



## **Shelmyth Njeri: My Experience of Transformation at Baraka Women's Center**



Never shall I forget the nightmare of retrenchment in Kenya. I was left without a source of income after working in a government office for seventeen years. It was so devastating; no peers to interact with and the society turned judgmental. I was lonely in crowded Nairobi city. I resolved to start a mobile business of selling second-hand clothes but that meant walking the whole day which I was not used to. I was exposed to the dynamics of being a jobless mother in Nairobi. As such, I interacted with very vulnerable

and needy ladies. This drained my emotional strength, but I had that urge of making a difference in their lives.

### ***The Birth of Baraka***

I bonded very well with women from a certain slum region known as Kariua. We all sailed on the boat of insufficient business management and life skills. Our businesses were barely making a profit which made life very hard. At this point, a gathering was convened and we expressed the urge to pull together jobless single mothers. The meetings were frequent and each time we gathered new insights were introduced. It was at this time when a Lady from America visited Kenya. She was Susan Burgess-Lent. It was so encouraging to find a foreigner joining our team at the time of need. She expressed the desire to uplift our standards as women through providing free education on entrepreneurship, adult literacy, and other needed knowledge. That was awesome and timely. We all agreed on forming a women's group known as Baraka Women meaning 'blessed' women.

### ***Numerical strength***

Spearheading education programs worked magic on the numerical strength of Baraka women. We registered in huge numbers and a strong bond of sisterhood was born out of it. The strength in numbers gave a spirit of continuity. Our facilitator Teresia Waikuru educated us on group dynamics and sensitized us on the situation of Gender Based Violence in Kenya. It was a noble gesture for it alleviated long

standing internal pain for most women in group. They were able to seek help on how to equip themselves with new life skills.

### ***Marching to Financial freedom***

It was awesome to learn that we were steps closer to our financial freedom after years of extreme poverty. Our entrepreneurship trainer Wanjiru Ngigi enlightened us on how to start small businesses from wherever we were financially. I took the lesson keenly and decide to start selling cereals from my small savings. As I followed the lessons on marketing, pricing, and customer service, my business grew. I was slowly but surely gaining financial freedom. Meeting my basic needs was no longer a nightmare. The importance of separating my business money from personal money was a handy lesson from our trainer in Money Management, Teresia Gachau.



Shelmyth in a session at Baraka Women’s Center with Programs Director Wanjiru Ngigi

### ***My Leadership Skills***

Previously, I had been a facilitator of Basic Community Health Education. So I volunteered to share that knowledge with Baraka Women trainees. I joined the team of trainers and started facilitating sessions on Feminine Hygiene and creating awareness of HIV/AIDS spread among women in Kenya . Of great concern was promiscuity among women because poor social standards.

I teamed up with another trainer and we encouraged the women to start small income generating activities based on whatever savings they had. I was a sure way that aided in controlling irresponsible sexual behavior among women who had joined Baraka Women. Our Trainer and Counselor Wanjiru did a lot of personality growth sessions through focused group discussions and individual guidance that aided in instilling positive self-image to the otherwise withdrawn women.

### ***The Shooting Star***

It was by God’s grace that I had a chance to meet a lady who was trainer from a leading Kenya Bank – Teresia Gachau. She introduced us to the concept of being a shooting star. This was to be achieved through saving a coin a day. The concept was easy, fun and yet practical. Saving daily enable me to expand my cereals business as well as meeting my basic needs. Gachau insisted on not having debts. She also introduced us to banking skills where most of us opened accounts with Equity Bank. This is a skill that I cherish up to today.



Shelmyth sharing her story with Teresia Gachau

### ***Sisterhood at Baraka Women's Center***

Nothing compares to the power of women when their purpose is to fight for a common cause. Poverty was deep rooted among women in Kariua. But with the advent of Baraka Women, most of us opted to engage in income generating businesses as opposed to the anti-social illegal activities we were engaged in previously. Sharing our challenges every morning gave a spirit of cohesiveness. Most of the ladies at Baraka Women can now lead a life of dignity without dependency. We love Baraka Center. It's a home where hope is restored through counseling sessions and capacity building trainings. Our trainers are available and approachable. I am now a Board Member of Baraka Women's Center.

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*Story told by Shelmyth Njeri, Baraka Women Center, Nairobi, Kenya      January 2019*

*Interview and transcript by Teresia Gachau, Financial Literacy Trainer, and Wanjiru Ngigi, Program Director, Baraka Women's Center, Nairobi, Kenya*

**Contact:** *Baraka Women's Center Manager: Teresia Mwangi*  
*254-721-381008    BarakaWomen2015@gmail.com*