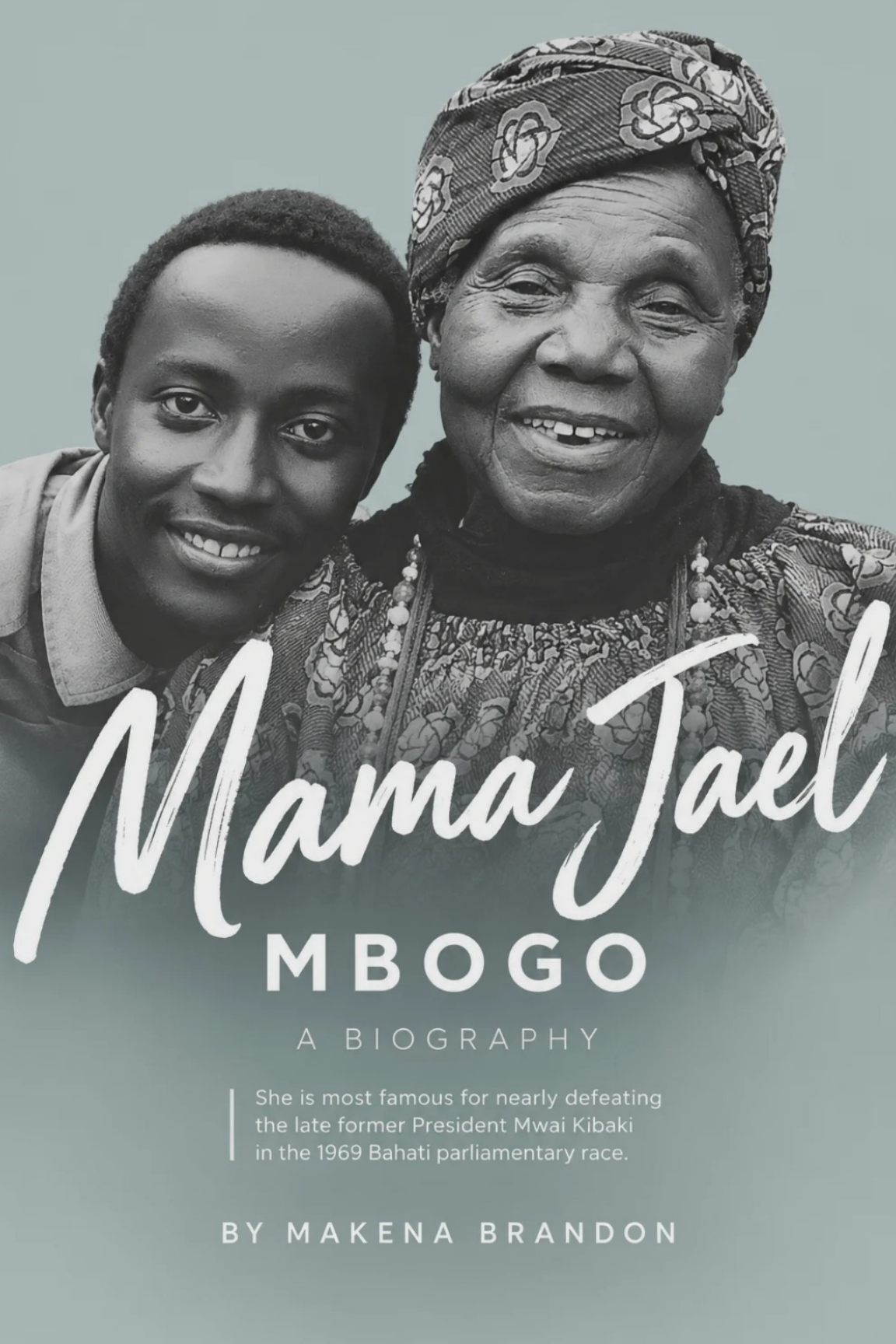




Mama Jael

MBOGO

A BIOGRAPHY

| She is most famous for nearly defeating the late former President Mwai Kibaki in the 1969 Bahati parliamentary race.

BY MAKENA BRANDON

Jael Mbogo

A Biography

Makena Brandon



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A Biography

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Sponsored by UTU HERITAGE

Library number DPL-000100003 · ISBN 979-8-20-100003-5

First edition: October 2026 · Nairobi, Kenya

Language: English · Category: Biography

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Author's Note

Mama Jael Mbogo arrived in Nanyuki from Nairobi on 19 October. We received her at the Sportsman's Arms Hotel. I was there with Babu, also called Al Amin Kimathi, the founder of Utu Heritage; Wanjiru, the organisation's project coordinator; and Babu's mechanic. We met there, and they ate something. Afterwards, we went to Porini Nature Sanctuary, which is owned by Utu Heritage, where Mama Jael would spend the night.

On 20 October, we went to the Community Forest Association in Kanyoni, Nanyuki, where we took a photograph.

I'm still a bit amazed that I, Makena Brandon, got to sit down with Matriarch Jael Mbogo. Being in the company of a woman who carries so much wisdom and so much of our heritage is something I'll hold onto for a long time.

This biography is written in her honour. Apart from the account of our meeting above, which is my own, everything in it is drawn from published interviews, newspaper reports, reference works and academic research. These are listed at the end. Where the sources disagree, the disagreement is stated in the text.

Introduction

Jael Mbogo is a Kenyan politician, women's rights campaigner and social worker whose public career began under colonial rule and continued into the multi-party era. She was the first female shorthand typist employed by the City Council of Nairobi, a nominated Nairobi councillor before independence, chairperson of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, a columnist for the Daily Nation, and a parliamentary candidate for Bahati constituency in 1969 and 1974, and again in 1997.

The Daily Nation describes her 1969 contest against Mwai Kibaki, then Minister for Finance and later the third President of Kenya, as widely recognised as the first case of poll rigging in postcolonial Kenya. She was later a founding member and the first national organising secretary of the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD).

In 2018 she was decorated at State House, Nairobi, and in 2021 she received an award on Mashujaa Day. Despite this, the historian Anaïs Angelo notes that she is virtually absent from the academic literature on Kenyan political history.

This biography follows her life in order: her birth and family background, education, early career, work with Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, her elections, her personal life, her later political work and the recognition she has received.

Chapter 1: Birth and Family Background

Jael Mbogo was born in Rift Valley Province, in colonial Kenya. Her parents came from Ugenya, Sidindi, in present-day Siaya County. Reference works, including Wikipedia and Encyclopedia.com, give her year of birth as 1939. In an interview with the Daily Nation conducted on 27 January 2024, however, she said she had turned 91 that January, which would place her birth in January 1933. When Anaïs Angelo interviewed her in July 2019, Angelo recorded her age as 86. Encyclopedia.com lists her full name as Jael Ogombe Mbogo, and she is widely known as Mama Jael.

She married Shadrack Mbogo Adhaya, who, like her, came from Siaya County. Wikipedia records that she is married in Gem, Siaya.

On the meaning of her family name, she told the Daily Nation:

"For us, 'Mbogo' is somebody who is a hero. It has nothing to do with any animal."

Chapter 2: Education

Jael Mbogo is an alumna of Alliance Girls High School, one of the leading secondary schools for African girls in colonial Kenya. After school she trained as a shorthand typist (stenographer).

She later studied economics in the United States. The available sources do not name the institution or give the dates of her studies.

Chapter 3: Early Career

Jael Mbogo was the first female shorthand typist employed by the City Council of Nairobi. According to a 2006 Daily Nation profile, she began her political career in 1958 as a Nairobi councillor, representing what was then called the Native Eastlands. The Daily Nation's 2024 profile describes her as a nominated Nairobi councillor in the late 1950s.

In the early 1960s she worked with women's political groups in Tanzania. The Daily Nation reports that during this period she served as personal secretary to Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's founding president. She also worked as an unofficial personal secretary to Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, later Kenya's first Vice-President, and in that role, by her account, typed the first constitution of the Organisation of African Unity. The OAU was founded in Addis Ababa in May 1963.

She returned to Kenya with her family in 1965.

Chapter 4: Maendeleo Ya Wanawake

Maendeleo Ya Wanawake ('Progress for Women') was founded in 1952 by a group of European women and passed into African leadership around independence. The Daily Nation records Jael Mbogo as its third chairperson, succeeding Phoebe Asiyo. Kenyans.co.ke describes her as the second chairperson after Asiyo. Anaïs Angelo writes that she headed the organisation at the time of independence and calls it the most important women's organisation in the country.

The position required frequent public speaking. She was also a regular columnist for the Daily Nation, writing opinion pieces that Angelo used as a primary source for her research.

By her own account, the idea for Maendeleo House, the organisation's headquarters building in Nairobi, was hers, and she organised the first fundraiser for it. She has said that the building was meant to generate income for women's headquarters in every province. She also said that she served the organisation for ten years without pay:

"I worked for Maendeleo for ten years and I did not earn even one single penny."

She has said that she hoped the organisation would, within four elections, produce Kenya's first woman president.

Chapter 5: Entry into Politics

Jael Mbogo has described how women were used during election campaigns in the 1960s. They canvassed and organised for male candidates and were then excluded from power. 'They were offered fish, salt, sugar to vote for so and so. They were really used,' she told Angelo. Male politicians, she said, held that a woman's place was in the kitchen. Her response is the statement for which she is best known:

"The kitchen is always in the house. And parliament is also a house, the house of parliament. So what is the difference, if the place of women is in the house? Why not? That is where we should belong! Why leave it to the men only?"

She also told women that politics was part of daily life:

"I told the women that politics is with you 24/7. You cannot escape politics. When you are in the kitchen, you have the politics of the kitchen. ... Therefore, politics is your daily bread."

In 1969 she decided to stand for parliament in Bahati constituency in Nairobi. Sources describe the area differently because of later boundary changes: Wikipedia places it in what is now Kamukunji, while the Daily Nation (2024) associates it with Donholm and later Makadara. She told the Daily Nation in 2006 that she chose Bahati because she was more popular there than in any other part of the city. At the time she was the outgoing councillor for the area.

The sitting member was Mwai Kibaki, Minister for Finance and Economic Planning in the government of Jomo Kenyatta and one of the founders of KANU.

Chapter 6: The 1969 Bahati Campaign

Her husband opposed her entry into politics. 'My husband was very much against everything,' she told Angelo. 'I had two battles: one at home and one outside.' He did not campaign for her in 1969.

She financed the campaign herself. She had invested her salary in a transport business and owned six trucks, which she hired out to the city council. 'It was not cheap! I used all my money,' she said. Her campaign team numbered about fifteen people, including several women who led local women's groups.

Nomination day was 26 November 1969. She had heard that her opponents might try to stop her from filing her papers, so she arrived at the District Commissioner's office in a lorry with her supporters. The Daily Nation of 27 November 1969 reported singing and drama at the DC's office. Her nomination was accepted.

According to the 2006 Daily Nation profile, Kibaki at first dismissed her candidacy. Angelo records that she was little known across the constituency at the start of the campaign and that the women of Bahati supported her strongly.

Chapter 7: The 1969 Election Result

Polling took place in December 1969. The Sunday Nation of 7 December reported that Nairobi polls were moving 'at a snail's pace'. At the time each candidate was assigned a separate ballot box bearing his or her picture.

Jael Mbogo has stated that she led in the early count. In a 2008 interview with The Observer she said: 'I was so far ahead in early vote counting that even the BBC reported that a young woman had felled a government minister.' Kenyans.co.ke, citing Daily Nation reports, states that the lights went out during counting and that ballot boxes were removed from the counting hall. She has said that she saw her ballot papers being burnt outside the polling station.

Kibaki was declared the winner. The margin is reported differently. Wikipedia gives it as 500 votes. In the 2006 Daily Nation profile she said that after counting that lasted three days, Kibaki won by 111 votes, and that she came second in a field of thirteen candidates.

She later produced the voters' card numbers of about 4,000 people who, she said, had queued but been turned away without voting. She petitioned against the result, but the outcome stood. The Daily Nation archive for December 1969 includes reports headed 'Ten candidates submit poll petitions', 'Plea to President on Bahati election' and 'Kibaki willing to have second poll'. On 15 December 1969 the paper published a letter from F. M. Mwangi of Kampala under the heading 'Mbogo should be a nominated member'.

She has denied claims that she was paid not to pursue the matter: 'I never held any discussion with Kibaki or the late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta over this matter. I am not the wavering type.' She also said that, given the tense national mood after the assassination of Tom Mboya in July 1969, she was advised not to stand in the way of the government.

Chapter 8: The 1974 Election

Jael Mbogo prepared to contest Bahati again in 1974. Before that election, Kibaki moved his political base to Othaya constituency in Nyeri, his home area. Wikipedia and the Daily Nation attribute the move to the competition she posed. Kibaki represented Othaya from 1974 until 2013 and served as President from 2002 to 2013.

She did not win the Bahati seat in 1974. She stood for Bahati three times in total.

Chapter 9: Personal Life

Jael Mbogo and Shadrack Mbogo Adhaya had six children, one of whom died. Her husband later married a second wife. She told the Daily Nation in 2024 that this was because she refused to 'stay home and be like any ordinary woman'.

"Men are always jealous, and, normally, very few will take it easy when the woman becomes so strong, powerful, and popular. ... He was not the only one, and I cannot blame him. But I did not ask him to marry me."

"There is always a price to pay to achieve your goal. This was my dream; to serve the people. To work for my country. To liberate the women in their thousands."

She did not divorce him. 'I told him, I'm not going to divorce you, but you are going to stay with your new wife, okay?' she said. Shadrack Mbogo Adhaya died in 2015.

After their separation, she told Angelo, he destroyed much of her personal archive, including three large photo albums:

"If he came across them, chop chop chop. They disappeared. My photo albums, three big volumes, he took them and burned them."

The loss of these records is one reason written documentation of her career is limited.

Chapter 10: Her Children

Jael Mbogo has said that her children suffered professionally because of her politics:

"My children have borne the pain of my political life. Only my firstborn is here in Kenya. The rest are outside because having Jael Mbogo as your mother, you know, you have it the hard way - they've even lost jobs, so 30 years ago, some of them immigrated to Europe and are still there."

Her eldest daughter, an accountant, told her that she lost jobs in private firms once employers learned who her mother was. Jael Mbogo advised her to start her own practice, and the daughter set up an accountancy firm, which kept her in Kenya.

Chapter 11: The 1979 KANU Elections

In 1979, during the KANU national elections at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Jael Mbogo campaigned for a national party office. The Daily Nation's 2024 profile describes the post as national organising secretary; the 2006 profile describes it as assistant national organising secretary.

She told the Daily Nation:

"I had canvassed and rallied about five provinces behind me the night before. When we got to KICC in the morning, there was a little yellow card (which listed) Moi's team of preferred candidates. And all of us were put aside. I was being asked to go to the podium and say I was stepping down for Maina Wanjigi who was now going to be the national organising secretary. I refused. That sent me out of the Kanu party."

According to the 2006 report, she was invited to the podium but instead picked up her handbag and walked out of the hall. Others, including Masinde Muliro, Jeremiah Nyagah and Dr Julia Ojiambo, withdrew from their races as requested.

Chapter 12: Civil Society Work

Alongside her political activity, Jael Mbogo held senior posts in non-governmental and church organisations. She served as Deputy General Secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches and as secretary general of Freedom from Hunger. Kenyans.co.ke also lists her as a founder member of the League of Women Voters.

Chapter 13: FORD and Multi-Party Politics

In 1991, after sustained pressure for political reform, Section 2A of the Constitution, which had made Kenya a one-party state, was repealed. Jael Mbogo was a founding member of the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) and, according to the Daily Nation, its first national organising secretary. Encyclopedia.com states that she was among the founders of FORD-Kenya together with four other women.

After FORD split, she remained active in FORD-Kenya. She contested the 1997 general election. In 2006 the Daily Nation reported that she was serving as FORD-Kenya's national organising secretary and was in a dispute with party chairman Musikari Kombo over control of the party.

Chapter 14: Honours and Recognition

On 23 August 2018, at State House, Nairobi, President Uhuru Kenyatta honoured her among outstanding Kenyan women at the launch of the Trailblazers Initiative. Angelo records the award as the Elder of the Order of the Golden Heart, and the Daily Nation as the Moran of the Order of the Burning Spear.

On Mashujaa Day 2021 she received an award for 'her lifelong struggle for freedom, democratisation, gender justice and human development'. The presentation took place at her home in Ngong.

Anaïs Angelo, of the University of Vienna, interviewed her at length in July 2019 and published a study of her 1969 campaign in *Women's History Review* (2023). Angelo writes that Jael Mbogo is well known locally but is remembered nationally mainly for her defeat by Kibaki, and that she does not appear in public historical institutions such as museums.

Chapter 15: Later Years

Jael Mbogo lives in Oloolua, Kajiado North, near Ngong. During the Covid-19 pandemic she took part in online talks about her career.

On 13 May 2024 she spoke at an intergenerational dialogue for young women organised by Polycom Girls at the Nairobi Serena Hotel. 'Never let anyone look down on you,' she told them. On the abuse women politicians of her generation faced, she said:

"The men insulted us until they had nothing left to call us. They had exhausted all the insults. So, whatever they call you today is not nothing new. We had all that and it did not stop us from achieving what we wanted."

In January 2024 she told the Daily Nation that she hoped to live to see a woman sworn in as President of Kenya, and that she was concerned no woman had yet declared for the 2027 election:

"That time I'll say, 'Lord, I'm ready. Please take me quickly.' But so far, I'm still fighting. I'm still fighting to see one woman."

Chapter 16: Has She Been Celebrated Enough?

Jael Mbogo's record includes a pre-independence seat on Nairobi City Council, leadership of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, a national newspaper column, the 1969 Bahati contest and its disputed result, the 1979 refusal at KICC, and a founding role in FORD. She has received two national honours, in 2018 and 2021.

Against this, the published record about her remains thin. A few newspaper profiles and one academic article make up most of what is available. Much of her personal archive was destroyed. Reference works disagree on her year of birth, the margin of the 1969 result and her position in the line of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake chairpersons.

Having met her and researched her life, I do not believe she has been celebrated enough. Her contribution is recognised in awards, but not yet in Kenya's history books, school curricula or public institutions. That work remains to be done.

Epilogue

Meeting Mama Jael in Nanyuki in October is the reason I began this biography. Her life and work are the reason it matters.

Has Mama Jael Mbogo been celebrated enough?

Makena Brandon

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Mama Jael Mbogo with Makena Brandon

Makena Brandon is a Kenyan author, poet and publisher whose work moves through literature, philosophy, faith, social reflection and youth empowerment.

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His serialized poetry and essays explore family, dignity, poverty, sin, digital life, faith and the inner conflicts that shape modern African readers.

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THE LIFE, COURAGE AND
LASTING LEGACY OF

Mama Jael Mbogo

Jael Mbogo is a Kenyan politician, women's rights campaigner and social worker whose public career began under colonial rule and continued into the multi-party era. She was the first female shorthand typist employed by the City Council of Nairobi.

I'm still a bit amazed that I, Makena Brandon, got to sit down with Matriarch Jael Mbogo. Being in the company of a woman who carries so much wisdom and so much of our heritage is something I'll hold onto for a long time.

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ISBN 979-8-20-100003-5

