

## THE ATEKER WOMEN'S CONFERENCE AT TURKANA COUNTY, KENYA

Hosted by our partner organisation Friends of Lake Turkana (FAULT), the Ateker Women's Conference was the first of its kind, bringing together pastoralist women from the Ateker communities to discuss critical issues affecting them. The Ateker people are a group of related ethnic communities residing in Uganda(Karimojong), Kenya(Turkana), South Sudan(Toposa), and Ethiopia(Nyangatom and Merile), sharing linguistic and cultural ties.

The atmosphere was electric, charged with the excitement of women uniting from different countries yet speaking the same language. This unique connection fostered a deep sense of sisterhood and solidarity, emphasizing our shared vulnerabilities and collective strength. The founder of FAULT, a remarkable woman herself, felt like a big sister to us. The women were so proud of her and sang the emotional song "Apolou Nyaberu" ("The Woman Has Risen") throughout the three days, a testament to our unity and resolve.

The conference was attended by women from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. This included the uneducated, grassroots women, political women, and representatives from the Turkana County Government. Young girls also participated, bringing diverse perspectives to our discussions.

As we shared our stories of resilience, we cried with those who cried, laughed together, and most importantly, addressed the pressing issues affecting us. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and widow inheritance were a major concern, particularly for women from minority tribes. While some regions have made strides in ending this practice, others still face this painful ordeal. Early marriages, rape, and defilement were also significant issues affecting young girls across the Ateker communities. Conflict had taken a heavy toll, with many women losing family members. The need for women to lead peace-building efforts was clear.

Economic deprivation and lack of property ownership were common issues, limiting women's decision-making power and increasing their vulnerability to gender-based violence. For those constantly moving in search of water and pasture, the inaccessibility of social amenities like health facilities and schools was a significant hardship.

Together, we resolved to hold this conference annually, mobilize resources to support awareness campaigns and dialogues, and advocate for Ateker women's cross-border trade. Young girls urged the women not to leave them behind and to support their aspirations despite generational gaps. The women leaders emphasized the need for grace and love in all our interactions, recognizing that the world is harsh enough.

Some of the quotes that captured the spirit of the conference were:

- "If women sit down, the men won't have peace."
- "We are all children of one man—God."
- "No one is coming to save us, the women. Let's not wait, let's rise up and take action."
- "One dead Ateker woman is all Ateker women dead. Let us fight for each other."
- "Women, men are our children. Do not fear a child you carried in your womb for nine months. Get involved in politics and remove the mentality of being under men."

It was a three-day, well-spent moment, strengthening bonds with sisters across the Ateker cluster, and a revolutionary step towards addressing our shared challenges and aspirations.



*Figure 1 The Ateker women during one of the sessions while at the conference.*



*Figure 2 Girls from Karamoja , Turkana and Toposa, who participated during the women's conference.*

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