

## HOW REFUGEE-LED WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISM KEEPS MANTAPALA SETTLEMENT SAFE FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

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Gender-based violence (GBV) often remains hidden, making it challenging to eradicate violence against women and girls. Activist groups worldwide are working tirelessly to change this, raising awareness and striving to put an end to GBV. Amani Women's Group (AWG) is a powerful example of a refugee-led organization of women's rights advocates in Mantapala Settlement in Luapula Province, Zambia. AWG is chaired by Deborah Kamwanga, a 48-year-old refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who arrived in Zambia in 2021. Her work highlights the critical role communities play in protecting women and girls and combatting GBV from the ground up.



Chairperson Deborah Kamwanga of Amani Women's Group processing an GBV report. © UNHCR / Dora Chinyama / 2024.

Bent over a report on intimate partner violence (IPV), former evangelist Deborah reflects on her work with Amani Women's Group at Mantapala Settlement. She notes a promising shift in the frequency of gender-based violence (GBV) since she joined a women's network in 2021. "Ongoing community sensitization has made a difference. Women are more aware of their rights, and men are becoming cautious due to stricter law enforcement. On average, I handle about three IPV cases per week, down from six per week two years ago," she explains.

While the frequency of incidents has decreased, Deborah observes that the nature of the cases remains largely unchanged. "Most cases of GBV still happen within families, often tied to substance abuse and economic challenges, like conflicts over debt," she adds.

This is why Deborah's mission to end violence against women and girls is far from over. With passion in her voice, she asserts, "Women's rights are human rights! My mission is to empower women, helping them rise above being mere caregivers to become active, productive members of society. I firmly believe that when women are empowered, they are just as capable as men in many spheres!"

Deborah believes that in addition to community sensitization, stronger legal measures, and women's economic empowerment, building partnerships with organizations like Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF) and Regional Psychosocial Support Initiatives (REPSSI) is key to tackling the root causes of GBV. "Organizations like these – and programs such as *Safe from the Start*, funded by the US Government – are transforming women's lives," she says. "In Mantapala, these efforts have enabled women to participate in soap making, food production, and even the hammermill business, creating new opportunities."



*The Amani Women's Group gathers at Mantapala Settlement. © UNHCR / Dora Chinyama / 2024.*

UNHCR Zambia Representative Preeta Law applauds the activism coming from the Mantapala community. "It is our responsibility to safeguard the protection of refugees and other people who are forcibly displaced. Women and girls forced to flee their countries face heightened risks during and after flight. The active engagement of groups like Amani Women's Group not only enhances the effectiveness of our joint efforts with the Government of Zambia and all our other partners, but also supports long-term behaviour change and resilience through economic empowerment," she says.

As the global 16 Days of Activism continue until December 10, 2024, the story of Deborah Kamwanga and Amani Women's Group serves as a powerful reminder that the protection of women and girls is an ongoing responsibility shared by all. Only by working together can we challenge societal norms and eliminate violence against women and girls for good.