



Our November 2022 UDSM Alumna

This is a “light corner” on the UDSM portal intended to feature for one month in turns two among many of the University’s graduates—alumni—since its foundation in 1961. The corner is designed to inform the public and the University itself, without prejudice in terms of historical precedence but guided only by professional information search, on the past graduates of the University, their whereabouts, their current position or engagement, what is remembered of them as past ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ of their time and, finally, on what is reckoned about their contribution to their Alma Mater, their nation, the Africa region and/or the wider world.

Jennifer IRIRA (Kenyan)



Year of matriculation: 1975

Year of graduation: 1978

Award: BA (in Education and Public Administration) (Hons), 1978

More info:

- **M.A (Educational Administration), University of Leeds, 1979**
- **PhD (in Women’s Education and Development), Kenyatta University, 1986**

If there is any woman among the rarest species of individuals in Kenya—even in our East African region—who has transformed a world culture of feminine obscurity, of timidity and uncertainty of ideas and opportunities among the womenfolk, it is that lady by the name of Jennifer Nkuene Riria of Kenya. Jennifer Riria is an alumna of the University of Dar es Salaam of the graduating class of 1978, four and half decades ago. She is a Kenyan business leader and the Chief Executive Officer of Echo Network Africa (ENA) headquartered in Nairobi. It is a woman-led organisation with a total membership of over 900,000 women in Kenya, an organisation previously known as Kenya Women Holding (KWH), which had in turn succeeded the original Kenya Women Microfinance Trust (KWFT) founded and chartered in 1982. Her story is a distinctive and refreshingly laudable one.

Jennifer was born in the 1950s in rural Kenya, some 700 km (350 miles) away from urban Nairobi, fourth child and fourth daughter among ten siblings of a God-fearing family whose father was a church deacon. At school-going age, she walked a long way—four kilometres—everyday to school and back, barefoot according to her. On completing primary school, she was admitted at Precious Blood High School of the Catholic Sisters of the Precious Blood in Nairobi, for ‘O-Level’ secondary education from where she proceeded with advanced secondary education (‘A-levels’) at Kipsigis Girls High School in Kericho.

Supported by good school performance and subsequent high principal passes at Kipsigis Girls, she applied to the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania for admission in 1975 and enrolled at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. She took a combination including Administration, Education and a teaching subject for the three-year degree programme. She earned her B.A. honours in 1978 and returned home to Kenya and began teaching at Kabete Technical Institute in Nairobi. After six months she moved to State House Girls High School where she taught until 1979/80. During that very year, she was lucky to obtain a scholarship for a postgraduate (masters) degree programme tenable at Leeds University in the U.K. She got an M.A in Education there in 1980/81.

On completion of her master’s programme and, as she embarked on a new career in organised women-empowerment and women entrepreneurship in 1982, she at the same time embarked on a doctoral research degree programme in education and development at Kenyatta University, earning her PhD in 1986; but she continued to do part-time lecturing there at the University for a while.

In 1982, Jennifer Riria was one of the few Kenyan women who founded a Kenyan Women Microfinance Trust (KWFT) dedicated to providing financial and non-financial services to ‘women entrepreneurs’. When she formally joined Kenya Women Trust in 1991, KWFT was in “bad shape, understaffed, and losing money.” She had to summon all her guts to save the situation—to work at the same time as “CEO, janitor, accountant, loan officer and receptionist”, as “microfinance banker, researcher and gender specialist” as she is described by many sources, in order to turn around the fortunes. Her work finally bore fruit and, eventually, her long journey brought her to the current helm of success.

Today, apart from being a rare kind of corporate leader in Kenya, Dr. Jennifer Riria has served as chairperson of Women’s World Banking, a global microfinance network that links over 53 microfinance institutions (MFIs) across 30 countries worldwide. Over the entire period, Riria served as a Chief Executive at Kenya Women Holding Group and its successor-institutions. This women-dedicated, women-focused institution has been able to work with over four million women, to disburse over three billion US dollars of loans and

to employ over three thousand persons. Lives of so many poor and originally powerless women have improved and been energised.

In addition, as a philanthropist, Riria supports and promotes the ‘Educate the Net-235 Girls’ programme, an initiative that supports needy girls in their education. As she has stated many times, “Good management of small assets can be crucial to the survival of poor people especially women who live in precarious conditions, threatened by lack of income, shelter and food. Direct access to financial services can allow them to progress from hand-to-mouth survival to planning for the future, acquiring physical and financial assets, investing in better nutrition, health and education. This is [what] we have worked so hard to ensure the survival of KWH, now Echo Network Africa”. In spite of her busy schedules, Dr Riria has published a few insightful works, including an autobiography, *Kenya’s Jennifer Riria: From teenage-mother to an institutional builder*, and *A history of higher education in Kenya*. Both books were launched in June 2014. The University of Dar es Salaam heartily celebrates her life journey of purpose, service, achievement and social impact.



The Jennifer Riria Shopping Hub in Nakuru: so named in recognition of her empowerment of the womenfolk and her contribution to national development in Kenya and East Africa in general. Photocredit/Muiga commercial



Dr Jennifer Riria: a scholar, teacher, entrepreneur, financial executive, author and exemplar.



Visits to girl students across schools in the country in inspiring and empowering them.

***Jennifer IRIRA is Our November 2022 Alumna,
and her great stories begin here!***

Get in touch with us through

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