

Ending **Child Labour & Abuse** On **RUSINGA ISLAND**



A mother holds her baby under a tree during the interview

Throughout the decades, exploitation and abuse of children and women have been rampant on Rusinga Island. Beyond mere statistics each case represents a shattered life, a survivor who endured unimaginable suffering. But amidst the darkness, glimmers of hope emerge. Through weekly training and practical policies, the island inhabitants are gradually dismantling and discarding harmful and exploitative norms to create safe spaces for all.

Text and images by Cynthia Omondi

A cool breeze blows from the lake. Wafting in the breeze is a mildly acrid, fishy smell that defines Lake Victoria beaches. The business of silver cyprinid fish, locally known as *omena* in the Luo dialect, is booming here. Women, old and young, are busy packaging, sorting or finding the finest bargains for the day. About a decade ago, the scene was different. Children would storm the beach to help their mothers do this work instead of attending school. We are at Litare Beach, headed for Luanda Village on Rusinga Island.

Just a few kilometres after trekking the hilly paths, and traversing empty homesteads, we are received by Emily Adhiambo. Her skin tone pops with a black star-shadowed look, and her hair is nicely done in spiral braids. Casually dressed in a white t-shirt and a black skirt, you can tell she has been busy working. With a room-grabbing smile, she offers us seats under a tree by their semi-permanent house roofed with shiny silver iron sheets. Behind her is a shirtless toddler who looks cheerful. This is her sister's home. "My parents died when I was young. Being the last born in our family, I was left to my siblings. I struggled with school and took longer to complete my primary education. Life was hard."



Women sorting fish at Litare Beach

'Emily's experience is not an exception. Many children here have fallen prey to fishermen'

Orphaned at a young age, the 21-year-old mother of two has a past that she feels uncomfortable talking about. She got her first child after clearing her primary education at 14. Abandoned by the man responsible, she struggled to raise her child. No sooner had life begun to take shape than the unexpected happened. She was molested, resulting in her second pregnancy. She never finished her secondary education.

She struggles with her words as she holds back tears. "Life turned bleak. The thought of how I would raise my children tormented me daily. It took a neighbour who introduced me to Victoria Friendly Montessori. After counselling, I was trained in soapmaking skills, which is what I currently do to provide for my children. My firstborn is currently in Pre-Primary 2 (PP2). This is my second baby," she says as she carries the toddler. Despite the long-lasting scars, she focuses on the future. She hopes Rusinga will become a safe space to raise her children for a better tomorrow.

Emily's experience is not an exception. Many children here have fallen prey to fishermen. The island is one of many scattered along Kenya's shores of Lake Victoria. Most households on the island depend on fishing for their income, leading to a very competitive environment where immorality dominates. As a result, women are forced to trade sex for fish.

Communities around Rusinga have seen an increase in teenage pregnancies and HIV/AIDS infections as fishermen and family members lure girls into transactional sex. A form of sexual exploitation which involves exchanging sex for material support or other benefits. Girls are coerced into sex in exchange for fish to meet basic needs.

The fish business consists of boat owners, fishermen and the 'middle woman' popularly known as *jaboya* a term also used to refer to 'sex-for-fish'. Men catch fish, while women sell them. For many women, living in poverty and with minimal education and no job opportunities, there is no other way to earn a living and support their children besides being fishmongers. Due to the manual nature of the business, prices depend on the whims and moods of the fishermen. As supplies diminish, fishermen tend to demand sex in exchange for providing fish. Being a *jaboya* is the fulcrum on which sexual exploitation revolves, and has been for decades.

Fishmongers used to drag their children into the business to make more money. One such case is that of Millicent Ororo, a 32-year-old mother of six who for five years, deprived her children of their rights by making them work at the beach. "I have been in the business since 2014 and it comes with its challenges. I started by sorting out and spreading the small fish. There is very little pay since it depends on how many kilograms you can sort. I needed extra hands for more pay and that is why I went with my children," she confesses.

She lacked a healthy relationship with her children as they barely talked to her about anything. They missed school most of the time and performed poorly, but to her what mattered was putting food on the table. "Sometime around 2018, while working at the beach, I heard another woman talk about a training she had attended on how to be a responsible parent. I was curious. I have always been a strict mother, which pushed them away. I inquired more about the training and attended. It had been organised by Victoria Friendly Montessori. The first session was an eye-opener. I realised I was not being fair to my children. It made me comprehend how important simple things like keeping your children close are. This

makes them open to you. There was a feeling of guilt in my heart. The training happened once a week for six weeks. It changed me," she admits.

After five years of harsh labour at the beach under the guise of helping their mother, Millicent's children finally got relief. Her firstborn is now in college, another in high school, and the rest in primary school. She confesses to the significant change she has seen in her relationship with her children. "I realised it was just a mindset that I had to work with them to make ends meet. Years later, I can provide enough for them on my own and am happy that their academic performance has improved as well," she adds with a smile.

Recently, communities have taken a step back to figure out where they erred. According to Ouma Atieno, a thirty-eight-year-old volunteer at a Beach Management Unit in Litare, the alarming rate of teen pregnancy cases, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, led to a call for action.

"We came together as a community with different stakeholders to brainstorm about how to protect our children. The Beach Management Unit, together with local leaders and the area chief, assembled the local communities to have dialogue. We agreed to have a child protection desk at the Unit and I was selected with Monica to man it," she tells us. The desk was created to address child abuse cases common on the beach and in communities.

For an island with a population of around 30,000 people, bringing them together was not a hustle. Changing their mindset was. It took a lot of effort and commitment from the local leaders. They would gather people at the beach every Friday for briefings and discussions on how ideally children could be protected. This was to reduce teenage pregnancies and stop children from working at the beach.

"Not all women were receptive. Some wondered why we were dictating how they raise their children. However, most saw sense and together we developed a set of rules that guide all beach activities," she adds. Among the rules, which she takes us through are; every fisherman and fishmonger who operates at the beach must be registered by the Beach Management Unit; children are barred from accessing the beach at given times; no child is supposed to be loitering at the beach during school days; and no child is allowed to do any kind of work along the beach.

"When we began around 2021, people were reluctant to bring cases, but with time, cases began flowing. Most of them were sexual abuse in nature. However, the cases have gradually declined this year compared to previous years," Monica, Atieno's fellow volunteer, says. Both are fishmongers at Litare Beach.



One of the riders rests at the *bodaboda* stage at Litare

A first-time visitor to the island would be awestruck by the majestic views of Lake Victoria. When the sun sets, the lake comes to life in a whole new form, with small yellow lights popping up across the water. Only a fisherman like George Wesonga Opoe who has worked in Rusinga for over twenty years, can confirm to you that the lake appears as a sea of lights at night as a result of fishing.

The thirty-two-year-old father of six, whose expertise is in Tilapia, or *ngege* as the locals here call it, admits to noticing a significant change at the beach in the recent past. "Some five or ten years ago, this place flooded with people of all ages. Most fishermen here are drunkards and, in most cases, nuisances. I cannot remember how many times I witnessed women and children being raped."

He confesses that he has never abused a child or a woman. He attributes his exemplary character to religion and family. He prays that his daughters may never fall victim to fellow fishermen's abuse. "Things began to look different in the last three years when we began receiving visitors at the beach. Through the Beach Management Unit, no fisherman or fishmonger can operate here without proper registration. There have been some new strict rules, which has helped reduce some of these cases," he affirms.

Fishermen are not the only threat to women and children in Rusinga. For a town that relies extensively on cycle taxis, commonly known as *bodaboda*, cases of riders defiling young girls have also been pervasive here. Victor is a twenty-two-year-old *bodaboda* rider who operates on the island. He tells us, "It reached a point where we were all seen as rapists. It is very difficult to operate in a space where you are not wanted."



Left: Women sort fish at Litare beach
Below: A student at Victoria Friendly Montessori School poses on a swing

It has taken many interventions by the community to bring sanity to their sector as well. Thanks to the strict rules of the Bodaboda Sacco, all operators must be registered. "We have rules and regulations that guide how we operate. For instance, as a Bodaboda Sacco member of Litare, I am only allowed to operate in this area and not in any other. If I went to Mbita, I would have to register again. In that case, if I make any mistakes, I can be easily traced," he explains.

Even though child defilement cases are still there, Victor tells us they are minimal since they came together to protect their reputation. Any offender they come across is firmly dealt with. "The last incident I heard of, a rider was accused of molesting a schoolgirl and thought he would escape. Other riders ganged up and set his motorbike ablaze. The police intervened and he was arrested."

Kenya is set to conduct a child labour survey this year after 15 years. The last Child Labour Analytical Report was developed in June 2008 from data generated under the *Kenya Integrated Household Survey of 2005/06*. The report indicated that 1.01 million children were in child labour. A 2018 report released by Childline Kenya said the most frequently reported abuse was child neglect with 116 cases. This was followed by physical and sexual abuse at 100 and 76 respectively. Rusinga was one of the leading areas with a high rate of child abuse and neglect.

With communities on Rusinga island coming together to end child exploitation, one can see the power of local contribution within communities. Once the child labour survey is conducted, communities are optimistic that child labour and abuse cases will decrease significantly.



VICTORIA FRIENDLY MONTESSORI

It is a local organisation that focuses on developing capacities among grassroots communities along Lake Victoria. It seeks to mitigate the effects of poverty through sustainable community-led interventions. Through their social services, VFM runs several programs, among which are child protection and skilful parenting. These programmes are committed to changing livelihoods on Rusinga Island in collaboration with different stakeholders.

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