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16 Champions of Change for 16 Days of Activism

As part of the continued commemorations for 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in Tanzania, Women in Law & Development in Africa (WiLDAF) and the Coalition Against Gender-Based Violence (MKUKI), with the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Danish Embassy in Tanzania, hosted an event to celebrate 16 Champions of Change – individuals who are working in Tanzania every day to defend and protect women and girls' rights to live a life free of violence. Ambassadors and representatives from the Embassies of Ireland, Finland and Switzerland – who are supporting women and girls' empowerment and ending gender-based violence (GBV) efforts in Tanzania – also attended the event.

The 16 Champions of Change, who each received an award at the event on 8 December, are all ordinary individuals doing extraordinary things, using their agency to fight GBV and harmful practices – and embracing this year's 16 Days national theme – Change begins with me!

The selection of the 16 Champions was not an easy task – hundreds of nominations were received, and in reality each and every one of them deserved an award – but the final selection captures the different backgrounds, motivations and paths the Champions of Change are taking to eliminate GBV and harmful practices in Tanzania.

From a faith leader in Zanzibar, a youth activist in Shinyanga to a hip hop artist in Dar es Salaam – the Champions of Change demonstrate that individual action to combat GBV can add up to a forceful nationwide movement.

H.E. Mette Nørgaard Dissing-Spandet, Ambassador of Denmark to Tanzania, presented an award to two champions, Dr. Judith Odunga, a GBV activist and 16 Days of Activism pioneer in Tanzania as well as the former – and first – WiLDAF national coordinator, and Detective Corporal Happy Eliufoo, who helped to set up the Police Gender and Children's Desk in Hai District Council, Kilimanjaro. The Ambassador said, "All women and girls have a right to live free lives without fear of violence. And when they do not, it is crucial that the systems are in place to support them. Denmark is proud to support the fight against gender-based violence in the world and in Tanzania, and I am personally proud to have presented awards to two great champions for women's rights. They have truly made a difference."

The 16 Champions of Change awards was one of several events organized during 16 Days of Activism by WiLDAF and the Mukuki Coalition – with the support of UNFPA and the Embassy of Denmark in Tanzania. A dialogue for leaders of all faiths in Zanzibar also garnered their renewed commitment to step up their efforts to end all forms of violence against women and girls. Ms. Anna Kulaya, WiLDAF National Coordinator, who organized the Champions of Change awards event, said: "Persistent social norms continue to devalue women and girls and keep them locked in a cycle of inequality and abuse. We each have a responsibility to challenge discrimination wherever we see it and to support others to do so."

Selemani Bishagazi – one of the awarded champions – has made change happen in his community in Kipunguni and believes that individuals, families and communities hold the power to ending all forms of violence. This was a sentiment echoed by Dr Wilfred Ochan, Officer-in-Charge, UNFPA, who called on partners and government to support the work of existing champions and to identify others, and of the need for a unified approach to tackle harmful social norms and inequalities: "If we do this together, we will get the results we want to see; empowered women and girls with the agency to meaningfully engage in social and economic development and with an active voice in decisions that affect them." This, he added, would not just benefit families, communities and Tanzania, but create a more equal and equitable gender world.

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