

Friends of Education: One Man's Fight against Stigmatization of Albinos

HakiElimu

When the term “Ujamaa” is mentioned, Tanzania comes to mind. A country that decided to take a participatory community-approach to development, Tanzania has taken strides. It has been lauded as one of Africa’s leaders in the provision of universal education at primary level. According to the Tanzanian Education Policy Data Center, “the primary net enrolment rate is 98% and the primary completion rate is 81%”. Despite these glossy statistics, many of country’s 55 million people still suffer from glaring inequalities in education. Girls in particular continue to lag behind boys in school and in society. At the society level, issues such as albinism, poor infrastructure and violence against children continue to hamper efforts to keep children in school and to protect them from abuse. The situation is worse for children suffering from albinism, who grapple with abandonment and abduction & murder.

The negative norms around children who are affected by albinism seem to have stemmed from the beliefs particularly in the fishing communities that sacrificing albinos and “offering” body parts to the traditionalists would help alleviate poverty. These beliefs have persisted as children continue to be maimed, abused and kidnapped because some believe that they either bring wealth or good luck. In 2017 alone, there have been cases of families hiding in fear during any elections because there is an increase in witchcraft and abductions during both local and national elections.

Busega, one of the poorest districts bordering Lake Victoria is one such area where the violence against albinos is rife. Busega’s residents have largely relied on fishing, but as stocks have continued to dwindle and privatization has taken over, superstition over the power of albinos has grown. Children are afraid to walk on their own, to go to school or to even attend community events because they “appear different”.

But the picture is not bleak. Communities and organisations have developed initiatives that are making a big difference in creating opportunities for girls to continue studying. **HakiElimu**, (*Right to Education* in Kiswahili) was founded in 2001 by 13 passionate Tanzanians who felt that the existing policies were not being translated into meaningful action in the education sector. They decided to tackle the disparities plaguing the country. In their words “education would improve when ordinary citizens became involved and create meaningful public participation in education governance”, using a “Friends of Education” approach.

The Friends of Education (FoE) movement brings together individuals and organizations throughout Tanzania who are looking to make a difference in the education sector by addressing societal issues impeding education.

Joseph Gimongi's involvement in Haki Elimu's Friends of Education movement and his determination to end the stigmatization of the albinos in Busega is an inspiration to all of us trying to end Violence Against Children. Supporting albino children with basic needs and giving them a chance to get an education and life skills in a safe environment is a guiding example to what needs to be done.

Joseph Gimongi (40), who joined the FoE movement in 2016, *has been leading a unique initiative to support education for children with albinism. He is passionate with education and he wants to ensure that children with albinism enjoy their right to education in a safe and friendly environment. He was moved to take-action to address education challenges at his locality by HakiElimu's tagline; **reflect and take action**. Since 2017, he has mobilised resources from national and international philanthropists to ensure these children enjoy their rights to education. During the year he supported children in Mitindo, Misungwi and Buhangija, Shinyanga through the provision of school uniforms and shoes, stationery, sun glasses and sun lotion to protect the children when they are traveling to and from and when they are at school.*

Efforts such as Joseph's are being recognized at the local, national and international level. Albinism is in the spotlight. Increasingly the narrative is changing with many others beginning to acknowledge that violence against children with albinism has to be stopped.