

## **KIHEREHERE: PROUDLY RECLAIMING THE LABEL**

By: *Kana ka Kiherehere*

In many neutropical societies, there are social cues and unwritten rules, I just never got the memo about one potent rule.... *Kiherehere*. No one wants to be labelled *Kiherehere*—a social pariah, too audacious, mouthy, unwise and impulsive.

From a young age, I was assertive, curious and extroverted. This was actually seen as a positive trait, a marker of character and strength. Suddenly as an adult, the same thing I was praised for, began to cause problems, lots of problems..... *Huyu Akona Kiherehere nyngi*.-the label stuck like glue. Everywhere, in church, university lecture rooms and social gatherings.

My quest for validation led me to deciding, my misfit days were over, my *Ka Kiherehere girl* days were over. Gosh, I really tried to be low-key and people please, but that larger than life personality kept creeping in. I was praised for this calmer, collected, *Not Usual Kana ka Kiherehere*. As I got lost and developed anxiety over social gatherings.

I noticed in my interactions, the selectivity of the *Kiherehere label*, my male peers, with a similar personality were often praised— daring, fearless, visionary, charismatic and commanding. When men are praised for being *soo daring*, what are we teaching younger people about gender roles? Justifiably, I became darker and angrier, another *No No* in our neutotypical society. Note to self, never publicly display displeasure— *Kana you need to be classy, sophisticated and graceful*

It boils down to social and cultural norms in post-colonial Kenya. Confidence in women is often not praised, it's demonized and constantly branded as pride. Obedience and respect are core values in Kenya, uniformity is prioritized over self-expression. Add the layer of gender and it gets murkier. Our society is generally, reserved, being *too much* is frowned upon. It shows up in how we expect women to show up into spaces, to be warm and background caricatures never the main characters. Who defines *being too much*? When you tell a woman or young girl, what do you actually mean? You are basically teaching her to shrink herself, to conform and be more palatable.

## **HIDDEN**

Being seen and not heard. Being in the public spotlight or any spotlight can be daunting, because our society does not emphasize confidence and public speaking skills. There's also a misconception between been confident and proud. So most women are seen but not heard

My first BIG GIRL job, I remember being told by my boss, that I always challenge Him. Whatever He says I say the opposite? Did I actually “challenge” my boss, or was I just giving a different opinion? Challenging the boss manifested in openly disagreeing with Him and questioning authority, something I came to learn was a No, No.

When I would share my experiences, well-meaning friends cautioned me, look, “*Kana, you're Kiherehere will cost you?*” Could you stop being extra? I actually listened to them. I swallowed

the discontentment and asked less questions. As acquaintances praised this new person, I sunk deeper and deeper.

I found myself in a shell, someone different, a *Not Kiherehere Girl*. I spoke less, agreed blindly and tried, I really tried to be calmer, poised and composed. But something about *Kiherehere*, it never goes away.... You suppress it but it stills comes out, it betrays you in spaces. You cannot hide *Kiherehere*.

I realized I'm not alone. Every day I would scroll through social media and mainstream media noticing the same dynamic. The double standard was clear and permeated every sector of life. Women just cannot catch a break!! Occassionally a Tiktok video of a passionate corporate or woman leader would trend. The comment section was usually filled with vile responses, yet the same commenters would actively praise men. Drawing parallels to my personal life, I could see how I had a similar experience. Society teaches girls and women to mask, to not wear our real personality. *Keep quiet*.

My years of *Un-Kiherehere*, taught me that being calm and poised would not save me from patriarchy and other social constructs. My calmness would not protect me. Letting things go unchecked was affecting my health —mentally and physically. Fitting into a role, I just could not.

Proudly *Kiherehere*. Bolder than ever. What they used against me, holds no power over me.

*Ka-Kiherehere girl.*

This comeback is personal. It has taken years.