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Living in the margins as an albino woman

By Pauline Imanga Songiso in Dar es Salaam.
Sun 24 Oct. 2010, 04:00 CAT [1587 Reads, 0 Comment(s)]



"If I were the first albino female president of Tanzania..." Nasra Mbonea adding her voice and sharing challenges faced by albino women in her country

The albino saga in Tanzania has taken a new twist with scrupulous businessmen offering jobs to albino women hoping to lure them into sexual activity in the belief that it has magical powers to boom business.

"If I were the first albino president of Tanzania..." goes Nasra Mbonea.

It is a symposium organised by Tanzania Media Women Association (TAMWA), in conjunction with European Union (EU) at which the 24-year-old pours out her day-to-day experiences as a woman who is different from others through skin colour.

"My life is filled with prejudices and discrimination. I have enough worries as an albino and people add to them by discriminating against me," she laments.

Nasra does not venture out to seek a job because she has received demands for sex from her prospective employers, who believe that sex with an albino boosts business luck and cures sexually transmitted infections like HIV.

"I gave up in looking for a job because some men employ us and later demand for sexual favours not because they love us but because they believe that having sex with a woman like me cures HIV. Others believe it rids bad luck off their businesses and increases their prosperity.

"Before we knew the gimmick, a friend of mine was employed and after she succumbed to her boss' demands, he fired her soon after."

Tanzania rose to recent international media prominence following what started as a prank in the northern region where albinos were being killed for absurd rituals.

The numbers rose as rumours of the efficacy of the African traditional medicine (juju) concocted with albino blood and body parts in the belief it is the fastest and surest way of making instant prosperity spread.

According to the 2009 Tanzania Human Rights Report, compiled by the Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC), 25 cases of brutal killings of albinos was recorded for last year.

The report also states that most believers of this illusion are involved in fishing and mining activities on the Lake Zone, northern and southern parts of the country.

"Despite this terrible record, none of the suspects are arraigned resulting into horror, terror and persecution of people with albinism. It took a long time before arrests were made and for suspects to be prosecuted," states the report.

Such lethargy compelled the LHRC to lodge a constitutional case in March 2009. The case, inter alia, challenged the irresponsiveness of the Police Force in curbing albino killings.

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The filing of the case boosted the prosecution to start, whereby two cases, where all the accused persons were found guilty of murder, were completed by end of the year.

However, the incidents of albino killings did not stop despite the court's death sentence imposed on the first batch of convicts.

For instance, by August 2009, four people with albinism were reported killed in Mwanza.

The report further states that the killings are perpetuated by people of different social and economic status, including religious leaders, youths and aged people.

"In March 2009, an old woman was found in possession of organs suspected to be of an albino...In July a pastor of the Baptist Church in Magu District, was arrested by police in connection with an albino killing that took place the month earlier."

Although no complete data exists on how many albinos are in Tanzania, Albino Society of Tanzania chairperson, Kassim Kibwe, estimates that there are more than 150,000 out of the national population of 37 million.

Today, albinos in the East African country live miserable lives compounded by fear and stigma as their relationship with society continue to strain.

"As an albino, I live in constant fear that I can be harmed at any time and at the same time well-meaning people fear helping us," continues Mbonea.

"One day, I was involved in a road traffic accident with a neighbour who used to offer me lifts before. When police came to the scene, they started questioning him as to what he was doing with an albino. Now my neighbour avoids me," she said.

"I would freely visit relatives but they too have reservations for fear that if anything goes wrong with me, they would be held responsible. I tried to sell food (vending) but people would not buy from me because they didn't want to eat food prepared by an albino. If I prepared food and someone sold for me, they would buy."

Mbonea, who earns her living through making and selling batik material, also complained that skin care products for individuals with a deficiency or absence of melanin in skin, eyes and hair are costly and rarely available in local pharmacies.

"A small tube costs about 21,000 Tanzanian Shillings (15 US Dollars) which is expensive for an ordinary albino who does not have a job," she continues.

"If I were first albino president, I would waiver tax on those importing those creams and lotions and make sure they are readily available in hospitals and dispensaries."

According to Tanzania Media Women's Association, executive director, Ananilea Nkya, people are marginalised because of uneven distribution of resources. In her opinion, resources always follow those already well placed in society.

"A woman is more challenged than her male counterpart. One woman is expected to look after a family and engage in other economic activities like agriculture, for example... Life is even harder for marginalised people like albinos," says Nkya.

The European Union declared 2010 as a year for recognising the rights of people languishing in poverty and social exclusion like persons with disabilities.

Head of delegation, Tim Clark, said such people must be assisted and embraced to live in dignity and play a full part in society.

"We hope that through interactions, persons with disabilities will gain confidence to express themselves because there is need for collective voice as they make their pleas and issues known. As European community, we will not forget the forgotten," he promised.

Albinism is hereditary and cannot be transmitted by blood transfusion. Albinos are considered physically challenged because they suffer from a host of cancers and suffer serious problems of eyesight.

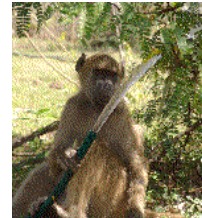
Mbonea's final statement is clearest.

"If I were the first albino president of Tanzania, I would make policies that embrace albinos and not allow stigma that makes our lives more miserable and difficult to enjoy life like any other citizen because we don't choose to be albinos."

Tanzania on October 31 goes to polls.

The writer is a member of Zambia Media Women Association currently hosted by Tanzania Media Woman Association under the Fredskorpset Exchange programme.

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