

Founder of the Flone Initiative, an organization at the forefront of creating a safe and professional public transport industry in Kenya, Naomi Mwaura was also one of the lead organizers of the #MyDressMyChoice campaign that saw thousands of women protest against gender-based violence in Kenyan public transport. She has been featured in Forbes Women and was named one of the BBC's 100 Inspirational and Influential Women.

Naomi Mwaura

CEO, FLONE INITIATIVE

KENYA

Naomi Mwaura is calling for a revolution in public transportation – making routes information more accessible, protecting passengers from harassment, and paving a career path for women in the industry. She founded the Flone Initiative whose mission is to transform Kenya's transport system into a feminist one.

"My family was in the matatu business," says Naomi, who describes having been born into the transport business. The matatus in Kenya are unique minibuses, the most popular and affordable way for Kenyans to get around the city. Yet they are overcrowded, unregulated, and drive recklessly through Nairobi's streets. "My family ran the flashiest matatu in our route, Gridlock'd. Like many, it was graffiti-filled, colorful, and loud."

Naomi's fire to transform the matatu business came after she was assaulted in a matatu and later saw a video being circulated of a woman getting stripped on a matatu. "It was then that I realized that I could not be a bystander anymore and I had to make a contribution, despite what others would say."

Her motivation is rooted in her personal experiences and a strong belief that the public transport system can and must be transformed to a safer and more inclusive space for women.

"Women as users and operators of public transport in Kenya face sexual harassment on a daily basis. This leads to a massive financial loss for women, more time spent commuting as they try to avoid dangerous routes, and eventually, they drop out of a system that isn't built for them and doesn't cater to their travel needs. In Kenya, over 88% of women have experienced harassment while using public transport. My work at the Flone Initiative is anchored in reducing these statistics, ensuring that public transport becomes a safe space for women to use but also a place where they can access and retain employment for the betterment of their quality of life."

Instead of rallying behind the common cries to get rid of matatus, she wants to reimagine them. "The system doesn't work. Let's get rid of it, some say. But I say no. We have a lot to work with, and we need to put in the work. Let's provide training on how to improve commuter experience. Let's change behavior. Let's train on and adopt sexual harassment policies. Let's hire a more diverse workforce. Just like myself and my family, I believe public transportation can be the preferred mode of transport and workplace for millions of Kenyans," says Naomi.

She credits Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan environmental and socio-political activist as her feminist role model. "I admire her zeal, courage and belief in her cause despite it being largely misunderstood in society."

