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Irony of labour rights in the flower industry



Poor working conditions as seen in many flower farms in Kenya. A visibly tired flower farm worker ferries the flowers.

Pictures: Reject Correspondent

By FLORENCE SIPALLA

Many new mothers in Nairobi's private hospitals will receive flowers when visitors troop in after getting the text message announcing the birth of a baby, stating that mother and baby are doing well.

For these women, the flowers are like an acknowledgement that they have made a transition into motherhood. They brighten up their rooms and remind them that someone cares about them.

Irony

However, this is not the case for the many women who work in the flower industry in Kenya. The women who labour to get the cut flowers that earn Kenya its second foreign exchange after tourism, that run into billions of shillings have little to smile about when

they deliver their babies.

And it is not the flowers they are yearning for, all they desire is paid maternity leave. As it is, some only receive the maternity leave pay after they resume work.

"A female employee proceeding on maternity leave shall apply for the same and will be entitled to payment upon return to work with the dues being paid to the employee after working for one month."

This is a statement taken from one of the flower farms company policies that is quoted in a report that was released recently by the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) titled *'Wilting in bloom: The irony of women labour rights in the cut flower sector in Kenya.'*

The study was undertaken in 15 flower farms in Thika, Athi River and Naivasha among a host of other secondary respon-

dents to inform the baseline condition of labour rights in the industry.

It is clear that such a company does not take into consideration the fact that a new mother requires her pay to sustain her growing family. As a result of such policies, the report indicates that most new mothers do not take the full maternity leave of three months as is stipulated in labour laws to avoid their pay being withheld.

Discrimination

What is going on in flower firms is tantamount to discrimination that is in contravention with the Constitution of Kenya (2010) and the International Labour Law (ILO) conventions.

"A female employee shall be entitled to 90 days maternity leave on giving seven

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US commits to promote maternal care in public facilities

By HENRY OWINO

One in every five women have been disrespected or humiliated at childbirth in government facilities.

A study conducted by the Population Council reveals that many women, therefore, opt to deliver at home to avoid ill treatment at government facilities.

According to the study, only four out of ten Kenyan women have their babies in hospitals or health facilities.

According to Charlotte Warren, Population Council's chief researcher, too many women are opting to deliver at home under the care of traditional birth attendants or imposters and this has contributed to the high rate of maternal mortality.

She points out that the main reason for low birth rates in hospitals and clinics is mistreatment from the midwives.

Dignity

To avert the situation, Warren says USAID is sponsoring a programme that aims at ensuring that mothers get dignified maternal healthcare during child birth.

"USAID has offered to support the Ministry of Health and a consortium of organisations led by Population Council, Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) and the National Nurses Association, the midwives Chapter (NNAK-MC) to address the problem in the project dubbed HESHIMA, a Swahili word meaning respect," Warren explains.

She underscores the need for health care providers, partners and women to change attitudes to guarantee quality childbirth care in Kenya.

"To increase the number of women seeking skilled childbirth care in pub-

lic health facilities, government, health systems and practitioners need sound evidence documenting the disrespect and abuse that women experience and the effect that such treatment has on a woman's willingness to seek skilled attendance. Proven strategies of improving the quality of the care women receive must be put in place," she affirms.

Warren adds: "Certainly every woman seeking care doesn't experience this terrible treatment, but even one case of disrespect or abuse will sound like too many women undergo the same. Women deserve quality care and support during pregnancy and childbirth."

Documentation

The health facilities identified during the research for documentation and assessing the dynamics of implementing interventions to reduce disrespect and abuse and generate lessons for replication and scaling are; Kisumu County at Kisumu East District hospital, Provincial General Hospital and Port Florence; in Nyandarua County at Nyahururu District Hospital, North Kinangop Hospital and Engineer Sub-District hospital; in Uasin Gishu County at Moi Referral Hospital, Turbo Health Centre and Plateau Mission Hospital; in Kiambu County at Kiambu District Hospital, Tigon District Hospital and St Teresa Maternity and Nursing Hospital; in Nairobi County it will be at Pumwani Maternity Hospital.

The research also indicated that the progress towards improving key skilled birth attendant in Kenya has stalled. Interventions are urgently needed to accelerate progress if Kenya is to reach its Millennium Development Goal (MDGs) target of



Women attending post natal clinics. Not many go to hospitals for the delivery of children.

Picture: Reject Correspondent

ensuring 90 skilled birth attendant and reduction in maternal mortality ratio (MMR) to 147 per 100,000 live births by 2015. While most of Kenya's neighbours are reporting some progress in improving proportions of births under skilled birth attendant, the local skilled birth attendant rate has actually reduced from 50 per cent in 1989-2009 to 44 per cent in 2008-2009, a likely contributor to the sustained high Maternal Mortality Ratio which is currently estimated at 488 per 100,000 live births according to Kenya Data Health Survey {KDHS} 2008-2009.

The reasons contributing to the low levels of skilled birth attendant are relatively well-understood in Kenya, where there has been a considerable amount of research that documents all of the deterrents to skilled birth attendant identified by other

researchers like Bowser and Hill, including women's perceptions of poor quality and abusive care.

Gap

Public awareness and debate on this issue is also high, with recent front page stories in the national press highlighting the problem. This evidence base and public awareness provide a strong platform for initiating sustainable interventions.

As much as Kenya is fully committed to achieving these goals there are gaps that might make it impossible to realise MDGs goals four and five by 2015. To address this gap, the Maternal Health Policy Framework objective of the health sector which is to reduce health inequalities and reverse the downward trend in health-related outcome and impact indicators must be a priority.

Ensuring access to the Minimum Health Care Package is the central strategy to this end. The same policy statement should describe the minimum package for sexual and reproductive health and rights. Additionally, the national reproductive health policy must also be aimed at enhancing Reproductive Health Status for all Kenyans.

The 2010 Kenya National Roadmap for Maternal and Newborn Health is also aimed laying the building blocks in reversing the downward trends in health indicators.

According to the recently released Kenya Services Provision Assessment 2010, maternal health indicators are still poor in our health facilities. Thirty percent of facilities provide services for normal deliveries, a decline from 38 per cent in 2004. The decline is due to the reduction in the proportion of clinics.

War against tuberculosis records progress

By HENRY KAHARA

Kenya has made tremendous progress towards tuberculosis (TB) control. This has improved hopes of finally getting out of the high burden countries bracket and achieving millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target by 2015.

The country is now ranked 15 among the 22 high countries that collectively contribute 80 per cent of the global TB burden which is two steps up having been ranked 13 since 2009.

Speaking during a media briefing for World TB Day 2012, Public Health and Sanitation Minister Beth Mugo said that although the country has made progress in this fight, a lot of work still remains to be done.

"We can do better than this. We are able to prevent deaths related to TB cases, we have to bring them down," she said.

Stakeholders

Mugo urged all the stakeholders not to relax but instead make concerted efforts in order to make a free TB Kenya and World.

"There is need for everybody to get involved because this is not a Government problem, it is our problem," she reiterated.

She noted that the progress is as result of the efforts which both the Government and the stakeholders have been putting in place for all that long.

"The number of the new TB cases is declining, many lives have been saved while the spread of the disease is being curbed," she observed.

Mugo noted that there is need for establishing more intensive TB case finding activities as they will help to maintain the momentum achieved to transform and reenergize the fight against TB.

"Two years ago, I launched the intensive TB case finding activities in the prisons and now the sector is reporting one per cent of all cases in the country while the private sector is contributing eight per cent," Mugo observed.

She reiterated: "We must build strong and innovative new solutions that can increase cases of TB detection."

Presently the ministry has embarked on new measures to reduce TB transmission in the community through provision of more rapid and user friendly tests that can provide tests within a day.

The Ministry in partnership with the World Bank has procured six Gene-xpert machines worth KSh44 million for diagnosis of TB including the drug resistance MDR-TB.

"With this help, the ministry has been decentralizing TB culture services from the only laboratory in Nairobi to five additional laboratories scattered in the country," said Mugo.

She added that surveillance for drug resistance types of TB especially MDR TB which is becoming a major problem in Kenya is set to improve.

Resistance

"MDR TB is perhaps the major problem we are likely to face in future. Therefore all efforts must be made to stop it from spreading now and not tomorrow as its treatment is too expen-

sive," she noted.

The minister also said that the ministry is placing serious emphasis on diagnosis of TB in children and provision of care to infected children; this comes after a report that 11 per cent of all TB cases are noted in children.

Due to this, the ministry has now developed guidelines on management of childhood TB.

Plan of action

Against a backdrop of growing concern about the impact of tuberculosis on children, top scientific experts have published a global plan of action for developing the vaccines that are seen as critical to eliminating the disease.

According to Dr Lucica Ditiu, Executive Secretary of the Stop TB Partnership, to develop a new TB vaccine that will be fully effective, researchers, donors and other partners will need to collaborate and coordinate their efforts as they address tough research questions.

"We cannot allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by either the costs or the obstacles. It is time to be bold and dare to do more in TB, especially in supporting the development of a new vaccine," added Ditiu.

The high occurrence of TB in Kenya is mainly attributed to poverty and HIV infection. A HIV positive person is more likely to contract TB as a result of the weakened immune system. About 44 per cent of TB patients are HIV infected.

Farmers join hands to fight exploitation from middlemen

By KARIUKI MWANGI

Farmers from seven different agricultural sectors in Embu County have joined hands under one umbrella body so as to increase their bargaining power.

The farmers drawn from the dairy, horticulture and other sectors want to find lasting solutions in the agricultural sector.

According to Cyrus Mbogo, KARES agribusiness services organising director farmers under the Rugendo Dairy Alliance want to build a strong institution that will help them in outsourcing financial services.

Mbogo pointed out that the farmer's have realised that it is only through working together as a group that they can attain the required economic benefits from their farming activities and avoid being exploited by middlemen.

"We are trying to come together as farmers from all the sectors to establish strong and powerful bargaining power, because farming as individuals is not only exposing us to exploitation but also denying us the benefits of trade," he explained.

Productivity

Mbogo noted that they intend to increase agricultural productivity in the area by ensuring that farmers access reliable and affordable farm inputs.

According to Irene Ndwiga, a farmer in Embu District they are looking forward to the operationalisation of Rugendo Dairy Factory which will soon be installed with milk cooling systems from the Ministry of Cooperatives Development and Marketing.

The farmers plan to embark on value addition instead of selling their milk products to other companies to enable them reap highly from their produce.

"We as farmers plan to invest in value addition to maximise on benefits in the market instead of selling our produce at throw away prices," noted Ndwiga.

She said that Rugendo Dairy receives 40,000 litres of milk from farmers in Embu only every day. She observed that if they can access quality animal feeds they can be able to produce even more and help curb the prevailing milk shortage in the country.

Ndwiga was categorical that the farmers will continue facing challenges unless they come together and have a collective access to credit services, farm inputs and jointly sell their products.

Man demystifies the owl as harbinger of bad omen

By JOSEPH MUKUBWA

You may say it is going against the grains, but he has proven to the Kikuyu community and indeed the world that owls do not bring a bad omen.

At the risk of being disowned by his family and banished by the clan, one man has defied his community's cultural and traditional beliefs and made owls the centre of his life.

Thirty-seven year old Paul Muriithi Kibuthu, founder of Mackinder Eagle Owl Conservation Project Sanctuary has for over ten years been conserving owls at Kieni West district in Nyeri County.

These birds are normally not wanted by many people since they are believed to be a sign of bad omen.

Myths

To many Kenyan communities, and Africa as a whole, an owl is looked at as a harbinger of bad news. Myths surrounding the bird has it that its nocturnal hooting sends the chilling message that something dreadful is about to happen.

Local people fear owls, regarding them as evil spirits of the dead and harbingers of doom. Their call is taken as a sign that death will strike soon.

Despite growing up in a culture where "cursed birds" are stoned to death, Muriithi somehow became interested in protecting owls.

In his Kiawara village, near Aberdare Ranges along Nyeri-Nyahururu highway, Muriithi has defied his community's traditional fears and now uses Mackinder owls (*Bubo Capensis Mackinderii*) as a tourist attraction.

Bird tourism

The owls also attract bird tourists and the income generated from this supports individual farmers and community projects.

He has worked diligently over the years to convince the community about the benefits of protecting owls after he witnessed his community persecuting these magnificent creatures almost to the point of extinction.

"The strength of the taboo against owls is such that finding an African willing to work with these birds, is extremely rare even among well-educated Kenyans," explains Muriithi. He adds: "For the past ten years I have been feeding and protecting owls in their natural habitat in the forest near my home."

This has resulted in a roost of 16 birds becoming habituated to human presence, some of which perch calmly in the branches of nearby trees, while others roost by day in caves scattered across the forest.

However, Muriithi has beaten all odds and now conserves them, a project which has seen him earn the name 'Champion of Owls'. He has also won several international awards for his good work.

"I have erected roadside signs to attract foreign tourists who pay me to guide them to view these elusive birds. I have demonstrated to my villagers that wildlife — including owls — can provide us with a source of income if only the habitat is protected," notes Muriithi. He adds: "I encourage villagers to appreciate the enormous value of the birds we have in the country." The site where Muriithi has preserved the owls can be found along Kamariki River.

Believes

He says that unlike Kenya where the owl is associated with bad luck, witchcraft and sorcery, in countries like Israel an owl is a sign of good luck, wisdom and a messenger of good news.

Muriithi says that though seen as a carrier of bad omen by most African communities, the owl is a friend of the farmer.

His association with a "cursed bird" nearly severed relationship with other family members and he just fell short of being excommunicated.

Born in 1976 at Embaringo village in Kieni West District, Muriithi went to Ruirii Primary School up to 1995. His association with the "birds of misfortune" started when he visited a relative just after he completed his secondary school at Gataragwa. It was while he was visiting a cousin that he encountered a group of Canadian tourists who had arrived in Nanyuki town after exploring Mt Kenya.

"They asked my cousin who was running a curio shop where they could find a real owl after admiring a sculpture of this nocturnal bird," recalls Muriithi. Having been brought up near the breeding caves of the owls, Muriithi intervened in the conversation and promised to take the tourists to explore the owl's natural habitat.

"I travelled with group from Nanyuki to Kiawara in search of the birds. They were very excited to see an owl perched on a branch of a cedar tree inside Gataragwa Forest," says Muriithi.

From that moment in 1997, Muriithi found a new job though it is frowned upon by his culture and traditional beliefs.

The owl conservationist nurtures, protects and feeds the owls which are nocturnal birds. They feed, mate and migrate at night.

Feeding

The birds are active at night and feed mostly on snakes and rodents like rats and mice, though snakes also feed on owl's eggs and their young ones. Owls hunt and eat rodents, insects, frogs and birds. Owls eat smaller prey whole and larger prey in chunks. They regurgitate the indigestible parts (including hair, teeth, bones, feathers and insects exoskeletons) in oval shaped pellets.

He says the bird have become an endangered species facing executions in large numbers due to traditional taboos.

He notes: "Owls are in danger of extinction due to indirect and direct interference by human beings."

Situated about 50 kilometres from Nyeri town and 50 kilometres from Nyahururu town, Muriithi takes care of about 16 pairs of the Mackinder Owl.

There are 17 species Mackinder eagle owl in Kenya. These owls were named after a British soldier who fought during the First World War and toured Mt Kenya in the early 1940s and found the bird species.

Distribution

"They are distributed depending on their diet, security availability, inhabitant and availability of nesting materials," Muriithi explains.

Muriithi founded the conservation project in 1997 to protect the owl from extinction. Traditional medicine men are suspected to hunt the bird and its eggs for use in witchcraft pur-



"I have erected roadside signs to attract foreign tourists who pay me to guide them to view these elusive birds. I have demonstrated to my villagers that wildlife — including owls — can provide us with a source of income if only the habitat is protected."

— Paul Muriithi Kibuthu



poses.

He now struggles to conserve this endangered night bird but says the key to owl survival is protecting forests which are the bird's natural habitat.

And what makes them fly at night? During the mating season they make the loudest noise that is what many communities consider a bad omen.

"The owl can also cry to scare away predators from its hideout," Muriithi explains.

During the full moon and while incubating, an owl is very active looking for food at night. However, Muriithi says it is at this time that many are killed by speeding vehicles especially along the busy highway as the owls cross at low altitude.

For the last five months, Muriithi has lost seven owls to accidents along the highway. Their carcasses, however, have been taken and preserved at the National Museums of Kenya.

The most common species of owl found in tropical Africa are the Mackinder, Spotted and Wood. The first shelters in caves while the other two are mainly found atop tree branches in forests.

Gestation

The owl's gestation period is 35 days and incubates three eggs. This is done by both the male and female in turns as the other hunts for food.

"The female is larger than the male and it lays one to three eggs which takes about 35 days to hatch. Interestingly, the male and the female interchangeably sit on the eggs during incubation period," explains Muriithi.

He says newly hatched owls can only fly af-



From top: Mackinder eagle owl rests during the day at Muriithi conservation site. Some of the tourists viewing owls at the same site. Pictures: Joseph Mukubwa

ter six months and no longer depend on their parents for food.

"They migrate to another territory so that the parents can come back to their initial nest. It takes about one and a half years for the young owls to start mating and laying eggs," observes Muriithi.

The farmer ventured into the business of looking after the owls in collaboration with the Kenya National Museums.

Muriithi takes the pellets to the National Museums and the curators can determine the types and birds that are dominant in a particular area.

Enemies of the owl include the mongoose and pied crow. The owl, therefore, does not build nests but rely on open barrows and cavities found in territories as its nesting place.

He says the conservation receives support from the government, donors and non-government organisations.

Tourists and students from as far as Tel Aviv, Rhodes and local universities frequent the conservation to learn more about ornithology and studies on the owl behaviour.

Muriithi has gone on to become a member of the Mackinder's Eagle Owl project, studying the effects of land use practices and culture on owl conservation.

He also promotes owl conservation in national newspapers and radio and his work was even featured on BBC radio.

Not so rosy in ailing flower sector



By DAVID NJAGI

While the Valentine's Day marked on February 14 left many Kenyans with a fresh lease of love, few have an idea that someone in the value chain is paying for every bunch of roses purchased with a health price — and in some cases even death.

The extent that floriculture is costing Kenya in terms of healthcare is captured in a new documentary released recently which brings to light the heavy burden that Kenyans are paying at the expense of a billion dollar export industry.

Testimonials by the cast in the Women of Flowers Documentary Film indicate that workers in the sector are so poorly paid and cannot foot a hospital bill, where in most cases they the ailments have been contracted from toxic chemicals inhaled or touched while on duty.

The film by Khamis Ramadhan also captures grim voices of women who have had to give in to sexual demands by their superiors to keep their jobs. Others have watched their marriages slide away due to the time they spend away from their families.

Sexual harassment

Confirming that the scenes which are replete with gross human rights abuses represent the pure truth, Catherine Mumbi, a former casual labourer at a flower farm in Naivasha caps it all when she says she lost her job after declining to give in to sexual favours.

When Mumbi fell sick, doctors diagnosed her with differing conditions including liver as well as chest complications and asthma, a situation that forced her on sick leave to seek treatment.

"When I felt better I went back but my boss demanded that I have sex with him so that I could keep my old job," says Mumbi. "I declined and since then I have been jobless, only surviving on the generosity of well wishers."

Lobby groups confirm that sexual harassment is widespread in flower farms, but even more alarming are details alleging that in some instances, employers change labels of chemicals to disguise them from those that have been identified as laced with toxins.

"This explains why strange diseases are being reported in health centres around flower farms," explains Charles Kasuku, a social worker in Naivasha. "Last week a former flower farm worker died from what doctors said was chemical complications."

Chemicals

Experts from the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) say the most prevalent diseases caused by chemical exposure include liver problems, respiratory complications, cancer as well as sexual incapacitation.



Female workers in the farm in Kenya going about their duties. Many women face challenges of their labour rights being infringed upon by employers.

Pictures: David Njagi

"But the severe effects of these exposures could come many years later after workers have been sacked from their jobs," says Dr Mohamed Karama from KEMRI. "People should not work for extended hours in these greenhouses."

Legal representatives say that the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention binds governments to protect its working force from industrial excesses and abuses.

Closer to home, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) requires every flower farm to establish a wetland for recycling water contaminated with toxins.

At the same time, they say, trade movements are backed by international trade charters such as the Occupation Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which are expected to empower them to rally for the welfare of the worker.

Inspection

However, according to Mary Kambo, a programme officer with Community Based Development Services (CBDS) the ILO Convention is not being implemented. She notes that labour inspection, a task entrusted to the Ministry of Labour, does not happen anymore.

However, some unionists say they are keen on seeking the welfare of workers in Kenya, but their efforts are being frustrated by the umbrella workers' body, the Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU).

"Those who are seen to be very vocal in voicing the plight of workers are being intimidated

by COTU through threats of sacking," says Jimi Masege, an officer with Aviation Industry Trade Union (AITU).

Questions have been asked repeatedly by human rights bodies about the flower farms' social responsibility genuineness, but Kenya Flower Council (KFC) says it has rallied its members to comply with health and environmental standards.

According to Jane Ngige, chief executive officer Kenya Flower Council, requirements such as trade, statutory, environmental, health, safety, traceability and social standards are for instance enshrined in the Council's Code of Practice and the Fair Trade set of rules.

Lobby groups

However, lobby groups say the weight of enforcement has in most instances cornered the workers into further destitution.

While most workers are employed for long years on casual basis, they are forced to join unions within their work places, a privilege that comes with high costs but with little to show in terms of service delivery from the employer-employee relations.

"Kenya Flower Council only caters for the rich producers and not the struggling poor in the farms," says Benjamin Tilapei, an activist from Isinya. "The Council spends huge sums of money to train us in a week about the production chain but does nothing to the plight of the affected poor."

State of the female worker

The research by Kenyan Human Rights Commission found that women workers seem to be locked in poverty with increasing vulnerability coupled with lack of coping mechanisms. The key livelihood issues emerging include:

Climate of fear is prevalent amongst workers with employment policies not considering workers voices;

Workers still earn wages that are below levels that can provide a decent living, with over 55 per cent of the workers being single mothers. (Some workers spend up to a quarter of their income on sourcing childcare);

Workers do not have job security as employment is offered on casual and temporary basis to avoid other legal obligations;

Debt

Low levels of pay lead to workers being in debt, and this combined with insecure employment provides conducive environment to sexual harassment of workers by managers, supervisors and money lenders;

Workers do not have a voice on the terms and conditions of their employment. Despite the fact that the labour laws guarantee the freedom of association, many barriers still exist that prevent the workers from organising and negotiating. It is the ineffectiveness of the main agricultural union that leave workers on flower farms exposed to poor working conditions;

Workers are not aware of their rights. There is a need for widespread workers rights education that enables workers to understand their rights and obligations at work and take action when they believe their rights are being infringed;

There exist need to strengthen workers organisation, and their ability to negotiate with independence, which is integral to providing workers with a safe working environment;

Involvement

Women workers need to be specifically involved in the organisation of workers since they make up the majority of the flower workers;

Lack of an effective grievance handling mechanism that ensures that workers rights are respected and protected by all actors in the supply chain;

Horticultural production requires the use of a high amount of agrochemicals to meet the high demands of the market. Workers can be exposed to harmful conditions where health and safety regulations are not followed. This can occur when targets set for workers are so high – workers return into greenhouses within re-entry periods in order to fulfil targets and earn maximum pay which is piece rate related;

Sexual harassment is still a major issue in workplaces in the horticultural supply chains. There is need for effective women's committees and communication channels. Often, where women committees exist, they are controlled by the same male dominated management that is accused of perpetrating sexual harassment. There is need for effective women committees linked to independent organisations that can educate workers and investigate grievances.

Courtesy of Kenya National Human Right Commission

Villas replace hotels as jobs become scarce

By KIGONDU NDAVANO

The future of the hotel industry in Malindi town is at stake. Magnificent villas and cottages are quickly taking up the once vibrant sector.

A number of hotels have been wound up to pave way for the construction of villas currently owned by Italian pensioners.

Hotels affected in the takeover include Blue Marlin and Lawfords which closed door about 10 years ago. They were bought at a throw away prices by Italians who transformed them to villas and cottages.

The Eden Roc remains squeezed between Italian villas and cottages some of which are today threatening to reach the high water mark of the Indian Ocean.

Today more than 200 Italian pensioners own villas and holiday houses in Malindi while others have chosen it as a second home.

Pensioners

Malindi has in fact earned the name "waiting bay to heaven" apparently because the pensioners lack much ambition in life and are in their sunset years.

Although, players in the industry feel that villas have had negative ramifications on the tourism sector, Italian investors find them more lucrative and an easy way to evade taxes.

"With the winding up of most hotels, employment opportunities previously available to a vast majority of the residents have become scarce and so is the revenue generated from the taxes," explains Godfrey Karume, a Malindi businessman.

He says that workers in the hotel industry were assured of medical cover, had a secured future through contributions to the National Social Security Fund and were also free to join trade unions and get presentation in case of disputes.

"All these benefits have been eroded courtesy of the mushrooming of villas and cottages as areas of accommodation for tourists," explains Karume.

Malindi has more than 2,000 villas and cottages including the commercial and private ones. This has seen the government introduce a levy of KSh25,000 for each establishment.

Levy

A fact finding mission presided over by a former Malindi District Tourist Officer Elijah Kasati established that some villas, private houses and cottages in the area could accom-



Villas have become a dominant feature in Malindi replacing the once vibrant hotels. Majority of the villas are owned by Italian pensioners who regard Malindi as their second home. Picture: Kigondu Ndavano

modate up to 10 guests comfortably.

Karume says that development of the villas and cottages started in the 1980s and 1990s. The rule by then was that they could only accommodate guests after the hotels had surpassed their capacity.

"Sometimes during the Christmas holidays, when most hotels would be full to capacity, we would direct tourists to the villas to avoid turning them away," he says.

He adds: "But we did not know that we were ushering a new style of holiday making which would later be secretly adopted by some foreigners to evade hotel licences and requirements and earn comfortable income from tourism".

When protests against the villas mounted, Karume explains that it was not merely because the hoteliers felt that the establishments offered unfair competition but because incidents of insecurity took a high turn as armed robbers targeted guests in private villas and slowly tainted the image of Malindi as an unsafe destination.

However, the protests have not borne much fruit as today the Italian villas offer accommodation to more

than 90 per cent of tourists coming to the area.

As a matter of fact, the Italians virtually control the local economy and own the hotels, villas, cottages, travel firms as well as tourist vans and cars.

Italian hotelier and developer, Marco Vancini, is today the doyen of the Italian community in Malindi owning hundreds of villas and cottages as well as hotels including the Coral Key Village, Blue Key Village, Lawfords. As an entrepreneur, Vancini has bought huge chunks of beach plots in Malindi where he has constructed villas, cottages and private houses which have been sold to wealthy people in Europe.

Advertisements for Malindi hotel holiday packages and sale of villas and cottages frequently appear in the leading Italian Newspapers including Corriere Derra Sera, La Stampa and La Repubblica.

The number of Italian pensioners permanently settled in Malindi has been on the increase meaning the resort gains immensely in huge transfer of funds from Europe each month.

Most pensioners have their monthly stipend of about KSh250,000

transferred into their bank accounts in Kenya.

"Italians feel at home in Malindi because they are able to socialise freely with the natives," says Presiozo Giovanni, a pensioner who has lived in Malindi for close to 20 years. "Due to the high number of Italians it is easy to pursue our rights and even enjoy Italian food locally."

The first Italian is presumed to have arrived in Malindi 50 years ago for adventure in hunting. Malindi was then an insignificant fishing village only acclaimed for hosting the first ever European tourist Vasco Da Gama some 500 years from Portugal.

Luciano Mischi and a couple of friends chose to live in what is today known as Mtangani area, nearly three kilometres from the coastline. The zone today hosts some of the highly luxurious villas and cottages owned by Italians.

Luciano may be long dead, but his legacy remains unrivalled as more Italians have acquired property and settled in Malindi.

Among the Italians who arrived after Luciano is the often stylish, friendly, loving but at times mysteri-

ous Armando Tanzini. He never managed to acquire the immense wealth associated with some Italians today but is still highly admired locally and internationally for his simple lifestyle.

Legacy

Though balding and slowed by age he still dresses smartly and once in a while paces along the beach driving his powerful car whose noisy engine draws attention from other pensioners.

Italians also dominate the restaurant businesses and own the largest and one of the busiest casinos in the country. The Malindi Casino is owned by Italian businessman Roberto Cellini.

Cellini controls a huge capital with hundreds of tourists pouring into the Casino every night instead of going into the now almost always empty restaurants and clubs. Even the main supermarkets, coffee shops belong to Italians.

However, they also own the main charity organisations and children homes. Malindi is second to South Africa in hosting the highest number of Italians away from their country all over the world.

Irony of labour rights in the flower industry

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days notice and without loss of benefits. An employee proceeding on maternity leave may apply to take annual leave consecutively," states the Kenya Employment Act.

However, for these women, to take annual leave in addition to the stipulated three months of maternity leave would mean going without pay for that period, something they can hardly contemplate considering their circumstances.

In addition, the women working in these flower farms are resource poor, in terms of time and money. However, time is a bigger problem as they hardly have time to attend to preventive health care like going to clinics to address reproductive health issues. This is because most clinics around them are open at the time when they are at work.

Even as the world marks international Labour Day today, discrimination against women in terms of remuneration remains high. The survey

results indicate that 69 per cent of women employed in the flower sector earn less than men.

As 55 per cent of these workers are single mothers, they do not have a spouse's income to augment their earnings. They are, therefore, forced to work with the meagre earnings they have to sustain their families.

Although, there are a few day care centres that have been opened for them to take their children to stay when they are at work, these all have faults. The report indicates that these day care facilities are often unhygienic and unsuitable for human habitation with children getting poor nutrition. As these centres do not have proper facilities, sometimes the little food the working mothers leaves behind goes bad as it is not refrigerated. This means that the health and nutrition of the child is not guaranteed.

The working conditions also impact on the women's health. Many reported cases of oedema from the long hours on their feet at the

pack houses. However, the report had some good news. There are fewer cases of sexual harassment in the flower farms although the vice still exists.

The African Charter that is more than three decades old, safeguards the socio-economic and worker rights of people living on the continent in articles 15 and 22.

Rights

These workers could seek protection from such oppressive policies through invoking such laws. These protections are further augmented by the UN Human Rights Commission guidelines for Business and Human Rights that were endorsed in 2011 with the view to ensure that businesses do not infringe on the human rights of their workers and redress the situation in the event that such violations occur.

It is rather unfortunate that many workers are not aware of their rights and thus are subjected to

wrongful workplace practices. In the event that they are aware, they have few or no options and thus choose the lesser evil, the job with stringent conditions as is the case of the women.

The researchers found that the Ministry of Labour, which is tasked with monitoring these situations, is under-staffed. They recommend lobbying for more budget allocations to go to this ministry to help safeguard worker rights.

In addition, they also recommend capacity building for the workers, minimum export compliance to include labour rights, strengthen monitoring through including workers and incorporating shadow reports for consideration for certification among other measures.

Perhaps consumers now need to take up the fight for better working conditions on behalf of the workers. If buyers made their flower purchases conditional, dependent on the treatment of workers in the flower farms, perhaps the women would have better work environments.

Good journalism the answer to free and fair elections

By CAROLYNE OYUGI

African elections have for a long time been dominated by men from voters to those who manage the process. The second characteristic is violence and lack of democracy.

While citizens of these countries always coexist peacefully until election time, the most conspicuous party in this whole process is the media.

Before the Rwanda went into chaos that culminated in a genocide, it was the media that passed the information and misinformation. The Kenyan post-election violence in 2007-2008 was not any different.

To some people this is normal and there is nothing they can do about it. There is, however, one African woman who believes that things should not be left at status quo.

Secret

Listening to her speak is enough to make anyone believe that a peaceful election in Africa is very possible.

She speaks with passion when demonstrating how this can be achieved and in between her words one can read her love for this great continent.

These are the thoughts of Pansy Tlakula, chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) in South Africa and the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights.

Involving the media

Prior to her current position, she was the Chief Electoral Officer at the IEC. She believes that the secret to free and fair elections is involving the media at all the stages.

"There is a poor relationship between the media and the electoral commission in Kenya and so many other countries, these two groups treat each other with suspicion," were her opening remarks during an interview with *The Reject*.

According to Tlakula, an advocate with a degree from Harvard, the media must work closely with the commissions and closely monitor the election commission.

Danger

A week before the elections, all media houses operate from the elections centre. "South African Broadcasting Cooperation (SABC) usually gets a contract one year before the elections, they are given responsibilities and it has always worked well," Tlakula explains.

SABC is usually paid around one million rand (KSh10 million) which they use to lay out a sophisticated infrastructure where outside broadcasting can operate freely.

Tlakula notes this does not mean that they are controlling media but instead closing all the loopholes that may lead to poor coverage.

She also emphasizes that electoral process is



The chairperson of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission Ahmed Hassan welcomes his South Africa's counterpart Pansy Tlakula during her visit to Kenya. Picture: Carolyn Oyugi

very complex and so those involved, including the media should undergo frequent training to understand it.

"I have handled two national and two local elections and I feel a little knowledgeable," observes Tlakula.

She advises the media houses to invest in training their journalists. She points out the importance of specialization in election coverage.

Report

"You do not send a journalist to cover crime scene today, business tomorrow and still expect him to cover elections the next day," she points out.

Though the media is at times known to sensationalise and exaggerate issues, she advises the electoral commissions to never keep secrets from the media.

"The media will always dig out skeletons. They can also protect you, they have criticised us before but we are always there to clarify issues before they are blown out of proportion," Tlakula reiterates.



"There is a poor relationship between the media and the electoral commission in Kenya and so many other countries, these two groups treat each other with suspicion."

— Pansy Tlakula,

However, she cautions that embedded journalists should remain true to impartiality.

Tlakula calls for decriminalization of laws that are used by states to oppress journalist. She points out that the proposal made by retired Supreme Court Associate Justice Vicente Mendoza in 2008 to decriminalize libel is the right way to go.

During her recent visit to Kenya, Tlakula observes that Kenyan politicians do not think that access to information is an essential requirement for free and fair elections.

This is misinformation she says. "The commissioners also need to be trained on how to handle the journalists. The problem is that commissioners always think that they can read the journalists mind which is very wrong."

Tlakula condemns tribal politics and hate speech in Kenya adding that you cannot create impressions on people's minds based on their tribes and expect them to live peacefully.

Tlakula spent her childhood experiencing the effects of apartheid and how Africans were discriminated upon because of the colour of

their skin. For this reason she does not understand why Africans fought the colonialists only to discriminate against themselves.

"The electoral commissions should also be very independent from state influence and get adequate funding," she says giving an example of the commission in South Africa which is funded 100 per cent by the state.

Tlakula, born Faith Dikeledi Pansy Rabotapi, in Everton in 1957, thinks that social media is very important but should be used with caution.

"It is so easy to use social media because it reaches the youths who are no longer interested in reading newspapers and watching television. It can, however, work against you because it is very hard to control what people post," she observes.

Finally ending our conversation, she calls on the Kenyan government to ratify the African Union Charter.

"I believe that most states are afraid of ratifying it because of its condemnation and that it totally rejects unconstitutional changes of government," she says.

Tlakula is the recipient of a number of awards, such as: Attorney's Fidelity Fund Award, Harvard/South Africa Fellowship, South African Career Development

Internship Program, USA, Community Leader: Vaal Achievers Awards, and the Black Business Executive Circle Award in recognition of outstanding performance in managing the 2004 elections.

She was also voted the Most Influential Woman Award by the CEO Magazine in 2007.

Widow inheritance remains high in Taveta

By BENSON MWANGA

Despite calls for women's rights to be treated as human rights, widows in Taita and Taveta districts remain chained in culture where they are forced into inheritance.

This has heightened the rates of HIV infections in the region. Many people are still practicing wife inheritance even in cases where it is apparent that the widows have lost their husbands to Aids.

Unfortunately, the practice has lost meaning in the society. Although previously encouraged as a measure to guarantee the widow and her children social security, it is today regarded as outdated and retrogressive practice with some community members viewing it as uncivilized.

It is no longer done in a formalised way like in the past where the widow was legitimately assigned to either a brother-in-law or any other close male relative for cohabitation.

Residents who still cling to the archaic practice prefer keeping it a secret with the critical role previously played by spouses and parents being shoved to oblivion.

The threat posed by HIV infection has not

served as a deterrent measure in the community where superstition is still rife and most deaths are blamed on witchcraft and sorcery even when it is obvious the deceased persons' succumbed to Aids related complications.

Individuals who favour wife inheritance have managed to conceal it from the discerning public eye to ward off the wrath of their spouses and those disapproving the practice.

Local leaders among them provincial administrators have heightened the campaign to discard the practice with little progress.

According to Joyce Mwangoji, chairperson Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation in Taita-Taveta County, cases of wife inheritance are still there but on a minimal scale.

"There is need to sensitise the community on the dangers of wife inheritance owing to the threat posed by HIV and Aids," notes Mwangoji.

She says the practice has outlived its usefulness and those practicing it were exposing their spouses to the threat of HIV infection.

"The provincial administration should supplement our efforts in the fight against wife inheritance and other retrogressive practices like incest and female genital mutilation in this re-

gion," she notes.

"Everybody should oppose this practice as it is now common knowledge that it endangers the lives of those perpetrating it," she says.

However, Mwangoji observes that the practice is waning and that only those men driven by insatiable sexual desires were still clinging to it.

"The practice is rampant in some parts of the districts where cultural die-hards still practice it," she says citing Tausa, Wundanyi and Taveta as the areas where such cases were prevalent.

"I've been receiving reports about such cases while others involve widows who complain of being approached by their brothers-in-law intending to inherit them," Mwangoji observes.

She says in the early days the practice was meant to retain widows within the family circle to avert a situation whereby she would get married outside the matrimonial home.

While some widows have been forced to be inherited by their brothers-in-law others have done so due to poverty. Mwangoji says that she does not personally approve of such unions of convenience.

"Some widows have children to fend for and find it rather difficult to resist the temptation of

being inherited in order to benefit from financial support of their inheritors," she reiterates.

However, Mwamadi Bakari, 78, decries the issue of marrying widows no matter what illness killed their husbands.

He says Christians and Muslims in the area have been at the forefront in speaking against the practice as it has been fueling the rapid spread of HIV and Aids.

Bakari says the practice has no place in the present society and those still hanging on to it should discard it.

People living with Aids say ignorance among men is to blame for the spread of the scourge in the district.

"We have visited churches and conducted outreach programmes among families but men do not seem to understand the dangers of wife inheritance," says Veronica Mkawasi chair person Wundanyi Isuwirio Lukundo Group.

Mkawasi who is living with HIV says her group has 34 members who have declared their HIV status but some men still go after them.

She adds: "We also engage in group therapy among ourselves as well as giving guidance and counseling to those who go astray."

Sexual Offences Act faces myriads implementation challenges and gaps

By HENRY OWINO

Even after the enactment of the Sexual Offences Act six years ago, the law remains largely in paper and has not become fully operational.

The law was introduced in 2004 by a former nominated MP Njoki Ndung'u who is now a Supreme Court judge. Prior to its enactment, the law was preceded by heated debate during the Ninth parliament.

In May 2011, a task force was formed to incorporate recommendations that would help enhance the implementation of Kenya's Sexual Offences Act.

Recently, a workshop was convened by the task force Steering Committee led by Hon Lady Justice (Rtd) Effie Owuor, which brought together participants drawn from Liverpool VCT Care and Treatment (LVCT), Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Kenya), International Commission of Jurists (ICJ-Kenya), Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW), Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW), German Development Cooperation (GTZ), Aids Free World, and Human Rights Centre and University of California, Berkeley (HRC).

The objective of the workshop was to explore ways for the implementation of the Sexual Offences Act by bringing together more than 86 participants drawn from both the government and civil society organisations.

Discussions

Discussions centred on challenges and explored ways to improve the overall process of protection envisioned by the Act.

Recommendations at the meeting ranged from making fundamental improvements to the coordination of government and civil society actors and to specify suggestions that would strengthen individual sector capacities.

Critical among participants' recommendations was the call for a permanent national coordinating body to orchestrate and oversee coherent implementation of the Sexual Offences Act, as well as enhanced communication between government and civil societies.

The Task Force, however, felt that for the implementation process to succeed, there has to be serious and sustained good will among stakeholders involved and commitment by all cross sectional leaders.

Workshop participants also identified critical challenges that remain in the implementation of the Act both within their individuals sectors and as an overall, cross-sectoral process.

According to Njoki Ndung'u, the full implementation of Act requires structural and administrative reforms both in the private and public sector.

Victims

Speaking at a meeting that was held to launch the report by the task force, Ndung'u said that the community must also be sensitized on the law to help protect them from sexual abuses.

She pointed out that victims of sexual violence have been unable to report cases to police and medical centres since most police posts are not well equipped to resolve such cases and most health workers are never sure how to handle such matters.

"Investigations have never been conclusive due to the inability by the police to find any incriminating evidence against the offenders and thus the government chemist should be equipped with a forensic laboratory that works without bureaucracy," noted Ndung'u.

Other overarching and common challenges that have continued to derail the implementation of the Act include resource constraints among government and civil society, individual capacity gaps in government and civil society, disconnection between professional sectors, urban and rural areas, government and civil so-



The chairperson of the taskforce on the implementation of the sexual offences act Hon lady Justice (rtd) Effie Owuor presides over the launch of the report. Picture: Courtesy of Liverpool VCT

ciety and among civil society actors themselves.

During the workshop, participants realized that community factors can either help or hinder a survivor's ability and desire to seek support or accountability through formal institutions. Key challenges that relate to community and informal justice influence are such as the chilling effect of stigma around sexual and gender-based violence, insufficient sensitization and engagement of men and boys to help change societal norms, inadequate assurances of witness protection and throughout investigatory and trial process.

The health sector's ability to fulfil Sexual Offences Act related obligations involves a general insufficiency of standardization which manifests itself in the current duplication of functions by two separate health ministries — medical services and public health and sanitation — gross disparity in resource allocation and services provided by major referral hospitals in urban centres and smaller clinics in rural areas.

Guidelines

Absence of uniform training for healthcare providers regarding sexual and gender-based violence, and few opportunities are available to develop workers' abilities, absence of standardized forensic examination procedure in place, despite brief mention in the 2009 National Guidelines on the Management of Sexual Violence.

Insufficient roll-out of the 2009 guidelines themselves, inconsistent and uncoordinated data collection about sexual gender based violence (SGBV) related cases, limited awareness among health care providers on the provisions of the Sexual Offences Act and lack of a budget line within the national budget that provides for consistent supply of post rape care supplies.

Furthermore, the health sector has had difficulty meeting its Sexual Offences Act-based related obligations to provide meaningful psychosocial support to survivors as well as accused

persons. Additionally, healthcare providers face conflicting means of documentation of sexual offences cases. Specifically they need to clarify the relationship between the medico-legal forms used by police and healthcare workers.

In the investigation and prosecution of Sexual Offences Act related cases, challenges involves insufficiency of effective witness protection, especially in cases where the perpetrator is known to the survivors and or family, inadequate sensitization and training among police officers which results into weak evidence gathering, spanning the collection, storage and transmittal of forensic evidence, to basic interviewing and statement taking.

Disincentives

Insufficient police training in handling children's cases, inadequate levels of sensitivity to the need for psychosocial support for survivors entering the investigatory or prosecutorial process, low public awareness of the Sexual Offences Act, which can impede the reporting of violations and can inadvertently lead to the destruction of evidence.

"Sexual Offences Act provisions contain disincentives to reporting of crime specifically section 38, with possible punishment of a survivor found to have falsely testified in an Sexual Offences Act case as provided. Inconsistent levels of expertise among police prosecutors regarding the SOA or related courtroom procedures remains a challenge, overburdened caseloads in the courts and seriously current absence of SOA practice guidelines from the Chief Justice which can result in inconsistent processes and protections in the courtroom," Ndung'u regretted.

She said in Kenya DNA analysis of all forensic evidence in criminal cases is analyzed by the office of the Government Chemist in Nairobi. Adding that the laboratory is found to suffer from the following challenges; difficulty generating DNA profiles from forensic evidence that has been improperly collected, stored or

transported, the DNA analyst is required travel to courts outside of Nairobi to testify about the DNA report and cannot be able to produce from the forensic evidence supplied.

Judiciary

Ndung'u reiterated this further contributes to backlog in laboratory work, little progress toward development of either of the sexual offender databases mandated by the Sexual Offences Act, including the DNA database of convicted offenders, backlog created by understaffing, a lack of a quantification system, and ongoing need for equipment maintenance and supplies.

In the Judiciary, it faces challenges in its adjudication of Sexual Offences Act-related cases; inadequate training and sensitization about sexual offenses and related legislation, including the Sexual Offences Act itself. There is also absence of practice guidelines from Kenya's Chief Justice, which would standardise courtroom procedures for sexual offences related cases, insufficient guidance regarding deployment of minimum sentences especially when faced with insufficient evidence due to poor investigations, absence of a national case management system to track cases, insufficient psychosocial support for judges and undue delay and inconsistency adjudication caused in part by the routine transfer of judges.

Post-trial phases such as incarceration and probation had been largely ignored when discussing Sexual Offences Act implementation. The workshop participants saw this oversight and some of the challenges they noticed were; lack of essential of psychosocial or rehabilitation support within the prison system to help reform sexual offenders before their release back into society, insufficiency of clarity and progress regarding the Dangerous Sexual Offenders' database, which relates to the general database of convicted sexual offenders. This has severe implication for a convicted person's rights to parole and supervised release and the effect of minimum sentencing on prison system resources.

Billions given to fund environmental development

By JOSEPH MUKUBWA

Two international donors have funded environment community development programmes in the country to a tune of over KSh2.3 billion.

European Union and Royal Danish Embassy (Danida) through Community Development Trust Fund (CDTF) environment have funded the environment component of community development programme for a four-year programme with the grant which also targets aspects of climate change and renewable energy.

Speaking during the launch of one CDTF Mt Kenya Environmental Conservation and Poverty Reduction Project at Karindundu area in Nyeri County, deputy ambassador at the Danish Embassy Ole Thonke said the funds were allocated to 97 projects in the country for a period of four years running between year 2010-2014.

Goal

“The goal of community development programmes is to reduce poverty through empowering communities to initiate and implement community based socio-economic infrastructure and environmental conservation projects,” explained Thonke. He added: “This programme also targets aspects of climate change and renewable energy.”

He said the purpose of the funding is to support and mainstream community-led approaches to poverty reduction and sustainable management of natural resources in rural and peri-urban areas.

Danida will be providing funds to CDTF environment facility through its Natural Resources Management Programme to the tune of KSh1.4 billion in its support of various community led national resources management initiatives as well as for projects in the area of climate change, renewable energy and gender.

The programme is being implemented in line with the Denmark's commitment to the Kenya Joint Assistance Strategy and in consistency with the relevant government of Kenya policies and strategies such as Vision 2030, medium term plans and country strategy paper.

Funds

According to Planning permanent secretary Edward Sambili funds are budgeted for community environmental management projects. Out of 97 projects, 39 target five major water towers namely Mt Kenya, Aberdares, Mau Forest complex, Cherangani and Mt Elgon for the community environment facility.

Those present included Mt Environmental Conservation group chairman Stephen Muniiri, Community Environment Facility Programme Manager Joseph Ruhui and CDTF programme coordinator Salesius Miu.

Thonke said 15 projects in Nyeri County will benefit from the funding amounting to KSh151 Million.

He noted that the funds will be used to rehabilitate the degraded areas of among others Mt Kenya forest.

“The officials entrusted in the implementation of the funds should uphold transparency while using the funds so as to reap maximum benefit from the donation. We are also working with dispensaries and health centres to improve the health standards of local communities,” reiterated Thonke.

According to Thonke, when the projects are fully implemented they will help reduce pressure on the natural resources in the country's water towers.

Central Provincial Director of Planning Grace Muimi noted that most of the projects that could not be funded due lack of money deserved to be implemented in order to improve their proponents' livelihoods. “I urge other donors to contribute more funds to the CDTF to enable it reach out to more communities,” she noted.

Bus trip hurls Meru farmer into rice farming

By MARTIN MURITHI

The five acre farm along the weedy path hardly reveals the components of the crops due to the tall maize plants that are crept up by black beans shoots that make the farm resemble a bush.

The only unique factor is the black cotton soil that is a clear sign of a once existing swamp and marshland that is slowly getting extinct with vanishing water hyacinth.

Josephine Ringera leads the way through the farm stopping to explain the various crops in the farm.

She will stop at nothing to explain the quality of farming and that new farming methods have been introduced that can be adapted by the residents of Meru County.

“The initiative if adopted can help in eradicating poverty and making the region food sufficient,” she explains.

Ringera also has several paddies of Pure Pishori rice variety and as we make the first attempt to enter the paddies, scores of birds fly out chirping in annoyance of disturbance from intruders of their feast.

“This is the challenge I have, these birds enter the fields at dawn and just in case there is no one around to throw stones and chase them they get out at dusk. I have to keep vigil throughout or we end up losing all harvesting nothing,” explains Rebecca Kagwiria, who tends and maintains the farm.

Moments later I realise that Kagwiria is Ringera's mother and she has been in the farm which is in Ndiine village in Imenti North District after leaving their home in Kiirua a year ago.

Fertility

She says farming in this region is better since when rain fed agriculture fails, there is plenty of harvest in their farms due to fertility of land and water to direct to the crops using furrows.

“Currently there are 25 users of the furrow that supplies us with water from the Kinyaritha Spring and conflicts are frequent due to disagreements over schedules of using the water,” she says.

In this farm she has inter-cropped spinach, kales, green grams, snow peas, maize, onions, tomatoes, rice, beetroots and sweet potatoes.

The task of rice farming has been demanding more than others since the nearest farmer is over 200 kilometres away in Mwea and she has had no one to turn to for assistance or advice.

In the whole Meru and Tharaka Nithi counties no other farmer has attempted to venture into the act of rice farming.

According to Ringera the idea of venturing into rice farming generated out of her many trips along the Meru-Nairobi highway.

“When I'm travelling I look at the Mwea plantations that have made the town to grow rapidly after rice farming was liberalized. Investors who are flocking the area, banks and the growing population have revealed the amount of wealth generated by rice,” explains Ringera.

Most of the commuters passing through the town stop to do shopping of major agricultural commodities.

Ringera estimates commuters destined to Meru leave approximately KSh200,000 to traders and she believes this amount can be regurgitated into the Meru economy and propel much more growth.

Irrigation

Kenya produces 30,000 tonnes against a consumption demand of 300,000 tonnes annually. All the rest above production is catered for by imports from Pakistan and Egypt which relies heavily on irrigation from River Nile.

“You can't grow rice and go wrong. I took a risk and out of curiosity I'm glad it is working and being the pioneer is a great achievement,”



Rebecca Kagwiria (left) and her daughter Josephine Ringera (right) tend their rice farm at Ndiine village in Imenti North District of Meru County. Picture: Martin Murithi

she says.

Ringera opted to try out the pure Pishori variety out of curiosity and love for the dish. She has realised there are other varieties like Nerica that can do well for commercial purposes which can also help in curbing the deficit of production if more irrigation projects are initiated.

She also affirms that the rice crop in her farm has proved manageable since there have not been any disease attacks or pests other than the bird menace.

According to Kenya Agricultural Research Institute lack of crop rotation in the Mwea Irrigation Scheme may in the near future lead to total crop failure due to lack of using certified seeds. They say soon production may ditch even lower and bring about new challenges to the farmers.

“With this particular example, the Government should consider extending the scheme to this part of Meru County. We should not put all our eggs in one basket without trying out other alternatives of sustaining the production,” says Ringera.

Her main wish is to derive curiosity from other people and organisations to venture into the practice.

This will be an effort of improving on the project as a team and for the farmers to take upon themselves the initiative of forming groups for better management and easier access by the agricultural experts and officers.

She also notes that if the government decides to expand the project to this region it must train farmers to practice crop rotation with cotton, sorghum, millet and other drought resistant crops in an effort to correct the mistakes that happened in Mwea.

However, Ringera faces a major impediment due to the community's sluggishness in adapting new ideas.

Research

“The government has to take time in doing research and other cost effective measures to ascertain the risks involved in the activity and make an assurance to the farmers that it's a safe investment,” she notes.

Further on, she calls on organisations to input some finance and conduct research into the activity of rice farming and to establish demo farms that will enable farmers learn more about the crop.

She pledges to liaise with agricultural extension officers to conduct soil sampling besides doing land terracing and going for the Nerica type of rice because it requires less water.

She notes that this will go a long way in reducing the water conflicts she has faced since the neighbours were always complaining that she is draining most of the water from the furrow.

According to Ringera, the birds menace can be eradicated if more farmers take up rice farming and help reduce the number of birds in her farm at any one time to reduce the loss caused by the birds since employing someone to chase them will be difficult.

She had planted 40 kilogrammes but close to half of it was destroyed by the birds. Ringera now anticipates harvesting close to 200 kilogrammes.

“I will then transport it to Mwea for hulling and re-transport back for sale and consumption at home. You see if we had more farmers here there would be hullers and this would reduce cost on transportation.”

Promotion

Ringera says she will encourage appropriate farming methods to avoid use of furrow system as a measure of improving soil quality and conserving environment.

In promoting better farming methods Ringera encourages farmers and organisations to adopt water harvesting during the rainy season to reduce floods and later reuse it for irrigation purposes during the dry seasons.

“Food production problems in Kenya require action from individuals, organisations, institutions and government to help in making agriculture a better career and change perception to have it perceived as a business. Mechanisms must also be put in place to match the demand and supply of the country,” she stresses.

Ringera urges the Government to establish silos for storage of food and cereals in all regions that are prone to hunger disaster to reduce the cost of transporting food to these regions.

She also notes that funds meant for agriculture need to be incorporated into systems of creating awareness, providing information and interpreting policies to farmers.

Ringera says the prisoners and armed forces personnel need to be engaged in activities of digging and servicing boreholes to generate sustainable water for irrigation and planting trees.

“They should also be engaged in building silos in arid areas so that we can avoid the rhythm that has emerged when we have so much it goes to waste and when we have so little we go seeking for help. This has to come to an end,” reiterates Ringera.

Farmer defies famine to grow fresh fruits in Ukambani

By NZINGA MUASYA

Despite the fact that Ukambani has some of the best agricultural soils, the region continues to face erratic rains resulting into recurrent food shortages. However, a farmer in Kitui County is turning the tables by using furrow irrigation to grow fruits.

In a sun-baked Vinda village at the far East of Kitui Central District in Kitui County, Itila Mbiti is regarded as a model farmer by all standards. Mbiti uses furrow irrigation by digging trenches along seasonal rivers cutting across his farm to water his plants.

The 67 year old has been in fruit farming for the last 40 years. Mbiti's farm is covered by green and healthy vegetation that is rare to find in arid and semi-arid regions.

The farmer grows bananas, paw paws, oranges and mangoes. The fruits of his labour are evident in his farm where burgeoning fruits weigh down trees. The healthy canopy of banana plants in his farm would rival those found in Kisii.

The farm also has about 300 orange trees. Elsewhere in his 15 acre farm is a section dedicated to sugarcane stretching several metres.

"Every season I get about KSh60,000 from the sale of oranges alone. Most of the buyers come to the farm," he says. The farmer reveals that he also earns substantive amounts of money from the sale of bananas and other fruits.

He has not achieved this by lazing around. Mbiti, who is the envy of the village abhors laziness and is up by 5.00am to check on the farm.

Education

"Through farming I have been able to educate my children, at least to Form Four level. Those who did not go past secondary schooling cannot blame me, it was their wish, not lack of school fees," avers the father of 19 and husband to two wives. His first born is a military officer while others are teachers.

Mbiti who did not get formal education recalls how he made up his mind to go full blast into farming after "wasting six good months in

Mombasa" idling around.

"I was 25 when I went to Mombasa like many of my contemporaries. After staying there for a few months, I realised it was vanity. I came back home and fell in love with farming," Mbiti explains, adding that there is a lot of unexploited potential in farming.

What Mbiti usually does is dig trenches to deviate sections of seasonal rivers cutting across his farm and the water spreads freely to water his plants. He has done this for the last 40 years, getting bumper harvests each season.

His youngest wife acknowledges that her husband is a workaholic. "Initially I thought he would work himself to death but overtime I have become used to it. It is very common to see him working in the farm late in the evening with sweat dripping all over his body," she says of her husband.

Ugly incident

However, it has not been a rosy farming affair for him. He remembers an ugly incident three years ago when a farmhand he had hired was buried alive by a wall of sand near a river while flattening a section of the farm. When Mbiti went to check on him, he found the wall had caved in.

"I called his name but there was no response. I panicked. Neighbours assembled here and helped to retrieve his body while some villagers were baying for my blood," says the old man, pointing to where the farmhand was buried. Through the help of his clan, the farmer settled the matter the traditional Kamba way by compensating the family of the deceased.



"Every season I get about KSh60,000 from the sale of oranges alone. Most of the buyers come to the farm."

— Itila Mbiti, fruit farmer



Mbiti removes a banana bunch from a felled banana plant. Mbiti admires mango fruits in his farm.

Pictures: Nzinga Muasya

However, the greatest challenge has been the pathetic road network in the area. Mbiti says most of his produce goes to waste before it can get to the market due to poor roads. The bananas and sugarcanes are transported using hired donkeys to Kalundu market in Kitui town, about 30 kilometres away.

The nightmarish journey from his farm to the market starts at 3.00 am if he has to make it to the market on time. Each donkey is hired at KSh200 to do the work. However, during the rainy seasons, it



becomes even difficult for the beasts of burden to navigate the alleys, prompting the farmer to sell his produce at throw-away prices.

He observes: "If the road network was good, farmers in this area like myself would be very rich, but now we are forced to watch our produce rot in the farm since we are unable to get it to the market in good time. Our efforts are certainly going to waste."

Mbiti's plea is to the area MP Charity Ngilu to ensure that access roads in the area are made to ease the transportation burden so farmers can reap maximum benefits for their sweat.

Africa's food situation worrying as livestock losses ground

By DUNCAN MBOYAH

The increasing population and demand for industrial development has put pressure on land and natural forests leading to a decline in tree cover within the country.

"This has forced us to come up with the Agriculture Farm Forestry Policy that requires all farmers to reserve 10 percent of every agricultural land holding to help improve the national tree cover," said Wilson Songa, Kenya's Agriculture Secretary.

Songa observed that as a result of the policy, the forest cover has increased from 2.7 per cent in 2009 to 5.9 per cent currently.

According to Songa, even though small scale food producers are responsible for food security in the country, farmers have been affected by effects of climate change.

"We must enhance the planting of resilience crops that could be of great benefit to farmers in our countries," noted Songa while addressing a food security expert conference on sustainable food security through land regeneration.

Nitrogen

The Kenya government is in the process of providing nitrogen fixing and medicinal plants that could contribute to the improvement of soil nutrients.

Songa challenged governments in Africa to consider working with the private sector and also acknowledge farmers own know how in a bid to improve food security.

"The food situation in East Africa has deteriorated due to over reliance on rain fed agriculture at the expense of water harvesting and soil conservation," he observed.

However, according to Dr Roland Bunch, the once vibrant livestock industry in most countries

in Africa is fast dying.

"Livestock keeping is reducing in Africa due to lack of grazing land as a result of global warming that affects organic matter in the soil," noted Bunch, a leading agro-ecologist.

"About 150 million peasant livestock farmers in lowland Africa are frequently affected by the increasing population and the decrease in supply of manure in the land," explained Bunch.

The loss in farming in Africa is as a result of abandonment of farrowing that enables 30-80 per cent of manure to sink in the soil, rise of fertilizer prices and global warming as reasons for food insecurity in most African countries.

As result over 50 million people are moving to the slums in urban centers in search of alternative means of living.

Many people in the slums now depend on food aid yet despite giving food assistance to the people in Niger for the last 15 years, the situation has become worse.

"Food aid is not long term solution but instead encourages farmers not to work on their farms. This must be stopped," noted Bunch.

He urged agriculture experts to collaborate with farmers in developing farmer innovations whereby they mix seeds with livestock manure to help improve soil fertility.

Food security

According to Dr Charles Owubah, regional leader World Vision East Africa, challenges faced by farmers in Africa are vulnerable and requires political good will to be overcome.

"To ensure that the region becomes food secure, there is need to promote modern farming practices that are scientifically proven," Owubah noted.

Dr Tony Simons, Director General World Agro forestry Centre (ICRAF) warned that pro-

moting carbon marketing worldwide as a way of minimising global warming but not the only solution to reducing climate change effects.

"To reduce the global warming we need other interventions in place rather than promoting only carbon credit as the solution," noted Simons.

He observed that looking for quick fix always solved very little, yet there are many scientific solutions that could be applied by communities in efforts to help reduce global warming.

"Let us help create awareness to farmers to adopt various technologies instead of over emphasising the monetary aspect of carbon credits yet farmers stand to earn less money in the end," he observed.

Simons cautioned against stereotyping new developments at the expense of the old ones adding that by devaluing indigenous knowledge that has been kept by communities for centuries is in itself a disservice to the fight against climate change and other later day catastrophes that faces this generation.

Land regeneration

"Let us transfer technology to deserving countries but also tap their knowledge for a better solution to the problems facing the world," noted Simons.

According to Dr Tony Rinaud, pioneer of Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR), Niger as a country along the Sahel region was badly hit by deforestation and desertification in the 1980s but this is no more, courtesy of land regeneration.

He noted that with no trees to protect the soil, windstorms swept the land destroying crops, drought was a frequent occurrence, livestock suffered and people often went hungry.

"Hunger and poverty were direct outcomes of deforestation that forced people to immigrate

to other countries," Rinaud who worked in the country as a forestry expert.

Through the practising of farmer managed natural regeneration, farmers have greatly increased their incomes through sale of wood and non timber forest products such as fodder, honey and traditional medicines. African governments need to empower local communities to determine their development priorities in managing regenerated trees.

Farmer managed natural regeneration is worth dissemination to other countries through mainstreaming it into policies and rural development projects.

These efforts are echoed by Dr Dennis Garrity, a former Director General at ICRAF who said countries need to emphasise on evergreen agriculture — a form of more intensive farming that integrates trees with annual crops as a way of helping them earning a better living.

He noted that the system increases nutrient availability in rain fed food crop systems and also improves microclimate and soil water relations conveying greater adaptation to climate change.

"Research institutions must scale up exchange of knowledge by ensuring that all researched work reaches the farmers in good time," he reiterated.

Garrity advised farmers to build alliances on the use of simple methods that could help in food security since millions of farmers have succeeded through that line.

There are plans internationally to reduce the rising trend in global warming before 2020, at least to halve global emissions by the middle of this century and continue cutting down on them thereafter.

Experts at the conference called for the review of innovative ways in tackling Africa's unending cycle of drought and food security.

Ukambani go traditional in addressing hunger menace

By PAUL KIMANZI

A few years ago, residents of the wider Ukambani region relied on relief foods and freebies for survival due to rain failure, but today smile all the way to the bank.

In its evaluation of success stories, the Ministry of Agriculture through National Agriculture and Livestock Extension Programme (NALEP) in Mwingi District has made impressive achievement in transforming this sleepy drought-ravaged region into a busy agricultural area.

According to James Muchoka, area District Agricultural Officer, the success is an outcome of aggressive campaigns which played a crucial role in sensitising farmers on growing drought resistant crops such as sorghum, millet, green grams, cassava, sweet potatoes, mangoes, poultry and camel keeping among other income generating activities.

It was not until these projects bore fruits that it dawned on the community that they were sitting on their success.

The residents from various locations such as Mwingi Central, Mwingi West, Mwingi East, Kyuso, Mumoni, Enziu, Ukasi and Tseikuru, among others have successfully joined hands and formed different groups purposely to grow crops for both domestic and commercial purposes.

To ascertain this, we visited various groups within the district and found their members busy with the projects.

In Tseikuru Location, Mwingi North Constituency, about 100 kilometres from Mwingi town, we meet 20 members of the 4KK Youth Group that has ventured in poultry keeping.

This group was formed in 2009 with a total of 20 members (18 women and two men) with the ultimate goal of keeping local poultry for the purpose of production and marketing within as well as in outside markets including Nairobi.

NALEP took the group through trainings in local poultry managements and also assisted the members in drawing a proposal to the World Vision Tseikuru IPA, for assistance in acquiring materials for construction of poultry houses, drugs, feeds and solar driven incubator. Although the group has not yet acquired the required solar panel for operating the incubator, they are in the process of acquiring one to boost hatching of eggs and improve production.

The group is currently keeping over 40 local hens.

As the case would be, majority were cynical about the success of this project but this group viewed it as a stepping stone to their success.

"Since I joined this group, I have noted we are making a progress and I believe with co-operation with the other members, we will achieve our goals," explains Agnes Kasyoka, a 4KK Group member.

In Enziu sub-location, Waita location we find another group of 30 members who live by the virtue that life is not complete without traditional food supplements such as sorghum, millet and green grams.

This group was sponsored to form Enziu Commercial Bakers in 2006, courtesy of NALEP-SIDA. It started with only 16 members (five men and 11 women). Today it is interesting to note that the group has now grown to 30 members (eight men and 22 women).

"It is very interesting to find someone taking tea with traditional cakes made from millet or sorghum," jokes Mwikali Mbomboko, the Enziu Commercial Bakers chairlady.

Anna Njoki, one of the group members confessed that about 80 percent of her family meals depend on the traditional supplement because she believes the meals have little or no side effects.

In Nguni division, about 30 kilometres from Mwingi Town, is the Kaghui Youth Group, located at Ukasi market, Ukasi sub-location, Mwingi East district. Here, one can be forgiven for thinking this group is formed by the Somali community, but these are just young people from



the Kamba community who on June 2, 2011, decided to venture into camel keeping project.

The camels have lived to survive and conquer the harsh climatic extremities in this area.

This group buys and keeps young female camels and a few male ones which later mate for maximum production.

The group has 22 members, most of whom are women. The group's objective was to pool resources and better their livelihoods through employment and wealth creation.

The group developed a proposal and submitted for funding under the NALEP ASAL component. The proposal project qualified and the group was funded to the tune of KSh722,800.

The biggest challenge facing this group is changing the perception and stereotyping associated with camel keeping. This fact dealt a blow to the introduction of camel keeping as an alternative enterprise in the community. Such stereotyping include the belief that camels are dirty and therefore their milk is seen as unhygienic and a cause for diarrhoea, transmits livestock diseases, pests and also leads to desertification.

Needless to say, it is further perceived in some quarters that introducing camels in the area will heighten inter-communal conflicts between the Kamba and the Somali community.

The group has plans to harness camel drought power for ploughing, weeding and transport. They also plan to market camel milk in Nairobi.

"We also faced the challenge of familiarising ourselves with technical know how on rearing the camels in terms of the feeding habits and lifestyles, but thank God that we are now very conversant with all that, thanks to the NALEP trainings," says Kyalo Musyoka, one of the Kaghui Youth Group official.

Venturing deeper into the interior parts of the larger Mwingi district, one finds Kisungi Basketry Self Help Group that is located in Konyu sub-location, Katse Location, Mumoni Central division, Mumoni District. This group makes and sells traditional baskets locally in large numbers.

The group was formed in February 2006 with total registered members comprising 27 women and 10 men.

The main objective of this group was to salvage the income of the members. The group also started merry go round activities.

Through collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, the group was undertaken through trainings in basketry and other income generat-



Ukambani go traditional. Pictures: Paul Kimanzi

ing activities.

Through NALEP-SIDA, the group was trained on local basketry to make other products such as fireless cookers, chopping baskets, trays and wall mats in 2009.

The group's future focus is to increase their production and products and if possible patent them for international market by 2013.

Kyandoa Self Help Group, located in Thonoi sub-Location, Waita Location, Waita Division in Mwingi Central was formed in 1999 as a community income generating group with 20 members — 16 women and four men.

The group undertakes the following activities; ranging from agro-forestry tree nursery, digging soil conservation structures, merry go round and goats keeping.

The group started on voluntary basis whereby it supported orphans in their villages in 2002.

Interestingly, the membership rapidly grew to 35 within few months, a clear indication that locals respond well to conservative campaigns.

Through sensitization from the Ministry of Agriculture, the group now grows mangoes and vegetables such as sukuma wiki (kale), tomatoes, and onions among other vegetables which found their way into the local markets.

The group has recorded a climbing trend in membership registration, which rose to 64 members, including 52 women and 12 men, therefore advancing to a CBO.

The group chairman Joseph Mwinzi, who could not hide his joy told Reject that his group members have benefited a lot from the sale of their produce adding that they intent to liaise with hotel managers and retailers for effective distribution of their produce.

"This group is very hardworking and co-operative, I get almost all my stock from them, says Grace Mawia, a roadside vegetables and fruits venter at Kamuwongo.

World Food Programme (WFP) in partnership with Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has been working hand in hand with Ukambani residents in donating some of the drought resistant crops such as sorghum, and green grams.

Poultry helps villagers cope with small land holdings

By JOSEPH MUKUBWA

FIFTY-year-old Charles Njoroge has been in the poultry business for the last one decade. He has been able to educate his children and also tend for his family using proceeds generated from poultry farming.

Twenty of the birds in his farm lay an egg each on a daily basis which translates to KSh300 daily income as one egg goes for KSh15.

Most of the farmers prefer layers' birds since eggs generate better income than the chicken itself.

"I have been able to build a good permanent house and also educate my four children who are in secondary and primary boarding schools," explains Njoroge whose fortunes have changed for the better.

Njoroge is in a group of other poultry farmers affiliated with Mugathi Focal Area Development which has about 20 members who have joined hands in rearing the birds for commercial purposes.

Started four years ago, the group has brought together farmers for a common goal of poultry business, which runs second after dairy farming.

The farmers earn a lot of money daily due to the eggs selling enterprise and also selling of bird's meat.

With the small portions of land in the area, every farmer now has to engage in income generating projects which will not require big chunks of land.

Breeds

The farmers rear different types of breeds including Sasso and Kenbro among other local breeds.

The project is supported by the Kenya National Agriculture and Livestock Extension Programme (NALEP) which is implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) and the Ministry of Livestock Development (MoLD).

NALEP has helped the farmers in training and also in vaccination. "Initially we would lose many birds but after training, we are able to vaccinate the birds ourselves against diseases like New Castle. We do the vaccination exercise after every six months," explains Njoroge.

He is supported by Simon Githinji, a farmer who says: "We focus much on vaccination, feeding and now marketing. The programme has been of much help to our group."

He observes that they have been empowered on the enterprise and opportunities ahead.

"Our birds have increased and even the income has increased. We are now able to plant more sorghum, sunflowers and even cassava in order to subsidise the feeds of the birds," explains Githinji.

Support

"This is a deliberate effort for encouraging and supporting smallholder farmers through confidence building measures and capacity building so that they can operate in organised structures, learn user-friendly technical and social skills for efficient production and initiate both income-saving and income generating agricultural enterprises," says Ruth Wanjiru Mwangi, NALEP Central Provincial Monitoring and Evaluation officer.

The main outputs in the programme deals with support to what is referred to as institutional setting, extension approaches and methods, technical packages, collaboration and networking with other actors, gender and other cross cutting issues mainstreaming.

Mwangi outlines that the programme offers intensive and thorough training to extension officers on how to identify and measure poverty, how to reach vulnerable groups, how to promote group formation and link farmers groups to various service providers (Stakeholder fora).

"It plays a major role in enhancing commercialization of agricultural production especially of smallholders most of whom reside in rural areas. This is achieved through formation of Common Interest Groups (CIGs) which are linked to various financial and marketing institutions," explains Mwangi.

Families at loggerheads as war against FGM intensifies

By PARSAL Ole JOTO

Josephine Shompisha, 14, missed the knife of a circumciser by a whisker during the last school holidays.

The vehicle which had been scheduled to drive her to Tanzania broke down on the day it was to arrive at Bisill to secretly whisk her away.

Her close relative, Sarah Nenau was not as lucky. This time, she is sure she will not be as lucky during the schools holiday.

Parents in Kajiado County have devised new strategies to beat the new law that outlaws Female Genital Mutilation.

Nenau stayed for three days with an uncle on the other side of the border in Tanzania.

The uncle and Maasai elders with contacts across the border facilitated the secret journey to have the girl undergo the rite of passage tradition upheld by the Maasai community.

She had been informed the night before they left for Loitokitok that the purpose of the journey was to meet relatives staying in Tanzania.

Shompisha is one of the girls social workers in Kajiado say are ferried secretly across the border to be circumcised each school term.

Business

According to Jacob M.Nkananai, an anti-FGM field Facilitator with The Free Pentecostal Fellowship in Kenya (FPFK), a church with extensive roots in Maasai:

"There is lucrative business for circumcisers across the border. Our girls are taken there to beat the recently legislated anti FGM law in Kenya."

Nkananai explains the campaign in Maasailand has gained momentum and fathers are not amused.

"Some argue that they need to reap from where they sowed. To them dowry is important especially during school holidays and festive seasons," Nkananai explained noting:

"Kisii is yet another destination for the underage school girls from Trans Mara where awareness rate is high and parents fear facing the consequences of the law."

Conflict

The campaign in Maasailand has pitted the lobbyists and the churches rescuing the girls and putting them in safe custody, against parents who argue that the local culture allows them to perform the rights and marry off the girls at will.

Mzee Luke Shompisha from Poruko is adamant that *"mtoto ni wangu. Walikuwa wapi ni kimlea* (the child is mine. Where were they



A group of girls rescued from forced FGM in Narok South District go through another rite of passage. The management of Bushtop Camp hotel in the Masai Mara has offered to support them until they complete their education. Photo: Kabia Matega

when I was bringing her up?"

Conflicts that have ensued due to this traditional practice which encourages circumcision of young girls among the Maasai community now poses serious threat to family stability in Kajiado County.

Certain fathers, who have been denied the precious dowry price, especially during school holidays and festive season, are bitter with anti-FGM lobbyists in the area.

The church has been sparring with owners of the daughters, who are infuriated because of its FGM stand.

Rescue

The church runs an anti-FGM initiative in Maasailand and is directed by director of the programme and community development worker, Lanoi Parmuat.

According to Rev Emmanuel Kisemei, the number of young girls rescued after they flee to the church compound and handed over to Christian homes to take care of them has been overwhelming homesteads.

"However, fathers of the girls become agitated and instead turn to families taking care of the young girls," says Kisemei.

He explained further conflicts is triggered by the arrival of new comers and some family members may reject them owing to the prevailing harsh economic times that has seen the cost of living escalate

"We see engagement of the church to end these conflicts as critical. It is our belief that families should be reconciled as fast as possible," notes Kisemei.

According to Florence Gachanja, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) national programme officer, there is need to discourage the setting up of community rescue

centres for the victims of FGM.

"Existing community structures and social cultural dynamics should instead be used," she recommends.

Gachanja says although the law is an important tool to rein in on perpetrators, its implementation requires that communities be engaged in dialogue to avoid the practice being perpetrated in the dark by backers.

"Stakeholders like the provincial administration, law enforcement agents, and judiciary require to be sensitized to avoid a situation where the Children's Act had been in existence yet most people were ignorant about it," says Gachanja.

However, Lanoi warns that the days of those involved in the heinous acts are numbered because the law is in place and are doing this at their own peril, especially for those who cause the death of the victims.

Bill

FGM in Kenya has been outlawed by the anti-Female Genital Mutilation Act, 2011 after the President assented to the bill on September 7, last year, making Kenya the latest African country to ban the practice.

The law makes it illegal to practice or procure it or take somebody abroad for cutting. The law even prohibits derogatory remarks about women who have not undergone FGM. Offenders may be jailed or fined or both.

The practice is still widespread in Africa, despite African Union opposition. At the time of the African Union summit in June, which proposed prohibition of FGM, Benin, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Niger, Nigeria, Kenya, Central African

Republic, Senegal, Chad, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda already had legislation against it.

But in nine countries — including some of those where it is illegal — it is still widely practiced. In Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan, 85 percent of women undergo mutilation.

"Aiding and abetting the practice or procuring a person to perform FGM in another country is an offense and those who may cause death face life imprisonment," says Lanoi.

New law

He clarified: "It is not our intention to have any one rounded up. Such steps will be taken as a last resort because people must be sensitised about the new law by engaging stakeholders in community conversations and trainings."

Those targeted for trainings on the law and the community conversation approach include key opinion leaders drawn from local villages and churches in Maasailand to empower them to sensitize those at the grassroots.

The trained community facilitators are empowered to carryout advocacy work on violence against women and their rights in addition to other harmful traditional practices.

Lanoi notes such initiatives recently resulted in success stories in Bisil where FGM cases reported dropped from 98 to 40 percent.

"The campaign will be intensified and relevant policies be distributed during public barazas to make communities understand the contents and engage them find solutions to own problems," she explained.

Women face threats to comply with FGM

By FRANK OUMA

Married women in areas that practice female genital mutilation in North Rift are being threatened with divorce and denied rights to inherit property as a way of pushing them to embrace the cut, a women rights organisation has said.

The cases are on the increase as married women are being forced to undergo female genital mutilation against their wishes and the situation is prevalent in Keiyo.

According to Mariam Suleiman, coordinator Women's Rights Institute for Peace said that the move aims at ensuring that the practice continues despite it being outlawed.

"Women are being told that they will be divorced by their husbands if they do not agree to the demands of the elderly relatives in the community to get mutilated," observes Suleiman.

The revelations were as a result of a study that the organisation undertook in North Rift region in the months of November and December and the activities were geared towards preventing attempts to subject girls to FGM.

Suleiman notes spouses of the victims were also being intimidated and threatened by elders.

Elders

"Elders are pushing FGM on their daughters' in-law before distributing resources like land to their sons which we feel is unacceptable," she reiterated.

For example, in Baringo East, Central and North 99 girls were circumcised while 125 escaped the cut adding that there is a significant decline in the number of girls either subjected to FGM or those who escape it.

She said that there is need to empower girls with the necessary knowledge on their rights as well as police and provincial administration on existing laws. Parents and the public must be sensitised on the need to abandon the practice.

"Communities such as Pokot have changed the circumcision period from December to August to avoid the public, government and media focus that comes at the end of the year in order to hunt down on those who ran away in August," notes Suleiman.

She laments the poor living conditions for girls who run away to avoid the practice in Baringo, saying that most of them end up with relatives or at rescue centres in churches and other Christian institutions which mostly lack the capacity to fully attend to their needs in terms of provision of food, clothes, education and sanitary towels.

She pointed an accusing finger at the some provincial administrators in Baringo County who she says support the practice as they shield parents and relatives who subject the girls to FGM.

Recommendations

The organisation is now recommending proper sustained civic education of girls both in schools and out of it on the importance of protective litigation in shielding them from the practice.

"There is need for sustained training for police, chiefs and children officers on the anti-FGM Act, children Act, constitutional provision on FGM and international legal instruments to equip them for prosecution and legal intervention," she reiterated.

Abandoned elders receive a new lease in life

By CATHERINE MURINGI

Joyce Wanjiku Kairu does not regret leaving her well paying job to come back to the country to cater for the old and neglected people.

For this work, for which she left a job abroad, Wanjiku has now earned the name 'Wanjiku the beggar' as she resorts to begging whenever she has nothing to offer to the elderly who she rescues. A venture that has earned her praise and criticism in equal measure. Wanjiku who hails from Mweiga in Nyeri County has been doing charity work through Purity Elderly Care Foundation, an organization she founded in November, last year. She serves as the organisation's executive director. Previously she worked as a project manager with several big companies abroad.

"I began this out of concern on how we treat the elderly people, having observed an incident with my mother. She fell sick with colon cancer which we discovered only six months before her death," she explains.

Wanjiku regrets that if she had discovered the disease earlier, she would have prolonged her mother's life by taking her to hospital. However, she did a lot of travelling during that period, instead of going back home to take care of her ailing mother who needed her.

She says that though parents object to their children leaving their jobs to look after them, at times such sacrifices are necessary.

Wanjiku officially launched the organisation after doing ground and research work earlier. She liaises with community's health workers who identify the elderly and inform her about their cases. According to Wanjiku, some of those neglected have special needs among other problems that include hunger, abandonment and sickness which they identify after conducting a needs assessment.

Among the activities they engage in are giving the elderly a brand new life like building toilets for them as well as cleaning their houses in case they live in dirt among others.

"We do a complete makeover such

as building the toilets in case of sanitation problem, cleaning their houses, buying them blankets, bed and bed sheets among others. In case of sickness, we take them to hospital where we seek free medical attention for them," she explains.

"I am also known as 'Wanjiku the beggar' as I go to doctors and ask them to treat them for free. I am referred by the same name at the Mweiga open air market where I frequent to borrow food for the elderly. Sometimes I move from door to door to borrow food and iron sheets when I do not have money," she explains.

She says the most common cause of abandonment of the elderly is the economical factor, where people leave their homes and abandon their parents. Others, she says, leave in poor financial conditions and cannot manage to care of themselves and their parents. Those well off concentrate on their luxurious lives and forget their parents.

Another one is distance which makes it difficult for children to pay them visits. This mostly occurs to those who travel abroad.

Already, Wanjiku has been to 50 homes and another 145 homes to visit. She has handled about 17 cases where one has died, one from Mukurwe-ini is sick while the rest are recovering from their situations.

According to Wanjiku, women are the most affected as men die soon upon abandonment. "If men are abandoned, they tend to die early as women survive on. About one out of ten we rescue is a man. Men die because they are used to tender care and if neglected, they neglect themselves leading to their quick demise. They are also neglected by the community who are not at ease with visiting men," she explains.

The biggest numbers of those neglected are above the age of 60, but there are others who are younger than that. The organization is currently attending to those above 70 to avoid being overwhelmed.

"The objective of the organisation is to ensure that the elderly live their twilight years in bliss and comfort with reduced stress, living an enjoyable, happy and dignified life in the old age,"

she articulates.

She started offering her services in Kieni before moving out to other parts of Nyeri County. Though all parts of the County are affected, Mukurwe-ini has reported many such cases, followed by Kieni. In Mukurwe-ini, Wanjiku attributes it to stigma while Kieni is a result of poverty.

However, the work is not without challenges. When she came back to Kenya, she started the venture with her own savings until she ran out of finances, leaving her with the option of begging from well wishers. This has hindered her efforts to reach as many homes as she would have liked to.

Another challenge is transport. She is forced to use boda boda (public scooter bikes) to get to her destination. Though she has not met hostility from families and community members she visits, she has engaged in war of words with a politician from Mukurwe-ini.

"He feels that I am exposing him which is not the case. My intention is not to expose him but to complement his efforts," she says, adding that Kieni politicians are cooperative.

However, Wanjiku hails members of the provincial administration who supply her organisation with relief food, enabling her to continue with the noble project.

Her advice to the community is to take care of each other regardless of age. "People should not watch from the periphery. They should know that what they do today will determine the future," she says.

"Old people fought for freedom and must be acknowledged and appreciated because without them Kenyans would not be enjoying their freedom," Wanjiku reiterates.

She adds: "Elderly people get sick and feel that they are troubling their children but children should be there for them despite even if their parents' oppose."

She says moving them from their homes where they are used to towns takes away their independence and



From top: Joyce Wanjiku visits Teresa Muthoni who was ailing at her home. Joyce (squatting), chats with one of the elderly women during a party hosted for them by the foundation in Nyeri County. She speaks to Joseph Gitahi one of the neglected old man in Nyeri county.

Pictures: Catherine Muringi



kills them quickly.

"We should ensure that they live in a hygienic environment to reduce diseases and provide them with proper nutrition and exercise as well. We also need to allow them to be independent and take control of their own lives," she stresses.

Wanjiku partners with other volunteers, Brothers of St. Joseph, Afyaplus Kamili, White Rhino hotel in Nyeri, Family Bank Nyeri branch, Outspan

Hospital, Cooperative Bank, religious groups and the community.

They intend to look for more partners who include donors and sponsors, adopters and care givers. They are also seeking experts to assist them in specialised cases.

Their future plan apart from door-to-door home-based care is to build a home where those with extreme cases can be accommodated. The home will be manned by elderly people as well.

Is politics the solution to land problem in Magarini?

By MASHA TONDO

Landlessness among the coastal people is common word as the people know nothing about the so called land title deeds.

Due to the perennial land ownership problem facing the area people, sitting MPs and civic leaders as well as other potential political candidates capitalise on the squatter problem to market themselves to respective voters.

During campaign periods like that of the coming general elections, aspirants boost themselves and try to tell the electorates that the squatter problem will be fought to the end if the people elect good leaders like them.

Contestants for the newly created seats, mostly castigate poor leadership as the reason why the squatters have continued to stay with no land.

Repossession

It can be recalled how a onetime area MP would promise that land grabbed from indigenous people will be reposessed and given back to the squatters if he is elected to parliament.

The legislator told people how he would fight

for their rights through parliament and ensure all land owned by absentee landlords would be reverted back to the locals.

He also promised that beach land grabbed by private developers would be reposessed and given to locals if the electorates voted him to parliament.

It was not only in Bahari that there were promises of land issues being addressed through politics. Different constituencies in Coast Province were given the same story by those vying for political positions.

Indeed the voters have many MPs in Bahari and the rest of the Coast region but after every five year parliamentary term the squatter problem is still with them.

It is at the Coast region where in most of the upcoming towns and trading centres people own houses on land which does not belong to them.

Absentee landlords

People living in such areas claim that they bought a portion of land to put up a house but are never issued land title deeds as the land belongs to mainly absentee landlords who are

mostly Arabs.

In such areas some people emerge claiming to be agents of the absentee landlords and sell land to interested buyers. The squatters continue paying monthly or yearly land rates.

One such area where squatters have built houses on land that does not belong to them is in Mnarani village, Kilifi town where more than 100 families are living in their own houses but the land belongs to an Arab who has never been seen in the area.

Mnarani Ward Councillor Esther Kache confirms that none of the area people including herself have title deeds for they land they have constructed their houses on.

Tittle deeds

"Not even a single resident of Mnarani village has the so called land title deeds for the portions of land they have built their houses on as the land is said to be owned by an Arab who does not live in the country," she explains.

According to Kache who is also the chairperson of Kilifi Town Council the residents have for many years been fighting over the injustice.

She says squatters formed lobby groups to fight and ensure they no longer pay land rates as that land belongs to nobody.

The residents with the support of the government finally stopped paying for the land rates in recent years.

"For the past few years squatters in Mnarani are no longer paying land rates as they came to discover that they are being conned out of their money by people who claim to be caretakers for the Arabs living out of the country," notes Kache.

Kache who has declared her interest to contest for the women representative seat in Kilifi County, has vowed to push further and ensure that the land in Mnarani land permanently allocated to the squatters.

The MP for Ganze, Francis Baya who has declared his interest for the governor position, Kilifi County says the new constitution gives the regional governments powers to tackle their issues including that of land ownership.

According to Mbaya, the squatter problem facing coastal people will soon be a thing of the past but only if the people elect good leaders who have their welfare in mind.

Mental illness-very common yet unknown to many

By CAROLYNE OYUGI

What started as the pain of the loss of a loved one ended up being the beginning of endless mental problems for Michael Njenga including attempted suicide.

Michael lost his father to a road accident in 1991. The experience was very painful to him and he was in denial for a very long time.

"My father and I were very close, we were best of friends and so when he passed on I did not accept the fact that he had gone for good," he said adding that he always told himself that his father would one day be back and life would be normal.

"I kept telling myself that maybe he would come through our door in a week's time, or even a month's time but I was wrong," Michael narrates.

As time went by he realized that that was impossible, he had just sat for his KCPE exams and was to join Secondary School. His mother, being a house wife had a challenge raising his fees and other expenses in the house for him and his younger sister.

"Finally I joined secondary school and everything was just fine. I was a bright student and performed well academically," said Michael.

Problems however started in form two when his grades started going down. He also had strained relationship with other students and the teachers.

Impact

"One day we were having a Continuous Assessment Test (CAT) and a teacher places a paper on my desk and I snapped. I tore the paper into pieces," he narrates.

As expected he was sent home for being rude and disobedient. At home people did not understand him they all thought that he just did not want to go to school and wanted to lazy at home. Michael did not understand what was happening to him.

After some time he sought medical attention, he underwent many comprehensive tests including head scan to find out what was wrong with him.

"I even thought that I had a heart disease, people started talking about me as we expect and other talked to me. Eventually I went back to school," he said

The situation however got worse, the society had their own expectations and in form two things got worse.

That is when he went suicidal. "I went to a petrol station, lied to the attendant that my mum's car had stalled somewhere and I bought 100 shillings worth of fuel. I drank it and lost conscious. Fortunately it was not far from the petrol station and so the attendant saw me and gave me some first aid," he said

Arrested

He was then taken to a police station in Thika town since attempted suicide is a crime. His mother was then called from Nairobi and three hours later she picked him. The police rebuked me, they also did not understand what I was going through.

He stayed home for a whole term then went back to school. He struggled through secondary education again and joined a college to pursue CPA.

At first it was simple but as time went by he started hanging out with the wrong company drinking frequently and partying.

"That's when I started feeling physical pains, chest tightness, head ache, joint ache, and insomnia. I went to the hospital and the diagnosis was malaria. I took the medication and I was fine for a few weeks and I would go back to the same cycle. This went on for two years without finding out what my problem was," he said

Michael went to public hospitals for a long time and became dependant on alcohol. He



Michael Njenga explains his predicament during an interview. He suffered mental breakdown after the loss of his father who was the sole breadwinner in the family. Many patients and survivors of mental health have had to suffer for long before they get the right diagnosis for their conditions. Photo: Carolyn Oyugi

would drink all kind of alcohol his friends bought him because he was unemployed.

That was the only way he knew to calm his nerves, he was uncomfortable in his body.

He then started hallucinating, he could see faces of people suspended in the air and laughing or crying at him. At times he heard voices inside his head.

"At this point I thought I was bewitched, I did not have any information about mental health and so I did not understand what was happening to me," he said.

Diagnosis

His chest then continued being tight and his mother decided to take him to a chest specialist after talking to her friend who also had chest problems.

The doctor then asked him questions about his sleep and physical feelings. He then referred him to a psychiatrist for a mental check up.

"Like other patients of clinical depression, I started having physical manifestation of mental illness in 1999. I had anxiety issues, I feared talking in front of people, I could not look at people straight in the eyes, I also had self esteem issues, I thought I was ugly and could not look into a mirror. My worst fear was escalators, I could not use it. My heart would beat hard, I would tremble and feel like things are moving inside my skin and I am being pricked," Michael narrated.

Michael's fear for elevators was as a projection of his past experience, he once almost fell trying to use it. So he hated it and

"At this point I thought I was bewitched, I did not have any information about mental health and so I did not understand what was happening to me."

— Michael Njenga

thought he would fall again. These fears interfered with his normal life. He was on anti-depressants and anxiety medications for some time.

After six months of medication he started feeling well and stopped using them. He was fine for three to four months but slowly he started slipping back into to depression. That was his cycle for many years and it was inhibiting his recovery.

"I was mixing the drugs with alcohol and some of them are sensitive, the doctor also did not tell me of their side effects (some of them have physical side effects like stiff neck), some also makes it hard for you to wake up in the morning. As a result I ended up being on medication for a very long time," he narrates.

Michael then came across Users and Survivors of Psychiatry Kenya- USP Kenya in 2007. He met and interacted with them. There is where he got his psycho-social support interventions, coping mechanisms and for him that was a very huge turning point.

"People do not address issues that come with mental illness; they take their medications and sleep. The group accelerated my healing process because I was able to overcome many issues. My mother was supportive of me; she gave me the best medication she could afford. She even helped me change my career choice. All my life I wanted to be a lawyer but the illness came and so I had to do a reality check," he said.

Fear

I had to let myself mourn my father's death, which was one of the causes of my poor mental state. I was not being true to myself I am however still struggling with the fear of cars and driving. My father died in a car accident and so that is the reason for my fear of cars he literally tremble when inside a car. I have worked for a car hire company but whenever I had an opportunity to drive I would turn down the offer.

I am very lucky that I did not undergo stigma from people close to me. They somehow understood me and they made my recovery easy.

20 years later, Kwamaya squatters still wait for demarcation

By WALKER MWANDOTO

In 1999, then Agricultural Minister Simeon Nyachae attempted to end 30 years of struggle on a 2,230 acre farm in Kauma Location, Jaribuni Division, Ganze District in Kilifi County.

Nyachae planted a commemorative coconut tree during the ceremony. "The planting of this coconut tree will be a living testimony to prove to whoever will lay claim on this land that it is your land given to you by the government with blessings from President Moi," Nyachae was quoted to have said as he watered the tree watched by thousands of squatters in the presence of then area MP Noah Katana Ngala who was Minister for Tourism and Wildlife.

More than 21 years later, Members of Kwamaya Farmers Co-operative Society Limited are still waiting for the division of their farm handed over to them by the government.

Kwamaya Farm is located at the end of the Kilifi Creek, the arm of the Indian Ocean. This area has a long history dating back to days of slave trade times when the land was forcefully taken from the indigenous Kauma community by an Arab who later sold it to a colonial settler known as a Mr Meire, mispronounced by the locals as Maya.

Maintenance

In 1949 the farm was again given to another white man who after independence of this country failed to maintain it and it was subsequently taken over by the Government of Kenya.

On May 4, 1965, the late Cabinet Minister Ronald Ngala wrote to the Ministry of Agriculture asking the government to release the land to the Kauma community who were then willing to buy it for resettling.

According to records made available in the Ministry of Agriculture, the Kauma community raised KSh390,000 for buying the land.

There was an aggressive fundraising campaign and the people of Kauma contributed whatever they had in order to raise the required amount.

When Nyachae visited the area, he announced that he had been instructed by then President Moi to give the land to the Kwamaya people to settle in.

Demarcation

He said the Government was going to demarcate the land so that each member of the society gets a title deed. Some parcels of land were to be set aside for trading centres, hospital and school.

"However, it took them over 30 years and four months to get the land and despite that they are still waiting for the Government to go and demarcate the plots and give them title deeds," observes Josephat Karisa, area councillor.

To date Kwamaya farm squatters have not been settled officially and they have no documents of ownership.

According to reports from the local leaders including chiefs who asked not to be named, some names of the local residents were removed from the original list of squatters and replaced with names of people from outside the area.

The residents are now appealing to the Government to investigate and ensure that the names of the rightful owners of the plots replaced are put in place.

No more stigma for people living with AIDS

By JANE MUTUA

While it has not been strange to find those who have been infected with HIV as being in denial, things are now changing and most people have come to accept their status. This is after aggressive sensitization programmes and counselling by various organizations.

Initially, most infected persons could not accept the situation when they tested positive and most of them were afraid of stigmatisation.

As the case used to be, it was not easy for people to visit voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) centres, due to misconceptions associated with the disease.

Acceptance

Against all odds, a group of women and men from Kyandoa village, in Mwingi Central District have accepted their status after testing positive as well as gone public. In an interview with *Reject*, Mary Kimala Kirungu chairperson for people living with Aids at Kyandoa Community Based Organisation said they have decided to go public about the disease.

"I lived with the virus for a long until 2005 when I decided to go for examination and to my dismay, I tested HIV positive," said Kirungu, a mother of two.

"*Natwaiwe Kikamba kya tene ki kaweto* (I got married under Kamba traditional culture known as *kaweto*, to a fellow woman)," said Kirungu.

When she tested positive, she had no option but to disclose to her 'woman' husband, who encouraged her to start taking anti-retroviral drugs.

Relatives

"My relatives responded positively to my condition as well as my sons who always keep on reminding me to take the drugs," Kirungu explained.

Kyandoa Community Based Organisation was formed early 2000, and led by chairman Joseph Mwinzi. It later dawned on the group that they needed to start a programme on HIV and Aids where Kirungu was elected chair of the persons living with HIV

when she disclosed her status to other members.

"We have other programmes within the organisation that include activities for orphans, widows as well as those that are general for all people," explained Mwinzi.

Most of the people living with Aids that are members of the organisation are women aged between 28 and 40.

"We are 24 in number, including two men," explained Kirungu.

A research carried by *Reject* indicated that men have shunned joining community groups. Some just ignore while others are busy looking for daily bread for their family.

"I know there are many men outside there who are HIV positive but it is hard to approach them unlike women who are easily approachable," noted Kirungu.

Counselling

She said they move from door to door doing testing and counselling with a qualified doctor, and she gives a good example for her own experience about the virus. They also sensitise people who are infected on how to take drugs and also train the affected on how to handle the infected persons.

"In our findings after doing tests on persons, most people whom we find to be HIV positive are single mothers," observed Kirungu, adding that being HIV positive is not the end of life.

"There are people dying every day from other diseases after being sick for a short period and while many of those who are HIV positive live along time," explained Kirungu. She noted: "For this reason, I do not fear Aids since it is just like any other illness."

She noted that they are active in trying to live healthy and grow various drought resistant crops such as sorghum, vegetable as well as doing



Members of Kyandoa community based organization after one of their meetings. A project by the group to have a balanced diet. Mary Kirungu the chairperson for the people living with HIV and AIDS in Kyandoa.

Pictures: Jane Mutua

goats rearing project among other activities so they do not suffer food insecurity.

"Since all of us are housewives, we have joined hands and come up with several projects that sustain our livelihood. We get the balance diet as recommended for us by our doctors through our own efforts of growing various crops."

Despite their status, they are able to do all activities unlike with the other

diseases which make people weak and unable perform other activities.

However, the only challenge they face is when they have to walk a long distance to health centres to get drugs and the situation is worse when one lacks bus fare.

Kirungu noted that they get their anti-retroviral drugs from different government hospitals such as Tei wa Yesu in Kyuso District as well as Waita and Mwingi district hospitals which

are far from their homes.

"We are appealing to the government to make an arrangement to bring these drugs nearer where we can easily access them. It takes most of us the whole day to go get the drugs therefore leaving our daily activities unattended," explained Kirungu.

She encouraged people to go for testing in order to know their status because then they gather courage easily relate to other people.

Experts want men involved to prevent child transmission of HIV

By HENRY OWINO

Most mothers are always advised and encouraged to breastfeed their young ones exclusively for the first six months as this helps to protect the baby against diseases.

According to medical experts, the best way to nourish an infant is through exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months before other foods are introduced.

Breast feeding

While previously, women living with HIV were discouraged from this noble task that promotes bonding between children and mothers, there are those who argue that they should breastfeed without introducing the children to other foods.

For such mothers, replacement feeding is the only 100 per cent effective way to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV after birth. Other risks of infant mortality from ailments such as diarrhoea

must be taken into account as they may be signs of bigger problems.

Arguments are being brought forth that by choosing not to breastfeed, a mother risks revealing her HIV status and becoming a target for stigma and discrimination.

She must be able to cope with this problem and resist pressure from friends and relatives to breastfeed.

Linda Oyier is a young mother in her 20s and is living with the virus and does not breastfeed her children to avoid infecting them through mother-to-child-transmission of HIV.

Oyier, a mother of two says she is young and needs to raise a family with her husband, yet she cannot breastfeed her child.

Sister help

However, since her baby must be breastfed, Oyier has found a good Samaritan in the name of her sister who has been breast feeding her children. Although Oyier's sister is

married elsewhere, they live in the same neighbourhood and she is able to provide the necessary nutrients the baby requires for the first three months.

"It is not easy but we discuss and come to a consensus that includes talking about our menstrual cycle and family private matters," explains Oyier.

Planning

She notes: "We discuss with my sister so that we do not fall pregnant at the same time to avoid a scenario where she is over burdened with breastfeeding."

Oyier learnt of her HIV status in 2007 when she went to deliver her first born.

"Doctors at the facility advised to chose between breastfeeding and undergoing a surgical operation that would render me infertile but I opted not to breastfeed," Oyier explains.

According to Dr Francis Nyamiobo of Kenya Aids Control Project there are various discussions on

how to prevent-mother-to-child-transmission of HIV. He says plans are underway to put all HIV positive pregnant women on antiretroviral drugs (ARVs).

"This will help to reduce the viral load in the mother's body hence the chances of the virus being transmitted to the child during normal delivery being reduced," explains Nyamiobo.

He notes that men are often unaware of their HIV status yet women are subjected to HIV testing at antenatal clinics.

Strategising

"We are planning to include men in HIV testing together with their wives so that when the pregnant mother comes for regular checkups, the husband accompanies her for the test as well," says Nyamiobo. He adds: "In fact we want to rename the Prevention-of-Mother-to-Child-Transmission (PMCT) campaign programme to Prevention-of-Parents-to-Child-Transmission

(PPCT) so as to include men."

He observes that mothers living with HIV should not breastfeed their young ones as that is another way of infecting their babies despite being born free from infection. He says intake of ARVs should be encouraged among pregnant women regardless of the CD4 count in the body.

Positive living

He explains that to eliminate parent to child transmission completely, stigma and discrimination against people living with the HIV virus must stop and be replaced by positive living as HIV or Aids is no longer a disease but a condition.

Nyamiobo reiterates that the World Health Organisation recommends replacement feeding for women in low and middle-income countries, adding that many companies nowadays allow breastfeeding mothers to do so in their premises where special rooms have been allocated for them.

Persons with disabilities lament lack of consideration

By HENRY OWINO

Physically challenged persons have expressed fears over continued marginalization by the government which is making their life even more difficult.

A group of persons with living with disabilities pointed out that they are being sidelined and discriminated upon in terms of employment opportunities, education, healthcare, transportation, accessibility to public premises, decision making and marriage among other factors.

Speaking at Jeremic SDA Church in Kibera, Fridah Monah, founder and chairperson of About Women and Realities of Disability (AWARD) a community based organisation, said persons with disabilities are facing several challenges some of which are open discrimination.

Monah noted that when it comes to employment opportunities, the disabled are marginalised.

"Policy makers are restructuring policies and manifestos for next government and yet persons with disabilities are not actively involved," she noted.

Monah who holds a degree in Social Ministry from Tangaza College, a constituent of Catholic University of Eastern Africa says she has always been invited for job interviews but turned down due to her disability.

She regretted that many persons with disabilities who have very good qualifications are being ignored and Government is quiet about it.

"The Government behaves as if we don't exist or just assume that we should be on the streets begging," she said.

Education

Monah observed that lack of equal opportunity to education for persons with disabilities is on the rise and the Government should establish schools for persons with special needs if targets for free and compulsory schooling of Millennium Development Goals are to be achieved.

"I always feel very bitter when you are invited for an interview because you qualify for the advertised position, only to be told your condition does not meet the job's requirements which in other words means 'our company does not employ people with disabilities,'" observed Monah.

Other areas where person's living with disability face challenges include healthcare services. In clinics and hospitals nurses force them to queue just like any other physically able person. According to Monah, in reproductive health services, the beds are high and not easy for one on a wheelchair or using crutches to climb. "They don't expect disabled persons to bear children since they are not catered for at all in the provision of such services," noted Monah.

Her sentiments are echoed by Mildred Adhiambo, chairlady of Physically Challenged Women (PCW) Self

Help Group in Makadara, who reiterated that sign language remains a barrier when they are in the hospital talking to nurses and doctors. They are forced to hire an interpreter at an extra cost that is not part of the hospital bill.

Without interpreters, most disabled patients have taken wrong dosage for not understanding the doctor's prescription leading to premature deaths.

"Why does the government want us to die early, or it is that they want to eliminate us? God loves us and the constitution now protects us fully," noted Adhiambo.

According to Adhiambo most people never give attention to independent persons living with disabilities. "They always expect such persons to be on the streets begging and seeking for sympathy."

Clarity

According to Adhiambo, there is a need for clarity on the form of assistance set up for support groups dealing with disability issues both at individual and group levels. She regretted that the media also portrays persons living with disabilities as needy, sympathizers and poor.

She cautioned that disability can happen to anybody any moment in life so there is need to address implementation of the constitutional requirements affecting persons with disabilities.

"Being disabled is not a ticket for begging on the streets or looking to people for sympathy as most people perceive us. No, it is just a condition that can find anybody when traveling in car, in the bathroom inside the house, in the pitch as a player, anywhere! So, we are just okay apart from the challenge in mobility," observed Adhiambo.

Lack of empowerment for persons with disabilities has led many into the streets to beg. Others have been reported raped or lured to foreign countries to work as shamba boys or house helps with little pay.

Adhiambo observed that there is even discrimination in marriage as most women would not mind marrying a man who is disabled but men shy away from marrying disabled females.

"Some women have been divorced after being in long marriages with men claiming they cannot stay with them in such condition," she noted.

Adhiambo urged effective political representation for persons with disabilities by persons with disabilities themselves. "This will help in proportional representation in the government as to who will address their sentiment and grievances as a whole," she says. "For instance, in sports disabled people are not given support by government, media and the community."

She cited the recently concluded Paralympics in London where most persons with disabilities could not



attend because there was no support from the government yet many qualified for various tournaments.

Adhiambo said that there is gender insensitivity when it comes to public toilets for the disabled. She noted there is always just one toilet with a picture of a wheelchair yet for others they come in a set of two — male and female.

Privacy

"Why is gender sensitivity for the disabled overlooked when it comes to privacy?" posed Adhiambo.

Several developments have taken place with exclusion of consideration for persons with disability. According to Adhiambo, construction of the super highway should have a section where persons with disability can cross. "If it is left with that stretch that even normal people have difficulties crossing, then what about disabled?" she posed.

The disabled persons also observed that the case is the same when it comes to public service vehicles (PSVs). Here, the drivers either drive off if a person with disability wants to board or the conductor forces them to pay double the fare simply because the wheelchair occupies extra space.

According to Monah there are many instances where matatu crew shout at physically challenged persons for being too slow to board or alight from a vehicle. "The transport sector has become unconducive yet some of them become disabled through accidents due to reckless driving."

They have also not escaped being victims to corrupt officials. This is why Fred Onchonga Kenyana, is worried about the whereabouts of the funds allocated to persons with disabilities by the Government. "The money was meant for all physically



From top: Fridah Monah, Founder and chairperson AWARD-Kibera. Fridah in a group discussion with team members. Tressa Atieno (left) and Pamela Adipo displaying some of the items made by a group of persons living with disabilities. Pictures: Henry Owino

challenged persons in the country as stated in the national budget but to date nothing fruitful has come out of the kitty," he noted.

Onchonga reiterated that there was another KSh500 contribution

made by every person living with disability towards exception of taxes to all physically challenged persons but it seems it was a trick by some unscrupulous and unsympathetic commen to raise money for selfish gains.



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