



REWRITING THE FUTURE FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN KENYA

A visionary leader pushes for equality and opportunities.

BY ESTHER MATAWA NGEI | SPRING 2026

Darare Gonche Saldesa learned at a young age to point out the wrongs she could see in her society in Kenya's Marsabit County.

At 21, she found herself between a child and a forced marriage. An 8-year-old girl in a neighboring village had been promised to a man by her father. When Saldesa heard about it, she refused to stay silent. When her attempts to reason with the girl's father fell on deaf ears, she went first to the girl's school to report the incident to the administration, then to the police, and finally sought the help of lawyers who drafted letters of protest.

With this backing, she confronted the father. He was arrested, and under pressure, agreed to release his daughter from the marriage. The girl returned to school, and Saldesa was launched on a career defending the rights of women and girls.

CENTERING WOMEN

In Marsabit, men largely lead the communities, often confining women to the margins of decision-making. Under this system of patriarchy, women have few opportunities for education, leadership, and economic independence.

Saldesa has always struggled to keep quiet in the face of unfairness. Now 55 years old and married with six children, Saldesa says she was concerned about women's rights before she knew they were called human rights. Her father's decision to send Saldesa to school gave her the tools to imagine a different future for herself and the women in her community.

Having spent 13 years as a social development worker, she saw how women's concerns were often sidelined. In 2013, determined to change the status of women

in Marsabit County, Saldesa founded the Indigenous Rights and Resource Management Organization (IREMO).

Her goal was to confront social injustices rooted in traditional laws and practices and to create opportunities for women to learn about their rights—and strengthen their livelihoods. Part of the organization's mission is to encourage young women to become leaders, run for political office, and make a difference in their community.

Oxfam and IREMO have partnered on a number of initiatives in Kenya in the past decade, including humanitarian responses, such as helping distribute non-food items and cash to people who were affected by droughts and flooding between 2023 and 2025.



Saldesa believes that it is imperative for women in this region to have alternative livelihood opportunities beyond traditional pastoralism. Between 2021 and 2025, Oxfam worked with IREMO to provide small grants to help more than 6,000 women in 55 groups to grow vegetables, stock their herds of goats, and launch businesses (like small stores) to diversify their income sources. “Women should be given the power to start their own alternative livelihoods,” says Saldesa. “And we have done so much in this area working with the support of Oxfam.”

One such grantee is the Ogas Women Group, which used the money to start a greenhouse and a garden. Members have been successfully growing climate-resilient crops, including kale and spinach.

IREMO was also part of the first cohort to receive support from Oxfam’s Women’s Rights Fund. This flexible funding allows grassroots organizations working on gender equality to invest in their desired priorities, building their capacities to perform their work effectively. “Oxfam has really supported this organization through flexible funding. ... They have done wonders for IREMO,” says Saldesa. “Apart from giving us grants and institutional funding in policies, they have also built the capacity of staff.”



TOP: The Ogas Women’s Group started a greenhouse and a garden with grant money from Oxfam and IREMO. ABOVE LEFT: Climate-resistant kale and spinach grown by the Ogas Women’s Group. ABOVE RIGHT: Darare Saldesa at the IREMO office in Moyale, Marsabit County. *Peter Irungu/Oxfam*

UNDOING HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES

Saldesa’s courage to stand up for other women has inspired a change in minds and is actively undoing decades of harmful cultural practices. Her advocacy has inspired other women to find their voices. One such woman is Tune, a 67-year-old traditional birth attendant in Horonder village who participated in IREMO’s programming.

Over decades of helping women through labor, Tune witnessed the deep harm caused by female genital mutilation (FGM).

“I stopped vouching for FGM because what we were taught by IREMO is true: It hurts women,” Tune says. “The circumcised girls experience more pain during child-birth and often have to [give] birth through C-section.”

Ilado Yattani was also transformed by what she learned through IREMO. “The first thing I learned from IREMO was about our rights and the rights of our children, and I told our people about it,” she says. “I help shape the character of young girls, whether educated or not, ensuring that they all grow up with good values. Child

marriages are no longer rampant, and the practice of FGM in our village has stopped.”

Yattani was recently selected by fellow women as chair of the Hargesa Women’s Group in Horonder village. She notes that women are more involved in community decision-making than in the past—a change she believes is not only positive, but transformative for the entire community.



OXFAM

OXFAM AMERICA
77 N. Washington Street, Suite 500
Boston, MA 02114
(800) 776-9326
oxfamamerica.org

Oxfam is a global organization that fights inequality to end poverty and injustice. We offer lifesaving support in times of crisis and advocate for economic justice, gender equality, and climate action. We demand equal rights and equal treatment so that everyone can thrive, not just survive. The future is equal. Join us: oxfamamerica.org

© 2026 Oxfam America Inc. All rights reserved. OXFAM is a registered trademark of Oxfam America Inc., and the Oxfam logo is a registered trademark of Stichting Oxfam International. None of the trademarks may be used without permission of the owner. 2603049