

*Reclaiming Narratives
and Imagery through
Feminist Storytelling:
The LAM Sisterhood*

The LAM Sisterhood, established in 2019 in Kenya, is a content studio founded by three creative feminist women. The name “LAM” is derived from the first letters of their names. They aim to fill the world with stories for African women to feel seen, heard, and beloved.

Historically, stories about Africa and African women have been predominantly crafted from an external perspective. The LAM Sisterhood’s innovative approach is deeply rooted in their dedication to reclaiming female African stories. By actively seizing control over the portrayal of women in narratives and imagery, they challenge societal stereotypes and reshape perceptions and power dynamics that contribute to the construction of collective imaginaries.

The starting point for establishing the LAM Sisterhood came in 2018 with the staged production of “The Brazen Edition” with Too Early For Birds. Inspired by the women who came before them and looking to challenge the male and western viewpoint that has traditionally dominated women’s representation in historical narratives, the LAM Sisterhood shone a light on the complex and multifaceted lives of Brazen Kenyan women while seeking strength, wisdom, and power from them. This was an award-winning play whose success showed a resounding hunger within Kenyan society for these types of productions, leading to the establishment of the LAM Sisterhood.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a significant setback. The pandemic-induced lockdown restrictions drove them to change their initial plan, which mainly revolved around theatrical work. After receiving an unrestricted initial seed investment from a Kenyan woman who supported their work, they directed this investment into making the pilot episode of the Brazen podcast. This later evolved into the **KaBrazen podcast**, which shares stories of Brazen African women reimagined for children, proving their vision beyond the initial stage idea and showcasing its adaptability to the current context.

Since then, the LAM Sisterhood has continued to expand, reshaping prevailing narratives and representations by putting African women at the heart of its work. In their own words:

“In a world in which African women are either sidelined or silenced, marginalised, and only looked at as either beneficiaries or as victims, telling stories that are for them, telling nuanced stories, that allow for complexity and centre their perspective on the world [is unique to the LAM Sisterhood approach].”

Aleya Kassam, Co-Founder of the LAM Sisterhood

Rebalancing power in the stories and

imagery they share about African women, as well as in the way they narrate these stories, is a fundamental aspect of the LAM Sisterhood's feminist perspective. That is why they dedicate significant time and resources to their initial research process, ensuring a thorough representation of women's stories while considering the historical and political context surrounding them.

In that sense, funding is essential to the LAM Sisterhood's way of working. However, they recognise the unequal power dynamic around access to funds that undervalues the work of professionals not from the Western Hemisphere. Within the LAM Sisterhood, founders juggle numerous roles (storytellers, performers, CEOs, accountants, and business development, among others), leading to high levels of burnout and being overwhelmed by donor demands. The lack of core funding prevents small organisations from growing beyond their initial years and puts even more pressure on their founders. As mentioned by the LAM Sisterhood,

“If we were a trucking business or a transportation company, we would be the business, the company that owns the trucks, as well as the actual trucks and the end of fuel. We're really stretched; we're performing 1000 other roles.”

Aleya Kassam, Co-Founder

To navigate this scenario, the LAM Sisterhood, while it carries out some grant-funded work, focuses on commercial work and ensures adequate and fair compensation. Having a commercial strategy - commissioned projects, merchandising opportunities or ticketing - gives them more control over the stories they want to tell and how to tell them. Likewise, they highlight the importance of investing in the creative process and the need for donors or clients to trust storytellers. Trust, along with fair compensation, is an enabling factor that makes innovating around narratives and imagery possible. As such, they consider it essential to partner with organisations that allow them to focus on creating powerful and compelling stories and expand creatively and recognise expenses related to their operations and management.

Moving from the rhetoric of rebalancing power dynamics to its practical implementation is not always a straightforward process. Funding for the arts and cultural spaces is still missing, and it is more present in the tech industry in East Africa than in the creative industry. In the current Kenyan scenario, where the currency is crashing and inflation grows, “moving” the money towards arts and culture is increasingly challenging. Furthermore, there are limited opportunities in the global south, even if the work being done is at par and of the same quality,

along with much “lip service” around the shifting of the power movement. However, despite the challenges, the LAM Sisterhood has developed an extensive portfolio. Since creating the pilot of the Brazen Podcast, which earned significant industry recognition - shortlisted by PRX in 2018 and the BBC in 2021 - they were selected in 2021 for the Aga Khan University Innovation Center Innovators-in-Residence Programme. This was instrumental in the LAM Sisterhood’s growth. It allowed them to develop a universe of stories that puts African women at the centre, including creating the first season of the Kabrazen Podcast. Such a podcast deliberately steps away from the conventional white, colonial, and male gaze that often shapes the narrative around the lives of past and contemporary African women. It is also designed with imagery that empowers young children, considering the impact visual elements have on their emotions and perceptions.

The Kabrazen Podcast has been a notable success. It recently won Best African Children’s Podcast of The Year in 2023. Furthermore, it has reached a broad audience, being distributed in both English and Swahili across 300 community libraries in East Africa, reaching over 10,000 children. Additionally, it is available on the “Yoto player,” boasting a user base of 1.5 million worldwide. Moreover, the LAM Sisterhood is dedicated to establishing safe spaces

for African women to share and nourish themselves creatively. They hold live events for creatives, like the sisterhood salons, and virtual storytelling and distribute the LAM letter, a monthly newsletter shared with their audience. They believe social media can often be a hostile place for African women, and they challenge this dynamic by creating their own communication channel to engage with their audience and share their creativity and artistry with them. Additionally, in collaboration with two other creative studios, they were commissioned by Aga Khan Foundation, to create a transmedia universe of children’s stories, resulting in **The Mysteries of Jabali and Sauti**, with over 40 stories in the forms of storybooks, audio stories, comic books, and animations. Within this project, they had a writer’s room involving six to eight different writers, with the goal to impact the creative ecosystem by enabling artists to sustain their work.

Their journey in creating and nurturing the LAM Sisterhood reflects the demand for the type of content they produce. The founders have showcased their success, learnings and storytelling process on numerous forums, from the Podcast Movement—the largest podcasting gathering in the world—to Stanford University, the Africa Leadership Centre, NYU, the Aga Khan University, and the University of Bonn. This dissemination of their experience is also an essential aspect of shifting

power, as it challenges the narrative that valuable insights mainly originate from the global north.

Learnings:

Recognising and endorsing the creative processes of professionals from the global south is crucial for rebalancing power dynamics and ensuring that storytelling remains authentic and rooted in local contexts. The LAM Sisterhood explains how Africans are significantly interested in collaborating to create stories that reflect their own perspectives and interests, free from western influence.

- ▶ ICSOs can proactively engage and subcontract professionals from the creative industry in the global south to amplify their vision, content, and creations, thereby challenging the dominant values and aesthetic choices perpetuated by western-led narratives and imagery. Organisations can establish trust-based partnerships with creative professionals to shoulder administrative and fundraising responsibilities and

alleviate these burdens, as a way of recognising the unequal access to resources that organisations in the west have, compared to organisations elsewhere.

- ▶ The LAM Sisterhood's innovative and multifaceted approach reflects the value of possessing diverse skills applicable across various initiatives. Organisations can support creatives and artists by helping them develop different skills necessary for producing diverse commercial work, and ensure they are paid in the same value as Western professionals, contributing to their financial sustainability.
- ▶ ICSOs can invest time in discussing what is a safe creative space and preferred communication channels and, instead of calling for proposals, the call can be for creative ideas. The selected idea is then paired with a programme manager or proposal writer, whose responsibility is to flesh out the details and ensure the idea can be executed.