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Laying a strong foundation for young mothers in Kishushe



Adenoise Mwakisha has always had a stubborn bone in her. When she was a child, the only way to get her to do something was to tell her not to do it. Now, at 26- years of age, this stubborn strait has persisted. Luckily for her, it has set her off on a journey of self-improvement and personal development that she never thought possible.

"I spent years out of school with no hope," she says. "A lack of school fees meant that I could not pursue tertiary education."

For six years, Adenoise hopped from one casual job to another, including a stint as a house help in the nearby Voi Town. Before long though, she fell pregnant and the father of the child abdicated his duties as a provider.

Soon, she was alone, unemployed



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and unskilled in the lifelong task of taking care of her a child.

In 2019, a casual conversation with other girls in her village revealed something telling. Action Aid, in partnership with the County Government of Taita Taveta had just established a vocational training centre specifically targeted at offering help to young mothers within the Kishushe community.

For Adenoise, this was the balm that her aching heart needed.

"I came to the vocational training centre with my school certificates and asked the director what ai needed to do to join the institution," she says.

Having spent all those years out of school, Adenoise already knew what she wanted to do in life. Her career path was well lit, and she was ready to make the first steps in what she believes will

be a long and fulfilling journey for her and her child.

"I enrolled for a course in masonry," Adenoise says, her sentence hidden behind a disarming smile.

Her decision however, did not go down well in the hugely patriarchal society that she has been brought up in. Masonry, like many other technical skills has long been believe to be the preserve of men. Adenoise was ready to challenge these perceptions.

"I want to be a good example for other girls, Masonry was what my heart wanted," she says. It was not easy for her at first, with doubt being thrown her way at every turn. But eventually, those around her accepted her decision.

"Now my parents, who never believed this is what I wanted to do, have accepted that masonry is my calling," she says.

Every day, she is among dozens of girls who walk into the compound of the Kishushe Vocational Training Institute to find their own escape. Escape from abuse. Escape from self-doubt. Escape from the lack of choices that home reminds them of. Within the classrooms offering tailoring, hair and beauty and masonry, young mothers find themselves again in a world that has been unkind to them.

But the classrooms have not always been full.

"There was a lot of struggle to convince the young mothers to come to the centre," Mercy Mawkio, a Programme Officer with ActionAid says. "Most of them were unemployed, with very low skill levels."

Literacy levels in Kishushe too are low. Most of the young women who got pregnant and are currently undergoing classes at the centre were forced to drop out of school as a result of the pregnancies. Ms. Mwakio says some of them were even being abused.

"The centre now offers them a chance at getting skills that will help them survive in the labour market and find their footing," Ms. Mwakio says.

The Resource Centre was built by ActionAid in partnership with the County Government of Taita Taveta. It offers certificate courses in masonry, hair and beauty as well as carpentry.

To keep the enrolment numbers up, the centre has had to be innovative. It does not just have classrooms and tu-



tors. The centre also houses a crèche, allowing the young mothers to come with their children even as they attend classes.

"We have a caretaker who cooks and looks after the children as their mothers learn," Ms. Mwakio says. "This gives them a peace of mind to concentrate on their studies."

Currently up to 60 young mothers are enrolled in various courses at the

institution.

"I have seen a great change in my life," Adenoise, the mason says. "The skills I get here have already started giving me jobs. Now even my father is happy that he cannot sleep hungry."

At the end of 2021, Adenoise will be among the first cohort of 36 young mothers sitting for their end of year examinations in the various courses offered by the institution.



Trading long treks for books

The road to Ngogodinyi Primary School in Taita Taveta County is a mirror image of life. It has ups and downs. It has curves and straight lines too. On it, one finds the very things that define the daily lives of not just the pupils of the Primary School, but the residents of the area too.

Every few metres, one encounters a child with an empty jerrycan by their side, hurrying to an unknown location to fetch a few drops of what is a previous commodity in the region- water.

Here, just a stone throw away from one of Kenya's famous tourist attractions the Tsavo National Park, children spend a huge part of their day in search of water. Every day, they are charged with fetching water for domestic use, sometimes walking for several kilometres in their quest to keep their homes free from thirst.

"The dangers presented by the weight of this responsibility on the shoulders of the young children are many," Mr. Kajimbi Mkamba, the headmaster of Ngogodinyi Primary School



says. As the school's head, he has seen first-hand what these added responsibilities to his pupils can do.

"Getting them to concentrate in class has been a hard task," he says. When they get to school they are already tired from the chores of early morning and when they leave school they go back to the same chores."

As a result, school performance in the area has dropped drastically. Adverse weather changes which have caused shorter rainy seasons and longer droughts mean less water for homesteads.

But, Mr. Kajimbi says, a silver lining exists in this dark cloud.

"We were lucky to have ActionAid realize just how important water was to the girls in the area and how bringing it closer through their tackling barriers to education programme will positively impact their lives," Mr. Kajimbi says.

This timely intervention is already recording some successes. Key among them is ensuring children spend more time in school and less time outside classrooms. More time under the nur-

turing supervision of teachers and less time within the reach of potential abusers.

At 13 years of age, Elvina Kathimbi knows that she needs to work hard for her to achieve her dream of becoming a journalist. She knows she has to study hard, make the grades to get to a good secondary school and eventually get into a university to study for the career of her dreams.

Six months ago though, she had given up on this dream.

"I never used to get enough time to study," she says. "I would get up early to fetch water before coming to class and then do the same in the evening," Elvina says. "I didn't even have enough time for homework or revision."

Now though, as a result of the tackling barriers to education project, Elvina no longer worries about walking over long distances to get water. And her family too, as well as the local community can benefit from the same project that is keeping her in school.

Without the long journeys to and from the nearest water point, she and her peers now have more time for their studies.

For Mr. Kajimbi, the head teacher, access to water means much more than just keeping the children in school.

"The project gives this community life," he says. "We have had incidences of early pregnancy within the school and the community drastically reduce because the girls are spending less time away from home. The predators who used to wait for the children to go to the river or boreholes to fetch water have less access to them."

The water tank at the school also supports a green house.

"We can now have balanced diets from the vegetables we grow in the green house," Elvina says.

The water security and the first steps towards food security has now encouraged Mr. Kajimbi to shake things up within the school. Ngogodinyi Primary School now has a boarding section.

"We want the children to only focus on their education. With water and food, we are giving them an opportunity to do that," Mr. Kajimbi says.

To date, the water project has benefited more than 400 school going children, allowing Elvina and her peers to be children. Allowing them to see the possibilities of their dreams. Allowing them to stay in school and work towards becoming what their hearts desire. And allowing an entire village to hit the reset button and embrace the possibilities that a water secure future has to offer.



Turning heartache to inspiration

Lydia Mzae stands in front of 30 women and a few men at a social hall in Paranga sub-location in Taita Taveta for an afternoon workshop. She adjusts her headscarf before asking one of the people in the room to pray.

After the normal niceties are done, she gets onto the agenda of the day.

"Today I want us to talk about time management," she says, as she flips a chart to start a new page. The group in front of her is a mixture of young and old women dotted with some younger men and a few older ones.

For Lydia, the workshop counts as one of the many successes she is currently enjoying as a result of the Nipunguzie Mzigo Project by Action Aid Kenya that has propelled her into a position of leadership.

But even before the intervention, her



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Lydia Mzae

personal journey and past trials and tribulations, she says, prepared her for the role she currently plays as the Chairperson of the Sauti ya Wanawake Paranga Women's Group.

Lydia's current role as an active women's leader is lined by her past interactions with failed leadership. Failed leadership that has cost her not one, not two, not three but four pregnancies.

"I have lost a set of triplets on my way to hospital...I have lost a single pregnancy again trying to get to a maternity hospital and I have lost another two children again on my way to hospital to deliver," she says. "But by God's grace the third in that set of triplets survived."

This failure of providing even the basic healthcare services to the mothers of Paranga pushed her to get into a position of leadership and perhaps in-



fluence policies that will lead to change within her village.

Lydia says one of the biggest challenges that women in her village face is the lack of time.

"Women in Paranga hardly have time for themselves. They are either in the farm, looking for water, taking care of the children, cooking or busy with other household chores that do not pay them," she says.

This unpaid care work, she believes, takes a toll on women.

"They do not have time to develop themselves, and by extension develop their homes."

In 2018, ActionAid, in partnership with organisations such as Sauti Ya Wanawake, started an empowerment programme that sought to make women aware of the potential that they had. That life could be so much more than household chores.

"We started off with seminars and trainings trying to tell the women of the importance of some extra time in the course of a busy day can do for them," Lydia says.

But in the beginning, very few women attended the trainings.

"Men would not let their husbands attend the trainings," Lydia says. "Many husbands were of the opinion that the trainings would turn their wives against

them and that they would become less supportive at home."

Instead of being adversarial, the women of Paranga chose a different path.

"We identified a few good men within the community and brought us to our side. We told them the plans we had for their wives and the benefits that these trainings would bring to their homes. These men became our voice and they helped influence their peers."

SH10,000

After being taken through trainings in entrepreneurship, the women accessed grants of up to Sh10,000 that they used to start businesses such as chicken rearing, kitchen gardens and goat keeping.

Soon, homes started seeing direct benefits of the trainings. After being taken through trainings in entrepreneurship, the women accessed grants of up to Sh10,000 that they used to start businesses such as chicken rearing, kitchen gardens and goat keeping.

"These activities directly impacted the household incomes and soon the men, who were against these trainings realised that they were a good thing," Lydia says.

As the chairperson of Sauti ya Wanawake Paranga, Lydia now speaks into the lives of many households encouraging men to help out with daily chores.

"And I had to lead by example," she says. "My husband helps me fetch water to irrigate the kitchen garden and when I am away on trainings, he does the household chores."

Lydia says this interaction has also improved their relationship as man and wife.

"We are even more in love now," she says. "We both support each other."

But she is not done yet, the continuous trainings have turned her into a vocal defender of the women in her community.

"I encourage them to speak up against injustices, to point out ills whenever they happen and to be aware of their rights," she says. "After getting the confidence to speak up, we can join hands and fight against gender based violence, female genital mutilation and poverty."

Before taking her seat at the front row in that community hall in Paranga, the participants in that workshop are caught between clapping for her and cheering loudly. In Lydia they see the possibilities of empowerment and the power of having one of them speak up for them.

Transforming lives one drop at a time



On a hot dry Thursday afternoon, a group of 10 women gather together under a tree at the Kishushe Resource Centre. They arrange their blue plastic chairs in a circle effortlessly. The grace with which they do it is almost second nature.

They have come from different parts of the Sub-County with one agenda on their minds. But before they start off the meeting, one of them, breaks into prayer.

After the collective prayer, the chair-lady of the group opens the floor and invites the secretary to read the minutes from the previous meeting.

"Are there any adverse things to report on since we last met," the group's treasurer asks after the minutes have been read and confirmed.

With no new thing to report, the meeting of the day proceeds. Top on the agenda is a water rationing plan, infrastructure maintenance as well as an update on the economic benefits that community members are enjoy-

ing as a result of the Mlungunyi Water Project.

The women talk of kitchen garden projects that have improved the food security of homesteads. They talk about irrigation projects that have ensured farmlands stay resilient in the face of climate change. They even talk of harmony within homesteads as families spend less time away from each other in search of water and more time around each other.

But even as they talk of these good times brought by clean water, they also talk of the burden of history that dogged Mlungunyi Sub location before the start of the project. A burden that led to the partnership between Action

20,000ltr

Apart from having water brought close to her, she has also benefitted from 20,000 litre earth fill dam that holds storm water during the rainy season.

Aid and Sauti ya Wanawake Kishushe to come up with a women led water project.

"And the bad times were many," Emerline Mwasi, a mother of four and a key member of the project's management committee says.

Without water, women, girls and children within the sub-county were shouldered the burden of care for entire households.

"Our days were defined by us fetching water," Emerline says. "Our daughters did not have enough time in school and their mothers did not have any time to think about advancing themselves in business," she says.

ActionAid facilitated the community to elect a women led water project management committee constituted of nine members. The committee mobilized the community in readiness for bush clearing for extension of water to Mlungunyi.

And this, the nine women of the Mlungunyi Water Project Committee say, changed lives within their community.

"Since the project started, I have had many major changes in my life," Emerline says. "I no longer go for long distances in search of water and this has given me time to involve myself in leadership matters within the community."

Emerline is among the 40 beneficiaries of the project.

Apart from having water brought close to her, she has also benefitted from 20,000 litre earth fill dam that holds storm water during the rainy season.

"I then pump this water from the earth-fill dam to my farm," she says, enabling her grow vegetables, fruits such as paw paws, cassava and a variety of legumes.

The crops have also helped her diversify her family's sources of income.

At the initial stages, the beneficiaries were taken through a 3-day training on animal husbandry and production that was conducted by government agricultural extension officers.

Even as she ensures her home is food secure and that it has a reliable income generation stream, Emerline says that the biggest success from the project is that it has given her a voice.

"Involvement in the water committee has given me a voice within the community," she says. "I just don't talk

about water issues. I address other issues such as gender based violence and rape."

Her position as a water committee member has given her access to local law enforcement offices that act on the information she provides.

"Being committee members and making critical decisions on water affecting the entire community has given

other women the confidence to come to us and report abuses against them or their children," she says. "And we take action and follow up these cases to the very end."

She says that in 2020, the women of the Mlungunyi Water Project Committee followed more than ten cases of rape and incest within their communities. Six of these have ended up in convictions for the perpetrators. The rest are still within the judicial system.

"We are not just about water. We want women to find their paths in entrepreneurship and business and find their voices in leadership matters. We want them to speak up when their rights are violated," Emerline says.

And when the Thursday meeting is adjourned, each of the nine women leaves with a burden on their shoulders. A burden of ensuring that the women, girls and children in the community grow up in a world different from the one they grew up in. A world where water is accessible. A world in which women are respected. A world in which unpaid care work is spread evenly within the family and a world in which girls and women are safe from abuse and violence.

All this, they believe, can be achieved from the simple project of ensuring water for everyone.



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Emerline





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