

Some of the 50 spirited Kenyans who have banded together to show their world what a woman can do



## A Most Amazing Village (and bracelets to match)

They've come through every kind of violence to create an astonishing, all-female community—and O Bracelets that are the sparkling embodiment of hope.

**LIZ BRODY** pays a visit.

**I** SPOT HER DOWN BY THE RIVER FILLING A JERRY jug, the sass in her eyes catching my attention, which admittedly has wandered. (*Where's that crocodile from yesterday? How can you see one coming? The water is so muddy—god, they drink this stuff?*) Hoisting the yellow plastic container on her head and walking—no hands—with a “watch this” flare of adolescence, she lets me follow her home.

At 14, maybe 15 (it's hard to know with a birthday like “born during the bad rains”), Senteyo Lenaiyasa may be the youngest member of [CONTINUED ON PAGE 108]



Rebecca Lolosoli has faced death threats for starting Umoja. "Okay, just kill us then," she's told the men who have tried to chase them off the land. "We're not moving."

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 106] Umoja, an all-women's village in a remote pocket of Kenya. From what I'd heard, this community is making history—a gutsy anomaly of female bonding in a world where women are still treated as livestock.

Stooping to enter her dung-roof hut made of sticks and mud, I take the seat she offers—a can of vegetable oil sent by a U.S. relief agency—the only furniture in this cozy dark surround, smoky from maize porridge cooking over an open fire. Through Jen, a teacher from a nearby village who joins us to translate (the area is so isolated, few speak Swahili, the national language, relying instead on their tribal tongue, Maa), Senteyo describes a grinding childhood spent herding cattle and lugging firewood with her six siblings, all brought up by a widowed mother. Nobody went to school. When Senteyo was 12, maybe 13, her uncles married her off for a few cows. "Empe," she says emphatically when asked about the customary circumcision. "Razor," echoes Jen knowingly, married herself at 9. The blades, I will come to learn, are often rusty. Because of infections, some girls die.

In animated bursts, Senteyo tells me how she bled down her legs for a while, but that was nothing compared to seeing her husband for the first time. She freaked. He already had four other wives, and—she takes the smooth skin of her forearm

## In Umoja they sit and ask, "What will make us happy?"

and, with her other hand, scrunches it, not waiting for Jen to translate—wrinkled! We all burst out laughing.

"And then what?" I ask.

"I ran," Senteyo says, her smile flashing, eyes saucy with indignation.

"What was going through your mind? How did you think you could do better?"

She shakes her head. All she knew was: *He's so old. How can I stay with him? How can I talk to him when I'm younger than his children?* With only a piece of goatskin wrapped around her waist, without an idea of what to do, she bolted, slipping away from the one village she'd ever known, asking anyone and everyone if they could tell her where she might sleep, until somebody finally pointed her toward Umoja.

Started 18 years ago by a handful of wives and mothers bucking their abusive Samburu culture, Umoja—"unity" in Swahili—is a haven for about 50 women

who have built their own houses, set up a preschool, and are supporting themselves by making beaded jewelry for occasional tourists. When Senteyo showed up bare-breasted and hungry—pregnant, too, at this point—she told her story to one of the head women, who called the others around and said, "Here is a child. She is running away with nowhere to go." After consulting among themselves, the villagers invited the girl to stay until her family came. But nobody did, so they taught her how to bead and helped her build her hut. Now, three years later, she's earned enough to own three goats and several colorful skirts and shirts. And she's raising a daughter who, like all the girls here, will not get circumcised or sold into marriage, but rather go to school and dream of doing everything a man can do.

**W**HEN I FIRST HEARD about Umoja I thought, *What a great place to create the next O Bracelet* (see page 112). If it

takes a village to change a culture, these intrepid women out there in the middle of Africa seemed to be doing it. But I was a little hesitant to actually go, knowing how stories like this often fall short when you get up close, the inspiration turning out to be a mirage. It didn't help that people kept describing the villagers as "fierce." Rebecca Lolosoli, the leader, had—I believe the word was—"punched" a female journalist. (Something about the interviewer being too exploitative.) Nevertheless, I headed to Kenya with two members of Madre, a nonprofit organization that teaches women their human rights and has been helping Umoja since 2001, and with three colleagues from Fair Winds Trading, our partner for the past year in the *O Bracelet* series.

After driving five hours north from Nairobi, across the equator, we pulled into what looked like a random spot on a relentlessly dusty, parched plain, coughed out from the lush highlands. A stingy landscape, for sure, but then the women emerged from a circle of about 20 huts, drenching us with color—blood reds and clanging oranges, flecks of devious indigo and green. They were dancing, laughing at us and with us, tossing manes of beads around [CONTINUED ON PAGE 110]

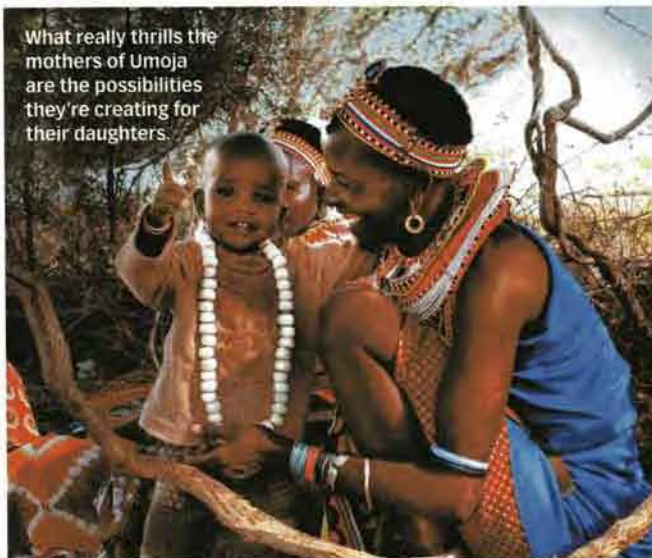
[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 108] their necks. *Fierce, yeah, in the cool way*, I thought, drawn, as everyone is, to those beads. I would find out later what they symbolize. A traditional Samburu wife wears only the necklaces her husband gives her; they're a sign of her worth to him. These women adorn themselves with as many as they want. "We all have beads in Umoja," Rebecca says, "because we are taking care of ourselves."

THE VILLAGE CAME to life "slowly by slowly," says Rebecca, 44, or thereabouts. Her stance has the settle of a grand oak—"You'll have to go around"—leaving no question who runs the show here. Pointing to the cockeyed sticks of a hut going up, she explains that the women in Umoja, which has no running water or electricity, prefer their traditional homes to the sturdier cabanas they've just built for tourists—never mind that the dung leaks in the rain, and there aren't enough cows to repatch. She tells me this with a warm laugh, as her cell phone goes off—an erratic connection to the outside world, dependent on when she can find a recharge. Days go by when she's out of touch.

The Samburu are seminomadic pastoralists and one of Kenya's many marginalized tribes that came under the international news spotlight earlier this year as flawed presidential elections convulsed the country in ethnic fighting. The violence Samburu women know all too well, however, comes not from other groups but from their own men. In Rebecca's case, after a relatively happy childhood during which she was lucky enough to attend primary school, it started at 17 when she was circumcised.

"I almost died," she says. "In Samburu, they cut everything, the clitoris, both sides, labia minora, all. And then they put their finger inside to see if there's anything left and, even after several hours, they will take you and cut again." She spent three weeks in the hospital, then married the man she'd been cut for, a stranger who'd given her family 18 cows,

What really thrills the mothers of Umoja are the possibilities they're creating for their daughters.



"We were very thin; we looked old. Now we look our age."

a few goats, blankets, and other commodities. The new couple moved into his family's home.

Her husband, Fabian, it turned out, was a good man who would later get a job at Barclay's Bank. He didn't beat her. But his family did, regularly and viciously. "I am just like a hyena there, like an animal," she says, her voice softening. "Nobody cared about me. My husband should have been asking why are they beating me? But he wasn't."

If there was any moment that cocked her daring to take such a heretical step as starting a village without men, it was when she asked her father-in-law why he'd sold one of her cows without consulting her and kept all the profit. His answer: "You are a woman and cannot say anything in my home."

*Then why am I here?* she thought.

IN 1990, WHEN REBECCA GATHERED 15 women on what is now Umoja, the land was vacant. "We didn't have food," Rebecca says. "We just worked and lay down, often faint, very weak." Every little success proved a battle. After they began

selling their jewelry, the other villages tried all kinds of tactics, some violent, to divert business from Umoja. When Rebecca attempted to buy the 13.6-acre plot, she says the local government told her, "How can women own land? We have never heard of this here." But with a smile that could net a school of sharks, she has a way of working things: 200,000 shillings later (about \$3,000 paid over time), the place was theirs.

What about all these babies, I ask her, looking around the place. How does that work with the women-only concept? "We

don't care if somebody goes outside and visits a man, or has her boyfriend come," she explains. "We just don't want the man to come here and talk badly to her or start beating her." In fact, men from other villages do sneak in at night to assault Umoja's women and steal their livestock, although in the past year, the attacks have somewhat diminished. Building a fence is high on the to-do list. Each house has a new padlock, but if you pull hard enough it will come off in your hand, probably right along with the rickety door.

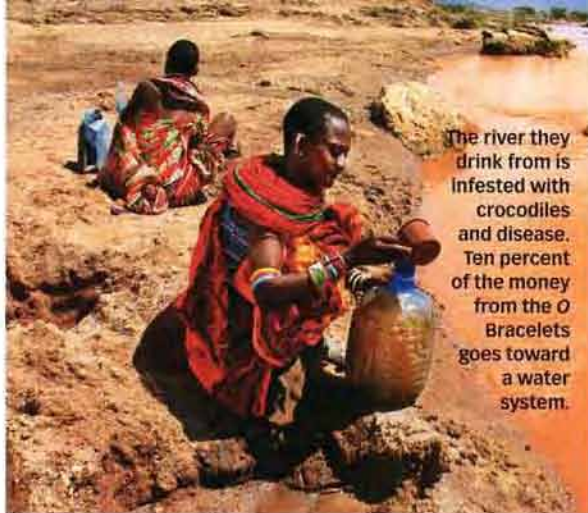
What the women have—and no one can rob them of now—are their rights. And that's thanks to Madre's Vivian Stromberg, who has traveled with us, despite a bad heart, diabetes, and a bum hip requiring a cane. When Vivian and Rebecca met seven years ago at a conference, they could barely speak (Rebecca later learned English from tourists), but from one tough, funny woman to another, they made a connection. Since then Madre has held several trainings at Umoja; before their session on AIDS, most of the women, including Rebecca, didn't have a clue they could get it.

"When you know your rights," says Vivian, "instead of begging for something, you start asking that it not be taken away. Your whole body language changes; you stop crying." In Umoja, they actually make a point of laughing—in tough times, sitting down and asking each other what will make them happy. "We have been so sad for so long," Rebecca explains. "Men become annoyed because when [CONTINUED ON PAGE 112]

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 110] we work, we talk, we have fun. But they know that before, their wives were very thin; they looked old. And when we came here and got food, and we started our life, we began to look our age again. So now the husbands are admiring us. That's why they come and beat us and try to take us back.

"Well," she takes a gleeful moment, "they can't! It's too late."

To spread Umoja's newfound strength, Rebecca is networking with 60 other women's groups in the area. "We are proud, us womens," she says—always adding the *s* as if she can't bear to miss the chance to express the power of the plural. "And it's not just the girls: We don't want our boys to be like their fathers, because they are the husbands of tomorrow." For her part, Rebecca has stayed married, but in name only. "Fab," as her husband is known, lives about 25 miles away and is quick to say that he supports Umoja 100 percent. You can see he's in a tough spot, though. "Yeeeahh," he says with a strained smile, "I've gotten a lot of talk about, 'Oh, this man is making the woman grow horns,' what have



The river they drink from is infested with crocodiles and disease. Ten percent of the money from the *O* Bracelets goes toward a water system.

says Margaret Ejejo, 28 years old by her estimate, the village's sharp-witted Number Two. "Some of the girls are getting pregnant. It's a big problem. And one little boy was going to school when a herd of elephants came and crushed and killed him. Lions, too. Things are happening all the time." The nearest doctor is about 124 miles away. A van, clearly, would help all around.

No one is offering up a vehicle, but Margaret is ready if they should. She just got her driver's license, the first Samburu woman ever to do so. The next breakthrough she and Rebecca are plotting is running for local office.

Meanwhile, all the women in Umoja are triumphant to be running their own lives. "Before, I didn't have anything that was mine," says a girl named Servicio, who like Senteyo, showed up a couple of years ago in only a goatskin. "But now I am eating well, my child is getting an education, and whether I have money or not I will go to the hospital, because the other women will stand for me.

"And also now," she says, "I have a voice." **O**

you. "The woman is controlling the husband." Even their 13-year-old daughter, Sylvia, has stood up to him. When his parents instructed her that it was time to get circumcised, she refused. "I told them, 'If you touch me, I will call the police and you will eat bad food,'" she relays in perfect English—a story the women in the village can't get enough of.

**U**MOJA STILL HAS A WAY to go. There's a two-room nursery school in the village, but at age 6, the children have to start walking quite a distance to class. "And the men get them in the bush and rape them,"

## Project *O* Bracelet



TO THOSE OF YOU WHO BOUGHT EARLIER EDITIONS of the *O* Bracelet (May and December 2007), thank you for helping transform the lives of the African women who made them (you can still buy them at the Oprah Store; 312-633-2100).

For our third collection, the artists of Fair Winds Trading (FWT), which develops markets for artisans all over the world, used the inspiration of Umoja to come up with a completely novel design: The new

bracelets are made with an exclusive woven mesh that represents the amazing web of women coming together in strength and unity to make change. Inside, different colors of Swarovski crystals tumble around, expressing the brightness of spirit that refuses to be dimmed.

Next, FWT arranged to get all the materials to Umoja, along with someone to teach the women how to make this design. FWT also secured a generous grant from the Kind World Foundation to supply the village with tools and training (before, all they had was a single pair of plastic scissors). Then the women went to work. Because of the instability in Kenya, we also employed our previous bracelet team in Rwanda, who were happy to support their Kenyan sisters now facing ethnic violence. The money raised by the bracelets breaks down as follows: Fifteen percent goes directly to the women involved in the production in Umoja (or Rwanda); 10 percent is donated to Umoja to help them set up a water system; 5 percent goes to Rwandan staff and trainers for the extra production there; 10 percent for FWT administration costs of running the project in three

countries; 15 percent covers materials; 10 percent for packaging (boxes, tags); 15 percent for shipping between Africa and the U.S.; 5 percent for ground transport within Africa; 15 percent for Macy's to set up their Web site and handle orders. No one is making a profit except the women. (In their economy, the earnings are significant.) To link arms with them by wearing an *O* Bracelet, go to [macys.com/obracelet](http://macys.com/obracelet) to order.

*O* Bracelets from Kenya: Swarovski crystals in woven mesh with sterling silver orbs: plain (\$28); jet black (\$54); white opal and quartz (\$54); gold and silver (\$70). Order at [macys.com/obracelet](http://macys.com/obracelet).

You can also donate directly to Umoja via [madre.org](http://madre.org).