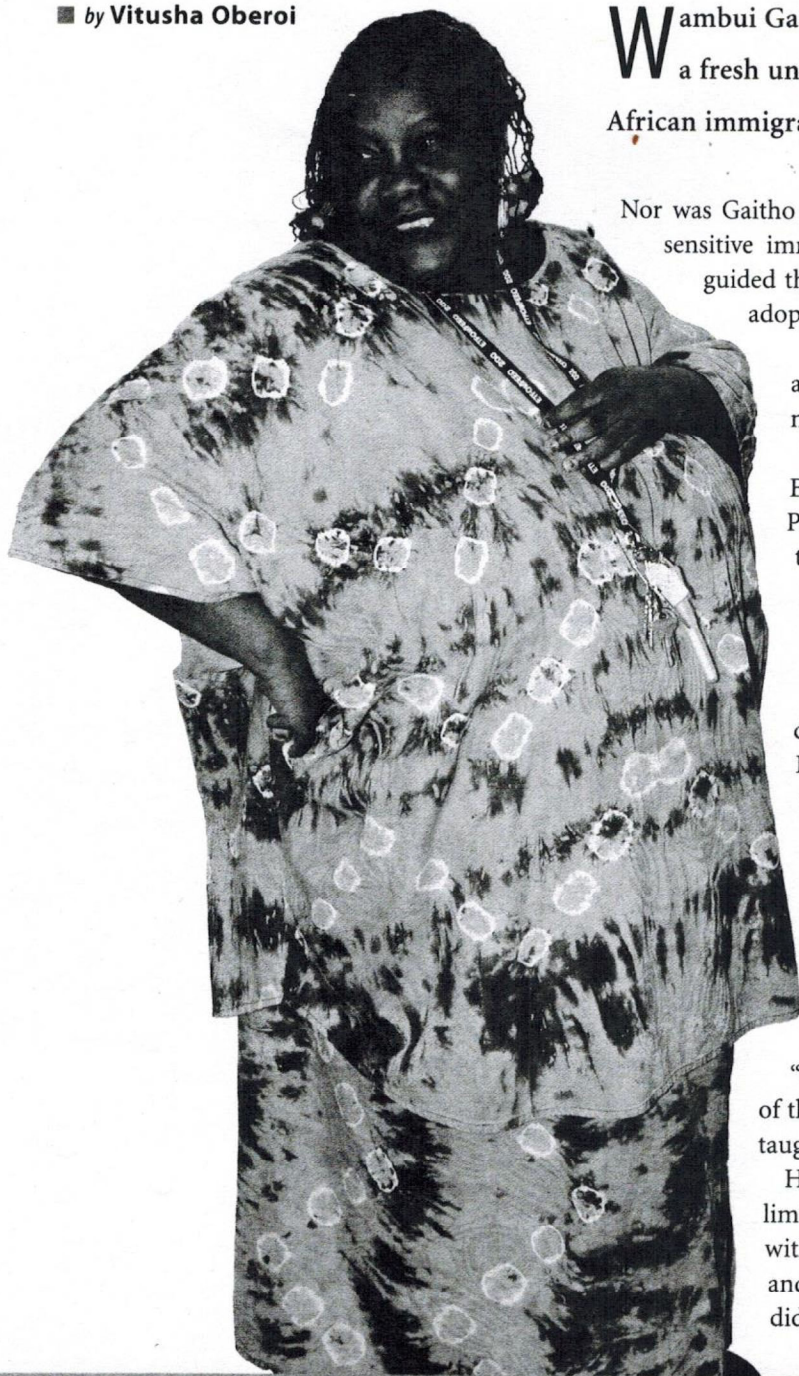


## ETFO Leaders' Profile

■ by Vitusha Oberoi



**W**ambui Gaitho did not set out to be a role model when, as a fresh university graduate, she worked to give children of African immigrants a sense of their own history.

Nor was Gaitho setting any examples when she paid weekend visits to sensitive immigrant communities to teach children; or when she guided their parents as they struggled to find a toe-hold in their adopted country.

And yet, after a lifetime of unswerving efforts for equity and fair play, Wambui Gaitho has indeed become a role model, an icon for those whose lives she has touched.

"Wambui, you have been my mentor on equity issues," ETFO President Emily Noble said as she presented the President's Award to the Toronto teacher at the federation's Annual Meeting this year. Noble described Gaitho as a consistent and effective advocate for social justice issues in the federation and a role model for younger members.

"It is an honour to be recognized. As social activists, we do a lot of things and we are not looking for accolades. But when we are honoured, the human part in us is touched," Gaitho said.

At the age of 18, Gaitho migrated from Kenya to Canada. She graduated from York University. Gaitho soon realized that her Canadian education enabled her to help new immigrants from Africa who could not communicate in English. She began to work in the heritage language program of the former North York Board.

"I tried to give the children of these immigrants a sense of their own history, which was not taught, which is still not taught, in schools," Gaitho says.

Her interaction with new immigrants did not remain limited to children. "I found myself becoming involved with the parents of my students. I had the language skills and knowledge of how the society worked, which they didn't necessarily have. They needed help to understand

# Wambui Gaitho

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the system, settle down, and find work." Gaitho was able to facilitate opportunities for the immigrants through her networking skills. Several years down the road, the rewards of her selfless work are still rolling in. Recently, a young woman whose mother she helped recognized her on the street. "She said her mom always told her to help others the way I had helped them."

"It is not the Governor General's Award but it is wonderful when a human story like this comes to you in the end," Gaitho says. Her association with children pushed her towards teaching. She became a classroom assistant and gradually took up full-time teaching.

Gaitho took education to the community in areas such as Lawrence Heights where children needed structures and programs to keep them occupied. The community centre had homework clubs and extra-curricular activities. It was so vibrant," Gaitho recalls. She traces the recent gun violence among Toronto's youth to the discontinuation of such programs.

"We have a whole generation of children who dropped out of high school, who were not given structures to keep them positively engaged. They found their own way of coping with life."

Gaitho's journey of federation activism began when she found herself at a meeting of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario (FWTAO) presided over by an executive which had no minority representation.

"I saw the executive at a high table answering questions. I told one of my colleagues: 'There is a table without one single woman of colour telling me that they know and understand all my issues. But have they ever had their professionalism and competence as educators ever questioned due to

ability to teach their kids because of my *cultural background*?'"

"I approached them and asked what made them experts to speak on my behalf. A few days later, I got a call from the president asking if I would put my money where my mouth is," Gaitho laughs. She took up the challenge and went on to become the president of North York Women Teachers' Association. She later became a member of the provincial executive. She continues to be active in ETFO as a leader of workshops for aspiring women activists.

The integration of new Canadians into the system continues to be one of Gaitho's cherished goals. "I teach a grade 4-5 split grade and I watched and discussed with my students the swearing in of the governor general, Michaëlle Jean. She is an immigrant, she is black and I thought a lot of children would identify with her. But the children wouldn't believe that a black immigrant could reach a top post in Canada without some extraneous reason, such as her profession as a journalist.

"These children need to know that this is their country. We have to start at the elementary level to let them know that they belong, that they are not visitors, and that they have a responsibility to make sure that the society is working for them, and also that the society is working as it should. Citizenship is about both rights and responsibilities," Gaitho says.

"Eighty per cent of the students in our school are from the Caribbean, African nations or Asia. I constantly remind my colleagues that the children need to be reflected in their education. The lesson plans of many young teachers focus on subjects like mathematics and not equity. Equity is treated as gravy, some sort of a side dish, and education as meat and potatoes. You can give the gravy if you wish, or hold it back.

"Until diverse voices are heard at different tables, it will be tough to achieve equity in our system. We still have gatekeepers who say they will allow one, may be two, and no more. We have old stereotypes, including questions such as if an organization is 'ready' for a black leader," Gaitho says. "Wonderful as ETFO is, it will be a pleasure to see a black woman, or an Asian, or a native man, or a disabled person – people from the so-called marginalized communities – head the federation one day."

What does she consider to be her biggest achievement? "It is raising two children who have a healthy respect for others and the diversity which comes with this nation we call home. For me, tolerance and respect are two words that are not interchangeable. I wanted them to respect other people's