



AFRICAN WOMEN'S
RIGHTS ADVOCATES

**SISTER TO
SISTER 2025**

Introduction



Across Kenya, grassroots women are leading some of the most courageous and transformative efforts to end Female Genital Mutilation (FGM/C), child marriage, and gender-based violence. These women are not distant advocates; they are survivors, sisters, mothers, youth leaders, and trusted voices within their communities. They carry lived experience, cultural understanding, and community trust that no external actor can replicate. Yet, despite their immense contribution to social change, many continue to work in isolation under-resourced, under-recognized, and without the sustained solidarity needed to protect and strengthen their leadership.

The Sister-to-Sister Convening was created to respond to this reality. Designed as a healing-centred, feminist gathering, the convening brought together grassroots women leaders from Kenya's FGM hotspot counties to build community, deepen solidarity, and co-create pathways for collective action. Rooted in shared experience and mutual support, the space enabled sisters to move from individual struggle to collective power, strengthening the movement through connection, political clarity, and care.

Building on the leadership of Domtila Chesang, the visibility created through Mtetezi: Daughters of Tomorrow, and the commitment of Firebird Foundation to re-imagine feminist resourcing, Sister-to-Sister represents a deliberate shift: placing recognition, voice, and decision-making power back into the hands of those on the frontlines. Over four days, sisters reflected, learned, healed, strategized, and articulated a shared vision for a stronger, survivor-led, and community-rooted movement to end FGM/C and all forms of violence against women and girls.

This report captures the journey of that convening, the stories shared, the insights generated, the commitments made, and the foundation laid for an ongoing Sister-to-Sister network. It reflects not only what was discussed, but what was felt: the power of sisterhood, the importance of healing, and the urgency of collective action in advancing gender justice across Kenya.



Foreword

The Sister-to-Sister Initiative was born from a simple but urgent truth: frontline women rights advocates cannot continue to carry the weight of resistance alone.

For years, women across communities have been holding the line, protecting girls, challenging harmful norms, responding to crises, and filling gaps left by systems that too often overlook those closest to the problem. Yet rarely are these same women given space to pause, to be held, to reflect, or to be seen beyond their outputs and impact reports. Sister-to-Sister emerged as a deliberate response to this gap, a space rooted in care, trust, and the belief that sustainable movements are built not only on action, but on connection, healing, and shared power.

The November convening marked a pivotal moment in this journey. It was more than a meeting; it was a homecoming. Women from different regions, backgrounds, and struggles came together not to perform, but to arrive as they were. Through intentional check-ins, reflection circles, storytelling, and collective grounding, the convening created space for honesty, about exhaustion and hope, isolation and solidarity, loss and resilience. In these moments, a powerful truth surfaced again and again: when women are given permission to speak freely and listen deeply, clarity and collective strength naturally follow.

The conversations held during the convening reaffirmed the core values that underpin Sister-to-Sister, sisterhood over competition, care over urgency, and collaboration over individualism. They also informed the direction of our collective work going forward. The priorities reflected in the proposed work plan did not come from a boardroom; they were shaped by lived experience, shared challenges, and the collective wisdom of women who understand what it means to lead at the frontlines.

This report documents that moment in time. It captures not only what was discussed, but what was felt and named, often for the first time. It reflects a process that honored participation without pressure, listening without fixing, and leadership without hierarchy. Most importantly, it stands as a testament to what becomes possible when women are trusted as co-creators of their own movements.

Sister-to-Sister is not a one-off convening. It is a living, evolving initiative, one that continues to be shaped by the sisters themselves. As we move forward, this report serves both as a reflection and a foundation: a reminder that care is political, that wellbeing is strategic, and that collective action rooted in solidarity is our greatest strength. May this document honor the courage of every woman who showed up, spoke her truth, held space for another, and chose to believe, once again, that we are stronger together.

C. Domtilla .

Domtilla Chesang Lorema
Co-Founder and East Africa Lead,
African Women's Rights Advocates



“Sister-to-Sister reminded us that our strength does not only come from what we fight against, but from how we hold each other through the journey. When women are given space to rest, reflect, and rise together, our movements become unbreakable.”





SISTER TO SISTER CONVENING

By any standards, the Sister to Sister Convening 2025 was a smashing success. The overwhelming takeaway from the sisters was that they left better informed, positive about the future of the movement and inspired to take action on their mental wellness as activists. The sisters felt that the conference put them on the right path as they continue on their path as activists against the violation of women and girls.

Driven by the broader objective to strengthen community-led movements and feminist organizing, the convening sought to nurture and amplify grassroots groups, survivor-led initiatives, and young feminist networks working to end FGM in Kenya. The gathering centers the power of collective voice and active civic engagement in influencing social norms, shifting harmful practices, and advancing gender justice.

OVERVIEW

This convening serves as a backbone for illustrating how communities become sites of transformation, how women, girls, and allies come together, define a shared agenda, and collectively act to protect rights and dignity. Guided by feminist principles and movement-building frameworks, the convening intentionally brought together diverse actors to deepen solidarity, strengthen organizing capacity, and build a unified movement to end FGM.

Across Kenya, activists and community groups are leading different forms of social change:

- Some are creating change through awareness, protection, and alternative rites of passage
- Others are resisting harmful norms that uphold control over girls' bodies
- And many are providing a political and social voice to girls, survivors, and marginalized communities who have long been silenced.



The sisterhood therefore provided a critical space for shared learning, strategy building, and collective action toward the elimination of FGM, ensuring that all girls can live in safety, autonomy, and freedom.



WELLNESS & CENTERING

The conveners were big on mental wellness, starting everyday with check ins and checking out at the end of the day. The grounding exercise to set the emotional and spiritual tone for the week. Sisters were invited to:

- Breathe deeply and arrive into their bodies
- Release tension and energetic baggage
- Name an intention for the day
- Hold themselves and each other with compassion

The atmosphere was calm, warm, and welcoming, reinforcing that this convening was not only about learning but also about healing and reclaiming personal power.



Storytelling Session I: My Journey as an Activist

A powerful intergenerational storytelling panel focusing on personal journeys into activism, exploring how each activist's story began, the struggles that shaped them, and the impact that keeps them going, offering both insight and inspiration to the sisters in the room.



Agnes – The Call to Protect Girls in Narok

Surviving sexual abuse then FGM/C as a child, She found the need to protect other children from any form of violence. Later in her life, seeing her daughter almost becoming a victim of FGM/C, Agnes realised she could no longer be a silent observer.

This became the turning point that led her to found Murua Girls—a community-rooted initiative that champions girls' education and supports families in choosing alternative rites of passage. Agnes spoke about her activism as **“a responsibility born from witnessing pain and choosing not to look away.”**



AISHA– USING TRAUMA AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

Although she lives with anxiety, she noted that activism has become a source of strength and purpose. She recounted her journey from previously supporting FGM to becoming an outspoken defender of girls' rights. This shift was triggered by a life-threatening experience during childbirth, which forced her to confront the harmful realities of the practice.

As she began engaging in conversations with other women, she learned that many girls in her community were suffering silently. This realization compelled her to take action to ensure that no girl would endure the violence she once believed was normal.



“My dream is for every girl to live a life free of pain.”

Fatuma – Turning Survival Into Sisterhood



Fatuma described her entry into activism as a deeply personal and emotional path. Coming back home after years abroad, her daughters suffered abuse over not being cut. The turning point came when she realised that her voice could prevent the same pain for future generations. Starting with her own family, then moving to the community and now having a generation of girls not gone through the violence.

Her activism emerged from the understanding that stories save lives, and she now uses her lived experience to educate, engage elders, and shift harmful norms within her community.

Seeing impact and change within the community, Was it worth it?

“The work is still worth it. As a mentor, seeing girls find their voices, share their stories, and challenge the status quo gives me deep joy. This journey has affirmed that change is possible, an honor recognized when I was awarded by the President as a Shujaa Heroine.”

— Fatuma

“Seeing communities slowly change their stance on FGM/C affirms that this work matters. Along the way, the work has also healed me, moving me from anger, to understanding, and now to healing. I believe in changing the world from a place of healing.”

— Agnes

FUBU SESSION – FOR US, BY US



The FUBU session created an intimate and honest space where sisters reflected on what sisterhood looks like in practice within feminist movements. They shared moments where solidarity held them together, a senior feminist offering guidance, a call from a peer during burnout, collective support during backlash, or simply being listened to without judgment. These stories affirmed that sisterhood is built through consistent care, shared courage, and a willingness to hold each other through the emotional weight of anti-FGM/C activism. At the same time, the sisters named the gaps: generational divides, competition for limited resources, exclusionary practices, and unresolved emotional harm that continue to affect trust and collaboration.

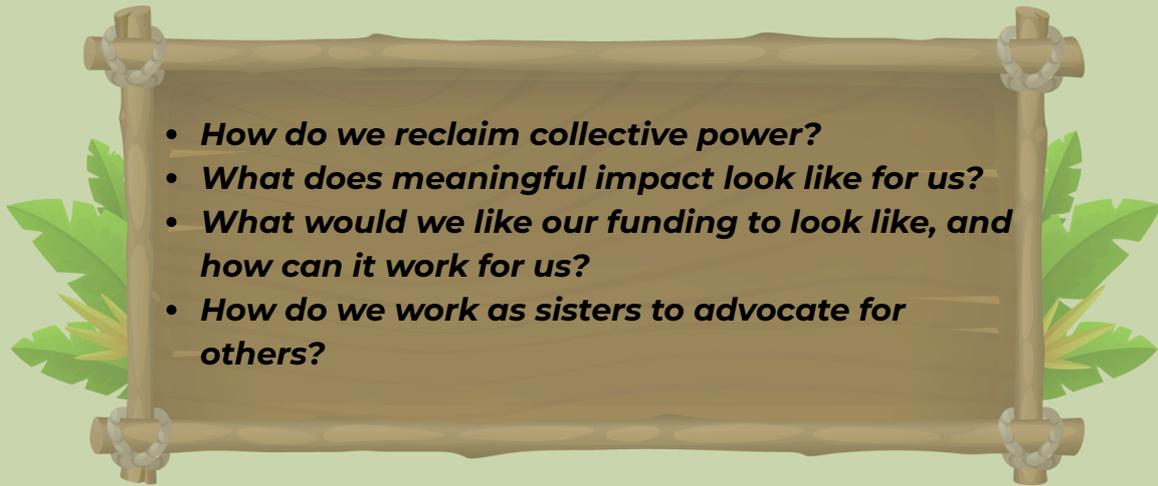
The conversation then shifted to accountability and support. The sisters expressed a strong commitment to an accountability rooted in honesty, compassion, and calling each other in rather than out. They acknowledged that while informal sister circles and peer networks sustain them, there is a need for more structured mentorship, trauma-informed healing spaces, and intentional intergenerational dialogue. The session concluded with a shared desire for deeper political clarity, an anchoring in common values, a unified understanding of the systems sustaining FGM/C, and a commitment to centering the most marginalized voices. Strengthening sisterhood, they affirmed, is essential for building a powerful and cohesive movement to end FGM/C.



“I am a product of other people’s support, held together by those who believed in me. That is why bringing others along matters; collective effort makes our goals attainable. We must stay true to the course, even when distractions and discouragement arise.”

— Domtilla

This brought the first day of the convening to a thoughtful close. In the final reflections, Naima encouraged the sisters to sit with several critical questions that will shape the days ahead :



She emphasized that these questions are essential for grounding the movement in shared purpose, strengthening solidarity, and ensuring that the journey to end FGM/C remains feminist, healing, and community-centered.



The most vulnerable human being is the African Girl child.

DAY TWO



Day Two of the Sister to Sister Convening opened with a grounding wellness check-in, creating a gentle transition into a day focused on strengthening sisterhood, building movement power, and sharpening political clarity. The sisters reflected briefly on Day One, reaffirming their collective commitment to storytelling, solidarity, and centering survivors as the core of feminist organizing.

Language, Power & Framing FGM/C – Reflections by Dr. Leyla Hussein

Dr. Leyla Hussein delivered a powerful reflection on the role of language in shaping narratives, perceptions, and ultimately the effectiveness of anti-FGM/C activism. She emphasized that the words we use carry power, power to heal, to harm, to shift mindsets, and to influence global understanding of the issue.

Dr. Hussein stressed that FGM/C must be reframed not as a cultural tradition but as a global human rights violation, a form of violence that transcends geography, ethnicity, and culture. She called for a deliberate shift toward survivor-centered language, reminding the sisters that how we speak about the practice can either uphold stigma or dismantle it.



She highlighted four key principles for empowering communication:

- Protecting and honoring survivors, ensuring their dignity remains central;
- Avoiding bias and re-traumatization, by choosing sensitive and respectful words;
- Bridging divides, using language that fosters inclusion and understanding rather than blame;
- Building trust through empowerment, particularly when engaging communities and survivors in movement work.

“Reframing FGM/C begins with reframing our words. Empowering language creates safer spaces, strengthens our movements, and ensures that girls and women remain at the heart of this work.”

— Dr. Leyla Hussein



Understanding the Changing Human Rights & Development Landscape – Session by Cathy Odera

In this session, Cathy Odera offered a critical analysis of the rapidly shifting landscape of human rights and development, particularly as it affects feminist organizing and anti-FGM/C movements. She highlighted the sector-wide transition away from funder-driven conditionalities, calling attention to the growing emphasis on localization, equity, and community-led approaches as central pillars of sustainable social change.



Cathy underscored the urgent need for movements to reclaim agency over their work, noting that communities themselves hold the deepest understanding of their realities. Effective organizing, she argued, must be grounded in what communities know, need, and envision for their own futures. This requires resisting externally imposed agendas and challenging forms of aid that undermine autonomy or distort priorities.

Her message was clear: movements cannot thrive under harmful or extractive forms of aid. Instead, they must insist on dignified, feminist resourcing that strengthens, not fragments local leadership and grassroots power. As Cathy emphasized, saying no to “bad aid” is part of building resilience, protecting integrity, and keeping feminist movements rooted in community wisdom.

Walk & Reflective Check-Out – Karura Forest



The day concluded with a reflective nature walk through Karura Forest. Sisters were encouraged to use the space as a moment of silence, grounding, and internal processing.

Many described the walk as:

- A needed pause in a heavy and intense convening
- A quiet moment to integrate learning and emotions
- A reminder that activism must be balanced with wellbeing
- A symbol of collective movement — walking side by side, breathing together, reconnecting with nature

In the final check-out circle, sisters shared what they were taking away from the day: clarity, courage, and a renewed understanding of their place within the larger feminist movement.



DAY THREE



Day Three began with a gentle check-in session that allowed the sisters to reconnect after the reflective walk the previous day. The space was filled with shared stories, joy, and laughter as sisters reflected on the moments of grounding, connection, and release experienced during the walk. This collective lightness set a warm and affirming tone for the day, creating an atmosphere of openness and renewed energy as the convening transitioned into deeper conversations on collective action and feminist leadership.

Reclaiming Our Power, Knowledge & Identity – Panel Discussion

This session brought together a powerful panel of sisters and a special ally who explored what it truly means to reclaim power, knowledge, and identity within feminist movements. Their reflections were deeply rooted in lived experience and the shared realities of organizing against FGM/C across different regions. The panel opened by naming the systems that continue to harm girls and women, patriarchy, cultural violence, underfunding of grassroots work, and the silencing of survivors and affirmed that reclaiming power begins with acknowledging these structures and intentionally working to dismantle them.



Key insights from the panel included:

- Reclaiming power begins with naming harmful systems and refusing narratives that normalize violence.
- Storytelling is a transformative tool, enabling survivors and communities to rewrite narratives imposed by external actors.
- Indigenous knowledge is not just history but power, and preserving it strengthens movement ownership and resilience.
- Identity reclaiming is both healing and political, restoring voice and agency to those most impacted.
- Survivor-centered approaches are non-negotiable, ensuring that girls and survivors lead not just participate in movements shaping their futures.

The session reinforced a collective understanding that reclaiming identity is an act of resistance, liberation, and intergenerational healing.

“If we are to redesign FGM/C programming, it must be survivor-led, guided by those directly impacted by the injustice. Real change comes when survivors lead the solutions.”

— Alice

AFRICAN-ROOTED CREATIVE LAB



The African-rooted Creative Lab invited sisters to co-create new ways of defining and communicating feminist impact through an African-centered lens. The session challenged dominant narratives and measurement frameworks by asking two guiding questions: How do we define our impact, and how do we tell our stories? Sisters were encouraged to move beyond externally imposed definitions of success and instead ground impact in lived realities, community transformation, and collective healing. The discussions and creative outputs were organized around five emerging themes, which captured shared values, strategies, and visions for feminist change rooted in African knowledge systems.

“Being part of a network gives us a sense of belonging. When we are intentional with our campaigns and integrate technology, using social media and AI thoughtfully, we strengthen our impact and move the work forward together.” — Godson





Collective engagement to reclaim our story.

- Engage collectively to reclaim and define our narrative.
- Use social media intentionally, with a shared language on how we speak about our issues.
- Work with media influencers whose values align with our principles.
- Ensure our stories are not just heard, but genuinely felt.
- Rethink how we share stories with love, care, and responsibility.
- Amplify stories of power, resilience, and change.
- Develop and sell merchandise as a sustainable way to fund storytelling and movement work.
- Provide training on social media use and how to stay safe online.
- Offer training on relevant legal policies to strengthen awareness and protection.
- Advocate for stronger policies and laws that hold perpetrators accountable.



Knowledge Sharing.

- Strengthen knowledge sharing across the collective.
- Identify the skills, strengths, and areas of expertise within the group.
- Develop a data hub that maps members' expertise to support targeted capacity building.
- Create a resource bank (e.g., Linktree) where documents, tools, and materials can be easily uploaded and accessed.
- Hold a monthly "What's Trending?" session for members to share updates on their work, achievements, and activities.
- Conduct ongoing research to inform our advocacy and programming.
- Develop practical toolkits to guide collective action and learning.
- Organize virtual capacity-building sessions to ensure continuous learning and growth.



Emotional wellbeing.

- Partner with organizations that offer similar or complementary wellbeing and support programs.
- Provide trauma-informed therapy and group healing sessions for members.
- Encourage and maintain individual self-care routines for all sisters in the collective.
- Organize regular physical meetups to strengthen connection and emotional support.
- Offer trauma therapy for both survivors and allies within the collective.
- Promote and normalize a culture of rest as part of our healing practices.
- Establish safe, reliable referral pathways for members experiencing mental health challenges.



Collective Programming.

- Support individual members to link up with organizations for advocacy on key issues.
- Engage with existing programs both as individuals and as a collective.
- Develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), frameworks, or a program curriculum to guide consistent practice.
- Create an annual work plan to align activities, priorities, and shared goals.
- Collaborate with other existing groups and networks to strengthen impact.
- Promote advocacy initiatives and mentorship opportunities across the collective.



Movement Building.

- Engage government stakeholders to ensure our work aligns with national policies and frameworks.
- Map out key actors including funders, allies, partners, and community stakeholders to strengthen collaboration.
- Bridge the gap between the collective and the communities we serve through intentional engagement
- Present our work and knowledge in ways that are accessible, relatable, and easy for communities to understand.
- Establish inter-county knowledge exchange programs to promote learning and shared experiences.
- Foster a safe space rooted in collaboration rather than competition.
- Put in place clear governance structures to enhance communication, accountability, and ease of coordination.

ARISING QUESTIONS

1. What makes us stand out?
2. What makes the movement sustainable?
3. How do we make the collective deliberate?
4. How best would we work with allies and stakeholders that do not necessarily align with our beliefs and way of work?
5. How do we communicate our knowledge to influence change on how our issues are being defined and are talked about in our communities and by funders and partners?
6. What are we as a collective responsible for and what are we not responsible for?

DAY FOUR



The final day of the convening centered on consolidation, commitment, and collective forward-looking action. Sisters began the morning with a gentle check-in session led by the Wellness Team, grounding themselves emotionally and physically as they prepared to close the convening with intention.

Mental Wellness & Self-Care Session

Led by Dr. Leyla Hussein the session focused on mental wellness as a foundational pillar of sustainable activism. The session reminded sisters that feminist leadership requires groundedness, emotional safety, and intentional rest.

Key messages included:

- "We cannot pour from an empty cup." Caring for ourselves is a political and personal responsibility.
- Setting and honoring boundaries is essential for longevity in activism.
- Ignoring boundaries leads to burnout, retraumatization, and unhealthy cycles within movements.
- Mental wellness is not a luxury it is a strategy for resilience, clarity, and collective strength.



This reflective session provided space for vulnerability, healing, and renewed commitment to sustainable feminist leadership.

Sister to Sister: The Genesis



The Sister to Sister movement emerged from a shared recognition that activism, particularly in the fight to end FGM/C, can be deeply isolating. During a moment of reflection, Domtilla named a truth that resonated across the room: sustaining this work requires community, care, and collective strength.

Sister to Sister was envisioned as a space rooted in shared knowledge and lived experience—grounded in what works within our communities and responsive to the realities activists face. More than a network, it is a movement committed to mutual support, political clarity, and collective voice. Through Sister to Sister, activists are supported to grow, better understand the systems they are navigating, and organize together in solidarity to advance a shared feminist agenda.

Reaffirming Domtilla's call for collective strength, Jo Wells of Firebird, underscored a powerful message: movements have the power to change funding systems. She emphasized that resourcing should not dictate agendas, but rather respond to the visions and priorities set by those closest to the work.

Jo shared Firebird's commitment to the Sister to Sister movement through a two-year flexible funding commitment, allowing members to collectively decide which activities to pursue. She stressed that programming must be co-created by all members, grounded in trust, autonomy, and shared leadership. This commitment marked a significant shift toward feminist, movement-led resourcing that centers agency, collaboration, and long-term sustainability.



BUILDING & SUSTAINING MOVEMENTS

Muthoni facilitated a powerful session exploring what it truly takes to build and sustain feminist movements committed to ending FGM/C. She unpacked the anatomy of strong movements, emphasizing the importance of shared values, political clarity, community trust, and consistent, long-term organizing. Sisters reflected on the need for intergenerational collaboration, sustainable resourcing, and approaches that move beyond short-term project cycles.

The discussions reaffirmed that effective movements must remain anchored in lived experiences, rooted in community power, and adaptive to shifting political and social realities. Sisters also emphasized the importance of resisting co-optation, challenging harmful narratives, and sustaining radical solidarity, even in moments of tension. Through breakout group discussions, sisters collectively reflected on three guiding questions:

1. How do we build collective trust?
2. How do we nurture our collective wellbeing?
3. What collective actions will move the movement forward?



HOW DO WE BUILD COLLECTIVE TRUST?

- **Establish clear, open communication channels (including a shared WhatsApp group).**
- **Commit to transparency through regular updates on movement activities and decisions.**
- **Create and uphold judgment-free spaces that encourage sisters to speak openly.**
- **Institutionalize regular personal and collective check-ins.**
- **Develop and document clear accountability, mediation, and conflict resolution processes.**
- **Agree on and respect shared boundaries and confidentiality guidelines.**
- **Honor commitments and collective agreements as a measure of trust.**
- **Respond to members' challenges collectively rather than individually.**

HOW DO WE NURTURE OUR COLLECTIVE WELLBEING?

- Schedule regular virtual and in-person convenings for connection and reflection.
- Introduce weekly virtual wellness check-ins.
- Organize periodic physical meet-ups focused on team building and healing.
- Facilitate meditation and healing sessions as part of movement activities.
- Provide access to mental health support through in-house therapists.
- Offer person-centered and group therapy sessions for sisters.
- Build internal capacity for peer support and trauma-informed care.
- Establish a buddy system for mutual support.
- Create a welfare kitty to respond to emergencies and wellbeing needs.
- Roll out skills-sharing sessions, including digital safety and self-defense training.
- Celebrate personal and collective milestones, achievements, and birthdays.

WHAT COLLECTIVE ACTIONS WILL MOVE THE MOVEMENT FORWARD?

- Adopt a rights-based, survivor-led advocacy approach across all programming.
- Develop shared advocacy resources, including curricula, toolkits, and how-to guides.
- Co-create a common language and shared policy positions on FGM/C.
- Draft and endorse a unified policy statement to guide advocacy efforts.
- Coordinate collective advocacy strategies at community, county, and national levels.
- Explore collective bargaining mechanisms for funding within the movement.
- Advocate for the safety, protection, and resourcing of activists and defenders.
- Ensure survivors and community members lead advocacy and implementation efforts.

COMMITMENTS & SHARED ROADMAP – #IAMMTEZEI CAMPAIGN

In a collaborative exercise, the AWRA team guided the sisters through crafting a shared roadmap for the #IamMtetezi campaign. Together, they articulated clear commitments towards strengthening collective advocacy, amplifying survivor-centered narratives, and elevating grassroots leadership.

The session reaffirmed that ending FGM/C requires coordinated efforts, consistent messaging, and a unified political stance across counties and communities. The sisters expressed a strong desire for mutual support, transparent communication, and shared accountability as they advance the campaign.

CLOSING & CULTURAL NIGHT GALA



The convening closed with heartfelt words of gratitude, recognition of partners and donors, and appreciation for the courage and labour of every sister in attendance. In the evening, the Cultural Night Gala and Mtetezi Film Screening offered a celebratory, reflective space to honor the resilience, creativity, and leadership of movement builders.

The night reaffirmed that this convening was not an ending, but the beginning of a stronger, more connected, and more determined movement to end FGM/C, rooted in sisterhood, justice, and collective power.



GALLERY







SISTER TO SISTER INITIATIVE



AFRICAN WOMEN'S
RIGHTS ADVOCATES



**Sister
Sister** to
From Shared Pain to Collective Power