



UMOJA VILLAGE, KENYA

Umoja village, in the Samburu district of northern Kenya, is a unique place of both safety and empowerment for local women. Founded in 1990 by a group of 15 women who were survivors of rape by British soldiers stationed nearby, this is a village inhabited only by women and their children. No men are allowed to live here. The brainchild of Rebecca Lolosoli, the current matriarch of the community, Umoja (which means “unity”) was founded as a safe haven for all women suffering from oppression in the intensely patriarchal Samburu culture. For over 500 years, men have had absolute control over women in this traditional society. In a culture where women have no rights and are treated like property, these women continue to be regularly subjected to child marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic abuse, rape, lack of education, beatings, and even murder.

Lolosoli was lying in a hospital bed, recovering from a beating by a group of men in her village for daring to speak other women about their rights, when she was inspired to create Umoja. Lolosoli’s husband, whom she had married at 18, refused to protect her from the other men in her village, and she knew that her life was in danger. Instead of accepting her fate, Lolosoli acted with great courage and convinced 14 other brave women to leave their homes and join her in establishing their own village. There they would either be safe or they would all die together. They were willing to risk the latter in the hope that such a massacre would bring widespread attention to the cause of women’s rights in Samburu.

Twenty-seven years later, Umoja is a thriving community comprised of 47 women and 200 children. The women have successfully established economic self-reliance and have taken over control of their own lives. To make money, village leaders run a campsite for safari tourists a kilometer from Umoja. The women also create and sell their traditional, colorful beaded jewelry to these tourists and other visitors. They have established a school for their own children and for children from all district villages. Aside from academics, children are about taught gender equality and human rights. Umoja women also educate women in other villages about FGM (still done to 80% of brides), arranged early marriages, and other women’s rights issues. Young women continue to join the village, and together the women make and maintain their own houses, care for and educate their children, and support and protect each other. Protection is still necessary since Umoja remains a perceived threat to many local men. As a result, both new refugees and village veterans endure a system of staying up at night, working in shifts to protect each other from angry husbands and other aggressive males.

Although excluding men from their village may seem like an extreme measure, it was necessary in order to establish women’s power in their own community. And as a result of their actions, these women are creating a new, non-patriarchal society where they can be safe, where they can have a voice, and where they can have agency over their own bodies and their lives. These women are not against all men. They are also free to have relationships with men who live outside Umoja.



But safety, empowerment, equality, and freedom of choice remain their dominant values.

Umoja women have also created a movement in the Samburu district. The ideals and actions of the Umoja women have inspired other women in Samburu to rise up and take political and social power into their own hands. Other villages have been formed which, although they permit men to live there, are all run by women. An example of such a village is Nachami, which means “love” in English. Each village is overseen by a chairlady, and Lolosoli, as matriarch of all the villages, has ultimate say over who is allowed to live in each community. Only men who accept the values of gender equality are allowed in.

Although originally created as a haven where women could be safe, free and independent, Umoja has had an enormous impact on surrounding communities, and is actively spreading the message of equality to the younger generations. And what is most impressive – Umoja women have done what women around the globe have been trying to do for centuries: empower women and create a society of equals.

written by Kali Douglas

Additional information:

https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/qvdeq5/the-land-of-no-men-inside-kenyas-women-only-village

<https://www.brightvibes.com/682/en/umoja-a-look-inside-the-kenyan-village-where-men-are-banned>