



Catalyze Without Offense:
Daily Nation Living Magazine and the “Laura” story
Epilogue

The *Nation* columnist and features writer Mildred Ngesa ultimately decided to write the story of “Laura” as an impassioned first person narrative. She opened the piece with the scene of holding Laura close to her chest during the interview at the shelter. She opted to write transparently about both what she knew and what she did not know about the case: Laura was 11 years old, HIV positive, and suffered from severe genital warts; advocates suspected that she had been molested; but no one, not even the mother or Laura herself, had been able to shed light on how the girl came by these injuries.

Ngesa recounted her own reluctance to question Laura further. She closed the scene with the woman who ran the shelter suggesting that Laura’s reticence was common among abused children, and that she was confident that in time the girl would open up to her counselors. From there, Ngesa broke back to the beginning of the case and narrated in broad terms the story of her reporting, beginning with the photograph she received, through the interview with the mother and Laura’s medical prognosis.

Ngesa prepared three sidebars to accompany the story. The first, titled “The photo that haunts me,” focused on the photograph. Ngesa described the image in graphic details. She also wrote about her personal reaction to it and the reasons the *Nation* decided not to publish it. Then she described the reactions of five men—an advertising executive, a boutique owner, a comedian, a printer and an anti-violence activist—to the image. Photos of four of the five men accompanied the story; each photo captured the reaction of the man looking at the photo for the first time.

In the second sidebar, titled “Speak up today, show you care,” Ngesa implored readers who had information on abuse cases to alert the proper authorities. This sidebar was accompanied by contact information for 11 advocacy groups and institutions. The third sidebar, titled “Help Heal Laura,” invited readers to contribute to Laura’s medical costs by contacting Ngesa directly.

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The story ran on Wednesday June 1, 2005. A “teaser” on the front page directed readers to the story in the Living section of the paper. The following day, the *Nation* was inundated with calls from readers wanting to donate money to Laura’s cause. The response was so intense that Ngesa decided to set up a fund, which she managed for several years (independent of the *Nation*). The fund ultimately helped pay both for Laura’s surgery and her HIV treatment. Laura eventually told her therapists that she had been sexually abused by a mentally retarded neighbor (it remained an open question whether the mother’s boyfriend had also molested her). However, the neighbor had died two years earlier.

As of spring 2012, Ngesa remained in touch with Laura. But, she says, “there are questions that still haunt me to date, questions which even though we have repeatedly interacted with Laura’s mother because of managing the fund for her school fees and medical needs, have prevented me from fully embracing her.”

For example, I always wonder if she knew of her child’s abuse but hid the fact; if she in her drunkenness (apparently--we later learnt she used to go on traditional drinking sprees and come home drunk sometimes and turn violent) “allowed” her daughter to be violated; the fact that she had obviously threatened her daughter to be silent despite the abuse.¹

Kenya’s Sexual Offenses Act was signed into law in July 2006. Among its provisions, the landmark legislation broadened the range of sex crimes, mandated the establishment of a pedophile registry and introduced minimum sentences. The act was the product of a multi-year effort instigated by a broad-based coalition of government, civil society and media actors. The direct policy impact of Ngesa’s story about Laura was difficult to identify. However, the authors of a history of the legislation argued that the media played a critical role in the passage of the act, in part by publicizing cases of sexual violence.²

¹ Mildred Ngesa email, June 15, 2012.

² W. Onyango-Ouma, Njoki Ndung’u, Nancy Baraza and Harriet Birungi, *The Making of the Kenya Sexual Offenses Act, 2006: Behind the Scenes*, Kwani Trust, 2009, p.7.