

# Why Elizabeth has been to every city nightclub

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

She set up the Kenya Voluntary Women's Rehabilitation Centre (K-Vowrc) in Nairobi in 1992 to help mitigate HIV-Aids impact among girls and young women.

"I am simply helping these women to be responsible practitioners — to protect themselves and their male clients against HIV-Aids," she adds. "In this war, one has to move in all directions like a spider".

Elizabeth says the HIV-Aids scourge has "completely destabilised players in the sex industry."

A host of commercial sex workers have already refined their trade techniques to operate safely.

The women have designed "friendlier" and "less risky" methods to hold on to male clients who are increasingly shying away.

**A**t a popular discotheque on Moi Avenue, male patrons are allowed to only caress, fondle and kiss at an agreeable fee.

"Babe-sitting", or lap-dancing, is the hottest item on the menu. In this procedure, a half-nude woman sits on her client's laps, and both cuddle as they rock to the disco music.

"Some of the men are willing to pay as much as Sh2,000 for this service," discloses Maureen, an 18-year-old girl who dropped out of school and is learning the ropes as a commercial sex worker.

Some of the girls bluntly ask for food and financial assistance, forcing themselves onto the company of men in bars.

"The truth is that I'm not interested in sex as such," says Julie, another operator at the club. "My aim is to make money, and I would be so much happier if I could earn an honest living without having to jump into bed with strangers," she adds.

Noting that most men appreciate the company of women while having an evening drink, Julie says that countless times she has been bought food and drinks and paid money by a male customer just to keep him company in the bar.

## Engaging the girls in vulgar talk

However, she explains, often there are strings attached. "Some of the men want to have a good time by engaging the girls in a vulgar conversation, fondling our bodies and even touching the private parts."

"Sometimes it feels good but at times it can be annoying or embarrassing, depending on the quality of customer at hand; but we girls have to bear it to make an extra coin," adds Julie.

But the men are crying foul. One male client says he has often been given a raw deal by the girls.

"I have at times been left alone by a girl after buying her food, drinks and even cigarettes; she picks up the drinks and disappears into the drunken crowds," explains John, a regular night club patron.

"Some of the girls exchange the drinks for money at the counter and slither out of the club into the next pub. It's a very bad experience for the male customer."

In even more cunning approaches, the girls get into an understanding with the barman, who constantly serves them plain water (strictly sipped from the opaque beer bottles) for each drink that is bought for them by a client. The girl and barman share the spoils when the man staggers to the loo or out of the club.

## She still earns little to boast

Maureen explains that even with such tricks, a commercial sex worker still earns little to boast. "While these games sometimes work, they don't pay much cash. Besides, the regular male clients know all the tricks and are hard to cheat".

In light of this, medical researcher Elizabeth is perhaps the sole individual offering the girls a most desired remedy — vocational training and credit facilities to start them off and change their lives for good.

Currently, her organisation is working with more than 1,000 women on the training and loan schemes.

In essence, K-Vowrc gives each woman a small amount of money to live on, for transport and food. In the meantime, it finds them a work training placement with a business in occupations such as hairdressing, dressmaking or basic motor vehicle



Photo/K-Vowrc

**Hair beauty specialist Rachel Wambui attends to a proud customer at her Essy Salon in Githurai, Nairobi. Training by Prof Elizabeth Ngugi's K-Vowrc school set her on the road to success.**

mechanics and repair work.

The tale of Judy Mwangi, 48, now working as community mobiliser at K-Vowrc, is perhaps the most inspiring.

**W**hen she quit the world's oldest profession in 1991, Judy was given her first loan of Sh12,000 and she set up a business venture that would also benefit some of the women she left behind in the pubs and clubs.

Having been in that trade for 20 years, Judy had been nicknamed "Queen". She knew the girls had difficulties accessing affordable meals from their lodging rooms, especially after a night of indulgence in drink, dance and sex.

"What I used to do," Judy recalls, "I would prepare meals like porridge, *githeri* and *njahi* (black beans with mashed potatoes), which I sold to them at the doorstep of their rooms in a popular lodging house on Luthuli Street."

The business idea proved lucrative, earning her a profit of well over Sh500 a day. She made money and seized the opportunity to win over a host of former colleagues from the flesh-peddling business.

Today, Judy is the envy of not just her former colleagues but people in business, formal and informal employment and even in the professions.

From her small loan and mentoring by K-Vowrc, she made enough money to build two houses, each with eight rental rooms, in Dandora Estate.

However, the going is still rough for some of the young women recently recruited from the streets by K-Vowrc. Owing to economic hardships, some

concede the temptation to return to the clubs is high.

"*Ujue saa zingine kunakauka mpaka inabidi nichomoke hadi tao kutafuta angalau shoti moja nipate chapaa* (You know, sometimes the going is hard without money, and I am forced to go to town looking for a male client)," confesses Sheila, who months ago made up her mind to quit the sex trade.

## Initially got into prostitution

The girls under rehabilitation, some as young as 15, initially got into prostitution after dropping out of school for lack of fees, peer pressure or after being kicked out of their homes by parents because they were pregnant or had a baby.

Some of the girls are being trained in hairdressing by two former twilight girls, Joyce Wangari and Catherine Wanjiku.

The two initially got the small loan (Sh12,000) to start up hair salons and are doing well.

"The profit margins may not be that much compared to what we used to get from the streets," explains Wangari. "However, the cash flow here is constant and the job is socially respectable and not risky in terms of health and hygiene."

Elizabeth says many girls she restored from the streets now have stable families and businesses. "Some even got married in the end and have happy families," says Elizabeth. "We are talking about life that was virtually lost that has been dramatically recaptured."

The UN award winner is convinced she has a good cause to brave the cold nights on the streets and nightspots of Kenya's capital city in search of lost lives to restore.

## Those who have helped the researcher in her work

**W**hen she is not mingling with commercial sex workers on the streets and in the nightclubs, Prof Elizabeth Ngugi is at the University of Nairobi delivering lectures to medical students or at her private office where she often receives reformed sex workers and runs programmes for their benefit.

Naturally for Prof Ngugi, her Kenya Voluntary Women's Rehabilitation Centre complex at Ngara is second home.

Working with these girls gives her a lot of joy: "You have no idea how it feels when they hang on me and lean on my shoulders. They do so with great pleasure too, for finding a new meaning and identity in life."

And she has a supportive board of professionals and a diverse staff of teachers, community mobilisers, administrators and accountants giving all the help.

## A bridge of resources to help

Founded in 1992, K-Vowrc forms a bridge of resources to help women and children quit a life of commercial sex and hopelessness to having a reliable job, having a business or becoming a community leader. The centre is entirely funded by grants and private donations.

Elizabeth's work on HIV-Aids dates back to the 1980s when she started doing research on prostitutes.

In 1985, a year after the first Aids case was reported in Kenya, she resolved that she could do something to stop the spread of disease and death.

Of the 300 girls on the programme, 15 have since got married. One of the girls rescued in 1986 is now pursuing a degree in engineering at a local university.

K-Vowrc's vocational training programmes for girl-child sex workers include tailoring, dressmaking, weaving, tie-and-dye, hairdressing and motor vehicle mechanics. The centre has given training and credit facilities to more than 800 women.

## Many more than we can handle

However, programme manager Anne Waweru says they have "a few teething problems, including shortages of funds. Our efforts to get women off the streets have apparently been very successful and that's why we're overwhelmed," says Anne.

"There are very many women out there who want to come over. Actually, they are many times more than we can handle."

The manager and colleagues have an added challenge of containing the girls tempted to return to night life.

The business loan scheme poses a headache too — considering the type of clients that K-Vowrc is dealing with. Some already have the HIV virus and their health is going down.

"Some of them fall ill and are unable to run their businesses effectively, putting the loan recovery arrangement into jeopardy," explains Anne.

## Reading books by great writers

Some of the women and girls are hooked on to drugs and alcohol and need a lot of counselling.

The Ngara complex houses the offices and is used for counselling services, weaving and tailoring courses. K-Vowrc has a rehabilitation centre in the Pumwani-Majengo slum area. Elizabeth is also chairperson of the Society of Women and Aids in Kenya (Swak). Away from her busy schedules at the Medical School and with the twilight girls, she enjoys relaxing at home "listening to cool music and reading good literature by great writers."

She is full of praise for her husband and only child, a son, now in his 30s, for their support. "They are the very reason for my motivation," she says.

Among K-Vowrc's collaborating and supporting institutions are the Carter Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Jaimtland International Development Agency and University of Washington/CHER.

— Oscar Obonyo