

# Africa *woman*

FOR AND ABOUT WOMEN IN AFRICA • MAY 2003

## KENYA

## Memories of pain, death and despair

By Betty Muriuki

**THE** elderly women walked slowly down the dingy corridor, afraid to look into the dark rooms on either side, yet drawn to them by a force more powerful than fear. They peered into the dark cells, their misty eyes running over the walls that had held their sons and daughters for weeks on end – long, dark days that they would probably like to forget, but never will.

The dark cells held dark memories and secrets of a dark time in Kenya's history, memories of pain and death and despair. Tears flowed down the cheeks of the 20 women as their offspring recounted their experiences in the cells, where anyone suspected of political dissidence was held and tortured by officers of the now disbanded Special Branch of the police in former president Daniel arap Moi's regime.

The underground cells of the 24-storey Nyayo House had been opened for public viewing three weeks earlier, following demands by former inmates of the cells to be allowed to visit them.

Stories of the physical and mental suffering inflicted on those who had been detained in the cells had been told from the 1980s to the early 1990s. While the accounts aroused feelings of horror, dread and sympathy for the victims, they

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## DOWN WITH THE DEMON DRINK

A woman in Central Kenya stokes the fire during a protest over illegal brews that have turned local men into zombies. (Full Story Page 8)

## UGANDA

# GETTING RID OF THE DEATH SENTENCE

By Anne Mugisa

**AFTER** 13 years of a legal regime that allowed the death sentence for child molesters, Uganda is going back to the drawing board – to the delight of those who dismissed it as too harsh and difficult to put in practice.

Supporters of the new move want the offence changed from a capital one tried only by the High Court to one carrying a maximum of life imprisonment. The Defilement Act came at the time when there was a sharp rise in attacks on children, some of the victims only a few months old. Parents and child rights activists saw it as an opportunity to curb the runaway rates of sexual crimes against children.

The law also came into effect at a time when the country was reeling from the HIV/Aids pandemic, with Uganda one of the countries hard hit. Teenagers and little girls were easy prey for older men's sexual advances, especially since they had no bargaining powers. It was also seen

## Law considered to be too harsh on child molesters

as a means to cut down teenage pregnancies. The age of consent to sex was raised from 14 to 18.

But the law has had little impact in real terms. Attacks on minors have risen, with the victims getting ever younger. In February, a three-year-old identified only as Margaret underwent a major operation at Mulago Referral Hospital in Kampala to fix her uterus, which was ruptured by a man in his twenties. Cases of sexual attacks on very small children are reported almost daily.

But legal practitioners report that they find it difficult to try the offenders because some of the

victims conspire to frustrate the justice system. They also argue that the death sentence is one of the major drawbacks in implementing the law, which some have described as "harsh and inhuman".

Some of the girls have had babies out of the "liaisons" with the defilers and they are reluctant to "sacrifice" the fathers. Others have been prevailed upon not to press charges because the offenders are close to their families or are minors themselves.

Two years ago, a 15-year-old girl undermined the case against her defiler by swearing she had never seen the 30-year-old man even though the baby she carried to the witness box was a replica of the accused. As she was the key state witness, the case was thrown out.

According to the girl's mother, the man had seduced her, made her pregnant and abandoned her after she was thrown out of school. When he was arrested, he started sending her messages

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## KENYA

# Check the small print carefully ...

By Florence Machio

**AHEAD** of the World Trade Organisation's ministerial conference in September, Kenyan MPs are waking up to the fact that they need to have more control of what the government agrees to at the meeting.

About 30 of them were recently treated to the full picture of the effects of some of the agreements that the government had signed.

Professor Yash Tandon of the Southern and Eastern African Trade, Information and Negotiation Institute met the MPs to prepare them for the conference. A similar discussion was held in Kampala, the main aim being to equip governments with the skills to negotiate with the West without "selling" their rights.

Former Trade Minister Kirugi M'Mukindia confessed that when he signed the WTO agreement he had no clue what it was all about. Indeed, many after him have done the same, including former trade

## Trade deals have bad effect on African economies

minister Nicholas Biwott, who said he was "arm twisted" into signing the Doha declaration.

If one thing emerged at the forum, it was that the world trade system is driven by forces who are looking out for their own interests. It took the West 10 years to develop the WTO agreement, but many African leaders took only one glance at the document, "assuming that the developed countries must have thought about Africa before formulating the document."

This mentality has led to Africa being re-colonised under the guise of sugarcoated agreements reportedly aimed at helping the continent

pull itself out of poverty.

Tandon encouraged Kenyan MPs to take their trade minister to task every time he discusses trade agreements. "This is the only way that developing countries can protect themselves from exploitation and neo-colonialism," he added.

According to Tandon, developing countries always assume that any form of investment is good for them. They rarely consider why a stranger should care so much that they offer to assist. A good example is when South Africa entered a bilateral trade agreement with the European Union. In two years, EU had managed to capture 17 percent of its confectionery market. At the same time, the EU started sending subsidised beef into South Africa, which leaked into Botswana and hurt the beef industry there.

While rich countries keep their markets closed, poor countries have been pressurised by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank into opening their

markets at breakneck speed, often with damaging consequences for poor communities.

Zimbabwe discussed a trade agreement for 40 days before the trade minister was given a plan for action. In Kenya, 39 clauses of the constitution will have to be changed if the country is to comply with the WTO agreement.

The country's traditional industries have suffered extensively due to haphazard agreements. The cotton industry is dead and yarn has to be imported from China. The sugar industry has been pushed to its knees by cheaper subsidised imports. Tea and coffee are on life support, as disillusioned farmers moan about losses due to a sharp drop in prices on the world market. Coffee prices have fallen by 70 percent since 1997, costing exporters in developing countries \$8bn in lost foreign exchange earnings.

The governments of rich countries constantly stress their commitment to poverty reduction. Yet

they have rigged the rules and apply double standards that lock poor people out of the benefits of international trade. Rich countries spend \$1bn every day on agricultural subsidies. The resulting surpluses are dumped on world markets, undermining the livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers in poor countries.

If Kenya tries to export anything to markets in the developed world, it faces tariff barriers that are four times higher than those encountered by rich countries. Those barriers cost developing countries \$100bn a year – twice as much as they receive in aid – and make their products uncompetitive.

Africans need not take such unjust terms lying down. Our survival lies in well-informed negotiations spearheaded by our leaders and legislators. Never again should we point accusing fingers at the West when it is within our powers to check the small print and refuse to sign on the dotted line.

# Memories of the past haunt people of Kenya

From Page 1

were often so terrifying that they seemed incredulous. Many Kenyans could not or did not want to believe that there were people capable of committing such cruelties against fellow human beings.

But the ordeal was real enough for Sylvanus Oduor, who was arrested from his office and driven blindfold to the torture chambers. He was stripped and forced to do countless press-ups, and then to lie on his back and maintain his legs at a 45-degree angle to the floor. When he failed to keep them up, his tormentors set on him with pieces of wood.

"I screamed and a huge officer stepped on my face," Oduor said on the day the chambers were opened. "They beat me until I was bleeding everywhere." Lawyer Gitobu Manyara says how ventilators blew dust into the tiny cell until it filled his eyes, ears and mouth. Then the cell was flooded with cold water, which he was forced to stand or sit in for days.

Hunger was also favourite weapon. "For six straight days I didn't eat and had to drink the water that was flooding the cell. I was beaten and asked to confess to things I didn't know," said Joe Njoroge, who was held in the cells for five weeks.

"Some of the starving detainees drank their own urine and ate their own faeces after they were denied food for several days," said journalist Wahome Mutahi who, together

with his brother, Njuguna Mutahi, were confined for 30 days in two of the 12 small cells. They were splashed with ice-cold water from powerful hosepipes and kept in pitch darkness, only realising it was daytime when they heard workers in the floor above dragging chairs and tables.

From time to time, the inmates were taken out of the cells to an interrogation room, where they were stripped naked and subjected to psychological and physical torture. Their tormentors were armed with all manner of weapon – rubber

whips, wooden clubs burning cigarette ends and iron rods and pins – which they used to try to extract confessions from their prey.

Some of the officers would be smoking leisurely or munching on chicken, which was often enough to make a hungry suspect confess to anything to get out of the cells. Some suspects had been maimed, and others had died there, and many decided that life anywhere else, even jail, was better than the underground torture chambers.

During the opening of the chambers, Constitutional Minister Kiraitu Murungi apologised to the victims of the police brutality, believed to have been about 2,000, for their ordeal.

The chambers would be turned into a national monument of shame, he said, to remind Kenyans



**SILENT PROTEST: Mothers of political detainees wept as they recalled the torture their sons went through.**

of what had happened there and hopefully prevent it from happening again. The government also degazetted police cells at the Nyayo House basement and Nyati House, where political prisoners were also held and tortured, ensuring that no one would ever be held there again for interrogation.

But that is not enough, says the co-ordinator of Amnesty International-Kenya, Miriam Kahiga. While the opening of the chambers and reliving the ordeal were cathartic both for the victims and the nation, Kenyans need guarantees from the government that such brutality will never be seen again. "We also need guarantees

from Kenyans that they will not let it happen again," says Kahiga. "Some of those who are now condemning the brutality were part and parcel of it or knew it was happening yet they never lifted a finger or said a word."

Many people were cowed into silence by fear that they would lose their privileged positions. She gives the example of a prominent psychiatrist who refused to give therapy to the torture victims but is now happy to appear on television giving free advice to them.

While Kenya is moving, albeit slowly, towards healing the wounds inflicted by a reign of political terror and intimidation, Zimbabwe

seems to be sinking deeper into that hole. President Robert Mugabe's government has resorted to physical intimidation of its subjects to still internal voices of opposition.

Fear rules the lives of many ordinary Zimbabweans, many of whom have resorted to fleeing the country to avoid being killed. But many continue to pay their price for their political opinion. Thousands were arrested late last month after taking part in a nationwide anti-government strike.

In an interview with BBC, an official of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change recounted her ordeal at the hands of government soldiers, who broke down her door in the night and told her they were going to kill her for her involvement in the movement. They were armed with guns ropes and sticks. The soldiers accused her of being "a prostitute of [MDC leader Morgan] Tsvangirai" and sexually assaulted her with the butt of a gun. "They put the gun inside me and they asked me if I was enjoying it. They forced me to make noises as though I was having sex with a man. It was so painful."

Similar tales of horror abound in Zimbabwe, where the government is doing its best to gag the independent media and all other voices that may be raised against the repressive regime. As in Kenya, some of the stories are so horrendous that we may not want to believe they are true. And sadly, as in Kenya, the political violence is likely to continue until there is a change of guard at the top.

ZIMBABWE

“I have confidence in young girls. They have the capacity to bring about change”

By Ruth Gabi

The woman speaks calmly, secure in the knowledge of her profession: “At the beginning of February 2003, the rate of inflation in Zimbabwe had reached an all time peak of 198.9 per cent and it is rising all the time. Now is the time for women to invest in the money market and beat inflation.” said Grace leaning back from the huge oval shaped-managing director’s desk in front of her. “Now is the time for women to invest in the money market and beat inflation.”

Grace Muradzikwa smiles, reaches for her drink of orange juice and leans back from the huge oval-shaped desk in front of her. “The young woman of today is admirable. She is aggressive and business minded. When she wants something she goes after it. She has the calibre and the right spirit to survive in these hard times.”

But as the managing director of Diamond Insurance of Zimbabwe talks and breathes insurance, 40-year-old Prisca Munda is pessimistic. “What investment,” she says, frowning. “All I know is that you can lose all your money and end up crying. I don’t know much about shares but I don’t trust them. My nurse’s salary is safer in a bank than with those money dealers.”

Muradzikwa is very understanding when it comes to women and investment. “Women are afraid of risks,” she says compassionately. “And yet all investment is about risks. Women are not risk takers because they are responsible for the family’s welfare. The onus is on women’s organisations to empower women on the benefits of investment. Investment is about risk taking. The higher the risk, the higher the returns. With soaring inflation, women should invest any excess money they have and see to it that it triples before the year is out.”

Muradzikwa is a first in many ways on

the Zimbabwean money market scene. This eloquent woman was the first black woman to transform a loss making insurance company and get it listed on the Zimbabwe stock exchange in October 2002.

“When I took over the fledgling Diamond Insurance Company in 1998, it was performing so badly that among all the 14 insurance companies in the country Diamond was rated number 13,” she says. “Within five years I turned it around. Now it is number three.”

Diamond Insurance’s intention was to raise Zimbabwe dollars one billion. “So successful was our venture that we were over-subscribed by over 4.3 billion dollars,” says Muradzikwa.

“With an enhanced balance sheet, Diamond Insurance is now ready to spearhead its expansion in the region.”

It is not all rosy for women in the insurance field. Muradzikwa laments that there are only a handful of women at the top.

“When we go for international conventions where there are over 500 delegates from Africa, there will only be about 20 women. But I have confidence in young girls. They have the capacity to bring about change.”

According to Muradzikwa, women usually look for safe investment with banks and post office saving banks, which give very low returns. Few dare to venture into the money market. Chipu Maruma, a lecturer in adult education at the University of Zimbabwe, bought shares on the stock exchange a year ago. “I am learning slowly,” she says.

Maruma is determined to try her luck once more on the stock exchange. “As soon as I get any money to spare I am going to buy shares. I have been doing some research in order to understand how the stock exchange operates and this time I know I will succeed.”

One woman who is very happy with the money market is 58-year-old Zenda Bete, a



DIAMOND WOMAN: Grace Muradzikwa urges women to invest in the money market

sociology lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe. “Right now I have the capacity to invest over one dollars spread over 10 companies,” she says, adjusting her royal blue embroidered headgear. “When I started dealing on the stock exchange five years ago my first investment was 50,000 dollars. As I went on dealing on the stock exchange, I discovered that stocks are a liquid investment so I turned to assets. With the money I made on the money market, I invested in property. So far I have bought four houses and two flats in the high-density suburbs of Harare. Proceeds from the money market have assisted me become a successful business woman.”

Muradzikwa says mothers have a duty to inculcate a business culture in their chil-

dren. “Every holiday I get jobs for my three teenage children so that they understand how money is made and learn to budget and understand that bills have to be paid. I was raised in a business family and by the time I was 11 I could order, price and sell goods and prepare a profit and loss account.”

To be successful in business Grace says it is important for a woman to surround herself with able and dependable people. For Grace topping the list is her maid of 16 years. “My maid Tsitsi is very important,” she said seriously. “I entrust her with my children and my home and I pay her very well. When I get a raise at work, I also give her one. Next is my secretary and my driver, who organise my life.”



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**EDITORIAL**

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Africawoman is produced by 40 women journalists from Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Ghana who meet in a virtual newsroom once a month. The information produced is then linked to community radios throughout Africa to reach grassroot women.

## Child molesters must not get away with it

Ugandans, who are best known for pioneering gender-sensitive legislation in this part of the world, are anxious to give another sharp look at the death sentence for child molesters. They have discovered, after 13 years, that there can be a huge gap between the law and the practice when it comes to gender issues.

The demand for the death sentence came on the heels of a sharp rise in sexual abuse of children and teenagers. Meant to appease concerned parents and child rights activists, the law has never really been applied – mainly because the judges and lawyers consider it too harsh. So do some of the very same people it was meant to benefit. And so child abusers have slipped through the net. And the children have paid the price of adult negligence.

This is strictly not a Ugandan dilemma. Many African countries continue to grapple with this sensitive issue. How should we deal with these criminals whose heinous actions strike at the very core of our humanity? As parents, we have the implicit duty to protect our offspring from evil. Yet the same people charged with this responsibility are sometimes the ones who expose them to repeated sexual abuse.

Age is just a number when it comes to the dangers that our daughters are exposed to. Boys are also subjected to sexual assaults, though to a lesser extent. Babies in nappies have been known to be attacked by their own kith and kin. The statistics rise as our children go out into the world and turn into teenagers.

There is any number of people out there, including family members, just waiting to prey on our children. The worst part of it is that they are more likely to be assaulted by people they know rather than strangers. This further compounds the difficulties with prosecuting such cases, with a great deal of emotional pressure being brought to bear on the aggrieved parties.

There is no doubt that we need tough laws that will act as a deterrent for any would-be rapists and child defilers. Yet prosecuting sexual abusers is often turned into a legal minefield by the demand for impossibly high standards of proof.

In some countries, the law demands that the evidence of a child be corroborated. This would be easy where DNA testing services were available, but this is not generally the situation in Africa. Consequently, many sexual criminals get away with it – either because there is no evidence or because the victims and their families have been bullied or otherwise persuaded to drop the charges. The tragedy is that this simply encourages serial abusers.

The lessons from the Uganda case are clear: If we are to seal the loopholes that allow these vicious animals to walk away from their crimes scot-free, we will have to consult more widely on realistic punishment.

In that country, some of the culprits have been minors themselves, posing a moral dilemma for those expected to hand down the death sentence. The finality of the sentence has also acted as a handicap for people caught up in such nasty situations. Forced to choose between the hangman's noose and the violation of their children, many people choose to let the matter rest.

Whereas a life sentence may offer a reasonable alternative, there is always the chance that a convict may earn parole and get released back into society. We at *Africawoman* believe that rapists and child molesters should not only be made to pay – and pay handsomely – for their crimes, but that they should also undergo compulsory therapy and be monitored by police for life.

As things stand, sexual abuse is often treated as a crime against an individual rather than society. Yet some of the attacks are so horrendous that they might as well be classified as murder. Whatever we do, let us not come up with sentences that minimise the suffering of girls and women who are assaulted for the simple reason that they are female. Whatever the sentences we come up with, they should be tough and watertight enough to scare the balls out of any would-be offender.

**POINT OF VIEW**

# Where are the voices of women who make news?

By Nabusayi L. Wamboka, Uganda

Women and children are suddenly making news in conflict areas, including Iraq, but only because they are the most visible casualties of war. At the height of Gulf War II, pictures of wailing and bleeding Iraqi women were flashed on television screens and in newspapers around the world. And who can forget the boy whose lost both his arms in a bombing raid?

Men start up the wars and then whip up people's emotions using helpless women and children because they know the world will react in anguish at a war that targets the so-called weaker sex. But where are their voices?

Journalists rarely voice the concerns of women in conflict, only considering them part of the news when they are helpless victims. Resourceful and outspoken women who can make meaningful contributions to world peace and development are rarely consulted.

Now we ask, where are the women in the media to give voices to the voiceless? Does the face of a newspaper or a television station change if the editor-in-chief or the producer is a woman? Is it possible for a leader to combine the interests of a professional career with the role of wife and mother? Would we see a different kind of journalism if women held the reins? Will it be the beginning of the loud voices of women coming through?

In 2000, Unesco urged media houses to let women journalists take over newsrooms on International Women's Day. Predictably, it was a resounding success. While commending Unesco for acknowledging the efforts by female journalists on this day, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said: "I cannot think of a single issue in the news that is not a woman's issue. Women are every bit as much affected as any man by peace and security, by human security, by human rights. It is, therefore, right and indeed necessary that women should be there to cover these issues, with equal strength and in equal numbers."

A newly released report from UNESCO Press says women are largely under represented in the media. The study, released on March 8, was carried out by the Media Institute of Southern Africa and the non-governmental organisation Gender Links. Titled *Here is the News: Where are the Women? Where are the men?*, the report analyses 25,100 news items broadcast and print during September 2002 by 116 media in 12 Southern Africa countries. "When it comes to subjects such as politics, economy and sports, their voices are virtually unheard," says the report. "Women journalists are, however, given more exposure in reporting on subjects that have to do with the body, home and beauty."

Television offers the best opportunities for women as presenters, but they are only employed

for a limited time since advanced age is largely unacceptable for the media. Representation of women in the print media is poor, according to the report, with only 22 percent of the journalists who write news being women. As TV presenters, however, women have almost equal representation with men. But even then, the men are the majority in each country surveyed except Angola, Swaziland and Zambia.

"While broadcast media employ the largest number of women, it favours young ones aged between 20-34. In Zambia, for instance, 63 percent of television reporters are women but the main reason for their success has more to do with their looks than their abilities," the authors say.

Even where there are women in government and parliament, this is often not enough to assure them of media coverage. "Even if women account in average for 18 percent of the members of parliament in the region, they are the source of only six percent of political news," the report points out. In the East African region, Uganda's women are at the top of the political chart, having 24.7 percent representation in parliament against the internationally

acknowledged critical mass of 30 percent. The country is in position 25 in world rankings. But numbers alone cannot influence decisions in parliament or media coverage out.

"There are 75 women in parliament, with one of these being an ex-official out of the 304 members. It is, therefore, difficult to influence the process," says Betty Amongi Ongom, MP for Apac District and publicity secretary of the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association and women MP for Apac District. "With our numbers, we can't win a vote.

What we are doing is caucusing with different political groups. Many of our members either belong to independent groups or with other political groups and are pushing for our interests."

These interests include publicity for the work of women parliamentarians in the house. In the East African Legislative Assembly, Uganda has the highest number of women at four followed by Tanzania with three and Kenya with two.

Women's voices will only be heard when they have the power to influence decisions. International Women's Media Foundation Co-Chair Carole Simpson of ABC News argues that media companies need to be reminded of the enormous contributions women can and should make in shaping our image of the world.

"In every part of the globe, women with considerable talent and ambition continue to be frustrated in their efforts to move into decision-making roles within the news media. With so few of us in positions of power, women have not had the leverage to successfully challenge the stereotypes of women as portrayed by the media, or to change the perspective of the media, its priorities or its values."

**Does the face of a newspaper or a television station change if the editor-in-chief or the producer is a woman? Is it possible for a leader to combine the interests of a professional career with the role of wife and mother?**



SIFANELE NDLOVU: "We will miss you dearly."

## OBITUARY

# Farewell, dear Sifanele

By Sibongile Ncube, Zimbabwe

Every time I write stories for *Africawoman*, I get excited about this newspaper that offers me the opportunity to press for equality among men and women and to push for those issues that I can't hope to get published in our traditional male dominated media.

Under normal circumstances, I would write my stories with my colleague Sifanele by my side. We would discuss how best to put our stories across.

Things are different today: I am writing about her rather than with her. Only days ago, we were planning our participation in the next virtual newsroom. She had a brilliant story idea. All her beautiful ideas have gone to the grave with her.

Nothing makes me sadder than having to write an obituary for a colleague so close to me. Sifanele Ndlovu passed away on Tuesday, April 15, at a private hospital in Bulawayo. She had been ill for some time. A veteran journalist, she leaves an indelible mark on Bulawayo's young journalists. We looked up to her for guidance on how to improve our careers. She played the role of mentor with patience and affection.

She also helped champion the cause of women journalists not only in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, but the country in gener-

al. She was dedicated to raising the status of women and protecting children and worked with various groups to achieve these ends.

Having worked for *Sunday News* since 1989, she was one of the longest serving journalists at the weekly paper, where she was the magazine editor. I first met Sifanele in 1997, when I was on attachment at the national news agency, Ziana. I would meet Sifanele on assignments and she would help me get my story and the right people to interview.

We become close when I joined the *Sunday News* in 2001. She was jovial in the newsroom, making everyone laugh as much as she did herself. Even when the chips were down, Sifanele would try to cheer you up and work would go on as usual.

In the newsroom, Sifanele played the role of big sister and we felt free to talk about anything with her. We would compare notes on relationships and women's rights and she would give us advice. I remember her very famous advice for women colleagues in the newsroom: "Girls," she would tell us, "don't allow yourselves to be abused by your boyfriends, know your rights and stand your ground."

It was a plea straight from the heart. We were her sisters, after all, and she was only looking out

for us, wanting us to benefit from her life experiences. I thank her for that. Sifanele, I will miss those moments at tea-time, lunch and those shopping sprees in Botswana that we would sometimes undertake, with our other colleague, Judith.

You taught us to be real women and impressed upon us that we should be proud of what we do. We will sorely miss you, dear colleague.

Sifanele was very particular about her two daughters Lindiwe and Nyaradzai. Being a single parent did not deter her from giving her children a home with the warmth that every child needs. She was so excited when Lindiwe went to boarding school for her first form. She just could not wait to be the mother of a teenager.

At the time of her death, she was planning to send Nyaradzai, who is still in primary school, to the same boarding school so they could be together. That's how much she cared for her children.

As for *Africawoman*, our monthly trips to Harare for the virtual newsroom meeting will never be the same again without Sifanele.

Sifanele, you were a sister, mother and friend to us all. We will miss you dearly. May your soul rest in peace till we meet again.

**In the newsroom, Sifanele always played the role of big sister**

## Now Kenyan women have an opportunity to join the abortion debate

By Mildred Barasa

THE statistics are shocking, even without taking into consideration the human catastrophe: 8,000 girls die in Kenya every year due to botched abortions. 250,000 illegal abortions are performed yearly, leading to all manner of complications.

Yet debate around the women's reproductive health crisis remains one of the most controversial in the country – so inflamed, in fact, that Minister for Health Charity Ngilu found herself in trouble recently when she was reported to have advocated abortion.

She quickly responded: "I was misunderstood. I am a supporter of efforts to improve availability and accessibility to family planning, protection of safe motherhood and curbing the spread of HIV/Aids."

Plainly speaking, the minister wants women to have the right to

# Shall we or shan't we?

decide when to have children, if at all, and how many. "What I am advocating is safe motherhood," she told her critics.

Religious organisations reacted angrily to reports on the minister's alleged remarks, the Anglican Church saying: "Legalising abortion is an open cheque for promiscuity. It will occasion irresponsible experimentation with sexuality that could contract the freedom that Ngilu is campaigning for."

Catholics dismissed her remarks as against the right to life. The church said it would not stay silent as some leaders turned the country into "a murderous nation".

Attempts by non-governmental organisations to start up a national

debate on women's reproductive health rights and abortion in the past two years have been stumped by an outpouring of emotions, with letters to newspapers often streaming in long after the official "debate" has been closed – no doubt offering a gauge of how strongly Kenyans feel about the subject.

Nevertheless, government hospitals routinely have to deal with patients suffering the consequences of incomplete abortions or injury caused by back street operators.

According to some estimates, 60 percent of admissions to gynaecology wards in public hospitals are due to abortions.

Those who can afford it are, however, able to get proper care in up-

market clinics.

According to Grace Ajiambo, director of Pregnancy Crisis Ministry, girls aged between 15 and 19 account for 700 abortions daily. That would put abortion on an equal footing with the Aids crisis, yet the only beneficiaries are the quacks who do the operations regardless of health complications that may arise, including infertility.

Opinion is changing fast across Africa, and countries such as South Africa has legalised abortion. In Ghana, the Federation of Women Lawyers had conducted a campaign more or less along the lines of saving women from back street abortions. A recent live radio show sponsored by the organisation is

reported to have indicated that many Ghanaians would be willing to support legalising abortion, if only to avoid the deaths and complications arising from illegal operations.

The American National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League holds that people's right to privacy is as essential as the right to think, vote, worship, work and marry.

This basic right to privacy includes having access to safe and legal abortion, effective contraceptive options and quality reproductive health care.

Whichever side of this murky debate one takes, it is clear that laws, creed and tradition must strike a balance that takes into account special needs and exceptional circumstances without necessarily giving blanket approval to abortion.

## UGANDA

# What one woman has broken, another is healing

By Nabusayi L. Wamboka

**SCREAMS** for help rent the air on the night of March 16, 2000, in a mountainside village in western Uganda. It was unusual for Nyabugoto village, located in serene surroundings in Kanungu district, but no one thought to take any action. The villagers woke up to the gruesome sight of 800 bodies burnt to ashes in a local church.

Initially believed to be mass suicide by fanatics caught up in the fever of a religious belief that the world would end in 2000, it turned out to be a well planned and executed massacre of followers of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God.

It began with a frustrated young woman, Credonia Mwerinde, the daughter of devout Catholics. She had started a bar in the neighbourhood but was unable to keep it afloat. Anxious to make a living, she turned to prostitution.

Sex work does not pay in Kanungu, and Mwerinde was soon in dire straits again. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, Mwerinde woke one morning and declared that she had seen the Virgin Mary, who directed her to start *Ishaatuuriro ryia Maria* (The Church of Mary Mother of God). Her father, driven to desperation by his daughter's constant nagging to support her sect, packed his bags and disappeared, leaving her much of his land at Nyabugoto.

In a decade, Mwerinde's fame had spread. With promises that they would go to heaven in 2000, when the world would come to an end, Mwerinde convinced her followers to sell their worldly belongings. They became paupers, shunned conventional medicine and adopted their own culture of silence.

The cult members started asking questions when the world did not end at midnight on December 31. Mwerinde and two of her most faithful lieutenants, politician Joseph Kibwetere and defrocked Catholic priest Dominic Kataribabo, urged their followers to pray harder and fast as they planned the next move. They are believed to have poisoned the believers in a big feast, along the lines of the Last Supper, and then herded them into the church, which was then set ablaze. The sect followers' accounts had been wiped clean beforehand.

Though there have been claims

that the three also died in the fire, the fact that the doors to the church were nailed in from the outside continues to raise questions. A Government commission into the Kanungu massacre also does not disclose the whereabouts of Mwerinde.

Now one woman has taken it upon herself to heal the wounds of the mourning village. Kasya Josephine rose to prominence when she contested the highest office to become the chairperson of Kanungu district, the only woman in the country to hold that position.

Local government officials say Kanungu is one of the fastest growing in the country. Kasya has no intention of waking up the ghosts of Nyabugoto, though. She wants to bury them once and for all.

She says: "I have been going to our members of parliament to urge the august house to speed up this inquiry. I'm concerned because seven families from this district lost relatives in that inferno. That woman came straight from the bar. Many people knew her, so they could not join her here. The majority of people who perished were from neighbouring districts. Still, people have a right to know this case is closed officially."

The government claims it has no money to pursue the inquiry. Although it has not withdrawn the international search warrant for Mwerinde and Kataribabo – once believed to be in the Democratic Republic of Congo and later said to be in Kenya – there are signs that the case is as good as closed.

Evidence of names and homes of some of the dead cult members has been found on file and their families have been traced in an attempt to prove identity. But local leaders are fast running out of patience.

Kasya says Kanungu is a new and poor district and her people need development now more than ever. The massacre aside, the district had yet more negative publicity when rebels of the Allied Democratic Forces killed several tourists in Bwindi, leading to an international uproar.

Last year, the Uganda Human Rights Commission released a report on the Kanungu massacre and announced the discovery of mass graves of about 500 other people. The commission suggested that though Kibwetere was the official leader of the group, the true power behind the sect was Mwerinde.



**MUSIC TO THE EARS:** Omwa Ombara, accompanied by "Orutu" players, makes a break with tradition.

## KENYA

# Wait a minute, you can't play that

By Kwamboka Oyaro

**THE** revellers wait eagerly as the woman adorned in traditional regalia, complete with a flywhisk, comes on stage at a nightspot in Kisumu, a city about 350 kilometres west of Nairobi. She sits on the floor, raises her knees and holds the nyatiti, a traditional Luo musical instrument, between her thighs. She is about to strike the first note when the hall goes silent – and then the patrons leave one by one.

The nyatiti is a male instrument and the protestors argue that it is an insult to men and their culture that Omwa Ombara should even think of playing it in public. Popularly known as OO, she fights tears as she contemplates the hours of rehearsal she had put into making the evening a success. It is probably the most embarrassing moment of her music career.

Among her people, the instrument is passed from father to son and on to grandsons – never to a woman. It is an abomination for a woman to touch the sacred instrument. When a local elder heard that OO was playing it he suggested that she should be cleansed. But the ceremony did not take place.

It is said in these parts that women who touch the nyatiti and orutu (another traditional harp) will never bear children. Yet the woman who taught OO to play had nine children. It is probably the way the instruments are held and the body movements that have in-

fluenced the decision to keep women away from the instruments. When one plays the nyatiti, it is placed between the thighs and the knees, which then knock in a suggestive way as finger and string strike. "A woman playing the instruments is thought to be a prostitute, making love to the nyatiti," says Ombara.

The orutu, held against the breast and marked by the sexual overtones, is just as discomfiting both for women and men. Traditionally, a man playing orutu was accompanied by a concubine or girlfriend and never his wife. He would sing in praise of her sexual prowess. The man also praised himself and how good he was in bed. But over time, the orutu songs have changed. One can compose songs on social issues without being obscene. That's what OO does.

Ombara says her paternal grandmother passed the knowledge to her when she was in lower primary school. "She secretly taught me how to play orutu when I was about eight. I would scrub her back when she bathed while teaching me songs, which I still know word for word. After we were through with the singing and playing, she hid the orutu in a millet granary and only fetched it when I next visited her."

As she pulled the string, her grandmother warned her it was an instrument for men and she should not tell anybody. Her family being staunch Anglicans and her father a

canon, she kept the secret until two years ago. It was hard for the family to come to terms with the fact that OO performs live in bars. Her mother sat through one of her shows just to confirm that her daughter had not actually gone mad.

A day after, she took OO to church and explained to fellow worshippers that her daughter had a calling to preserve culture. Although her mother appreciates her talent, some of her siblings feel that her singing in the bars mars the reputation of the family.

But she has stuck to her resolve. Some men want to touch or dance with her when she is performing but she has learnt to keep her professional distance.

Even though she will not go as far as to praise women's sensuality, OO uses her songs to sensitise women on social empowerment and she remains true to the praise component of orutu.

"I can praise a handsome man who swept me off my feet or one who broke my heart. I sing of tall ones, good ones, clean ones. These were taboo sentiments a woman was never allowed to express."

The stage allows Ombara to say things she would not elsewhere. She uses figurative language while men describe things the way they are. The most challenging moment for her is when a person she knows walks into a show with a girlfriend and yet OO cannot tell the wife, even if she is her own sister. It is all in a day's work for a musician who has chosen to challenge the myths that keep women out of the entertainment industry.

**Some men want to touch or dance with her when she is performing but she has learnt to keep her professional distance**

## POINT OF VIEW

# World opinion is the first casualty of the war on Iraq

By Susan Naa Sekyere, Ghana

US President George Bush went to war on the understanding that his forces would disarm Saddam Hussein and free the Iraqi people, not destroy them. Was that why cruise missiles and sophisticated bombs never seen before rained on Baghdad?

Take note of this too: Civilians were not to be targeted. But they were still injured, inadvertently or not, in their thousands. And by the minute. Pregnant women miscarried and vulnerable people died of heart attacks.

The Americans told a world wary of this invasion that the whole exercise would take three days. It took them three bloody and messy weeks to take Baghdad. But these are the gruesome realities of war, brought to the world live by the international media.

It is these disturbing images, perhaps, that have led some to call for the resignation of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

His critics say he shouldn't have withdrawn his weapons inspectors, that he should have left them there to be bombed out of existence alongside the ordinary Iraqis. After all, even journalists died there too.

Would the coalition forces have targeted their bombs more accurately had the weapons inspectors stayed? We will never know. What clearly emerged from the war was a world of divided opinions.

Some would say that this opinion business was the first casualty of the war. Did America not defy the United Nations and some of its European allies with its decision to start the war?

Throughout the world, ordinary women and men protested loudly, with some even taking to the streets on every continent. Indeed, it was



Cartoon by Michel Cambon, produced by the World Association of Newspapers, for World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2003

the first time in the history of mankind that so many voices rose against war. But the warmongers paid no heed.

That loud "No" was ignored.

Before the start of the war, the African Union, Ecowas and other regional bodies added their voice to those cautioning against war and its likely effect on Iraqi civilians. Perhaps the boldest of the African leaders was Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and his predecessor, Nelson Mandela.

Seeing as South Africa is one of the select few countries that are on the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) programme of the US, you might think they would not want to

risk sticking their necks out and choose to simply hide behind regional groupings. The only other protests came from Kenya, where there were demonstrations against the war.

And what of the leaders in the Middle East, many of whom did not so much as lift a finger, some preferring to ask Saddam to go into exile, ostensibly to save his country from destruction?

What did their silence mean? Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi condemned the American military operation but quickly added that Iran would not take sides in the conflict. Vocal opposition was left to ordinary people in the Arab world.

Thirteen clear days after the start of the war, Jordan's King Abdullah finally spoke out against it on April 2. Better late than never. Unlike his peers in Africa, he at least made his opinion known.

King Abdullah deplored the civilian casualties, saying: "As a father, I feel the pain of every Iraqi family and child."

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the war on Iraq was a "black mark

in history, with the new world now realising that might is right". That country's conservative Islamic opposition party went so far as to predict the eventual downfall of the United States. Other Muslim groups described it not as an attack on Islam but on humanity.

It is all over for Saddam Hussein and his cohorts. But as the world waits to learn the fate of the former Iraqi leaders, one question remains unanswered: Did Saddam really have chemical weapons of mass destruction? And if he did, why were they not unleashed on the American forces? Not that anyone's opinion matters, of course, except that of President George Bush.

## Death sentence may be too harsh on child molesters

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promising to resume the relationship. Meanwhile, the girl's mother was taking care of her daughter and grandchild.

Those pushing for reduction argue that the defilement law has drastically increased the number of capital cases tried by the High Court. More than half the offenders, according to the prison authorities, face defilement charges. Because it takes long to dispose of the cases, justice is defeated because the victims have grown up and may have even lost interest.

None of the offenders convicted so far has been handed the maximum death sentence. The life sentence has also not been given out – because, as a magistrate explained, judges "don't think it calls for such a harsh sentence".

The only judge to have handed down what can be regarded as a stiff sentence is Justice David Wangutusi.

In January, he sentenced a polygamous father to 40 years in jail for repeatedly defiling his two children aged 11 and 13.

Some of the concerns of the legal officers are borne out by cases where parents reduce their daughters' ages to fix boys or men they have failed to extort money from.

Such isolated incidents should, however, not be an excuse to tamper with the defilement law, according to children's rights activists.

The activists are adamant that the death sentence stays because of the damage girls suffer forced sex. Even where the girls consent to sex, doctors say, the bodies of those under 18 years are not mature enough to handle sex and pregnancy.

Activists say that claims that suspects in child molesting cases are increasing prison congestion are just excuses for the inadequacy of the judiciary and, as a result, criminals are getting away scot-free. Says Lydia Kabatembuzi: "Our country is sick, everything needs overhauling because our system is a corrupt system and the moral fabric of our society has been eaten away."

If anything, argues David Mukholi, lowering the sentence to life imprisonment will worsen the congestion in prisons. He fears that relenting will lead to offenders being released back into the community only to abuse more children.

## Bush should have played football with Saddam

By Margaret Ziribagwa, Uganda

Sport is all about the spirit of friendship and togetherness. Rarely does any match end in acrimony and some players form lasting relations on and off the pitch. When it comes to national teams, the fans routinely forget their political differences, cheering and demonstrating their loyalty as one nation.

Sport can also override military and political tensions between countries. Uganda and Rwanda have had difficult relations for a long time, each country accusing the other of training its rebels. The Ugandan government believes that top soldiers Samson Mande and Anthony Kyakabale, who deserted the national army, have used a base in Rwanda to train their rebel

troops. Rwanda argues that the murderous Interahamwe have been trained and sheltered by the Ugandans. In March, Rwanda went to the extent of deploying armed forces on its border with Uganda.

Despite these tensions, Uganda Cranes and Rwanda's Amavubi honoured an Africa Cup of Nations qualifying match at Amahoro stadium in Rwanda.

Rwanda's President Paul Kagame watched the March 29 game. The Rwandese were overwhelmed by 6,000 Ugandan fans who turned up to cheer their national team, most of them dressed in distinct national colours and singing patriotic songs in favour of their country and president.

Looking upon the hospitality the Rwandese laid out for their guests, it was difficult to be-

lieve that the two countries had ever had political differences. The match ended in a goalless draw and the return leg is due in June, this time in Kampala.

The unity that sport can create is a vital part of any reconciliation process. If England had accepted to travel to Zimbabwe for their cricket world cup game, there might well have been an opportunity to resolve the political standoff between the two countries. The players would have shaken hands and upheld the principle of fair play, setting an example for the political players. Who knows, the Americans would have thought the better of invading Iraq – and avoided the senseless killing – had the two countries worked out their differences on the pitch! We need a new motto for the 21st Century: Make sport, not war.

**KENYA**

# Demon drink strikes below the belt

By Lilian Juma

**THE** clock strikes midnight. Tebla Wambui, a mother of three, stirs in bed and realises that her husband has not returned from his drinking spree. Nothing new there.

The children, tired of waiting for food that was not forthcoming, fell asleep long ago.

The eldest girl has yet to return to school for lack of fees and the local shopkeeper has taken to threatening to skin Wambui alive should she not pay the Sh500 (US\$6.5) that had been outstanding since the

beginning of the month.

Deep in thought, Wambui does not immediately realise her husband has suddenly arrived. He is banging furiously on the door and streaks into the house as soon as she gets it open, smelling like a brewery. He demands food and climbs into bed in his muddy shoes and wet trousers. He wets the bed in his sleep. It is the climax of Wambui's daily nightmare.

"It is like I have four children," says Wambui as fellow women in the same situation take to the streets in Murang'a district, Cen-



**HEAR OUR CASE:** Protesting women in Central Kenya demand that the government take action against brewers and vendors of illicit drinks that have wreaked havoc with their lives.

tral Kenya, to protest against illicit brews. "Where will I get a diaper for men?"

This is just one of a series of protests against illegal beers and spirits that have been blamed for death, illness and impotence

among local men. Usually very cheap, at Sh10 (US\$0.13) for a glass or cup, the drinks are highly popular.

Jane Wambui, leader of a women's group in Gaturi in Murang'a, says women are bitter because their men "think and live *kumi kumi*". The name of the brew is derived from the Sh10 price. Not even the fact that 230 people have died after taking this brew and others since the mid-90s is enough to deter the merry drinkers. At least 24 others have been blinded by the cheap drinks laced with lethal chemicals, such as methanol.

The wives initially remained silent, believing they were the only ones who had lost their family and love lives to the drinks. But word soon spread through the villages as more women confided in their friends.

Soon enough, women bound by the shared agony of husbands turned into vegetables decided to take matters into their own hands, raiding the breweries and protesting at local administration offices to take action against the brewers. They have made some headway, but this is a booming business and the forces behind it powerful and influential enough to get away with what amounts to murder.

With a determined look, however, Wambui says women in her neighbourhood are fed up watching their husbands waste away and they will not tire in their efforts to "kill the monster".

Women in a neighbouring division, Kangema, recently stormed the drinking dens and poured out all the brews. "We are determined to wipe out the scourge in the villages, starting with the vendors,"

says Joyce Wahu.

The women complain that their men neglect their families while those still unmarried are reluctant to settle down – even assuming there were any young women willing to accept their proposals. Ironically, most of the vendors are women – who plead poverty as their reason for engaging in this deadly trade.

The alcoholic content in these brews is very high, *Africawoman* has established. Going by names such as Tornado, Budget, Manga, and Chang'aa, the killer brews were banned five years ago after a public outcry spurred by 130 deaths in two of Nairobi's main slums.

A chemical analysis done by the Kenya Bureau of Standards and the Government Chemist revealed that the brews contained poisonous concoctions of dry batteries, sisal juice and hydrochloric acid. Competition between brewers has increasingly led to additions of lethal substances to make the drinks stronger. These have led to fatal injuries to critical organs, causing blindness, paralysis, liver damage, chronic migraine and impotence.

One drinker well on his way to dropping unconscious told *Africawoman* during an interview for this article: "You die when your time comes. After all, not everyone dies because of taking *kumi kumi*."

The coordinator of the National Agency for the Control of Drug Abuse, Mr Joseph Kaguthi, puts the blame squarely on the provincial administration and the police as some brewers claim they are licensed to manufacture and distribute their brews. "If they are fit to drink, why are people dying?" Kaguthi asks rhetorically.

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