

THE HOME THAT'S A WOMAN'S PLACE



Nuns (sr. Rita, sr. Rosily, sr. Mary) from St. Mary Village in Sagana, who take care of the aged women in the home. (PHOTO: STANDARD)

BY LYDIA LIMBE from Standarmedia.co.ke

From the gate, it looks like any other rural homestead. Just inside the compound of St Mary's Village in Sagana, a large avocado tree extends its large branches over a vegetable garden.

Two women are tending to the sukuma wiki, as they engage in animated chatter. One is bent over, digging with her hoe, while the second one is seated on a low stool as she weeds the vegetables. So engaged are they that they do not notice our presence, until our guide calls one of them by name.

Salome Muthoni, the one who is seated, struggles to get up while reaching for her crutches. Her companion scampers away, looking keen on getting to the other side of the compound.

Salome is 75 years old, and her left leg was amputated in 1944, when it got infected and failed to respond to treatment. She has been living at St Mary's Village for the last four years. She explains that she has no family to live with in her old age.

"I have never been married, and have no children, so there's no one to look after me at home," she says. "My only sister is married and struggling to support her family, and our brother passed away a long time ago."

This is the story of many of the 40 women housed at St Mary's Village. The 'village' was started by Consolata Missionaries, who first came to Sagana in 1959. As is the style of Catholic missions, a church was built, as well as a school and a dispensary.

The home as it stands today was built in 1974, after the Italian missionaries realised that in the community within which they were serving, many women were homeless due to leprosy and old age. Leprosy may no longer be a major problem in the area, but there are still old women in need of a caring environment in which to live out their sunset years.

This 'village' can host 56 residents, but is rarely full to capacity nowadays. The women range in age from 32 to octogenarian (the oldest resident ever, Njambi, lived to be about 130).

It is impossible not to be moved by the sight of these women — full of despair and hope in equal measure. They are happy to help around with chores — sweeping, shelling beans, tending to the vegetable garden, and weaving baskets.

Every woman here has a story, mostly a sad one, and for many, coming to St Mary's gave them a new lease on life.

Anne Gathoni is thought to be about 70 years old, and has two daughters. Nobody knows her exact age because her family is not known, and she has no identification with her. Most of the residents do not. Her husband abandoned her when she became mentally ill, and she was brought to this home by well-wishers.

"Mental ill health is a common problem among the women housed here. We have 17 of such cases. Many are depressed, and even physically challenged. In fact, one woman went on a hunger strike for two days because her children had refused to come and visit her. We had to talk to her and cajole her to eat," says Father Jackson Murugara, the director of Bethany House, a retreat centre within Sagana parish.

St Mary's is managed by four nuns, originally from India, with the help of eight employees who work in shifts. St Mary's Village used to be largely supported by donations from well-wishers in Italy, but since all but one of the Italian priests have passed away, the village greatly relies on the profits from income generating projects at Sagana Technical Institute. But the amount falls short.

"We have plenty of food. The only problem is money to pay the electricity and water bills as well as workers' salaries," Salome says through an interpreter.

Despite her age and physical disability, she's of sound mind and has an excellent grasp of issues. She even takes the liberty to prod some of her village-mates on our behalf.

Joseph Muoho, the chairman of the St Mary's committee, says the facilities have never been renovated since they were put up in 1974. The toilets have since stopped working properly, posing a health hazard to the women housed here — most of whom are sickly.

Since the village cannot afford full-time medical staff, cases of mental illness are controlled using drugs under the watchful supervision of Sister Rita, who is a trained pharmacist.

"Apart from mental ailments, many of these women suffer from depression, and a few are physically challenged. We get the necessary prescriptions from Kerugoya Hospital," says Sister Rita.

The nuns also strive to provide a wholesome diet, mostly based on produce from the 'village' farm, to keep the residents healthy.

Depression comes about mostly from the feeling of being abandoned by their families. An example is the case of Anna Njeri, who is 32 years old, and originally from Kasuku in Nyahururu. Two years ago, she was brought here by her mother after she became psychotic. She was very destructive in that state, but has now improved tremendously after undergoing treatment.

"Anna keeps asking for her mother, but when we call, nobody from her family answers the phone or returns our calls. We suspect that they fear being told to come and pick their daughter. But we just want to relay the message that Anna is fine and she'd like to see them or even just talk with them on the phone," says Sister Rita. "Most of the women who come to St Mary's live here for the rest of their lives; we do not force anyone to leave."

Another case is that of Emma Wanjiku Kinuthia, who was brought to the centre in 1996 by members of her church from At St Mary's Village in Sagana, women with nowhere else to call home find a place where they are accepted and cared for.

REMORSE VS GRATITUDE

Josphat Kamanya, a counsellor at Living Clean Society, says that the older people grow, the more they need care — medical, social and sometimes even physical.

He suggests seeking treatment for whatever illnesses they may be suffering from, and maintaining an environment where old people feel loved and appreciated.

"When an elderly person is unwell, thorough diagnosis is important, so that you know what you are dealing with. Then formulate a treatment plan, which may include medication, therapy and psycho-social support."

Psycho-social support is basically creating an environment where the elderly person is accepted with all the prevailing issues that they may be going through. Eliminate stigmatisation, and foster self-acceptance through inter-personal relationships.

"At St Mary's Village, the women are in a better place, compared to living alone, or in neglect. They have all-round care from the sisters and the other care-givers. They have each other as company, each of them has accepted their limitations, as well as those of the others, and they lack for nothing as far as basic needs are concerned," he says.

You also have to know the threshold that a person is operating from.

"Many old people are remorseful or grateful; remorseful for the goals not achieved or for how 'bad' their life has turned out, or grateful for achieved goals. This will make them either grumpy and depressed, or joyful and involved in community work. Either way, knowing their specific threshold will determine the kind of care you give."