

Love brewed in an African pot

By Annastazia Ndlovu
Zimbabwe

Want to tie the love of your life to your side forever? Look no further than *umuthi*, magical herbs better known as love potions all over the world. Expect a tough time of it, though. Not only are there doubts that they really exist, but they can also hasten the end of a relationship.

Take the case of Barbara Rusere. Married to a Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority manager, she reportedly wrapped his underwear in *umuthi* and placed it in the glove compartment of her car. The couple had been together for 12 years and was going through a rough patch, no longer sharing the same bedroom.

Her husband, Raphael, told Harare Magistrate Sithengisiwe Ndlovu that he found his underwear in his wife's car on March 31 last year as he was looking for his own car keys. He confronted her and she denied that they belonged to him. Rusere turned violent and struck her with a stone, hurting her left ankle.

The magistrate would hear

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RETURN OF THE GUINEA WORM



After years of hard work, the Guinea worm has defied all odds and re-emerged in Ghana, which now ranks second only to the Sudan in recorded cases. The resurgence of the disease, especially in the northern parts of the country, can only worsen the plight of women. **See story on page 14**

It's no way to reward women in politics

By Eunice Menka, Ghana

ELECTIONS are in the air in Ghana, Namibia, South Africa, Malawi and Botswana. Can we expect changes in women's representation? Not if you go by statistics. It appears African leaders have simply paid lip service to women as a means to get power.

Under the Jerry Rawlings administration in 1997, Ghana had six female ministers out of 37, four deputy ministers out of 34 and 19 women MPs out of 200.

Very little has changed since. The number of women MPs is 18 out of 200 in the Kufuor administration, which took over in 2000. There were 10 women out of 71 ministers of state in the Rawlings administration. Kufuor has 11 women ministers out of 81.

Women who want to make it to



Charity Ngilu was the first woman in East Africa to take a shot at the presidency.

Parliament must struggle for a foothold, even in the primaries. "Some of the constituencies are hostile to women being elected as MPs or entering the political race because of cultural perceptions of women in the communities," says Rojo Mettle-Nunoo of the National Democratic Congress, the party Rawlings formed after Ghana did away with military rule.

"The NDC has a clear policy to appoint more women as ministers of state, chief executives of organisation, ambassadors, district chief executives and other positions of authority when we come into power after the 2004 elections," adds Mettle-Nunoo, who is quick to add that this is not just political talk.

Where women are represented in politics in significant numbers and work in enabling environments, they make a marked differ-

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Sex-for-maize scandal rocks Tanzanian village

By Sakina Zainul Dato, Tanzania

EXTREME hunger has forced Chilungulu village girls in Rural Dodoma to sell their bodies in exchange for maize. Girls as young as 14, some still in school, go without food sometimes for five days in a row.

In such circumstances, villagers told *Africawoman*, concerns about morality and even the threat of HIV/Aids take back seat.

It is common practice for girls from villages in the neighbourhood of Makutopora JKT Camp to sell charcoal to the soldiers; it is also just as common for the sol-

diers to offer free food to those who agree to have sex with them.

Says Ester Mchiwa, a mother of five, including teenaged girls: "What do you expect? A girl who has not eaten for days and knows of the extreme situation back home cannot refuse. She is only thinking of her survival."

Selina Mlewa, mother of two girls and three boys, told *Africawoman*: "We try to tell our daughters not to succumb to such invitations, but the situation is very tough. Many girls are thinking of their own benefits, so

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EDITORIAL

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Africawoman is produced by 80 women journalists from Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia and Nigeria who meet in a virtual newsroom once a month. The information produced is then linked to community radios throughout Africa to reach grassroot women.

Leave our skirts out of it

When a rumour started recently in Nairobi that women had only three months to throw their trousers and mini-skirts out of their wardrobes, the response from men taking part in radio call-ins was, to say the least, surprising.

Surprising because the idea of women in trousers is as much a foregone conclusion as the fact that girls will go to school and stay there until they get a meaningful qualification. This is the land in which the police force has kitted out its women in trousers. The First Lady is particularly fond of trousers, even wearing one to last year's wedding of her husband's vice-president.

Yet some of the men were threatening to strip women in the streets and offices because wearing trousers and mini-skirts was "unfair" to men.

It could have been the spirit of the times. As you will find out from our reports from Malawi and Nigeria, there are many people who are obsessed with what women choose to wear. For them, it is as if the devil has set up camp in women's wardrobes.

They keep referring to African culture and the high morals that communities on the continent have. Strange, when many African communities began to wear clothes just within the last century. Skins and plenty of bare skin were the norm. Mothers and sons faced each other in them, as did fathers and daughters. There is no evidence that rape and incest were higher then than now.

Indeed, there are still many communities that think nothing of bare breasts and miniscule loin clothes just covering the essentials. You only have to see the reed dance put up annually for the benefit of King Mswati of Swaziland to see just how skewed the debate about women's dress is.

Women just cannot win this war: France is busy talking the language of demanding that Muslim women do not wear the veil in public places. They are so jaded there that they cannot live with this frontal evidence of religion.

This is not the first time that the debate on a dress code for women has come up in the world. In 2002, the highest-ranking female fighter pilot, Lieutenant-Colonel Martha McSally, sued the United States military over a requirement that women wear the Muslim Abaya while working in Saudi Arabia. It offended her Christian sensitivities and violated her constitutional rights as a woman, she argued. She won hands down.

Whatever the excuse, we tread on dangerous ground when we allow hordes in the streets to grab every woman they consider inappropriately dressed. As Kenya's first attorney-general responded when asked in parliament to declare a ban on short skirts, "Look the other way".

The trouble with these matters is that one person's meat is another's poison. Where do we draw the line when it comes to "suitable" dressing? And why should the power to decide this lie with a total stranger in the streets?

There is no doubt at all in our minds that women must reserve the right to decide what to wear and enjoy the full freedom to do so. This is the stuff of which human rights is made.

Still, it is only wise sometimes to stick to the rules. If your college demands that you live within a set dress code, it would be foolhardy to break the rules just to make a point — especially when it is part of the rules and regulations that you signed at the beginning of the course.

Sometimes being appropriately dressed is simply a matter of common sense. Just as people would raise their eyebrows if you turned up in heavy jackets and boots on the beach, they would be forgiven to think there was something amiss if you wore something reminiscent of a bikini set or gauzy evening gown to the office.

No one has the right to strip women dressed in clothes they do not like, but it is also just a matter of self-respect and good taste to dress according to the demands of the place and ceremony.



BEYOND THE SMILE: The women and children of Chilungulu village are faced with tough choices as famine bites.

Sex-for-maize scandal rocks Tanzanian village

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they don't listen. We are forced to send our girls there to sell charcoal so that we get money to buy food. We know of Aids and other diseases, but what to do?"

Ester Makasi, aged 18, says many of her friends are involved in the trade but she has not succumbed yet: she is being obedient to her mother. "Even very young girls, as young as 14, run away from school and go to Makutopora because they know there is food there," she says. "They don't tell their parents."

Famine stalks the land, mostly the rural areas, due to drought that has affected the harvest since August last year. The situation worsened last November, when reserves depleted. Since late January, the situation in many villages has become critical, with some villages declaring deaths due to starvation.

Dodoma is particularly prone to famine. The land is not ideal for food crops. The main cash crop in the area is grapes, whose market is presently diminished due to closure of the local parastatal winery a few years ago. Kenya is the main, but limited market for Dodoma grapes now. Other cash crops cultivated in small quantities include pyrethrum, sim sim, peanuts and groundnuts while millet, cassava and maize are grown as food crops.

Says Dodoma-based journalist Susuma Susuma: "The problem with people in Dodoma is that they are lazy and don't use their land for their own use. The majority will work for a tycoon, cultivating crops for him for small pay. That is why if a natural disaster strikes, they are hit the most as they don't have any reserves or their own farms to sustain them."

People have already started eating wild insects harvested from bark trees in Farkwa division. The executive director of Kondoa District Council, Fred Masele, confirmed that he had witnessed people eating the insects.

In Singida Rural, meanwhile, three children have been reported to have died after their mother fed the family poisonous wild plants. The family with five children had not eaten for five days and, following what has become common practice, the mother boiled the only leaves she could find and fed her children. The two children who survived have been admitted at the hospital in Mbulu district in Arusha.

According to Dodoma Regional Commissioner Alhaji Mussa Nkhangaa, any long-term plan to avoid famine will involve putting in place irrigation systems throughout the region. But this requires major

investment, something the government cannot manage on its own. "Assistance is needed," he said.

Meanwhile, food is being sent to villages based on the needs data compiled by village leaders. However, Chilungulu village Executive Officer Sebastian Mwiliko said no food had arrived here.

He had received information only that morning that two bags of maize had arrived for the first time for his village and were being held by the Mundemu Division secretary awaiting collection.

He told *Africawoman*: "How can I take two bags of maize when more than 100 people are critical in the village? How will I distribute such food? I cannot take it since I fear for my security. Villagers can attack me and I have no security."

Mwiliko said they had compiled all data as requested by the government and forwarded it. There are 2,485 people in the village, but only 752 are able to work and another 206 are disabled and feeble.

"Most of the youths have started running away from the village, leaving the old in even worse conditions. Look around the village, there is absolutely no food, the little cassava that was holding us together is finished now. People have developed swollen legs and are extremely weak. They can't work anymore, children can't get to schools and women and babies are suffering the most," he said.

Village women confirmed that breast-feeding mothers were suffering the most since they were trying to feed their babies without themselves having eaten for days. Many of them are no longer able to nourish their children. According to Mwiliko, the situation has fuelled underage sex, with parents being paid in food or cattle for their daughters. "An 80-year-old man can get a girl of 15 or 18 in exchange for a cow or some food," he adds.

Older girls are running away to towns and cities and getting involved in prostitution out of sheer desperation. "Aids is the main threat, but you can't choose when you are selling your body for food," says Mwiliko.

But Regional Commissioner Alhaji Nkhangaa says he was not aware of the practice at the village. He was not even aware of its location. "I am hearing this first time. I can't say this is not true but I can't say it is true either ... we will have to investigate...."

There have been reports of similar desperation in the North Eastern Province of Kenya, which is dominated by drought too, with children as young as 13 going into prostitution in order to get a loaf of bread.

Land mine survivors



By Nabusayi L. Wamboka, Uganda

Her name is Upenzi. It means “love” in Kiswahili. If there is anything that seven-year-old Upenzi needs, it is love. Just a few months ago, no one imagined she would recover from the trauma of watching her mother die.

Following a tribal fight between the Lendu and Hema in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo last May, Upenzi’s mother fled with her daughter in search of refuge. But the violence caught up with them weeks later: a bullet shattered Upenzi’s little hand as she held on to her mother’s dress. The same bullet ripped through her mother’s back, killing her instantly.

Other families fleeing the fighting chanced upon Upenzi, grabbed her and continued the race against time. For days, they travelled through Ituri, Bunya and on to Ntoroko in Bundibugyo. They were then ferried to Kasese in western Uganda.

Says Masereka Yusuf, supervisor of the psycho-social rehabilitation transit centre in Rukokyi, where the children are staying. “She has not uttered a word since she arrived here. We spent two months fixing her hand because the bullet ripped it apart.”

Upenzi is the youngest of 16 children who made their way to the centre. A 14-year-old boy bears machete scars across his head and a bullet wound in the leg. “This one was hacked by people he knows,” says Yusuf. “They left him for dead but he managed to escape. When he first arrived here, we did not think he would survive.”

Kasese has borne a heavy burden arising from internal and external fighting. According to the district planner, Police Mugisha, over 1,000 children were abducted and 456 are still unaccounted for years after the insurgency.

Besides the refugee crisis, the threat of landmines looms over large parts of Kasese, leaving residents of three sub-county’s still displaced. Many of these people dare not go home for fear of landmines.

In Kyondo sub-county, schools were

closed and a passion fruit project that had become a source of income for local residents was destroyed. In Kilembe and Kitwamba, villagers moved to the lower lands and have never returned.

Ugandan rebel groups often leave landmines on roads in the north and north west regions of the country, most notably around Gulu and Kitgum and – to a lesser extent – around Bundibugyo and Western Nile.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, children comprise three-quarters of the victims of landmines in northern Uganda. The total number of landmine casualties in Uganda remains unclear, however, as there is no comprehensive data collection system. Some information on landmine casualties is available as part of general hospital records.

Between 1991 and March 2001, 602 landmine casualties were reported in Uganda. In 2001, the International Service Volunteers Association reported 12 new landmine casualties in the Gulu, Kitgum and Adjumani districts. Other sources reported that

landmines had killed at least seven people and injured three others in north and western Uganda in 2001.

One man was reported killed in Kasese. In Gulu district, five people were treated at St. Mary’s Lacor Hospital, including four men, aged 20-28, and a woman aged 22. In Kitgum, a man and a boy were injured. The driver of a truck was killed after his vehicle hit a mine suspected to have been planted by the Lords Resistance Army on the Gulu-Juba road. His passenger was admitted at St. Mary’s with severe injuries.

Women and children have been most affected in post-conflict Kasese and neighbouring DRC. At least 78 have died in landmine accidents. The greatest worry for local people is that they do not know where the mines are.

Because of the instability, says Augustine Maserika of Kitholthu sub-county, schooling has been hard hit – especially Kyabukera, Kitobira and Kiraro primary schools. He adds: “These are temporary and have no toilets. They have not been planned for be-

cause people believe they will be moving again.”

Two women died recently after they stepped on landmines in the fields in Kabwe, he recalls. Landmine victims in the sub-county have not been compensated, even though they have lost their capacity to generate an income or support their families.

Damascus Machel, a Unicef official working in south western Uganda has this to say: “It is disastrous. The villagers can’t go back to their homes and the army won’t tell where the landmines are planted. As a result, most of these communities are displaced. They are very poor because they can’t farm and they are always struck by cholera epidemics.”

In 2001, Uganda received Sh360 million (US\$217,800) from the government of Canada’s development agency for an integrated mine risk education and victim support programme, mainly for northern Uganda. Funds were provided through Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief for 18 months.

In February 2002, the Canadian government announced a donation of \$365,000 for ongoing landmine work in northern Uganda. As detailed in Landmine Monitor Report 2001, the Mine Advisory Group (MAG) carried out an assessment in May 2001, finding some mined areas in northern and western Uganda but noting that “the problem is not acute, but is causing deaths and injuries in these areas”.

The assessment has not led to any major changes, but has spurred more funding for non-governmental organisation mine risk education and support programmes, which had stopped due to lack of funding.

The Uganda People’s Defence Forces is reported to have acquired new mine clearance and detection equipment, including “chubbies or mine breachers for detecting landmines” – a likely reference to the South African “Chubby” mine clearance and detection machine. The military displayed these during the 16th Anniversary of National Resistance Movement celebrations on January 26, 2002.

Landmine havoc in a land of despair

A female president in our times?

'Some women have described the role of women in politics as insignificant'

By Diana Nkhulembe, Malawi

VERA CHIRWA is an academician, human rights activist and lawyer. If she has her way, she will crown her long list of achievements by becoming president of Malawi.

So determined is she that when she could find no party to back her presidential bid in the May 18 poll, Chirwa declared that she would go it alone. It is the very first time that a woman has sought the highest office in the land.

It is a long shot in a country that has only 17 female MPs out of 193. Only eight women are ministers.

Women comprise 52 percent of Malawi's population. But she would be ill advised to bank on drawing her support from this pool. The public has received Chirwa's candidacy with mixed feelings. She appears to have support among the intellectuals who think it is about time women came out of the kitchen and played a leading role in governance.

But the average Malawian rates her chances of winning the presidency as very slim, considering that she is 71 and has not been active in politics over the past 20 years.

At a meeting held on January 23, in the capital, Lilongwe, eight opposition parties that want to form a united front against incumbent Bakili Muluzi, rejected Chirwa's nomination unanimously. Allowing her to contest would create a situation where anyone could come in and contest without representing any party, they said.

Billy Gama, spokesperson for the facilitating committee for the coalition, said it would bring together political parties and not individuals.

Chirwa wrote the facilitators to consider her as a presidential candidate, but says she has not received any official communication.

Chirwa's credentials are impressive. She holds a masters degree in law and has won several international awards for her human rights work and appears in the world Who is Who. She was voted Malawi's woman of the year for 2003 and in 1998 won the Geuzen Hero's Medallion in the Netherlands.

Chirwa, the first woman barrister in East, Central and Southern Africa, was also commissioner of the presidential commission of inquiry on land policy reform and a



HIGH HOPES: Vera Chirwa seeks to make history in Malawi.

board member of Women in Law in Southern Africa. In 1992, she received an award for distinguished achievement and for being an inspiration to women lawyers in Malawi.

She serves as commissioner on the African Union's African Commission on Human and People's Rights and is a special rapporteur on prisons and conditions of detention in Africa.

Chirwa is also the coordinator of the Southern Africa Peace Women for Nobel Peace Prize 2005 and a member of the United Nations Secretary-General's Task Force on HIV and Aids relating to women and children. She formed Malawi Carer, a non-governmental organisation that has worked with prisoners, in 1994.

James Ntale, a tycoon in the commercial city of Blantyre, believes Chirwa should be taken seriously. The issue, he says, is not whether the president should be male or female. It is simply a question of service delivery and capability. Chirwa has also received crucial support from women's non-governmental organisations, including Women's Voice. Director Makoko Chirwa says her organisation will be backing the woman whose achievements have put Malawi "on the world map".

Says an indignant Chirwa: "Some critics have described the role of women in politics as insignificant, and have said that they cannot hold a high public office like that of the president."

Yet others argue that Vera Chir-

wa is better known in the context of human rights and this will likely hurt her chances in the political arena. She was imprisoned for 12 years by the Kamuzu Banda regime. Her husband, Orton, died in custody in Zomba in 1992.

"She should have identified herself with a political party when she came out of prison and played an active role in trying to sell herself. Many people know her as a human rights activist and not as a politician. It is difficult to raise her profile in less than four months to the elections," said a University of Malawi don.

Joel Phiri suggests that Malawians might also be reluctant to support Chirwa because they would not want to be associated with failure. He argues that Chirwa has not done enough leg work – the election being only three months or so away.

Chirwa is not alone in her attempt: in Benin, Marie-Elise Akouavi Gbedo, a lawyer and divorced mother of two, is the only woman among 17 presidential contenders. She is the first woman presidential candidate in West Africa and it is not plain sailing for her either.

The first Ghanaian woman to contest her party's 1996 primaries as a presidential candidate was considered to have gone "crazy", even by her fellow women, but she was able to beat at least two male contestants out of six.

In the United States of America, a White House Project started by MS Foundation President Marie Wilson is seeking to build the political climate necessary to elect a woman president by the year 2008. The project publicises the names of 20 accomplished women, and will eventually campaign for five.

Whatever comes of Chirwa's campaign, political analysts reckon that she will have laid the groundwork for the drive to raise the level of women's representation in parliament to 30 percent.

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Women and power go well together

They should get involved in business, education and politics early, advises activist

By Yetunde Oladeinde, Nigeria

THINK Golda Meier, Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Corazon Aquino. Think power. These women must surely rank among the best known leaders of their times.

Women have also wielded great power in the ancient and classical world. Cleopatra, Hatshepsut and the Celtic queens are just some that come to mind.

Today, a quick survey indicates that most women heads of government come from the Asian and Pacific regions. Here, they hold 8.9 percent and 8.6 percent of all parliamentary seats. In the Commonwealth's collective 8,180 parliamentary seats, women have a cut of 14.1 percent – just slightly higher than the global 13.8 percent.

How to translate women's numbers into at least half the parliamentary seats and political power in their countries has preoccupied women's rights activists for the better part of the past 30 years.

Tina Amoke Oladimeji, who has been in the crusade for women's emancipation for three decades, advises that women should get involved in business, education and politics early. The labour activist believes that sustained campaigning has started yielding dividends. She told *Africawoman*: "It's getting



Yeye Olufunke Daniel, first lady of Ogun State

better now. Most of the elected candidates (women) came from the North. When I started with Adams Oshiomole in the 1970s, it was not like that. We had people like Gambo Sawaba, who were fighting a lone battle."

Oladimeji adds: "I started as one of the officers of the then United Labour Congress led by Alhaji Hassan Sumonu. Then I went through a lot of tutorials that helped shape my life. My most famous sobriquet then was, 'Ever Ready'. I became the secretary of the union and held that position for 13 years."

Erelu Olusola Idowu Obada, deputy governor of Osun State, takes the matter further. The only thing that women need is dogged-



Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of Britain.

ness and determination to take them to the top. At the beginning of her career in politics, there were enough people trying to discourage her. They gave up and let her be: today she is the number two citizen in Osun, south west Nigeria. But it is not enough for Obada: "Look at the Budget. We have qualified women economists, they have no say in it."

Having been on the ground for some time now, her exposure to the intricacies of politics in Nigeria, as it affects women, has sharpened her skills. "I have realised that all you need to do to get to the top is work hard and carry the men along with you. That has really helped in my case and I have the support of



Erelu Olusola Obada, Deputy Governor of Osun State

the men in my state. I would encourage every woman interested in public office to do the same. We should look above the odds because they will always be there."

Obada explains some of the hindrances for women in politics: "All parties have caucuses, which are very powerful. They are the ones that select candidates. Our women must learn about them and how to use them. For me, money is not everything. Integrity is what will give any woman an edge."

Olufunke Daniel, first lady of Ogun State, believes it would be great to have a female president in Nigeria some day. "Women should be seen as go-getters who add value. I know that we can get to the

top if we really want to. All we need to do is support one another. If we did that, we would have more opportunities and get more positions in government. We are prudent managers and this is why we excel in business and other sectors of the economy."

In 1996, women made up 6.9 percent of Cabinet ministers worldwide, rising to 7.4 percent in 1998. As of March 2000, there were only eight women heads of government: in Bangladesh, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, New Zealand, Panama, San Marino and Sri Lanka. Asia has had several female heads of State and counts many respected women chief executive officers, but the overall achievement rates vary widely, especially outside of the upper classes. The women who rise to power are often related to powerful men, and are helped by name recognition.

Probably Africa's highest-ranking female leader yet, Ruth Sando Perry was sworn in as head of Liberia's interim government in 1989, just after the rebel forces of Charles Taylor assassinated Samuel Doe. The former teacher, bank executive and senator is remembered for her dogged pursuit of peace in a country racked by civil war. How much longer before we can speak of another female African head of state?

No way to reward women in politics

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ence to governance, says a study by Gender Links of South Africa. In a study released last December, the organisation says women's equal participation in decision-making is not just a democratic right but it is critical to more accountable, transparent and responsive governance. The study was based on interviews with 172 politicians in six Southern African countries.

In 1997, heads of state of the 14 Southern Africa Development Community countries signed a Gender and Development Declaration in which they pledged to achieve 30 percent representation of women in decision-making by 2004.

Only South Africa and Mozambique have reached this target so far. Three countries will not have elections again until after 2005. But nine of the countries have elections between now and the end of 2005.

Nthoi Motsamai, Speaker of the Lesotho National Assembly and chairperson of the SADC Parliamentary Forum has called on the leadership of political parties in the region to adopt policy initiatives aimed at ensuring more women

seek election in the forthcoming polls in South Africa, Malawi and Botswana.

The Ghanaian government has approved 40 per cent representation of women at all levels of decision-making. But local women have yet to be equally represented in primary areas of decision-making such as in governance.

Some analysts link women's poor standing in society with their absence in political and economic power. December, a petty trader in Kpong, in the Volta region of Ghana, was sentenced to 10 years in jail for procuring an illegal abortion. The woman, a single parent, already had three other children.

Demonstrations by a section of Ghanaian women during the latter part of 2003 over the murders of 34 women have yet to yield any prosecutions. These gruesome murders have now been politicised as former president Rawlings points accusing fingers at top ministers in the Kufuor administration as being responsible for the deaths of these women killed towards the end of his government.

Until women are empowered and well represented in all areas of gov-

ernance, they will continue to be powerless against such brutality; they will continue to face discrimination as leaders continue to pay lip service to convention after convention directed at enhancing the rights of women.

SADC women have made some gains: at last December's SADC Parliamentary Forum Plenary Assembly held in Lesotho, several women were elected chairpersons of standing committees of the forum, which is soon to be transformed into a regional parliament to complement the work of the African Union Parliament.

They included Zambian MP Edith Nawakwi, who is chairperson for the standing committee on regional integration, and South African Lulama Xingwana, chair of the standing committee on the regional women's parliamentary caucus.

Already, there are indications that civil society groups are gearing up to push the empowerment of women further during this year's elections.

The British High Commission and the Department for International Development (DFID) are

jointly providing 500,000 pula to the Botswana Caucus for Women in Politics to support training to encourage more women to take a role in all forms of government.

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation has developed a training of trainer's programme and sought support from co-operating partners to cover the costs of a series of national workshops – at which the trainers intend to identify and train women parliamentary and local authority candidates. These candidates will then be prepared for primary elections in the 57 constituencies and subsequent council elections.

In South Africa, which has achieved critical mass representation, women were drawn together before the first democratic elections in 1994 by the Women's National Coalition, which drafted the Women's Charter for Effective Equality.

Out of 490 politicians elected to the National Assembly and Senate (now National Council of Provinces) in April 1994, 117 were women – 108 in the National Assembly and eight in the Senate – a far cry from the apartheid govern-

ment's 2.8 per cent parliamentary representation of women.

Today, South Africa has 33 per cent women parliamentarians and holds the distinction of being one of the countries in the world with the highest numbers of female MPs.

It is about time that women played a more assertive role in demanding their right to participate in governance as political leaders. Power will not be delivered to them on a silver platter. They must make the demand if they are to get anywhere

Ghana's Hawa Yakubu, MP for Bawku Central, appears bent on pushing the women's agenda further: she is one of the few women represented on the Economic Commission for West African States Parliament.

Ghana's 2004 elections is a straight fight between Rawlings' NDC and Kufuor's New Patriotic Party. Local gender activists are not sleeping. They have put together a Women's Manifesto that they hope to push down the throats of political parties. The elections will no doubt be exciting. The real challenge, however, is how to translate into reality what is on paper.

PROSTITUTION IN KENYA: THE STORY



HERE TO STAY: MP Nick Salat says prostitution should be regulated.



SCANDALISED: nominated Mp Julia Ojiambo

Caught in a bind

Kenyans find themselves face to face with a dilemma over commercial sex: should it be legal or condemned out of hand?

By Mildred Barasa, Kenya

The oldest profession in the world has just become the latest bone of contention in Kenya, following a number of swoops on women in the streets. Arrests and jailing of commercial sex workers is nothing new here. The buzz is about prominent people in government reportedly being caught red-handed picking up women in the now infamous Koinange Street cutting right across the central business district in Nairobi.

According to local media reports, politicians and prominent businessmen were among those netted in the December raid that also netted 102 women. Fifty eight were said to be students at the University of Nairobi and diploma colleges.

Commercial sex work is illegal in Kenya and some of those arrested were as young as 12. The men got off scot-free while the women were hauled to court and fined or sent to jail.

But while the arrests have generated enough controversy in themselves, some Kenyans now suggest that commercial sex work be made legal. It is a case of "If you

can't beat them, join them", they argue.

Among those who back the validation of the trade is MP Nick Salat, who argues that commercial sex work is here to stay and should simply be regulated. Commercial sex work should be seen as any other trade that can benefit people and not necessarily ruin them, he says.

"The government should work towards regularising the trade, like any other being carried out in Kenya," he says. "This is the most ancient business and it cannot be done away with. Some countries have legalised the business, why shouldn't we as a country do it?"

Critics argue that this would be tantamount to throwing morals to the dogs, but the MP reckons it is a personal matter and individuals should be left to choose whether or not to engage in it. "If a person is Christian, Muslim or whatever religion, they know where to go and what to do according to their religious beliefs. They should not be told what to do."

Speaking strictly in business terms, he adds: "It is regulated, the people involved in it will have frequent check-ups and will operate in a controlled environment, thus making sure they are healthy. It is one way of working towards eradicating HIV/Aids rather than spreading it."

But Nominated MP Julia Ojiambo is scandalised that anyone should even think of legalising commercial sex work. "Why should we allow it? Our daughters should have a good life, not legalised prostitution."

Like many others in a society that some describe as ultra-conservative, she believes that commercial sex dehumanises women and propagates sexually transmitted infections. If working in certain areas will expose Kenyans to a high risk of infection and death, then the government has no business legalising it. "Some people think it is a pleasure to venture into such activities. But there should be better ways of earning a living," she adds.

MPs chair their constituency Aids control

committees, and a cross section of Kenyans argue that they must behave like role models if they are to be taken seriously. Being found in comprising situations is unlikely to help the cause.

Thailand is one of the few countries that have turned commercial sex into an "honest" business. The trade reportedly injects three percent into that country's Gross Domestic Product.

But some have argued that, given the moral implications of commercial sex work, it is highly unlikely that it can be regulated effectively.

Any talk of regulation raises the spectre of increasingly jobless young people venturing into the high risk business of commercial sex – and it is enough to send shivers down the spines of many parents here.

It is bad enough that young women aged 15 to 19 appear to be hardest hit in terms of new infections, probably because of high levels school dropout and the subsequent poverty. But local people argue for "gainful" employment and income-generating opportunities—which may be harder to start out with, but will eventually be easier on body and soul.

"Why should we allow it? Our daughters should have a good life, not legalised prostitution."

PROSTITUTION IN KENYA: COMMENTARY

It's a question of supply and demand

This commentary was initially presented for publication in the Daily Nation, in response to a crackdown on commercial sex workers in Nairobi last December. It could not be published, however, after a gag order slapped on the Nation Media Group by the courts barring the newspaper from reporting anything to do with the scandal in which prominent politicians were said to have been released after being arrested along with 102 women.

Since Africawoman was not one of the publications ordered to keep off the subject, we take this opportunity to carry it as it would have appeared in the Nation.

By Lucy Oriang', Kenya

There's a stanza of our national anthem that resonates in my mind this week. Part of it goes: "...Justice be our shield and defender..."

Nowhere in that anthem does it say that justice is divisible. Nowhere does it say that some are more entitled to it than others. There were no degrees of justice mentioned at all when we put words to the traditional Pokomo lullaby that ended up as Kenya's signature tune. We simply wanted a fair and just society, period.

Yet independent Kenya has had great difficulty dispensing justice – whether politically, economically, legally or socially. Nowhere are the disparities felt more acutely than when it comes to men and women. After this past week, we are in no doubt whatsoever that, even in matters below the belt, there is one set of rules for men and another for women. The effects of these double standards have been felt deep and wide, and in all the wrong places.

It's been a rude awakening for some. It's one thing knowing about the night life on the streets and shady little joints that we take for granted by day and another to have it thrust into our faces so graphically.

Yet the lasting message that has been sent out is this: men may prowl the streets of urban centres all over the country in search of what one colleague describes, in a rather old fashioned way, as "sexual gratification" and get away with it. Women go into the business knowing that they are not only putting their lives at great risk but that they can expect no mercy or understanding from authorities that persist in seeing prostitution as a woman's problem.

There are some of us who would argue that it takes two to tango. Yet we have behaved like those mirrors that throw distorted images back at you. We have little girls whose upper legs have barely firmed out into thighs being thrown into dingy cells for being picked up by male customers in the streets and back alleys of our towns as the men who prey on them get away by simply pulling rank on the officers.

The way I see it is this: girls can stand at

any street corner that they choose. It was a free country the last time I checked. Men are under no obligation to look at them, let alone strike a deal.

It becomes commercial sex only when the men glide to a stop in their fancy cars and begin negotiating terms and conditions. And, when you come to think of it, they do so from a position of advantage: they can afford to haggle, given the fact that the people they are dealing with are generally so poor and desperate that, rather than miss out altogether, they will eventually take anything offered.

There have been enough stories of women who have been killed in fights after their cheapskate clients refuse to pay up. Or the men that hire their time could be into gang rape or kinky sex. Their pimps could beat them up for not delivering. They could be unwittingly drawn into the international trade in human trafficking. The risks are many and varied.

"There has been little interest in putting a human face to the women involved as much as the men who have solicited their services"



NABBED: Twilight girls caught by police.

desperate the circumstances.

When we lay the blame solely on women and girls – in practice, if not in law – is it to say that men are so easily led by the nose that they have only to see a skirt strutting down the street to drop all pretence at rational behaviour?

Predictably, there has been little interest in putting a human face to the women involved as much as the men who have solicited their services. Hundreds of women have coalesced into one faceless and nameless body labelled "hooker". They have no feelings, no history and no future.

Even in this critical hour, when Kenya must look deep into itself in search of values, these women have been reduced to mere objects. They are only the tool by which we seek to play politics, and they do not qualify as people in their own right.

Yet, it would hardly be honest for us to gloss over prostitution as purely a system that works against women. Life is rarely split into black and white. There are many shades of

grey in between. Commercial sex is booming business worldwide. During certain seasons, women and girls from as far afield as the Democratic Republic of Congo reportedly buy one-way tickets to Mombasa (on the Kenyan coast), hoping to clinch the deal with visiting marines that will change their lives. Some may even come from middle class families.

It is just business, no offence meant. Indeed, one sex worker in the coastal town once owned up to earning as much as Sh6,000 (\$80) a night, coming to Sh180,000 (\$2,400) tax free a month if she worked every day of the week. By my reckoning, she could have retired comfortably at the end of her first year in the sex business. But, no, she had dug in for a long haul. It's the demand and supply thing again.

Whichever way you look at it, commercial sex is fuelled and driven by men. Police Commissioner Edwin Nyaseda and his men in blue can round up as many women and girls as they wish. But as long as they do not sweep the male prostitutes who pull the strings in this business, they will be wasting our time and theirs.

The women arrested in police swoops often have no means to hire lawyers. They are given no time to call news conferences or get court injunctions like the men involved in this latest ignominy. The women and girls simply pay the fines slapped on them or serve the alternative jail terms. And then head back to the streets for more of the same.

They are only the supply end of things. As long as the demand exists, they will turn tricks on the streets and in brothels.

It has always been so. Grace Onyango, the first woman to be elected an MP in Kenya, is on record as far back as the 1970s, asking why it was that only women were being arrested and prosecuted over prostitution, these days referred to as commercial sex work in politically correct language.

Prostitution may be as old as time, but it is an abomination – whatever the sex of the person involved, whatever their age and level of education or status and no matter how

The high cost of keeping up with fashion

By Diana Nkhulembe, Malawi

WITH the advent of multi-party politics in 1994, Malawian women achieved more than just the freedom to speak their minds. They could dress in whatever manner they chose – something they could only dream of during the 30-year reign of founding president Hastings Kamuzu Banda.

Thanks to the new political dispensation, women could keep up with fashion trends they admired on television. Trousers, short skirts, high slits and figure hugging clothes became the in-thing.

A decade after, and with the Decency in Dress Act well and truly out of the statutes, the freedom to dress as they wish is being interfered with from the most unexpected quarters. Street vendors and minibus touts in Blantyre, Mzuzu and the capital, Lilongwe, have taken it upon themselves to “punish” trendy dressers – who they dismiss as prostitutes.

The vendors, who claim to simply “finish exposing what the own-

Malawi women stripped and raped by street vendors who prefer traditional values over trendiness

ers started”, have pounced on unsuspecting women in short skirts, hipsters, clothes with high slits bare backs. Women have been stripped and raped under the pretext that their mode of dressing is against “Malawi’s culture”.

The street boys demand that the women be “fully covered”, preferably in the traditional plain or multi-coloured wrap locally known as chitenje. A rice vendor in Blantyre, Matthews Dikisoni, argues that as long as women continue to “over-expose” themselves, they will be taken to task because it is “improper” for them to “copy outside influences”.

He continues: “Those tight fitting trousers are just too much, especially on one with plenty of flesh. We do not mind loose fitting clothes or a moderate slit on a skirt. It is the horrendous types of dressing that we fight against.”

Most of the vendors said they

strip such women to “teach them a lesson and to deter others from repeating their mistake”.

The latest incident involved a Brazilian living in Malawi, Piedade Marques. She was assaulted, stripped and nearly raped by street vendors in the heart of Blantyre.

Marques was wearing a mini skirt on a sunny day. The vendors shouted and taunted her as she passed by and finally descended on the unsuspecting woman. A brave motorist whisked her away to safety, but not before she suffered cuts and bruises on the thighs.

The attack on Marques, highlighted by the media and the human rights non-governmental organisation Civil Liberties Committee, so outraged Malawians that they organised a protest march in the city despite efforts by about 20 representatives of the vendors to dissuade them. Carrying placards reading “Castrate all rapists”, the

marchers were confronted by vendors who hurled abuse at them and vowed to continue raping all women as long as they continue wearing “revealing clothes”.

Said Cilic Executive Director Emmie Chanika: “There is a law in Malawi that gives people the freedom to dress any way they want. I wish the president would do something about this because this not only damages Malawi’s reputation but also causes psychological injuries which last a lifetime.”

The organisation was criticised, however, for taking to the streets only when it was a Brazilian under attack when many Malawians have suffered at the hands of the street boys. Chanika retorted that she was sick and tired of critics who constantly took her organisation to task, pointing out that Cilic was not the only group set up to campaign against violence.

She said: “Malawians are my-

opic. They personalise everything. Why don’t they give Cilic credit for the so-called little it does rather than condemn it every time?”

Catherine Munthali of the Centre for the Advancement of Women said it was disheartening to see the attackers of the Brazilian woman go scot-free, even going to the extent of continuing to make more threats. “Dressing is free in this country and vendors should be sensitised to the fact,” she added. “However, in a society that has not yet embraced change, it would be safer to dress accordingly.”

Street attacks on women have been reported in many other countries, including Kenya. In Malaysia, the conservative Terengganu state plans to ban non-Muslim women from wearing mini-skirts or figure hugging dresses to places of work as part of a drive against indecency. Muslim women will have to wear headscarves and loose dresses to the office and employers risk losing their business licences and face fines if their staff flout the rules.

Skimpy skirts raise a furore on campus

By Bimbo Oloyede, Nigeria

A BAN on skimpy clothes at Lagos State University has raised a storm not only on campus but throughout Nigeria.

While some people welcome this ban, saying that the dictates of fashion have made Nigerian teenaged girls throw caution to the wind, others argue that school days are supposed to be the best days of anyone’s life and that trendy dressing is just an expression of youthful creativity.

Kunle Ogundare, a 23-year-old part time student of business administration at the University of Ado Ekiti, is appalled at the way female students dress on campus. Says Ogundare: “It has reached a point where male students deliberately drop items near girls wearing very short skirts just to see what happens.”

According to him, the boys take great delight in hurling verbal insults at the girls when they expose their underwear as they bend to get the items.

If exposed cleavages and short skirts have become a thing of sport, Pamela Boyle-Roberts, a 72-year-old with five undergraduate granddaughters, has other concerns.

Girls should be concentrating on getting better grades, she argues, not exposing their bodies on campus.

She says: “Our girls should realise things are very different now. With so much cultism in universities these days, girls should not dress in ways that attract the baser nature of young men.”

But while some gripe over the amount of exposed flesh on Nigerian campuses, others point out that students can hardly be blamed for wanting to be fashionable. Television, magazines and billboards bombard the senses at every opportunity, usually featuring pretty young women in suggestive attire that leaves little to the imagination.

Advertising agencies and television production companies are inundated every day by young women looking for opportunities to become models in television commercials and calendars or even as ushers at product launches, book presentations or corporate dinners. The girls inevitably turn up for casting sessions in various stages of undress.

May Nzeribe, chairman of the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria, says that the way students and young women dress sug-



POLITICS OF STYLE: Most countries in Africa are short of enforcing a law on dress code

gests that they are promoting permissiveness. Western styles and fashions is not in keeping with local traditional heritage, he says. “This kind of skimpy dressing is likely to lure a lot of people into immoral acts. It becomes a vicious cycle, with indecent dressing perpetuating immoral behaviour.”

He adds, however: “We have to be very careful in making laws that may be in keeping with our own evaluation of morals yet fall foul of the constitution.”

“Parents and teachers should work together to train young adults. Parents should be more responsible and not abdicate their obligations to teachers.”

Babcock University, in Ogun State and privately owned by a religious organisation, forbids trousers for female students. Should the students flout the rules, they can expect severe sanctions. Other private universities are beginning to follow suit.

In Abia State, the rule extends to all women. The state government accused women of behaviour capable of distracting men from performing their administrative duties.

A government circular has been issued, threatening public disgrace for any woman found in trousers in Government House.



POWERHOUSE: Oprah Winfrey

From one woman to another...

By Sarah Ngwenya, Zambia

SHE came to Zambia a rich woman – one of the wealthiest people in the world, in fact. Oprah Winfrey left after her first visit to the country still a well-endowed woman but far richer in life experiences for having met some of the poorest people in the world. Said the popular talk show host at the end of it all: “It’s only women who will resolve the many problems that the African continent is faced with.”

But only if they are given the chance. “I am a woman myself and understand what it means to be a woman with power,” she said. “I understand what it means to be a woman who can empower other women worldwide.”

On a continent where HIV/Aids and poverty levels are so high, only women who are empowered enough with education, information, financial resources and equipped with different skills in their respective field can change the course of Africa.

“I have seen so much hope and will from the women themselves. With the little they have, they manage to sustain big families – how much more would they do if about 60 percent of them are empowered in their respective fields?” she asked.

The TV star shared her own origins: “I understand what it is like to grow-up in a house without running water, what it is like being without a house, to have to go and fetch water and live under poor circumstances. Today am a different woman because I have been empowered.”

Visiting Zambia under the aus-

pices of Unicef, Oprah’s mission was to tour projects touching on the welfare of women and children affected by HIV/Aids in Zambia.

Among the centres visited was Chelstone Clinic, one of the government health centres the government was using to distribute anti-retrovirals to mothers and their children. She also visited Garden Drop-in Centre, where she met Aids orphans forced by circumstances to become heads of households. She also met grandmothers caring for up to 10 orphans at a time.

“Aids is the greatest moral issue of our time. It is necessary to every human being who has an understanding of the issue to do something to fight it. We need change politically, medically, socially, emotionally and spiritually because we are all affected and infected in one way or the other,” she said.

Oprah launched the Angel Network in 1986 to assist women and girls boost their confidence to make it in life, despite the HIV/Aids pandemic. The network is building a 450-student school for girls in South Africa.

“We all have to get involved in the fight, we have to do what we can as individuals,” she said. “As for me, I am going to use my influence and even my wealth to help the fight against HIV/Aids.”

Bwalya Beupe, a grandmother taking care of nine children left behind by six of her children lost to Aids, said: “I have heard of powerful women in the world, but meeting hery was a great moment. It was particularly inspiring as Oprah Winfrey is a product of a grandmother’s care.”

Rape on the marital bed

By Madube Pasi, Zambia

AT 27, Rachael Wamunyima considered herself lucky to have found a man willing to marry her as a second wife. To her surprise, however, her new husband soon started beating her at the flimsiest excuse.

Things came to a head during the festive season when he threw a stool at her, leading to a miscarriage two months into her pregnancy. On being released from Mongu General Hospital in Western Province, she was told to abstain from sex for a while.

Her husband, brought up to believe that he had the right to sex on demand, pinned her to their bed and raped her, completely ignoring her pleas. Worse still, he gave her a sexually transmitted disease and left her to find her own money to pay for treatment.

Wamunyima decided to report the rape to police, who asked for a medical report to prove the assault. Like many poverty-stricken women in Zambia, however, she could not afford the 11,000 kwacha fee (US\$ 2.5) that the hospital demanded. She chose instead to file for divorce in a local court.

If Zambian women have trouble reporting physical abuse by their partners, there is total silence when it comes to marital rape. At the Zambian Young Women Christian Association’s shelter for battered women and girls, no one ever speaks openly of having been raped by her husband, and it is left to the officials to read between the lines.

Says Lillian Kaoma, the gender adviser: “A woman will say, ‘my husband came home drunk and battered and undressed me and then had sex with me’. But when reporting to police, they talk only of the physical assault and remain silent on the sexual assault.”

Part of the problem could be because African culture encourages women to keep their marital problems to themselves. Besides, she has no right to reject her husband’s

‘When a man is insecure and suspects his wife of infidelity, he will usually resort to sexual violence’

sexual demands. Many women are also afraid to prosecute abusive husbands for fear that they will lose the main source of their livelihood.

Traditions such as bride price have not helped, says Kaoma. It is also a matter of power relations. Men are socialised into believing their needs come first, and forcing their wives to submit is evidence that they are “real” men and that they are in control of the relationship.

Kaoma adds: “When a man is insecure and suspects his wife of infidelity, he will usually resort to sexual violence.”

Steven Mbat, coordinator of the YWCA Drop in Centre, says marital rape deserves special attention in an era of soaring HIV/Aids statistics. In one instance, he says, a woman reported that her HIV-positive husband had been trying to force her into sex without a condom. She was reticent when advised to take action against him, only to report back shortly after that he had raped her.

Though women who are educated are also abused, Mbat says, education is important for women as it is the starting point of empowerment to negotiate for safer sex with their husbands and report abuse.

Women have also been conditioned into submissiveness by Christian teachings: Sweta Mulonda of Lusaka says she cannot deny her husband sex because the Bible tells her to submit. But United Church of Zambia’s Bishop Vincent Kagaya argues that people quote the Bible out of context. “It starts by saying couples should submit to

one another, and not only the woman,” says the clergyman. “People concentrate on the part of the wife submitting to the husband. The husband also has to love his wife as his own body. If you love your wife, you will not rape her.”

In traditional society, he says, village elders would be called in to resolve matters such as marital rape and a man would be asked to compensate his wife with a cow or goat. The proceedings would be conducted in secrecy, however.

Peter Kanunka, director of the Zambia Police Service Victim Support Unit, which handles cases of marital abuse, says he would like to see a test case where a woman reports her husband and police take the matter to court.

“This would act as an authority. As it is now, some police officers would not even know how to handle such a matter. The problem that police have had with sexual offences is that the women are not willing to testify against their lovers.”

Zambia has no laws on gender violence, and such cases are handled under the penal code, which is not specific on marital rape.

Women in Law in Southern Africa (Wilsa) has conducted a study on the justice delivery system and its response to women’s issues in Zambia. But though the government was initially responsive enough to appoint a technical committee to look into the issues raised, things have gone silent, according to Programme Officer Joyce Macmillan.

Wilsa wants marital rape made a criminal offence in the penal code because of the increased risk of HIV. The law should also provide for damages to be awarded to women so they can have somewhere to start from even if they have to leave their husbands. The abuser should be the one to leave the matrimonial home in cases where the couple owns a house.

But women first have to be able to speak of marital rape.

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Much ado over babies in camp

By Ada Agina-Ude, Nigeria

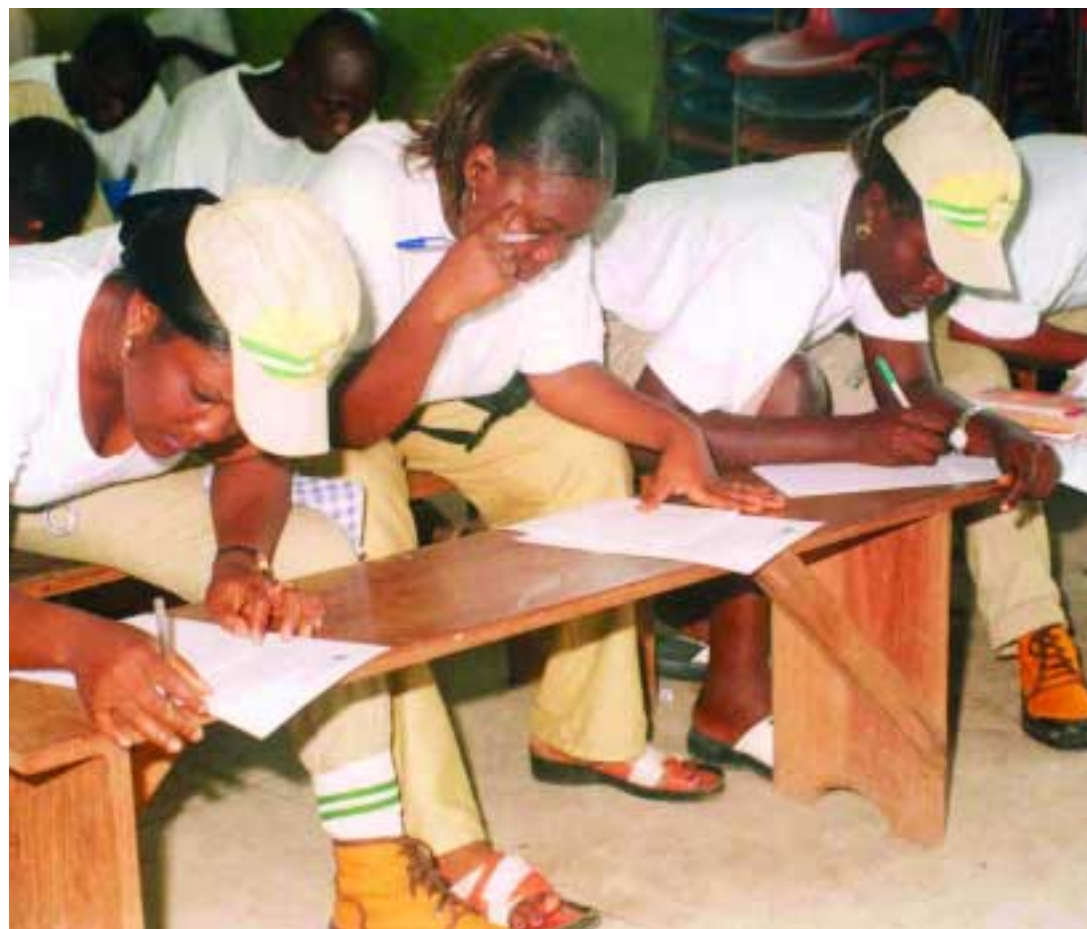
Davista Nnamani, a newly-married graduate from Delta State, was in high spirits on the first day of September as she approached the reception room of the National Youth Service Corps camp at Iyana Ipaja, a Lagos suburb. Just a year earlier, she had graduated from the Department of Mass Communication of Bayero University, Kano, in northern Nigeria. She was getting closer to realising her life ambition, which is to become the editor of a national newspaper. But first, she had to complete the one-year mandatory youth service.

The long wait for the call-up letter now behind her, she was joyful on arrival at the training camp for the one-month orientation. While waiting, she surveyed the colourful posters on the wall. The one that read, "The NYSC is now baby-friendly, no pregnant Corper, no nursing mother" held her attention and she studied it for a while. If she had any doubts over what appeared to be a contradiction in terms, they were cleared at the parade grounds, where Director Rita Uzo-Akinlade issued a stern warning that "pregnancy and nursing of baby will not be tolerated and defaulters will be decamped as soon as they are discovered".

Even though Nnamani was not pregnant, she was looking forward to it as a young bride. To be decamped does not mean an exemption but a suspension of service for one or more years. Critics object to the new policy as it appears to single out women for punishment.

The current director-general, who served under the programme in 1973 as one of the pioneers, introduced the policy last year shortly after taking over from his predecessor. The rule drew much flack from women's rights activists before it quietly became operational, only resurfacing as a national issue when Ekiti State director, A. Kolajo, said during a media interview that married and pregnant women in the youth service were unproductive.

Led by Unifem's programme officer in Lagos, Funmi Balogun, women sent a petition to the then minister for women's affairs and youth development, Aisha Ismail,



condemning Kolajo's remarks utterances. They described the policy as one that "effectively disenfranchises most adult women on the flimsy justification that they are married, a reason that clearly does not apply to men, from a national programme that is supported by resources generated by both women and men of Nigeria".

Kolajo was quickly transferred to Oyo State, but the policy was quietly implemented. Some observers see the new rule especially the suspension of service for pregnant and nursing women as a prelude to excluding them entirely.

Bayo Adenaiya, NYSC director of information in Lagos, argues: "When the NYSC started 30 years ago, it was unusual for girls to get pregnant while still at university. But these days, because of incessant strikes by lecturers, girls now spend more years in school and they can't wait to graduate before getting pregnant. The new policy

is in everyone's interest. Imagine women coming into camp with babies, nannies and husbands. Imagine pregnant Corpers doing man-o'-war exercises."

But he is philosophical about pregnancy during service. "We are still trying to fine-tune the system. It is not yet perfect and you know that the moment you try to solve one problem you create another. With time all the issues will be resolved."

Indications that there may be other reasons for the new rule apart from the comfort of baby and mother in camp lay in the statements and actions of officials at the camps. Tina Edewor, from Warri in the oil-rich South and a computer science graduate of the University of Ibadan, says: "Uzo-Akinlade warned us that even if one comes to camp with hidden pregnancy she would be decamped when the pregnancy showed. Every female Corper signs an undertaking that she is

not pregnant and that she is fit to take part in camp activities."

Some people believe that truly the problems associated with pregnancy justify the new rule. Tinu Odugbemi the chief executive of a non-governmental organisation says: "A female Corper is currently serving with us but, if I had known initially that she was pregnant, I would not have taken her. I had a choice between her and a single woman but I took her on the assumption that she would be more responsible. But, shortly after, she she started asking for days off to go to the antenatal clinic. Now she goes to clinic every Thursday, and doesn't come to the office all day sometimes. On Wednesdays, she goes for compulsory community development fieldwork, so she actually works for us only three days in the week. I wonder what will happen when she is in her third trimester."

But for Iheanyi Osuji, head of a computer graphics typesetting

company, the NYSC is not about being productive or not. "The main objective of the scheme is to expose young graduates to communities outside their places of origin in order to forge national unity. But, on medical grounds, it is a good idea to excuse pregnant women and allow them to serve later, although I think that this new thing is meant to reduce the number of people serving on the scheme. Making the service voluntary would achieve the same result without creating the additional problem of infringement of rights."

Mariam Marwa, from Adamawa State in the north east and a law graduate of the University of Buckingham in the United Kingdom, is worried about the trend of special rules for women. Says she: "If the trend to single out pregnant women and nursing mothers is not nipped in the bud, discrimination may spread to other areas such as dressing for women, which I hear is becoming a problem now in some state camps. Something must be done quickly about this systematic erosion of women's rights."

Her friend, Idayat Hassan, adds: "The NYSC by-laws that Corpers were given in camp clearly states pregnant Corpers are entitled to three months' maternity leave and that they can apply for it, so how does one reconcile that section with the new policy?" Nse Jacob, a part-time undergraduate student, feels that women have every reason to protest about the policy, which he describes as unnecessarily punitive. "If, after 30 years of the programme, the government is having problems with babies in camp, it should seek alternative solutions such as providing crèches and making the man-o'-war exercises optional. It can also make the whole scheme voluntary like the American Peace Corps."

There seems to be a consensus that the programme needs a radical readjustment, such as shifting the target beneficiaries from graduates of tertiary institutions to young school leavers and dropouts, as is the case in Botswana and Zimbabwe. At that level, there will be less pregnancies and nursing mothers to deal with. Besides, it is easier to instil discipline and a sense of national unity in adolescents.

'Because of incessant strikes by lecturers, girls now spend more years in school and they can't wait to graduate before getting pregnant'

Maternity laws return to haunt women

By Ruth Butaumocho, Zimbabwe

MARTHA Chireya's search for a job after completing her degree in marketing yielded nothing. In her second month job hunting, a male friend remarked that "women are no longer employable".

"What employer would want to employ a woman who after a year would go on fully paid maternity leave?" her friend pointed out.

Zimbabwe's amended maternity law that was a much-celebrated piece of legislation a year ago has become a handicap to women of child-bearing age in search of jobs. The Labour Relations Act ensures that women get their full salaries while on maternity leave.

The law stipulates that a female employee is entitled to 90 days maternity leave on full salary. The section on maternity was amended after women's organisations lobbied Parliament and the Government for full maternity benefits.

Previously, women received between 60 and 75 percent of their pay while on maternity leave. The reduced salary was not enough, given the demands of newborns and the health of the mother. The amendment of the law was touted as a victory for motherhood and

the scores of women's organisation that rallied behind the cause.

Now the same platform that had offered respite to women has turned out to be a source of misery. Most employers no longer want to employ women of child bearing age, saying it is costly for them to meet the 100 percent salary payments and also find a replacement for the woman while she is on maternity leave.

Says Ahmed Naidoo: "The woman wins, but the organisation suffers. Who then would reimburse me for the losses I incur when she goes off, leaving me with an extra burden to keep her job while paying someone else to do it?"

Naidoo says many organisations have become "cautious" when recruiting. Employers, says Naidoo, can only consider employing more women if the Government commits itself to paying half the salaries of the employees on maternity leave.

Women are shattered by the turn of events. "I have worked all my life to improve my professional qualifications to get better pay, but I can see this was all for nothing," says Lucy Kamwango.

Even legal experts are no longer sure if the law will work towards the advancement of women, judg-



MOTHERS: Child bearing is one of the fundamental roles that women play without recognition

ing by response coming from industry. Josephine Mandagu, says: "Women are being punished, yet child bearing is a human right."

Stifling employment opportunities for women would result in reduced incomes for families since women contribute significantly to their household resources as economic and social challenges take their toll on the ordinary Zimbabwean family. The stand taken by Zimbabwean employers contravenes the international labour standards formulated by the International Labour Organisation that strongly encourage member organisations to grant paid maternity leave to female employees.

An International Labour Organisation report says that most industrialised countries – except Australia, New Zealand and the United States – provide paid maternity leave by law. More than 120 countries do provide paid maternity leave, including Algeria, Burkina Faso, and Togo (all 14 weeks paid at 100 percent).

The ILO asserts, and rightly so,

that "all women are working women" and that "Maternity protection is a pre-condition for genuine equality". The basic elements of maternity protection include the right to maternity leave.

They also have right to cash benefits to replace earnings lost during the leave period, enabling them to recuperate fully from childbirth before returning to work. They also have the right to medical benefits, including prenatal, confinement and postnatal care. They must also be guaranteed protection against loss of jobs and retraining for a return at an equivalent job level after maternity leave.

But ILO acknowledges that the greatest barrier to ratification by member states is the question of who bears these costs when most countries do not have adequate social security systems. The longer the period of paid maternity leave, the higher the financial costs involved and the greater the need for retraining. If the employers are legally bound to bear these costs, then they may be more reluctant to

hire women workers.

A study carried out by Dy Hammer of the ILO chief conditions of work branch found pregnant women in developing countries are faced with the threat of job loss, suspended earning and increased health risks due to inadequate safeguards of their employment when they go on maternity leave. "Loss of continuity in employment is a major handicap for women's career advancement and is costly in terms of seniority and reduced pensions and other employment-related benefits," she said

The study noted that these conditions exist at a time when the percentage of women of child-bearing age in the work force continues to rise. "Women now provide the main source of income in some 30 percent of all households worldwide," the report notes.

While paid maternity leave has become the standard in most industrialised countries, progress has not been uniform. African countries are lagging behind, with the exception of those where governments have invested in systems to meet the maternity benefits of employed women.

Meanwhile, \$800 billion is spent yearly on military budgets worldwide – with the Bush administration proposing to spend additional billions on Star Wars II – when \$80 billion would provide the essentials of life for the whole world. Yet the money needed by African countries to meet maternity benefits for its people is very little.

In Ghana, the employer meets 50 percent of the employee's wage, while in Kenya the employee gets her full salary while on maternity leave.

The majority of employers in Uganda pay full maternity benefit for only one month. In Lesotho, the majority of employees get no maternity benefits.

In the case of Zimbabwe, women's organisations must return to the drawing board and lobby the government to pay half the maternity benefits.

Cry, the beloved children ...

By Christabel Addo, Ghana

Becky Asantewa is in an introspective mood, tears in her eyes: "If I had known of my HIV status before pregnancy, Maaa Abena Ampomaa, now four-years-old, would have been spared the agony of this deadly disease. Any time I set my eyes on her, I weep inside, praying that she dies before me to spare her further pain of being orphaned and rejected by both family and society. I have been rejected by both friends and family ever since they discovered I am HIV-positive."

Parent to child transmission accounts for 15 percent of the modes of transmission of HIV in Ghana. Sakyi Awuku Amoah, director-general of the Ghana Aids Commis-

sion, says about 600,000 babies worldwide have been infected through parental infection, 90 percent of them African. The statistics are likely to double in the absence of serious interventions.

Transmission rates from HIV-positive mothers range between 25 to 40 per cent in the absence of any intervention at all. But this drops to 15 percent with the use of anti-retroviral therapies and further to two per cent or less with the use of anti-retroviral therapies and infant feeding alternatives to breast-feeding.

Two-thirds of infants are infected during pregnancy, with labour and delivery being the time of greatest risk, while breast-feeding accounts for one third of the infec-

tions.

A 2002 survey showed that 38 percent of nearly 3,000 women attending ante-natal clinics in Ghana were infected. This may well be a tip of the iceberg, considering that most health facilities are not adequately equipped to ascertain the status of pregnant women.

Besides, mothers are encouraged to exclusively breast-feed their babies for the first six months, without water or any breast milk substitutes.

But there is hope: a pilot study is underway at Atua Government Hospital in the eastern region, where HIV-positive pregnant women are put on Nevirapine to prevent the transmission of the virus to their babies.

A single 200mg oral tablet of nevirapine is taken by the mother at the onset of labour and a single oral dose of nevirapine in suspension (2 mg/kg) is given to the newborn within 72 hours of birth. Research suggests that the oral tablet for the mother can be taken at home at onset of labour. However, it is essential that the child is brought to a health facility within 72 hours of birth for its own dose.

Nevirapine has been used successfully in countries such as Uganda. The project in Ghana is being conducted in collaboration with the ministry of health, non-governmental organisations and some queen mothers.

But the cost, at \$30 per day, is likely to limit women's access to

the anti-retrovirals.

In his state of the nation address this year, President John Kufuor called for support for his government's proposal for a national insurance scheme that will take care of medical expenses. This would put paid to the cash and carry system that has been a major setback to providing quality health care.

What would be of greater value is for pregnant women to know their HIV status early enough to take precautions so they do not infect their babies. Pregnant women must not play down the importance of antenatal clinics. Health professionals must also create an enabling environment – one devoid of discrimination – to attract more pregnant women to their clinics.

A cure for Guinea worm: Not too much to ask, surely?

Mua Mission Hospital sets simple, but effective standards in maternal care



SEARCHING: Some women in Africa and Asia walk up to six kilometres to collect water



Scarce: Half the population do not have access to potable water

By Joyce Gyekye, Ghana

After years of an intensive campaign, the guinea worm has defied all odds and re-emerged in Ghana, which now ranks second only to the Sudan in recorded cases. The resurgence of the disease, especially in the northern parts of the country, can only worsen the plight of women.

They seem to bear the brunt of the disease as they come more frequently in touch with infected water. Performing their traditional domestic chores such as fetching water, cooking and washing becomes an endurance test against the pain of the disease.

Rudolf Amenga-Etego, director of advocacy and campaigns at the Integrated Social Development Centre, attributes the return of the guinea worm to poverty and lack of potable water.

Not only has the disease risen in the north, but waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid have been diagnosed in the capital, Accra.

Ghana faces an acute water problem: the



GUINEA WORM CASES: Ghana ranks second to Sudan in recorded cases.

major river basins are drying up due to population pressure, bad agricultural practices and environmental degradation.

There are inadequate supplies of drinking water because the facilities have not been expanded in tandem with the rise in population. The urban water supply stands at 59 per cent.

With half the population having no access to potable water, the burden on women and

children searching for water for domestic needs rises. Indeed, some women in Africa and Asia walk up to six kilometres to collect water. The weight of water they carry is equivalent to the baggage weight allowed per person by airlines —20 kilogrammes.

Men, especially in rural areas, do not traditionally fetch water. Their relation with water has more to do with agricultural work. This has implications for women's daily lives. Carrying water not only leads to physical disorders in some instances but also makes it difficult for them to get involved in education, income generation, politics, leisure and recreation.

At the Millennium Summit, heads of state appended their signatures to a commitment to implement the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Key among them was to reduce the number of people without access to safe drinking water by half.

Three years on, Ghana has made no headway in achieving the targets. Amenga-Etego is convinced that the public sector participation in urban water sector delivery strategy that Ghana has adopted will

not deliver.

Rather, it will worsen the plight of the poor because the multi-nationals involved are profit-oriented.

"An essential service like water delivery should not be in the hands of global corporations," he argues.

The deadline for making a decision on private-public partnership in urban delivery came and went last March. Still, the government remains silent.

About 6,200 women have been recruited to help in the fight against the guinea worm. According to Mwando Diallo, the resident technical adviser of the Global 2000 project of the Carter Centre in Ghana, greater involvement of women in the eradication campaign makes sense because of their domestic role.

There is no cause for celebration, however. There is no excuse whatsoever for the resurgence of the disease. All that this tells us is that the government has failed to fulfill its duty of ensuring potable water for its citizens. Is even this too much to ask of our governments?

Young people have rights, too

By Wezi Phiri, Malawi

YOUNG people aged between 14 and 24 in sub-Saharan Africa are highly infected by HIV/Aids, according to the World Health Organisation. The reason is simple: most do not know how their bodies work and go into sex on an experimental basis, leaving them exposed to sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.

And this against the backdrop of cultures in which parents find it difficult to talk to their children on sexual matters. They will not provide contraceptives to their children, considering it taboo. The young people have paid a high price: HIV infections among this age group keep rising.

Now the Malawi government has stepped into the breach with the introduction of Youth Friendly Health Services.

Blandina Kambala is the national youth coordinator for Banja La Mtsogolo, a non-governmental organisation that provides reproductive health services in Malawi. She says youth friendly health services are not only "appropriate, affordable and accessible" but they also do not discriminate against the

Family planning advice is made available to teenagers in Malawi

young, treating them as they would adults.

The outlook is that there is great improvement in the demand for the services. Prior to the introduction of the programme, young people especially those under 16, found it difficult to walk into clinics. They were bombarded with questions like: "Are you married? Why do you need them?"

If they had a sexually transmitted infection, the questions would be: "How and where did you get this? How could you let yourself be infected?"

In most cases, the questions would be fired at them in the presence of other people, making it well nigh impossible for them to express their real problems. Many young people simply chose to keep their problems to themselves and shunned treatment for fear of being embarrassed.

Besides, many parents would discourage their children, especially girls, from going for reproductive health services on the grounds that

this would promote promiscuity.

Though the situation has greatly improved, between 10 and 15 out of 40 young people who are trained in reproductive health issues drop out because their parents will not consent to their extending this service to fellow youths.

Says Kambala: "We deal with youths in school, but we mostly target those out of school as they go into rural communities where they meet people who know little or nothing about their reproductive health."

Abstinence, though touted as the only solution, does not work in reality, says Kambala: "Nowadays, you get people as young as 12 being sexually active. There is need to make sure that young people get all the information they need for them to make informed decisions. We believe in laying the cards on the table: while abstinence is best, it is hard to practice."

But what do the youth themselves say? Marcel Chisi, director of Active Youth Initiative for Social

Enhancement, says the changes that youth undergo during adolescence confuse them, especially in the absence of meaningful information.

The National Youth Council trains young people in Blantyre to train their peers on sexually transmitted infections.

Chisi worries, however, that rural and privately owned hospitals may not jump on board the trend towards youth friendly services. This can only lead to youth lying about their real problems, further exposing them to health risks.

He adds: "Although there are no statistics, I'm sure that many young people flock to clinics and other government health centres these days, indicating the trust that young people are slowly building regarding these facilities."

Though the situation is greatly improved in urban centres, girls as young as 12 are still dropping out of school in rural areas because they have no information on sexual and reproductive health. "Quite a large number of youth are unemployed and girls usually fall prey to sugar daddies and get infected," said Chisi.

Joyce Mphaya of Unicef argues

that the information that used to be given to youth was superficial. She says: "It would be meaningful if the youth were equipped with life skills. They should be bold enough to know what to do. They should be able to go out and buy a condom and have negotiating skills to be able to abstain and resist peer pressure."

In neighbouring Zimbabwe, the Centre for Reproductive Rights and Child Law says that there is a state of denial among the youth and their parents. Zimbabwe's legal policy and social barriers inhibit adolescent's ability to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection, including HIV/Aids. Up to 26 percent of women aged 15 to 24 are infected with HIV/Aids and 40 percent adolescents are mothers by the time they are 19.

Zimbabwean service providers cannot provide adolescents with contraception, including condoms, without parental consent due to confusing laws and policies. Adolescent rights to privacy and confidentiality in seeking medical care are virtually non-existent. Will the Malawian project live long enough to set standards in the region?

For better and for worse: Positive thinking on Aids

By Sinqobile Ndlovu, Zimbabwe

DRIVEN to desperation by a shortage of foreign currency to buy anti-retrovirals, Zimbabweans living with HIV/Aids have resorted to the unconventional in order to stay alive.

"There is more to life for an infected person than drugs," says Sukoluhle Ndlovu, an activist who has lived with HIV for more than a decade. "What's the point in waiting for something that will probably never come? It is best for us to come up with strategies for survival, strategies that are practical and easy enough anyone despite their social status."

She was diagnosed in 1992 and works as a counsellor with the Matabeleland Aids Council, a non-governmental organisation that offers HIV testing and counselling in Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo. She is also a member of the Zimbabwe Network of People Living

with HIV (ZNPP+).

Last year, the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare was allocated \$4 billion for Aids drugs but was unable to do so for lack of forex.

Now Ndlovu says: "Our message to all those who have been infected is that since there are no drugs in the country, why not marry the virus?"

"If you promise to love it, it will love you in return and will let you live longer. Promise to take care of it, in sickness and in good health, for better, for worse, as death will only part you."

Positive thinking has worked so well for her, she says, that she has gone a long time without being admitted to hospital. "When you love someone, you make sure that s/he eats proper food everyday to ensure good health."

With the virus, people who are infected need to make sure that they have a balanced diet. Should they fail to do so, the chances of

falling sick on and off become very high."

Just as married couples are expected to be happy together, the virus and the person infected are also supposed to learn to live in harmony, Ndlovu continues. What's the point of leading a miserable life when you are HIV-positive, knowing very well that you will never be separated from it? Be happy to live with it, as it is your lifetime partner."

Gracious Linda, also a member of ZNPP+ has been living with the virus since 1995. She has a 15-month-old daughter who was born under the Nevirapine programme. "When I was told my status, I wanted to commit suicide but, after some time, I realised it was not worth it. I recalled a counsellor telling me that some people could live with the virus for several years without getting sick and I said to myself that I could be one of them."

She continues: "I accepted my



LOVE YOUR VIRUS: Sukoluhle Ndlovu.

status because I realised that it was no use crying over and over again when nothing was going to change. I talked to the virus in my body and we agreed to take care of each other. I have been taking care of it since 1995 and it has let me survive all this time, even having a baby."

She wants her baby tested when she is 18-months-old.

"As a network of people living with the virus, we will not rest until we change the attitudes of thou-

sands of people living with the virus. The virus has been with us for a long and it's high time people accepted it instead of getting worried sick once diagnosed positive," Linda adds. "We want to see many marriages of the virus and the infected so that people can live longer."

Zimbabwe is one of the worst affected countries in Africa, with at least 1, 800 people dying every week due to HIV-related diseases.

By Rebecca Kwei, Ghana

Children pay for nursing brain drain

PART of the emergency section of the Child Health Department at the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital could be forced to close down for lack of nurses. The looming threat has been urgent enough to send the authorities pleading with retired nurses to return to work, even going to the extent of offering them a special package.

Like most African countries, Ghana has been grappling for years with a brain drain in the health professions. Thousands of nurses, pharmacists, doctors and medical technicians have left for Britain, the United States and South Africa due to poor pay and conditions of work.

According to the chief executive of the hospital, Kwabena Frimpong-Boateng, other wards in the nation's premier teaching hospital could be closed down if the exodus of nurses is not averted.

Ghana's contingent of nurses has dropped to 10,000 although nursing training schools all over the country graduate about 600 nurses yearly. Frimpong-Boateng cites a serious shortage in areas such as neo-

natal and intensive care, paediatrics, cardio-thoracic care and cardiology, pulmonary medicine, diabetic care, ophthalmology and ear, nose and throat.

Children admitted to the emergency unit lie in their mothers' arms for days until they or others are discharged. Up to four children share a cot in a dilapidated structure with few nurses and doctors to attend to the patients. The unit, built to accommodate 30, now handles more than 100.

The State of the Ghanaian Economy Report 2002 indicates that 3,157 health workers left between 1993 and 2002.

Africa spends about \$4 billion annually to recruit and pay 100,000 expatriates to work on the continent, while developing countries train health professionals for the devel-

oped world.

Statistics from the British Medical Journal in 2002 indicate that over 2,000 African nurses left their countries to take up jobs in Britain, with South Africa losing 2,114 nurses and midwives, Zimbabwe 473, Nigeria 432, Ghana 195, Zambia 183 and Kenya 155.

Speaking during the national delegates congress of the Ghana Registered Nurses Association, Frimpong-Boateng expressed regret that nurses were leaving at a time when the health delivery system was encouraging specialisation. He appealed to nurses to be reasonable in their demands since no African government could compete with the developed countries in terms of pay and conditions of service.

The chairperson of association,

Emma Banga, noted however that it was not only about pay packages but also deteriorating structures in hospital that were a great disincentive to workers.

She said: "The inadequacy of nurses in the country has brought about heavy workloads, tiredness and a burnt-out syndrome in nurses. Overworking has both physical and psychological effects, leading to stress at work. About 9,000 nurses doing work meant for 40,000 nurses."

It is estimated that Zambia, which had about 1,600 medical doctors, now has only 400 while Kenya is able to retain only 10 per cent of the nurses and doctors it trains.

In an attempt to deal with the situation, the Ghanaian ministry of health has raised the intake of trainee nurses in anticipation of

forestalling staff shortages in the coming years. It has also introduced the Additional Hour Duty Allowance and other incentives.

According to Yaw Antwi-Bosako, the director of human resource for health development, the ministry has developed career pathways for staff that include new programmes for nurses and allied professionals, expansion of sandwich programmes, accreditation for diploma programmes and student vacation attachments.

The ministry will also re-initiate training of health care assistants, with the district assemblies involved in the selection of trainee nurses. The assemblies had been given quotas to identify and sponsor qualified candidates from their districts. This is expected to ensure that the assemblies-sponsored nurses will serve in the communities for a period not less than three years before changing location.

It is estimated that more than 10 million children die each year in the developing world, the vast majority from causes preventable through a combination of good care, nutrition and medical treatment.

Keeping mothers alive need not be expensive

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By Wezi Phiri, Malawi

MUA Mission Hospital has no pretensions to being posh. It is small and has none of the sophisticated equipment that some hospitals take for granted. But Mua provides maternal health care that is miles ahead of the sub-standard service provided by most African hospitals reeling under lack of resources.

What's the trick? It is simple, really. Nurses, midwives and other medical staff from the hospital do not wait for expectant mothers to come to the hospital. They go to the villages, seeking out women of child-bearing age and their husbands – and then instruct them on how to handle their reproductive health needs.

"Charity begins at home," said Mua nurse Patricia Kaunga. Taking maternity lessons to the villages makes things easier for her hospital. Not only are the expectant mothers alert to potential prob-

lems, but their families also know what to do at any given time.

"They know when exactly to rush to hospital," says Kaunga. "They don't wait until things are very bad before they come to us."

Mua delivers 120 to 160 babies each month, the only complications arising where mothers take traditional herbs to speed up delivery. "This becomes a problem as the mother who takes this stuff has a lot of contractions when she is not fully dilated," said Kaunga.

Some women even bring the stuff into hospital secretly. "They end up having caesarean section needlessly," said Kaunga.

Mua's story is remarkable in a country with a maternal death rate of 1,100 per every 100,000 births. Most hospitals in Malawi do not have telephones and getting reports of emergencies can be very difficult. The Mua case has proved that even in places where resources are at a bare minimum,



MATERNITY: In Africa one woman in 16 is at risk of dying from a complication related to pregnancy and birth.

when maternal death is reduced," she says. Maternal deaths remain high, mainly because of delays attributed to hospitals and patients themselves. "It would be of help if patients recognised a developing problem and did not wait until the last minute, in which whatever assistance is offered is of little use."

Many women seek the assistance of elderly relatives such as aunts and grandmothers before they turn to hospitals. Lack of transport becomes even more critical during an emergency. Besides, their husbands rarely consider childbirth important enough to invest in. "They feel it's normal for a woman to get pregnant and go through all the pain of child bearing without their help," says Namasasu.

The ministry of health is trying to get men involved in improving maternal health care – from the time a woman conceives to delivery. They are kept informed about how to care for their pregnant wives, including providing them with good food and antenatal care and helping them prepare for the coming baby.

"They are advised on dangers of taking drugs that have not been prescribed and traditional drugs which, if taken in excess, are harmful to both mother and unborn baby," says Namasasu.

But maternal healthcare has not been a failure altogether: the contraceptive user rate stands at 26 percent, midwives have been taught life saving skills and HIV/Aids education has been given to expectant women.

women's lives can be saved.

The majority of mothers who come to Mua come from surrounding villages and simply walk to the hospital. Some come in oxcarts, bicycles or the bus. But when traditional birth attendants have to refer cases to the hospital, they use bush ambulances – a bed attached to wheels and pulled by a bicycle.

Traditional birth attendant Anamiliso Zakeyu lives at Msolo village, just a few kilometres away from Mua. She has been doing this work since 1964. The only formal training she has had was six years ago when she delivered about eight to 10 babies in one month under the supervision of medical personnel in a hospital ward.

The health education that Mua

personnel give in the locality makes her work easy as the women know when to seek her or to go to the hospital. In the past two years, she has referred only three complicated cases, including a breech birth.

In the second case, the baby had severe deformities and her life could not be saved even on the operating table. Says Zakeyu: "The mother survived and now has another healthy baby. She had obstructed labour in the other case and this was successfully managed at the hospital."

Jane Namasasu, deputy director of clinical and population services, laments that maternal health care has not been much of a success in Malawi. "We measure success as

Cervical cancer: a killer easily disarmed

By Bisi Yomi-Layinka, Nigeria

CERVICAL cancer kills about 300,000 women every year worldwide and disproportionately affects the poor. More than 80 percent of those deaths occur in developing countries. But bad as the disease is, it can be treated if detected early enough.

The sad news is that whereas the disease can be nipped in the bud – even in at high risk, such as commercial sex workers – through screening and early treatment using relatively simple technology, only a paltry five percent of women in developing countries present themselves for screening. In the developed countries, it is 40 to 50 percent.

Says Sina Oladokun, consultant gynaecologist at Nigeria's premier teaching hospital, University College Hospital Ibadan: "This is why women die a lot from these things. If we could identify these problems early, so many lives could be saved."

A study of market women in Nigeria indicates that less than four percent are aware of cervical cancer. Besides poverty and low literacy levels, tradition does not allow women here to talk openly about their bodies and

sex. This means that they often suffer in silence, seeking little help from hospitals – not even when the symptoms become pretty obvious, like bleeding after sex. By the time they get to hospital, it is often too late.

Cervical cancer is generally caused by the human papilloma virus, which is sexually transmitted and gradually causes changes in the cells of the cervix that are a precursor to cancer. It often occurs in women aged 30 to 50.

According to Cecilia Amotsuka, director of the cervical cancer prevention programme at the J-Rapha Hospital in Ibadan, the critical factors include early age at first sexual experience, recurrent sexually transmitted diseases, multiple partners and poor socio-economic conditions.

Poor women are more likely to go into prostitution. Their daughters are also more likely to be abused and raped. And they can rarely afford to go to hospital for proper treatment.

A woman who has never had sex is unlikely to have cervical cancer, says Amotsuka. In Nigeria, cervical cancer is most common in the north, where girls routinely marry under

the age of 18. At these ages, the lining of the cervix is not developed enough to resist infection.

Women who have had many children are also susceptible to cancer due to the friction that occurs between soft tissues and the childbirth process. Grace Oluwatoye, a nurse specialising in reproductive health, adds that cervical cancer may also be hereditary, with those whose mothers and sisters have suffered being more likely to get it.

When a woman is first infected, cellular changes begin in the cervix which may revert to normal depending on her immunity levels, the load of virus and whether or not she has a sexually transmitted infection. The changes may lead to cervical cancer between five to 20 years of infection. Full blown cancer often develops at ages 35 to 50. Cervical cancer progresses faster in HIV-positive women.

The irony is that even big teaching hospitals often concentrate so hard on pressing daily challenges that they often do not pay attention to prevention. Instead, they invest in expensive cancer treatment machines – and the women still die, anyway. And this despite the fact that it is cost effective to screen

rather than treat cervical cancer as this involves no pain, is less expensive and over in a few minutes.

The World Health Organisation recommends that sexually active women should have a cervical check every two to three years in the early ages to catch any abnormal cells. With regular pap smears, a woman's lifetime risk of cervical cancer could be as low as 0.8 percent, according to Oluwatoye. The visual inspection of acetic acid test, already in use in Asia, East Africa and Ghana, uses vinegar to expose abnormal changes to the naked eye.

However, both the pap smear and the VIA will be of value only if women who have cancer also have access to treatment. Although Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Health has policies on women's reproductive health, they are rarely implemented.

Besides the usual diet of social mobilisation, training and advocacy, the trio of Amotsuka, Oluwatoye and Oladokun have a simple suggestion: Attitude really makes the difference when it comes to cervical cancer. Get it right today and head for the nearest clinic. It might just save your life.

Thrown out by husband for being HIV-positive

By Diana Nkhulembe, Malawi

THE fate of the woman who tests HIV-positive within marriage is desperate – especially if she does so before her husband. She can expect to carry the burden on her own and suffer the consequences of a "sin" she probably did not commit on her own. As they say, it takes two to tango.

In our culture, it is conceivable that a man may come home, eat the dinner he finds waiting, smile at his wife and casually drop the bombshell, "Dear, I am sorry I tested HIV-positive. Would you go for a test tomorrow just to be sure?"

The woman will probably clear the dishes and ask her husband to escort her for testing. And life goes on. If the roles were reversed and it was the woman announcing that she was HIV-positive and wanted him to go for testing, the end result would probably be violence, accusations of infidelity and an end to the marriage.

Says Marrium Yona of Chiradzulu district, just outside Malawi's commercial centre, Blantyre: "My husband and my in-laws were blaming me, saying that I had brought HIV to the home. They chased me out of the house. The moment I revealed my status, I became a pariah and was dispossessed of everything except my clothes. I made a huge contribution to the construction of the house

and several investments towards our well-being as a family."

Because of this hostility, women often decline to divulge their status to their husbands. And this despite public campaigns encouraging voluntary testing and counselling, raising questions about hopes for the success of the project.

Yona is now destitute and very ill. "My husband leads a promiscuous life but his relatives are blaming me," she complains.

In many parts of Africa, the first sign of HIV trouble comes when expectant mothers turn up for antenatal care, which includes full medical examinations. Hilda Mulauzi of Lilongwe reports that her husband left her in hospital, helpless and

"My husband and my in-laws were blaming me, saying that I had brought HIV to the home. They chased me out of the house. The moment I revealed my status, I became a pariah and was dispossessed of everything except my clothes"

bed-ridden, after she had a baby girl who is also HIV-positive.

"My husband dumped me when I was six months pregnant upon hearing the news that I was HIV positive," she says. "This was after being tested at the antenatal clinic, where they run a programme on the prevention of HIV transmission from mother to child through the provision of Nevirapine."

After being counselled, she was advised to bring along her husband so he could be tested and consid-

ered for the free anti-retrovirals programme. "He did not even let me continue explaining, just slapped and booted me out of the house," she recalls. "And that was the end of our marriage. He even denied being responsible for my pregnancy and claimed I had been unfaithful. And that even before he went for testing!"

According to Mercy Kawonga, who coordinates the Prevention of Mother To Child Transmission programme at Chiradzulu District Hospital, most of the women were reluctant to disclose their status to their husbands for fear that they would be divorced. MTCT is these days referred to in politically correct language as parent to child

transmission. Even after diagnosis, pregnant women still turn up alone for their next clinic appointment, says Kawonga. When asked why they did not bring their husbands as requested, they inevitably report that they had been unable to pass on the message for fear that they would lose their husbands. Sometimes, they do not return to the clinics at all. In one instance, Kawonga reports, a woman kept her nevirapine dose secret, not even

taking it when she went into labour, for fear of reprisals.

The Zimbabwe Report Positive Women Voices and Choices, prepared by the International Community of Women living with HIV and AIDS in Africa, says women in Africa are blamed and accused of bringing the virus to their husbands even before the men are tested and often suffer discrimination as a result of their diagnosis.

The report also advocates couple counselling and testing to reduce the blame and conflict that follows a positive HIV diagnosis that results in women being victimised and stigmatised.

Director of Gender Isabel Matenje says that Malawi's laws provide for a fine of one million kwacha (US\$10,000) for people who grab the property of dead people, leaving destitute their spouses – in most cases women. Yet this has never been a deterrent for people determined to victimise widows, especially in HIV/Aids cases.

United Nations Volunteer Mphatso Tambala said it is high time organisations became involved in action and advocating for legal protection for people living with HIV/Aids, especially women, through special policies that will address power relations and gender inequalities. He also wants community legal aid centres that will help solve cases of discrimination and abuse of human rights.

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Love brewed in an African pot



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none of it, however, and sentenced him to 15 months in jail, nine of which were suspended conditionally and six of which he had to make up for by doing 210 hours of community service at Pararenyatwa Hospital in Harare.

Rusere has appealed against the conviction and sentence; the rest of Zimbabweans are debating the value of love potions.

Ukudlisa (Zulu for secretly administering a love potion to a spouse) is a highly controversial subject. Debate usually centres on whether or not it exists. Some say it is a myth and an invention of jealous people bent on destroying other people's relationships.

The relatives of a husband are usually quick to accuse the wife of using love potions to ensure that their son listens to her and no other person in the family. It appears, however, that men too use love potions.

According to the president of the Zimbabwe National Healers Association, Gordon Chavunduka, men also use herbal concoctions to win and seal the affection of their women. "It is not true that women are only ones involved in *ukudlisa*. Men also use love potions to get women to fall in love with them," said Chavunduka.

Love potions come in various forms, including tree roots and concoctions. Some of the potions are believed to help a man successfully propose to women. "The men put the herbs under their tongues so that they can talk their partner or girlfriend into doing whatever they want," said Chavunduka. "Some men dissolve a mixture of herbs in water and gurgle it."

As they spit out the mixture, they say aloud all their wishes and plans for the object of their love. Others have talismans that they keep in their pockets so that any woman they meet and fancy falls in love with them.

"With others, it is inborn, and women dream about such men and just fall in love even when the man makes no effort," Chavunduka added.

But for those who must work hard to get noticed, Chavunduka and company have a variety of ingredients for concoctions that can be secretly slipped into food and offered to lovers:

Scraps of flesh from a blind puppy will make a woman blindly do whatever a man wants. A lizard's tail will tie a woman to the house when she has finished her duties at home instead of going out to look for boyfriends and gossip. The heart of a pigeon ensures that the wife is always in the

company of her husband.

Love potions are particularly common among men and women who are anxious about marital fidelity in light of HIV/Aids.

A snap survey in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, revealed a booming trade in love potions. The elderly women in this trade usually conduct business in public toilets to avoid detection.

Seemingly oblivious to the smell in the filthy toilets, the women advertise their wares to every person who comes in. Those who cannot stand the smell can always visit traditional healers. And a new breed of love potion peddlers move from door to door, selling the love potions to housewives in the comfort of their homes while their husbands are away at work.

"These women sell a variety of products, ranging from aphrodisiacs to love potions that ensure that the husband sticks around and does not run around with other women," said a woman who was once confronted by a trader selling "women's things".

There is a widespread belief locally that love potions and aphrodisiacs from Malawi and Zambia are the most potent. These are peddled door to door, at work places, on the streets and in public toilets.

A visit to the public toilets at the Bul-

awayo Communal Bus Terminus is an eye opener.

Women display their potions on the toilet floors, touting for customers. A bus terminus for urban commuters in Bulawayo is usually also a hive of activity, with herbalists announcing an assortment of love potions for men and women.

Some of the herbalists travel overseas, and one even has agents in the United Kingdom to handle that end of the business.

She added: "These herbs were in use before you were born and no harm has come to society because of them. Those who overdose give us a bad name, but it is possible to do so even with Western medicine. If you give a chloroquine overdose, do you then say that chloroquine is not good?"

But Pastor Raisden Sawasawa argues that some potions are artificial and may expire, eventually backfiring on the user. And still the debate continues, especially in circumstances that are not easily explained: How else to account for situations where a woman is abused physically and emotionally, such as when her man brings another woman into the house in her presence, and yet stays put?

Chavunduka and his team have the answer: it is the power of the love potion.

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