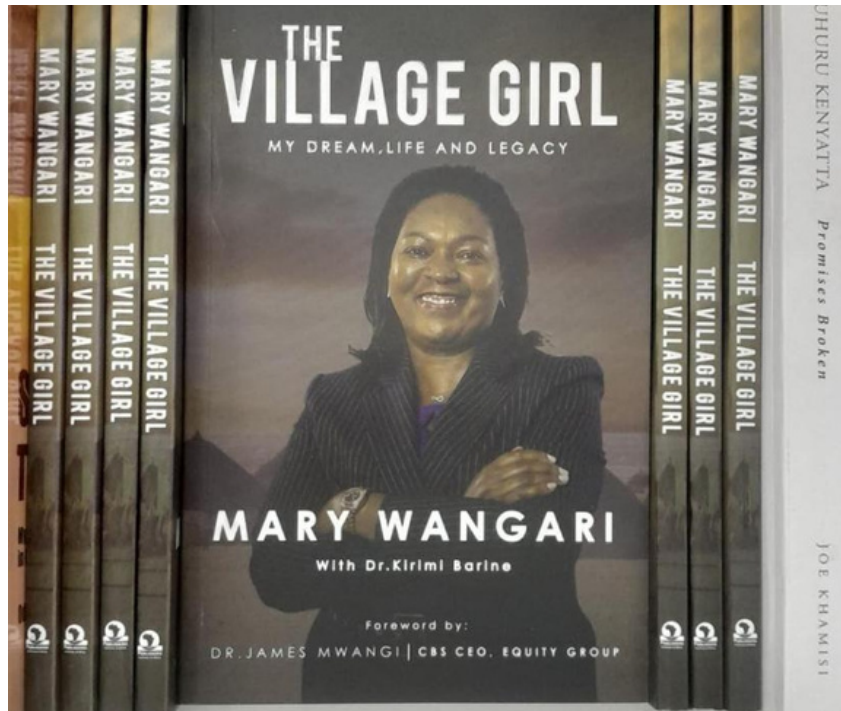


Review of Mary Wangari's 'The Village Girl'

Although some of her friends were apprehensive about her joining an unknown institution, Mary's heart was won over by Equity's business model which sought to empower the huge population that had previously been locked out of banking ...



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Mary Wangari is the Group Executive Director of Equity Group Holdings Plc. She is an Advocate of the High Court of Kenya by profession and one of the Republic of Kenya's leading women icons, particularly in banking. She has won many awards in leadership and has contributed immensely to the empowerment of women in Kenya. Her awards include; the overall winner of the inaugural Angaza Awards in the "Women To Watch In Banking and Finance 2021" category and overall winner of the "Woman on Boards Awards 2021". These are not honorary awards but awards that have been won through Mary's hard work and dedication to all that she does.

From her autobiography, the readers are treated to the story of a woman who had very humble beginnings. To state that Mary Wangari came from very humble beginnings is not a matter of using a cliché. Her mother Cornelia Wanjiru Matteo brought up her six children in Tetu Constituency of Nyeri as a single mother when her marriage failed.

It was bad enough for her marriage to fail, but having to bring her children to her maternal home was a nightmare. It meant total rejection for Mary and her siblings by their maternal uncles. In the African (Kenyan) patriarchal communities' tradition, Cornelia and her children were seen as unwanted foreigners and intruders. They neither owned anything nor were they entitled to anything in this home. Mary narrates that it was through their mother's hard work, strength of character and encouragement that the two sisters and four brothers grew up to become successful individuals in their respective fields. Cornelia was a staunch Catholic, a disciplinarian and a no-nonsense woman. She instilled Christian values in her children and often reminded them that the only item they could inherit from her was education since she had no property to pass on to them.

Mary's primary school education was fraught with challenges. After-school chores had to be attended to by all the children before doing homework using the smoky kerosene lamp.

During the holidays, she and her siblings had to pick coffee berries and take them to the factory for weighing as well as for quality control. Their mother had taught them never to complain because their hard work would yield good results for them in the future.

Kangubiri Girls High School which Mary attended for her secondary school education was not on the Kenyan map of renowned schools. However, her goal here was not anchored in the school's prestige but on what her hard work could yield for her. She devoted her time not only to her studies, but also to extracurricular activities such as music, drama and Catholic Aid. She was in the school choir and was among the students who brought trophies for the school from the Kenya Music and Drama Festivals.

Her performance in the national examinations at the end of Form Four at Kangubiri Girls was excellent and won her admission to Ngandu Girls High School for her A-Levels.



She had performed particularly well in the sciences and was hoping to join the Science Class in order to do Medicine at university. When she was placed in the Arts Class instead, her Christian beliefs must have prevailed over her disappointment. Being a devoted Christian like her mother, she must have remembered that, "When God closes a door He opens a window". Subsequently, her excellent performance in the Arts A-Levels gained her admission to the University of Nairobi's Law School for her LLB Degree course.

Our author informs us that after being sworn in as an Advocate of the High Court of Kenya following completion of the Kenya School of Law course, it was not smooth sailing to Equity Group Holdings Plc (Equity Building Society then). She had to undergo some kind of "training" in private legal practice in the City of Nairobi. Her own first private office was in Luthuli Avenue, an area of the City that was condescendingly known as "Third World". Even after moving upmarket to Old Mutual Building in the Central Business District, she had to face stiff competition from the better known as well as long established legal firms. It was not easy having to travel upcountry for assignments on public transport, while at the same time trying to balance between business and parenting her three daughters.

Why did Dr James Mwangi, the then Finance Director of Equity Building Society and currently the Group Managing Director and CEO of Equity Group Holdings Plc, choose her instead of the bigger firms to draw up such a mammoth contract between Equity and

Africap Microfinance Fund? Yes, her law firm was on the panel of the lawyers of Equity, but why hers and not any of the others? And why not any of the more highly recognised firms in the City of Nairobi? James's colleague in Credit Department who had spoken well of Mary must have been greatly impressed by her commitment in every matter she had handled for Equity. And he, as well as James, was right in choosing Mary. Mary took the engagement with the seriousness it deserved. She immediately went to the High Court Library and delved into research on Commercial Law and contracts. She gave her best to the process of drafting the contract and delivered it to her client. She informs us that it was this contract that inaugurated her long relationship with Equity.

The successful conclusion of this contract was a significant turning point for both Equity and Mary. On the one hand, the money earned from Africap Microfinance Fund enabled Equity Building Society to convert into a commercial bank in 2004. On the other hand, Equity gained unreserved confidence in Mary as the legal professional who would oversee the process of transitioning from a Building Society into a full-fledged commercial bank. It was at the peak of this transitioning process that Mary Wangari was won over by Equity as a full-time employee.

As a reviewer of the autobiography *THE VILLAGE GIRL: MY DREAM, LIFE AND LEGACY*, I view this point in the story as the moment when we (readers) get to know who the subject and protagonist Mary Wangari actually is. Although some of her friends were apprehensive about her joining such an

unknown institution as Equity was then, Mary's heart was won over by Equity's business model which sought to empower the huge population that had previously been locked out of banking due to inability to meet the stringent requirements for banking. Hence we see here a protagonist who combines professionalism with humane attributes.

Mary has had her share of the tragedies in life. The end of her 25 years marriage dealt a heavy blow to her and her children. However, instead of engaging in a blame game, she gave her children the counselling support that they needed. Subsequently she has been very devoted in raising these three daughters to become successful and responsible individuals. The death of her loving mother who had been her friend, mentor and role model was devastating, but she makes her spirit live on through imparting the values she learnt from her to her children.

Mary is a giver. She contributes towards uplifting the lives of the disadvantaged in society both at a personal as well as institutional level. She mentors the younger generation and, in spite of her busy schedule, she sets aside time when invited to give motivational speeches. This is in line with her belief that she has the duty, not only to give back to society, but also to leave a legacy. Her autobiography speaks volumes to readers who have ears to hear.

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