
WAMUYU TERESIA WACHIRA

There were fierce arguments amongst students taking the “Women in Literature” course at Kenyatta University, Nairobi. Some of the male students revealed their own prejudices by arguing that when an African woman says “no” to sex it means “yes”. In their culture, others insisted, a wife who was *not* beaten by her husband would say he did not love her.

Listening to this, student teacher Wamuyu Wachira was amazed that young men, studying a subject that involves critical thinking, were so unable to see beyond their culture. She recognised that at times women themselves colluded with violence or abuse. “I made up my mind that when I left university I would work towards helping people change their attitudes to the cultural practices that are oppressive, especially to women.”

Wamuyu belongs to the Loreto Sisters, a Catholic congregation also known as the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM). Working as a teacher and head of secondary schools, she soon found that assumptions about women’s role in society lay behind all kinds of discrimination. Some parents felt that educating a girl was a waste of money because she would marry and join her husband’s clan. One parent told her: “It is easier to sell a girl in marriage than to give away a cow, because cattle are wealth and life”. If money was short then school fees for sons took priority over a daughter’s education.

Traditional beliefs that undervalued girls encouraged exploitation - as did poverty. Girls were prey to sexual abuse by teachers and “sugar daddies”, older men who seduced them with presents and promises. Each year four or five of

Sister Wamuyu’s senior students became pregnant - and that was fewer than in most schools. Some families advocated early marriage to gain the bride-price, and girls also dropped out of school after undergoing female circumcision - a rite that still affects some even though it is banned by law in Kenya.



In the 1990s several horrifying episodes of violence brought home to Wamuyu the urgent need to develop a strong culture of peace. In one school four prefects were locked in by other students and burnt to death; in another, 69 boys died after fellow students set fire to their dormitory; and in a terrible assault on a girls’ secondary school in 1991, boys from a neighbouring school attacked the girls in their dormitory. Nineteen girls died, 71 were raped,

and the rest were traumatised. Questioned by the media, the female deputy principal explained: “The boys never meant any harm against the girls. They just wanted to rape”.

Responding to violence

How could a shocked headteacher protect her girls from injustice and violence and equip them to be confident young women ready to contribute to peace in their country? Sister Wamuyu responded to this challenge with energy and imagination.

After those terrible fires, “our school community visited in order to mourn and console the bereaved parents and to be with the students in their grief. We took the girls to educate them about how far violence can go if they do not learn to dialogue and appreciate each other.

“I believe that peacemaking is at the core of a woman’s heart.”

This was also a way of training them for peacemaking and reconciliation."

Wamuyu handled discipline problems by affirming the students' talents rather than always looking for faults and weaknesses. Good communications were essential, and she urged them and their parents to speak freely, and even criticize, without fearing that teachers would then pick on their daughters. When a girl got pregnant "I would guide and counsel her, and when she was ready, invite the parents in so that we could dialogue". She persuaded the angry parents to help their daughter to complete her studies if she wished, and expected the other students to offer support. "We had to keep reminding them that they should develop the 'spirit of sisterhood' among themselves."

That spirit also prevented bullying. The Loreto custom was that each new girl in Form 1 would be cared for by a girl in Form 2 - their "school mum". This helped them to adjust faster and to treat each other like one family. The "school daughters" were allocated at random to their excited "mums", so that girls from different ethnic groups and provinces interacted.

Resolving conflicts

Since conflict is part of life the girls needed to learn how to resolve conflicts themselves. Nonviolent peacemaking is not new to Kenya; it is rooted in traditions whereby disputes are settled by sitting down together, listening to all sides and finding a solution in common. "Hurry, hurry has no blessing" is a well-known proverb. Real peace takes time.

Wamuyu revived the school's Peace Council with some students trained as peer counsellors. Often girls preferred to sort out quarrels in that way rather than involve teachers. The role of prefects was also taken very seriously. Those elected by fellow students were given intensive training in leadership skills and teambuilding. At a commissioning ceremony the new prefects promised to serve the student body without bias, and were each given a candle symbolising the light of example they were to provide.

During ethnic conflict in the region, when some people were killed and families were displaced,

Sister Wamuyu adapted the Lord's Prayer, naming the local tribes. "*Our Father who art in heaven, here in the Rift Valley you are our Father. We are your children. You are the Father of the Kalenjins, Father of the Luos, the Father of the Kikuyu, Father of the Kisii...*" Her aim was to help the girls to live in harmony in school, even when this was absent from the surrounding areas.

Drama, music and art developed students' ability to challenge violence and discrimination. They worked with another Loreto sister, Dr Ephigenia Gachiri, to produce a campaign film, *As beautiful as God made me - Say no to female circumcision*. The Sisters advocate a process of Christian initiation for teenagers to ensure that girls receive appropriate sex education and guidance from a concerned adult.

Sr Wamuyu is in no doubt about the value of positive role models for young women. She finds inspiration herself from the foundress of the IBVM, a 16th century Yorkshirewoman called Mary Ward. "One of her sayings that has continued to influence my life and passion for peacemaking is 'Women in time to come will do much'. Her dream has come true in the lives of many Loreto Sisters empowering women." Past students include politicians who have championed women's rights in Kenya, and the Nobel Peace Prizewinner, Professor Wangari Maathai, who is a prominent campaigner for the environment.

Wamuyu is pleased that the values she has tried to instil in her students are not lost on them. "One pointed out that I enjoyed getting passages from the Women's Bible. She perceived that I truly believe that women are indeed empowered by God - each to do what she has to do to ensure a better society than we have."

Read:

Mary Ward: her life and legacy, Loreto Sisters Ireland 2006. Loreto Centre, Crumlin Road, Dublin 12, Eire

A Culture of Peace: women, faith and reconciliation by Marigold Best and Pamela Hussey, CIIR (Progressio), 2005