

Discrimination follows Aids orphans to school

By MARIA WAMBUA

Nyumbani Children's Home, situated in Nairobi's upmarket Karen area, has offered hope to tens of abandoned and orphaned HIV-positive children, giving them a home and a loving family environment to grow up in.

But the social stigma that has dogged them from birth seems to be rearing its ugly head again. Many public schools in the city, says Nyumbani's chief manager, Protus Lumiti, says some schools have refused to enrol children from the home because of their HIV status.

This, he says, has forced Nyumbani to seek admission for its children in private schools, placing a heavy financial burden on the institution. And even in the few schools that have agreed to admit children from the home, the admissions have come with conditions.

Lumiti is particularly unhappy with public schools within the Karen area, which would be very convenient for children from the home to attend. But Nyumbani's children have been unable to get any places there.

"We have tried to get admission for our children in these schools since 1998 but all in vain," he says.

With education having been made free in public schools, the administrations say they are over-enrolled and so cannot take children from Nyumbani. Out of eight public primary schools that the home has tried to get its children into, says Lumiti, only one has agreed to take them in, but on condition that the children are never dropped at the school by the home's official bus.

"They demanded that the children be dropped far off, then they would walk to the school," Lumiti notes.

Similar problems

Another home for HIV-positive orphans based in Langata has been experiencing similar problems.

Nyumbani's total expenditure on education alone this year stands at Sh1,013,400. It is money which, says Lumiti, could instead have gone to meeting the children's medical expenses.

The home made an official written complaint to the Nairobi City Council's education department, which, in turn issued a memo to the schools concerned instructing them to admit children from the home. But the memo has had no impact, as doors remain closed to Nyumbani's children. The home also wrote a letter of complaint to the Ministry of Education last December, asking for its intervention in the matter, but there has been no response so far.

Nyumbani has 88 children, aged between seven months and 20 years. It offers permanent residence for the children until they are 18 — even beyond if necessary. Some of the children turn HIV negative after a while, adds Lumiti. "When this happens, we ask for family adoption through the normal adoption process," he says.

The home currently has 34 children in a private primary school and one in Form One. Ten more children are scheduled to join primary schools next term.

The home takes care of the children's medical, nutrition and psychosocial needs. "Life is precious, and as long as these children are alive they have a right to education, just like any other child. It is our duty and society's responsibility to ensure that the right to education is applied uniformly to all children," he says.

Even when they do get a place to learn, children from the home have been discriminated against and stigmatised. At first, they were not allowed to eat with the rest. They had to wait for the others to eat first before they could be served. The school had also had set aside cutlery specifically for the children from Nyumbani, but this problem has since been solved, says Lumiti.

He notes that even though the administrators of the few schools that have admitted Nyumbani children have no problem with their HIV status, some of them have suffered a severe loss of business. Some parents withdrew their children from the schools and incited others to do follow suit as soon as they learnt that the institutions had admitted



File

HELPING HAND: A volunteer assists children at Nyumbani Children's Home during a painting class.

children from Nyumbani. Some of the schools, says Lumiti, are forced to choose between admitting the children to their schools at the risk of losing other pupils on the one hand, and turning them away on the other.

Nyumbani has been trying to educate communities on the care of people with HIV/Aids and to eliminate baseless fears, helping them understand that one cannot catch the virus simply by living in the same house with an infected person. It has a special outreach community-based care programme known as "Lea Toto" for HIV-positive children who are living with their relatives. It covers Kenge-mi, Kariobangi, Korogocho and Dagoretti areas of Nairobi. The headteachers of Karen C and St Mary's Karen primary schools, both of which are

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situated near Nyumbani, deny ever having refused to admit children from Nyumbani. They both accuse the home of failing seek admission for their children on time.

They both say that Nyumbani never registers their children for admission on time with every other applicant and instead seek admission way after the schools have filled all openings.

Karen C's headmaster, Mr John Kahang'i, says the school's entry point is usually Standard One, and yet Nyumbani always seeks admissions in Classes Two and above. The school hardly has any vacancies in those classes. In the past, he says, the school was under strict instructions not to admit more than 50 pupils in each class and was therefore unable to accommodate Nyumbani, especially because its applications were late.

"Now that we can have than 50 children per class, we will be able to admit Nyumbani children as long as they come to register on time with everybody else in June this year," says Kahang'i. He denies having turned any children away because of their HIV status, adding that the school already has some children who are HIV-positive.

St Mary's Karen Primary School also has some HIV-positive pupils, says headteacher Pauline

Igria, and so the issue of discrimination does not arise. Nyumbani, she says, brings a long list of children whom they want to have admitted at ago, yet the school only has 25 openings for new parents every year, and these have to be distributed evenly and fairly to all applicants.

"If Nyumbani comes late and with a list of 22 children, do they really expect to be allotted all the vacancies?" asks Igria. "We do not give special treatment to any applicant. If they want to have their children admitted here they should come and apply on time like every other parent."

Nyumbani, she adds, should seek to distribute their children to various other schools instead of expecting to get them all into one school.

Elizabeth Wafula, a senior deputy director of education in charge of a newly-established department specifically set up to address complaints and grievances from the public, says no

child should be denied the right to education on the basis of HIV status. She promises to look into the Nyumbani complaint.

At City Hall, Deputy Director of Education Jane Kimani admits that there is an element of stigma and discrimination against HIV-positive pupils in some council schools, but she describes such cases as isolated and blames them on lack of understanding.

The council's teachers, she says, have now been specially trained to deal with the issue since HIV/Aids was integrated into the schools syllabus. Still, she adds, the training needs to be intensified if it has to have an impact. Everybody, including children, need to be sensitised if problems associated with stigma and discrimination are to be eliminated. "People need to not only be informed but transformed," says Kimani.

In August last year, the government issued guidelines aimed at scaling up measures to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV/Aids, which mainly occur during pregnancy (5-10 per cent), delivery (40-60 per cent) and through breast-feeding (25 per cent). Ministry of health statistics indicate that in Kenya, 10 per cent of all reported HIV/Aids cases occur in children under five years, all of whom are due to seek admission to school as they reach school-going age.

— An AMWIK Feature

Hawkers take downtown territory from flesh peddlers

By OSCAR OBONYO

At a popular bar on Latema Road, Nairobi, several women sit drinking, keeping a keen eye on the men walking into the bar and those already sitting around the tables.

Clad in short, tight, see-through outfits, and wearing come-hither expressions, it is obvious that the women are commercial sex workers.

Soon, one of the girls walks out with her pick, but returns almost immediately, cursing and clicking her tongue in annoyance, to the amusement of the other women.

"He has refused to go to the lodging," explains the girl, Loice.

This has been happening more and more recently. A client is hooked, but once outside the bar, refuses to go to the lodgings. Yet the building that houses the rooms where the women have been taking their clients for 'business' is just next to the club.

Hawkers have filled every open space of the corridor leading to the building, spreading their wares all over and almost sealing the entrance to the lodging house.

Having operated at the area for some time, some of the hawkers now understand the nature of business that Loice and her colleagues engage in, and gaze at them and their clients with sneers every time they head towards the lodgings.

"Kwa kweli jamaa hawa wametukatisia kabisa (Honestly, these people have ruined it all for us)," laments Loice.

Only clients who are totally drunk have the guts to face the crowd of hawkers and their customers, she observes.

Loice is one of hundreds of young women who roam the streets of Nairobi every evening in search of men willing to pay for sex. As city authorities moved hawkers from the central business district, they unwittingly affected commercial sex work.

Slump in business

Hundreds of commercial sex workers are now complaining bitterly about a slump in business following the hawkers' invasion of their "working territories" in downtown alleys, where their trade has previously thrived.

"All action has now shifted towards this end of town, including the backstreets where we used to lean on the walls while trying to woo clients. The area is now full of humanity," laments Betty, one of the aggrieved women.

Most of the younger women are in the trade secretly and fear exposure, but with the huge crowds of hawkers and their customers in these areas, they run a high risk of bumping into neighbours, relatives or even parents.

The relocation of hawkers from the central business district in February was primarily aimed at ridding the city of congestion and dirt from the hawkers' wares. It now seems to be achieving more than its initial objective.

The hawking menace has been an itchy issue in the capital city for decades. The problem peaked shortly after the new Narc Government came to power last December, with an estimated 15,000 hawkers taking over every available space in the city's streets, pavements and parking lots, and turning Nairobi into a noisy marketplace.

The hawkers were cleared from the streets after a meeting with Local Government Minister Karisa Maitha. At the meeting, it was agreed that the hawkers would move to the city's alleys and back streets.

Widespread hawking and commercial sex work are both trends necessitated by high unemployment levels and a non-performing economy.

Although commercial sex workers routinely operate for clients in designated bars, nightclubs and discotheques, a scarcity of clients owing to the HIV/Aids scare has compelled them ply their trade on the streets.

The women say they have also had to adjust from the traditional trend of hosting a client all night long, to what they now call "short-time". The latter arrangement enables them to maximise on time by hosting many clients for short periods.

Most commercial sex workers in downtown Nairobi have largely been operating from the backstreets, or hooking them from drinking joints. It is not always safe for the commercial sex workers. They are routinely rounded up by the police and harassed or charged with loitering with immoral intent.