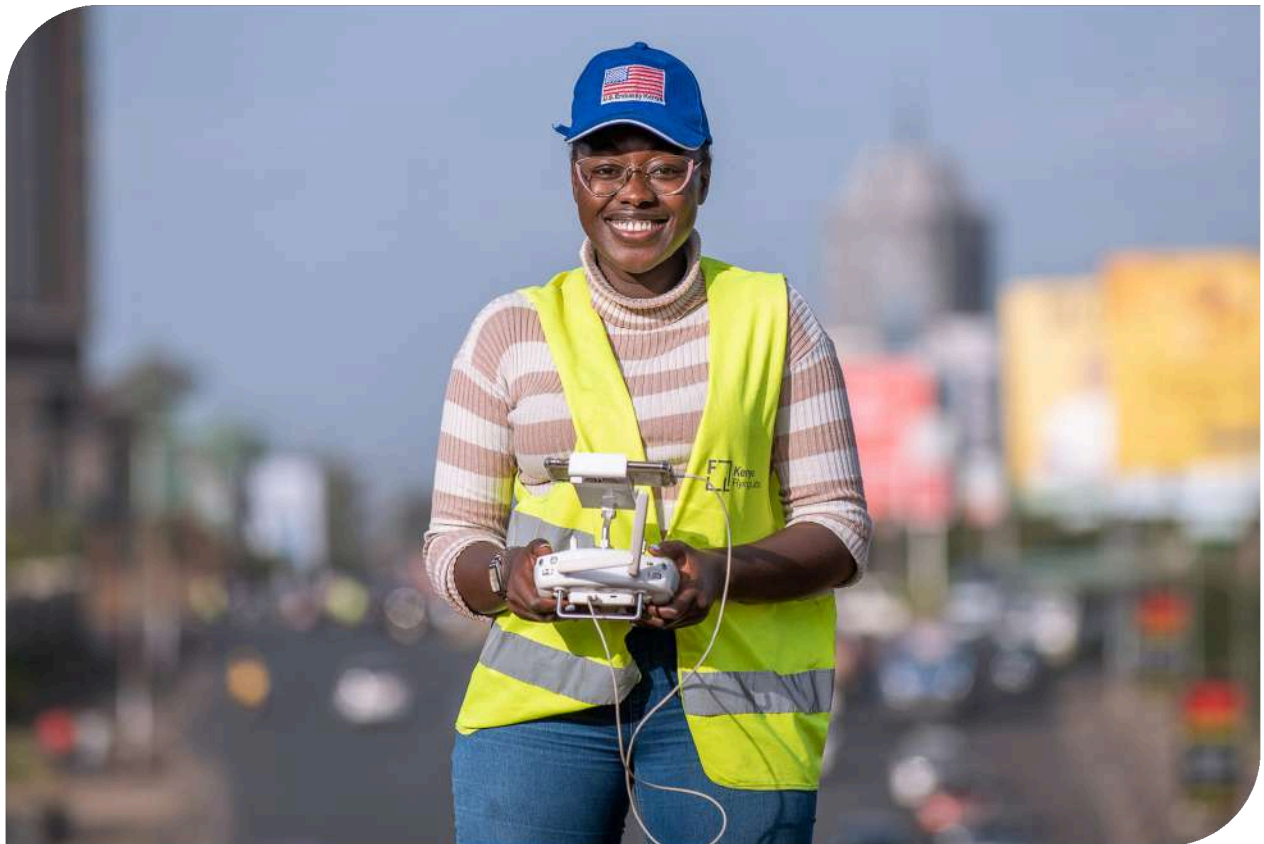


Taking Flight

Mary Jane Wangari's Impact Story



Mary Jane contributing to the first ever drone fleet project in urban Nairobi in 2022

When she was 9 years old, Mary Jane was taken to Wilson Airport in Nairobi. She was fascinated by the planes, but underwhelmed by the adults' assertions that "It's God who keeps them in the air?" "But how do they fly," she kept on asking.

She says, "I have always been interested to know how things work. I am a critical, methodical thinker and I want to take things apart and put them back together. Fast forward a few decades and she moves from Kenya to China to study aeronautical engineering. On her return home, she unfortunately finds that even though she is equipped with a top-notch degree, her job opportunities are not inspiring, exciting, or positioning her for growth.

Despite her expertise in manufacturing design, she has to make do with mundane maintenance work on planes. With her overalls and boots on and grease on her elbows, day by day she checks the wheels of planes for punctures, cleans the bearings and wakes up to yet another day on the hangar floor of work that doesn't inspire the builder, breaker, and creator in her. It's also a very male-dominated field which adds its own set of challenges.

She leaves the field she has worked so hard to be in, feeling disillusioned. "I moved to sales of luxury menswear. After a few years, I even stopped telling people I was an engineer."

Then Covid hits, the business goes down and she feels that she needs to find a way to put her degree to good use. "When I was finishing school I had a list of jobs that I wanted to do with my skill set. Manufacturing was at the top, but we don't do that in Kenya. Then there was aviation management and quality management, and finally, I had drones at the bottom of the list. In China, we used to fly drones as a hobby. I had no idea how the industry had advanced in Kenya."

She came across information about a woman who was Kenya's first fixed-wing drone pilot and part of the Kenya Flying Labs team. She reached out to the team offering her services as a volunteer and the rest is beautiful flight history.

Today, Mary Jane Wangari is leading all STEM/Youth programs at Kenya Flying Labs. She is grateful to the Kenya Flying Labs team for embracing her and providing invaluable mentorship.

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"I have found my purpose working with drones. I finally get to bring all my skills together. I also had no idea that I would love being an instructor. It's so much fun to work with the kids."
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