

When civil engineer Grace Nzivo was a young girl living in her village of Kakindu in Embu County, she heard a story about a lady called Florence. Florence had left the village to become a civil engineer and then returned to provide her community with a water supply system. At the time, Grace had never even heard of the discipline engineering and it certainly was not a common narrative to talk about the ways in which women were contributing to their communities in such integral ways. Since then, Grace, who already was quite curious about the sciences, aspired to be like Florence; to become an engineer and to give back to her own community.

Nowadays, Grace works as a Project Coordinator at Steel Structures Kenya Ltd, the leading steel supplier in East Africa, where she manages structural steel projects from inception to completion. As much as she loves her job, she is even more inspired by the possibility of future engineers and women in STEM in general. Remembering how life-changing it had been for her to hear about Florence when she was a child, Grace now runs a program that educates school girls around rural Kenya about the opportunities within STEM careers. STEM Wahandisi La Femme is a collaborative initiative whose mission is to empower young African girls to seek careers in STEM.

Her leadership of STEM Wahandisi La Femme awarded the role of a STEM ambassador for the African Union International Centre for Girls and Women Education in Africa (AU-CIEFFA) which advocates for instituting national legal frameworks that support women and girls in academia, ensuring that curricula are gender-responsive and finally increasing girl retention in schools. The opportunity took her to Tunis, Tunisia where she joined a cohort of like-minded individuals from all around the continent in trainings centred on topics like how to foster relations with potential collaborators, how to deal sensitively with disadvantaged women and issues relating to STEM. The confidence and new communication skills that Grace gained from the experience encouraged her even more to continue her path of reaching more girls in STEM.

While the award was a positive consequence of her work, for Grace, the real satisfaction comes from realizing she has helped somebody completely change their viewpoint. Speaking to girls are young as nine to late teens, their content and medium may vary, but their messaging remains the same. The purpose is to have girls imagine their lives more complexly. To consider that not only is it possible to do well in the sciences as a girl, but for it also to be a means in which they can create real life-changing good. Grace has realised that sometimes the message is simply to impart on the girls a level of agency. That they can have some level of control over what happens next in their lives.

“For example, when we go to Narok, it can be like we are starting from scratch. Sometimes you are educating people to have a dream. Some don’t even have a dream.” The ability for young girls to dream and picture themselves as women succeeding and contributing in STEM is perhaps the single biggest motivator for Grace. The young girl who was inspired by a woman from her own village who had managed to give back to her own community is the same person who now speaks to young girls around the country and encourages them to see in her the possibility of their futures.