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Educator turns desperate young mothers into productive women

For someone who has helped hundreds of hopeless young mothers, Teofasia Karimi is not one to sing her own praises. She hastily brushes away questions about her, choosing to instead concentrate on the myriad problems affecting girls and young mothers in Kilifi County.

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“Let us talk about this project and the problems facing young mothers in this remote part of the country,” Ms Karimi tells The Standard on Sunday in Kuruwitu.

Following a government report on the alarming levels of illiteracy among women in Kilifi — a paltry 30 per cent compared to 60 per cent for men — Karimi arrived in Kilifi in 2007 hoping to change this. The expansive county is home to the Mijikenda community whose ways of life seemingly favour the males. Reports reveal alarming cases of early and forced marriages among the community. Cases of parents “selling” their daughters to tourists for sex are common. Recent statistics for Ganze constituency alone indicate that more than 1,300 girls drop out of school annually.

“Research intricately linked the worrying levels of illiteracy to

poverty, early marriage and high infant mortality rate in the area. It is because of this that Kianda Foundation, my employer, decided to do something about the problem,” says Karimi. When Kianda Foundation decided to do something to reverse this trend, she readily jumped in. “I did not even ask for time to mull over the idea. I just said yes,” she says.

Since 2007, Ms Karimi, through the Tewa Training Centre where she is the principal, has been giving hope to female school dropouts and young mothers forced into early marriages by poverty in Kuruwitu, Sharian, Vipingo, Chondari and Shauri Moyo villages in Vipingo. The centre offers courses in farming, laundry, tailoring and cookery to help the young women become self-reliant and provide for their families.

With no classroom, Karimi initiated outreach programmes where teachers visit the villages to train the women and help them get employment. Under the programme, three teachers traverse different villages for four days every week. “The students choose to study cookery or tailoring. For cookery, they pay Sh20 per class while those studying tailoring pay Sh20 per month. But literacy courses are free. To date, we charge the same for the outreach programme,” she says.

Bearing fruit

At Tewa Training College, girls denied the opportunity to pursue secondary school education for lack of fees, are trained for one year. Form four leavers are trained for two years. With more than 300 graduates over the last eight years, Karimi’s zeal and determination has yielded

fruit. Almost half of the graduates are young mothers.

Kwambika Mwambire is one such beneficiary. After her graduation from Tewa in 2013, Ms Mwambire opened a cake shop. “Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I will one day operate a shop and make my own money,” says the 44-year-old mother of three who dropped out of school in class four.

Jenifer Zawadi, 22, got a job at the Prestigious Vipingo Ridge, a renowned golf club and holiday inn. “I was born into a family of eight children. My future was bleak, but Tewa rescued me and I can now support my family. I earn enough income to support my two brothers in their education,” she says.

Zawadi’s father Mzee Chengo Kalume says her daughter has become a role model to other young women in the village, thanks to Karimi and Tewa

Centre. “My daughter is a big influence in our family and community. Her peers are determined to uplift their families too,” says Kalume.

Other graduates from the institution have either started small businesses or secured employment in local hotels and homes within Kilifi and in neighbouring Mombasa County.

“One of our former students, Malkia, has set up a salon and employed two people. She has also been employed at Mombasa Beach Hotel where she bakes cakes. This is what makes me happy,” Karimi says.

Hard work

The young women are also trained on the values of hard work and self-respect. Karimi’s work have been noticed beyond the sisal fields of Vipingo. In 2010, various corporate firms came together to sponsor

construction of a school in a 10-acre piece of land in Kuruwitu. This enabled the centre to admit more girls on a residential basis where only Sh2,000 was charged per course per term.

But the sponsors pulled out in 2013, forcing Karimi to reduce the number of students from 300 to the current 50 and raised the fee to Sh5,000 per term.

But she never lost hope. Through the assistance of telecommunications giant Safaricom, the centre has erected greenhouses where it plants sweet melons, watermelon and cherry tomatoes for sale.

“The returns have enabled us to subsidise the fees,” said Ms Karimi. The centre has also dug bore holes and put up a pump to cushion the centre from perennial water supply and help it irrigate the plants.

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