land”. One of the major challenges for any migrant is navigating the systems and institutions of the new country. I arrived in Ireland in the early 1990s and 21 years ago started my activism journey here. This was during the Celtic Tiger period—the economy was booming—if you can all remember we even had a government programme that in every 4 euro you saved you get 1 Euro—it had a threshold.

I wanted to work as a social worker, after all I had studied social work and worked in a social work capacity for four years in Kenya. I visited the social work qualification office to examine my qualification and after discussions, I was informed the best solution for me was to go back to college in Ireland for 2 years and study social work, a suggestion that I declined; I did not see any need for studying for another masters degree as I had just completed a degree in Equality studies in UCD. Struggling to pay for my fee for my masters in UCD, I had no choice but to take up a job in care work where I worked for 3 months with the elderly before landing a job where I could apply my social work skills, working with boys with challenging behaviour in Dublin. This job however brought the best outcome in my life which led to the establishment of AkiDwA. Many migrants that I met at the time highlighted racism, discrimination and lack of recognition of foreign qualifications as a key major barrier to their progression.

AkiDwA came up as a new paradigm within a framework of social change. Yes, the Celtic Tiger meant change, change for the Irish people who saw a country with a growing economy, thus affecting positive social mobility. The education system adapted also to this change, encouraging adults to engage in educational opportunities that would facilitate their social mobility. At the same time, everywhere around the globe immigration started increasing as opposed to emigration, which was common and regular for the country of Ireland. The competition brought in by skilled migrants constituted a threat for people who have always lived in a homogenous society. Thus, racism and a lack of tolerance for people who 'looked different' ensued. Migrants started experiencing discrimination at all levels, from the community setting where they were subjected to vandalism and all sort of attacks in their homes and streets. They also suffered from racial discrimination when accessing the labour market. Indigenous Irish people were prioritised for privileged jobs and migrants could content themselves with unskilled jobs left by the indigenous who started moving up the social ladder. Migrant women were one of the most disadvantaged groups of migrants who would be left behind if no intervention occurred. A society with huge social gaps remains unbalanced and unhealthy. Lifting migrant women and addressing the disadvantages they faced should be problematised. AkiDwA came up as a social structure that could critically address the social context of a transforming Ireland.



The process began by convening a group of African women as AkiDwA—we needed an experience driven approach. The meetings we held were informal, they started in Temple Bar, just few African women meeting regularly to share their experiences in a new country and supporting each other. We all had tough experiences. One woman's story in particular had moved my heart and pushed me in wanting to do something. She had two children living in East Wall. The neighbours were very harsh towards her children to the extent of releasing hunting dogs to chase them. Her children lived in fear and rarely left the house. Another African woman had come to Ireland with a business visa and had opened an African hair and beauty products shop near Connolly station, only to find her shop vandalised; she was in a state of despair.

I had also been targeted when our house shed had been set on fire and completely burned, down. We later learned that a few people in my estate were not happy with our presence. 23 years later we still live there and have managed to change the attitudes and mentalities of these neighbours with our humour and community level engagement. The AkiDwA group consisted of young highly qualified and ambitious women, who wanted to fit into Irish society. We wanted to speak for ourselves, share our experiences, challenge racism and discrimination, be able to access employment, services and receive support without being intimidated or ignored.



Receiving support and learning to deal with harsh situations, trauma and challenges of dislocation were key. We were provided with training and counselling by the Catherine McCauley Centre. This enabled the group to reach out to others while still going through the healing process. We were able to set ourselves up for mobilising migrant women around the country. We mapped out the situation of migrant women in Ireland in 16 different counties. Contacts were made and the information collected set the base for the building of the AkiDwA movement. We identified and appointed influential migrant women in each county and through outreach and networking we have been delivering services and support using these very same strategies.

Linking up with organisations of indigenous women played a huge part in AkiDwA's establishment. We identified all the national women's networks and met with them to share information about our work and how they could support us. The NWCI had a project at the time called 'In from the Margin' funded by the DJE under the equality for women measure project which was part of the implementation of the National Women's Strategy. This project brought indigenous women, travellers and migrant women together. Racism and discrimination formed key themes for the project, which we engaged with through the media. We collaboratively challenged and voiced our concerns regarding the increasing trends of racism in Ireland on the radio and TV. I learned a lot from this project which later resulted in AkiDwA being given the opportunity to apply for funding to deliver an employment project for migrant women under the government strategy. We also linked up with the Islamic Cultural Centre and brought many women with us into the mosque where we discussed issues of domestic violence.

Education and training have been crucial parts of building resilience. We learned a lot from indigenous Irish women, especially on issues relating to inequality. I personally participated in many training sessions which helped me gain ideas that helped the advancement of the organisation and increased my capacity to support other women. A particular organisation which was called Banúlacht invited me to participate in their policy training. This gave me insight into how to review and develop policies through the lens of equality. I learned that this could be achieved through research and presenting my research to policy makers. Furthermore, the POWER project conducted by the UCD Women Studies programme led by Ailbhe Smyth provided me with inspiration after I learned how Irish women were erased in throughout Irish history. The idea of AkiDwA's first publication: Herstory- Migration stories of African Women in Ireland was born out of these courses. We wanted to make sure migration and the struggles of African women were well documented.

The delivery of capacity building workshops and training to women helped a lot in lifting them out of isolation to learning and sharing experiences with each other. The first training that I developed was on training African women how to present. This was funded by DFA and helped build confidence and self-esteem. The participating women exhibited personal development and valuable life skills through training and exploring the of history of feminism- past present and the future. To date over 4000 women have received our training. It was in fact during a training session with women in Edenderry, county Offaly in 2013 when five women notified me of letters they were receiving with the threat of deportation. This led to the development of the first ever anti-deportation campaign, which AkiDwA was instrumental in establishing.





My beliefs regarding justice and equality were tested. Women were panicking, they had 14 days to respond to the letter before they were deported alongside their children. I called a few people for support and Dr. Ronit Lentin in particular responded very positively. Together we convened the first meeting which led to the development of the Coalition Against the Deportation of Irish Citizens (CADIC). The group had members from various backgrounds: lawyers, academics and children's rights activists all who contributed very positively to the campaign with their knowledge and expertise. The group had all the capacity to provide and support families that were going through difficult times and living in fear of deportation. The first meeting at Liberty Hall with those affected caused panic, we had booked for a maximum of 100 but the numbers exceeded 300—the majority with their children on buggies. We were told that we had been marked in the bad books for not keeping to the rules of the booking. Formal structures were developed when the group received funding from Atlantic Philanthropies. Campaign meetings, demonstrations and vigils with parents, children and supporters were organised and held on regular basis. The "Irish born children" unit within the DJE was established and parents with children born before the 1st of January 2005 were given the opportunity to apply for residency. With over 17,000 people affected, CADIC helped them with the information and support they needed to apply. There were a number of conditions for eligibility and renewal. Applicants had to become economically independent and could not depend on the state for financial support and they were not allowed to apply for reunification of the siblings and spouses that lived outside Ireland. These conditions were enforced at the wrong time as Ireland was already in an economic crisis and consequently accessing jobs was going to be next to impossible. However, many parents were happy to sign in even with these conditions and submit their application for residency, after all they could plan and move on with their lives if granted residency. The impacts of the citizenship referendum however continue to affect families and in particular migrant children.





Despite the resilience of migrant women, we are still far from achieving equality as racism and discrimination continue to affect our community. Access to employment, services and supports are hindered by bias and the lack of cultural competence. However, we are proud that AkiDwA has continued to influence social change after 20 years. We are a network that represents migrants women's issues to be taken within government's programming in order to maintain social balance. Even though we haven't gotten all our issues addressed, we have been formally acknowledged through the financing of some of our programmes by State agencies and our voices have been considered in policy making at all structural levels. We do this work in partnership with others, which is essential when it comes to enhancing social change.



Here is a summary of my key learnings in the last 20 years of leading AKiDwA:

- It is important to identify influential people and to build allies (for example being introduced to funders, doing a course such as the Eisenhower Programme, meeting with influential people to lobby for change—Policy on SGBV).
- Networking and working in solidarity - Indigenous women have been a great support for my work; they are also key in keeping to the spirit of inclusivity when working on campaigns involving women's issues.
- Turn every occasion into opportunity: When you are used as a token turn that into an opportunity to communicate and share your message.
- Been consistence in what you do.
- Mentors matter: Seek mentors both men and women and use them wisely.
- The Lord helps those who help themselves: not to depend too much on mentors or those who help you—learn to take care of yourself.
- 'No Guts no Glory: Take risks, change is frightening but energising. Flexibility and willingness to adapt is essential.
- Negotiation and diplomacy are key, understand the politics and policies of the organisation you are working in, network and get to know people, develop personal relationships.
- Keep perspective: Remember what is important in life: having a life balance is good. Be well grounded and focused.
- Don't take yourself too seriously: Remember who you are, where you come from and where you are going.
- Luck counts.

I would like to dedicate my appreciation to everyone who has supported AkiDwA over the years—those men and women of goodwill who have guided, connected or simply joined me in building a reputable organisation with so many successes in the last 20 years, we have transformed both the lives of migrants and Ireland itself in many different ways. To all migrant women who have persevered through the harsh times, especially those who had to spend years in Direct Provision centres in Ireland: the future is brighter, may you all realise your dreams.











*"We are working together in solidarity, building an integrated society, one in which all people are valued, treated with respect and dignity, and enjoy equal opportunities and protections."*

# Akina Dada wa Africa

## African and Migrant Women's Network

Established in 2001 AkiDwA is a network of African and migrant women living in Ireland. AkiDwA's vision is a just society where there is equal opportunity and equal access to resources in all respects of society: social, cultural, economic, civic and political. Our mission is to promote equality and justice for migrant women living in Ireland. The organisation employs three key strategies to achieve its objectives: networking, policy work, and capacity building. AkiDwA develops African and migrant women's capacity for participation and representation in their communities and in decision making structures through training, consultation, focus groups, information provision, and research.

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An Roinn Gnóthaí  
Eachtracha agus Trádála  
Department of  
Foreign Affairs and Trade



**AkiDwA**  
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Dublin City Council  
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government supporting communities



Rialtas na hÉireann  
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