

COVER STORY

The post-election violence saw many mixed-culture marriages and families torn apart. A group of brave young couples is trying to bring them back together while promoting the idea of a tribe-blind Kenya.

By **MILLICENT MWOLOLO**

HEALING COMES THROUGH MARRIAGE



Christine Wanjiku and Francis Osogo were married for about seven years – until the post-election violence struck in December '07/January '08. As the hate campaigns spread at the height of the violent episodes, the couple – who come from different parts of the country – found themselves torn apart as their respective families put pressure on them to separate.

Christine explains that the parents on both sides forced her and her husband to part due to the negative perceptions each side held against the other.

“The first indication that there was something going on was when my mother took our older child, a son, to stay with her, long before the violence broke out. I thought nothing of it at first because she is, after all, his grandmother,” Christine says.

But when her mother came for her baby daughter, she sensed trouble. When Christine asked her son to accompany her to visit his father, the seven-year-old boy replied, “The Luo are bad people!” The damage had been done as her son had been convinced that his father came from “a bad tribe”.

Likewise, Francis says there was a lot of pressure from his relatives to quit the marriage. “But I cannot just denounce my family,” he says, although he is currently living with relatives.

Francis and Christine make up just one of the many mixed-marriage couples that were torn apart following the ugly displays of hatred that followed the country's last General Election. And they are saying it should never happen again.

That is why they are members of Women and Children in Distress (WACID), a community-based organisation that seeks to fight negative ethnicity by promoting mixed-culture marriages. They believe the solution to these negative perceptions among different communities lies in the basic family

unit, and that mixed marriages should be embraced as a way of bringing communities together “if a sense of unity is to return to Kenya”.

Until tragedy struck the country, WACID was an ordinary support group that included a financial and children's support centre in Njiru, Embakasi. But just prior to the elections, it became apparent that even conducting an ordinary meeting with the 34 couples who are members of the group was becoming impossible, says Jecinta Nyaguthii Korir, who is a former banker and the treasurer of the group.

‘Betrayal and favouritism’

“Every time we met, we realised some people were missing, only to discover later that they were dealing with ethnicity issues in their homes,” Jecinta says. In addition, there was “betrayal and favouritism”, especially when a member wanted to borrow money from the group.

“Sometimes, a loan could be withheld because of one's ethnicity. That is when we woke up to the reality that we had to fight these negative perceptions among ourselves and others too,” she says, adding that only



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two couples of the 34 who are members of the group are not in mixed-culture marriages. “This was a good starting point for us,” she says.

The group members reviewed their plans and decided to immediately divert energy and resources to rescuing those marriages that were on the verge of collapse. They hired professional counsellors who offered home-based counselling sessions over the weekends.

Jecinta reveals that her own marriage was not spared. “My husband and I had were separated from December 2007 to February 2008, due to what I would call tribal incitement,” she says. Her husband, Hezron Korir, is a college instructor and says he “got stuck” in Bomet because he did not dare venture through Limuru on his way to Nairobi to see how his family was doing.

However, the separation was simply the culmination of seven years of negativity from relatives. “After graduating from university, my husband and I started living together secretly. We had our first baby without our relatives knowing about it. Then one of my aunts came to visit and was very negative about our relationship. She actually asked me if the best thing I could do for myself was marry a Kalenjin man after spending years in university.”

“She kept urging me to walk out and when she realised I would do no such thing, she warned that my husband would re-marry and this time it would be a ‘proper’ wife from his community. But when my mother – who is a single parent – came out and supported our marriage whole-heartedly, I was besides myself with joy and relief.”

Korir says initially his parents weren't too impressed when they discovered he had married someone from a different community. “I initially suffered rejection, but when they realised I was serious, they accepted it. And they were supportive all

Some of the members of WACID, a group seeking to promote unity through mixed marriages.

Top right: Two couples, Francis Osogo and his wife, Christine Wanjiku (left), and Jecinta Nyaguthii Korir and her husband, Hezron Cheruiyot Korir. Both couples were forced apart by family during the hate campaigns.

Photos/Faith Njuguna

along, but not after the violence started,” he says.

Jecinta says her relationship with her in-laws has not been the same since “and that is why we need healing and reconciliation”.

‘Nosy relatives’

The couples say negative ethnicity is not new among mixed-culture couples. “Many struggle each day to survive amid pressure from nosy relatives,” says Raphael Mungai, a counsellor who is also a member of the group. He explains that increasing literacy and enlightenment seem not to have born much fruit in fighting this problem as apart from extended families, society and the church also view inter-community marriages with a lot of skepticism. According to Jecinta, the church pretends these couples simply do not exist among their congregations.

“This happens especially when parents have not ‘rubber-stamped’ the union,” Raphael says, adding that this only makes a couple feel insecure about what might happen should either one die or become incapacitated. “This is because it leaves them vulnerable to abuse by relatives, some of whom surface to grab property and vanish immediately thereafter.”

Raphael reveals that in many communities, especially in the rural areas, the stigma surrounding mixed-culture marriage is actually worse than that of HIV and Aids. “There is serious need for public education and awareness,” he adds.

“We are advocating that families embrace different tongues and look at them positively. Look at the person, not the community he or she comes from,” says Jecinta of the work WACID is trying to do.

She gives an example of what is happening in the IDP camps where the group sometimes goes to share their vision of a tribe-blind Kenya. One man and his

wife separated, leaving the woman and her children in a vulnerable position. “The man went ahead and married a ‘proper’ wife, while his real wife and their five children languished in the camp!”

She also talks of women who have shared horror stories of how they were raped by men from their communities “because of marrying men from other tribes”.

To reduce negative ethnicity in mixed marriages, Alice Kadogo, another member of WACID, says older couples should support younger ones. “This would facilitate mixed marriages as a tool we can use to unify and ensure peaceful co-existence in the country,” she adds.

The use of mixed marriages to resolve conflicts is not new. In 2006, Sagawa Toru, a Japanese anthropologist, suggested this as a way of restoring peace between the Dasanach of Ethiopia and the Turkana of Kenya, both of whom inhabit the northern shores of Lake Turkana on the Kenyan-Ethiopian border.

To push their point home, WACID is planning to bring together over 1,500 mixed-culture couples for the One Kenya conference scheduled to take place on August 29, 2009, at the Bomas of Kenya.

“Professional counsellors and speakers from diverse backgrounds will provide an interactive forum that will allow the participants to share their experiences,” says Jecinta. She adds that the conference is open to the youth, mixed-marriage couples in courtship and those who have been married for less than 15 years. mmwololo@nation.co.ke



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