

DISPATCHES

A trusted servant's gross betrayal

By STEPHEN MBURU

When a Kiambu family hired a young man as a farmhand two years ago, they could not have guessed how much anguish and devastation he would bring to their home.

He claimed to have lost his national identity card during the tribal clashes in Laikipia District. His name, he said, was Maina Mwangi from Ol Ng'arua division in Laikipia.

Mwangi proved to be a good worker, and was gradually entrusted with a lot of responsibility, including the care of the three children in the home. He was given spare keys to almost every building and room in the homestead.

Four months ago, however, the man they had put so much trust in suddenly turned their lives into a living nightmare. On the morning of Sunday, June 17, he pounced on one of the children, 13-year-old girl Juliet Wanjiru*, as she studied in the living room, and raped her. He took a machete and slashed her on the neck and then hit her on the head with an axe in an apparent attempt to murder her.

Miraculously, she survived.

Dark Sunday

That morning, Juliet's mother, uncle and grandmother were going to visit a relative in a hospital in Nairobi.

Juliet, who was in Standard Eight, opted to stay home to study.

"My daughter was happy and bright, having just returned from Sunday School," her mother recalls. "I instructed her to wash the house and utensils, change the seat covers and feed my two cows."

She knew that the girl would be safe because the family's trusted farmhand was around. She left at around 11am.

But when she came back at 5.30 in the evening, the house had been locked from the outside — with a new padlock — and all the curtains were drawn. There was no sign of life.

The cows had not been fed.

"I sensed that something was wrong because it was unusual for the house to be locked with a padlock."

She remembered that her mother had bought some new padlocks the previous day. One of the spare keys fitted the padlock on the door.

"When I got in, my daughter's books were lying open on the table in the living-room. But there was no sign of her. Nothing had been done in the house. Everything was as I had left it in the

morning.

Trembling with fear, she called out her daughter's name. But there was no response.

"I tiptoed into the bedroom and what I saw nearly knocked me out. My daughter was lying on her bed, naked. The bed itself was covered with blood. She had a cut on the neck, her head was swollen and the blood had clotted. Her eyes had sunk deep into their sockets."

Thinking that Juliet was dead, she started to scream, bringing neighbours to her door.

The girl, who was unconscious, was driven by her uncle to Kikuyu Hospital, where two cuts on her neck and another near the right ear were stitched. Her skull had also been fractured, and she was transferred to the Aga Khan Hospital. She was in a coma for one week.

Loss of memory

She pauses, and turns to speak to Juliet, sending her to the kitchen for a glass of water. The girl gets up and leaves the room, but returns a few minutes later without it. She asks her mother to tell her again what she was to bring.

This happens frequently nowadays. Juliet often forgets things. In fact, she cannot remember anything about her life before that Sunday, when her whole world came crashing down.

Before the attack, she was a brilliant student. Her progress report for the past three years shows that she was always number one or two in her class.

"She used to be the best in class. She was confident and thorough in her work," says her class teacher.

Now, her speech is incoherent and she cannot write full sentences.

"She will raise her hand to answer a question, but will forget the moment you ask her to answer. She has yet to recover her reading and writing skills."

But he is optimistic, nevertheless. "We had, and still have, high hopes that she will go to a national secondary school."

Her mother fears that the rapist might strike again "to complete his killer mission".

"This man could be a murderer. As if raping my daughter wasn't enough, he battered her and left her for dead. But God is great because He gave her back to me," she says, fighting back tears.

The suspect was employed by the Juliet's grandmother. He was introduced to her by two other farmhands in the neighbourhood.

The old woman's son, a retired teacher, was sceptical about hiring him because he had no form



of identification. But his mother argued that the young men who had brought him knew his background because they were also from Laikipia.

She now regrets her decision: "That was the gravest mistake I ever made. Had I heeded my son's advice, I would not have hired the man in the first place."

"He looked so innocent. I trusted him with almost everything. I had come to think of him as my grandson. I even bought him shirts," she says.

No information

With no concrete information on Mwangi's background, the police have been unable to track him down.

The two farmhands who claimed to have known him have since fled the area after allegedly stealing from their employers.

A senior police officer at Tigoni, where the incident was reported two days after the June 17 incident, said that the case was still being investigated. But the police did not have much to go on.

"We cannot make much progress because we have neither his ID card number nor a photograph. We need the cooperation of the public to bring him to book."

All they have is a physical description of him. He is in his 20s, about 5'5", and left-handed. He has a broken left incisor and is illiterate and shy, an introvert. He is almost always in a cap.

Strange behaviour

In retrospect, Juliet's grandmother had noticed some changes in Mwangi's behaviour in the two months before the attack.

"He had become difficult and secluded. Sometimes he would refuse to perform his daily duties like feeding poultry or cattle. And whenever I sent him to the shops, he would go reluctantly, return in minutes and head straight to his house. When I asked him about the changes I had noticed and told him that I no longer trusted him, he just laughed it off."

Four days before the attack, Mwangi had reportedly confessed to sleeping with his employer's housegirl, who had only been hired that month.

The girl's mother, too, had noticed his strange behaviour. "When working in the shamba or walking along the path, he wanted to be directly behind me. I would feel uncomfortable and tell him to walk ahead of me."

Juliet's uncle warns potential employers to be cautious: "A rapist and murderer is on the loose. He is likely to do the same thing he did here."

Despite all she has been through, Juliet has shown admirable strength and determination, and is trying to get back on her feet. She attends counselling sessions at the Nairobi Women's Hospital to help her overcome the trauma. And while HIV Aids tests at the Aga Khan Hospital were negative, she still has to go back for tests.

Though she may not remember much about the past, the jolly girl has dreams, big dreams: "I aim to be number eight this term, and finally make it to my dream school — Alliance, St Anne's Lioki, or Loreto Girls. I would like to be a doctor."

*The name of the victim has been changed to protect her identity.

Old prejudices blamed for vanishing girls

By SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN

An alarming drop in the number of girls born in India is being blamed on a strong cultural preference for sons — coupled with cheap and widely available medical tests that can tell parents the sex of their unborn child.

Data from India's 2001 census shows that the sex ratio for children aged 0-6 years fell from 945 females per 1,000 males in 1991 to 927 in 2001. The new figures give India one of the world's lowest ratios for women to men; the statistical norm is 1,050 females for every 1,000 males.

The drop is largely due to the widespread but illegal practice of using ultrasound scans to identify female foetuses and then aborting them.

In 1994, the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technologies (PNDT) Act banned the practice. But it has proved toothless; seven years after enactment, not a single conviction has taken place.

Data from states such as Punjab, Haryana and Gujarat — the first to ban the use of sex determination tests — points to the PNDT's failure. "It is precisely in these states that the

ratio of baby girls has declined dramatically," says feminist Madhu Kishwar.

In 1991, two states had child sex ratios below 880; today there are five states — Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi and Gujarat — and union territories in this category. The Punjab-Haryana-Himachal Pradesh belt in the north is called by some 'India's Bermuda Triangle', where girls vanish without a trace.

Even states with better socio-economic indicators, like Karnataka, have shown a dip in the child sex ratio.

The pronounced skew in sex ratios has long been a feature in India. Girls and women routinely suffer from poorer health and nutrition, infanticide and high rates of death from pregnancy and childbirth. Experts say that ultrasound technology simply compounds an age-old prejudice.

Since their introduction in the 1980s, ultrasound clinics have mushroomed all over the country. No village is too remote for enterprising doctors who ferry portable equipment in vans.

"Villages might not have clean drinking water but they will have an ultra-sound machine," notes

Dr C M Francis of Community Health Cell, a non-governmental organisation.

The government is finally taking action, spurred by a Supreme Court directive in May mandating the government to crack down on unscrupulous medics who continue to tell parents the sex of their unborn babies.

Clinics openly advertise their foetal sex determination techniques, charging on average about 500 rupees (just over \$10).

If the foetus is female, doctors or midwives are on hand to conduct an illegal abortion — for an additional fee.

Abortion is legal when a woman's life or health is at risk, or in cases of foetal impairment, conception from rape or contraceptive failure.

The reluctance by impoverished parents to raise large amounts of money for a girl's dowry is often cited as the reason for preference of sons. Parvathi, a mother of two daughters in Bangalore, says: "Better to spend 5,000 rupees (\$106) now, than raise 500,000 rupees later for the dowry." Fliers advertising the services of the sex determination clinics blare out the same message.

Parvathi says she will have the foetus scanned

next time she gets pregnant to avoid having another daughter.

But the preference for sons cannot be blamed on poverty alone, since the drop in the number of girls is sharpest in prosperous states like Maharashtra and Punjab. Some wealthy communities are enthusiastic clients of expensive new techniques that use genetic manipulation to select male foetuses.

"The rich are most keen to know the sex of the unborn child, for they want a male offspring to take care of the family business. They see no use for a daughter," says Dr Hema Divakar, a leading gynaecologist in Bangalore active in the campaign against sex-selective abortion.

Family and social pressure on women is so great that even some educated and working women prefer to have a male child. "That way, I can stop after one child," says 26-year-old Asha, who works in a bank. "If not, I will have to have more children. That will jeopardise my career," she worries.

India's religious leaders have condemned sex selective abortions. Last April, the Akal Takht, the highest Sikh religious authority, issued an edict that any Sikh involved in the practice would be ex-communicated. (PANOS Features)

A village might not have clean water, but it will have an ultra-sound machine