

**FEATURE**

Giving a voice to Tanzania's horror-struck albinos

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By **LLOYCE KIMBUNGA** in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania

PEOPLE with albinism in Tanzania, the nation with the largest rate of the condition in the world, endure horror with evil cabals hunting them down for their body parts, at times in connivance with the victims' parents and family members.

They are regularly killed and dismembered, which has led most to understandably live in fear.

Women and girls with the condition also are subjected due to the myth that having sex with them can cure HIV/Aids.

Albinos also face significant barriers which restrict their participation in society, impacts on their rights to enjoy physical and mental health as well as their ability to access adequate health care, education, social services, legal protection and redress for abuses.

About one in every 1,400 births result in albinism in Tanzania where 170 violations have been committed against albinos over the last decade, the highest in the world.

After many years of persecution, people with albinism in the East African country have been given a voice.

Standing Voice, an international non-governmental organisation based in Tanzania, with its headquarters in the United Kingdom, has been at the forefront of the campaign.

The organisation is prominent for fighting human rights violations of marginalised groups.

In Tanzania, such a campaign to fight for the rights of people with albinism is spearheaded by Grammy award-winning United States music producer, Ian Brennan.

He is the brains behind the 18-member Tanzania Albinism Collective, which has released the album, *White African Power*.

After contacting Standing Voice two years ago, expressing his desire to work alongside people with albinism in Tanzania, he has set on a path to uplift their voices and shine a light on their lives, through the vehicle of music.

Best known for producing Tinariwen's Grammy-winning album, *Tassili*, as well as *Six Degrees'* two critically lauded Zomba Prison Project releases, his mission is concentrated in Ukerewe, a remote island, four hours from the mainland in the heart of Tanzania's Lake Victoria.

It is a place so remote that historically people often travelled there to abandon their children with albinism and now serves as a haven for many with the condition.

He worked with members of the Standing Voice community, who volunteered for songwriting workshops.

Brennan encouraged them to write about their experiences and to express what they

wanted others to understand about their existence but even among the willing, singing-out proved hard within a group that routinely avoided eye contact, rarely spoke above a whisper, and were unaccustomed to dancing.

“Upon arriving at the island, I learned that the local community with albinism had not only never been asked to sing, but often were forbidden to, even in church.

As appalling as that is, it does not come as a surprise given that among those parents that choose to keep their children, some families still often force that child to eat outside and apart from their other siblings,” Brennan said.

Once the music started flowing, not surprisingly, themes of loneliness emerged in *White African Power*.

Among these lyrics include “I Am a Human Being,” “They Gossiped When I was Born,” “Life is Hard,” and “Who Can We Run To?”

Many lyrics were written in Kikirewe and Jeeta, the dialects which were officially discouraged and censored following unification of the country in 1964.

As with Brennan’s *Zomba Prison Project* releases, it offers a glimpse into music that comes from the heart and soul of a group of people, who up until now have been underrepresented and “unheard.”

“The resulting album is in turns beautiful, emotional, harrowing, fascinating and most importantly, completely human.”

Brennan bemoaned that those with albinism in Tanzania were often referred to disparagingly as “White” by their oppressors, prompting the members of the Albinism Collective to take control of and reclaim that message in an empowering, rather than denigrating way, hence the album title, *White African Power*.

“As one of the most persecuted populations on the planet, when a member of the albinism community in Tanzania – especially one who has been relocated by the government for his own physical protection – asserts his power, it is a claim that is hard to deny, in all of its multi-layered nuances.

“And, if anyone, anywhere has earned the right for the use irony, it is those that have

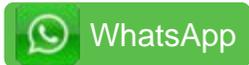
suffered such atrocities and ostracism from birth, yet still somehow managed to endure, and even thrive,” Brennan said.

Standing Voice hailed the impact of Brennan’s and Tanzania Albinism Collective’s work.

It follows successful projects in Malawi and Vietnam where Standing Voice provided platforms for otherwise voiceless communities to share their stories.

“We embarked on an exciting and collaborative journey that has only recently reached its climax,” the organisation said of the project in Tanzania. – **CAJ News**

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