

Kenya: Schools Reject Children with Disabilities

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Government urged to make greater efforts to ensure education for those with special needs.

Stephen, 18, has cerebral palsy and has never managed to attend school for more than a few days.

Every day, his mother Mary Wanjiku leaves him alone in their home in the Kibera slum on the outskirts of Nairobi.

He watches television in a special seat while she goes to work, and a neighbour keeps an eye on him in case of emergency.

Mary has spent most of Stephen's life looking for a school that will take him and can offer him the care he needs.

At one school she visited, the head teacher told her that he did accept children with disabilities, but not those with Stephen's condition.

Another school agreed to enrol Stephen as long as Mary paid extra fees so a full-time carer could accompany him, something she could not afford to do.

Mary is among many parents of disabled children in Kenya who struggle in vain to find appropriate schooling for them, in the end forced either to educate them at home or leave them there while they go out to work.

In theory, children with disabilities in Kenya have two choices when it comes to education.

They can attend an integrated school which should enable them to study alongside able-bodied children. For children with more severe disabilities, there are special schools which cater for particular conditions. Parents get extra grants to enable them to pay for tuition.

However there are no special schools near Kibera, and head teachers of supposedly integrated schools often argue that their institutions lack adequate facilities to accommodate children with special needs.

According to research carried out in 2008 by the National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development and the Kenya Bureau of Statistics, 67 per cent of children with disabilities receive a primary education but just 19 per cent complete secondary school.

Another woman who lives in Kibera, Millicent Akoth, has had similar difficulties finding a school for her eight-year-old daughter Sheryl.

Sheryl is mute, and mother and daughter communicate using sign language. Sheryl attends a disability support group run by a local charity once a week, but she does not go to school.

"The schools do not accept these children, not because they don't want [to] but because they believe that our children will distract other children when they are studying," Millicent explained. "But I believe integration is good because it will help. The other children will get used to them. The stigma will be less."

For her part, Mary has given up trying to find an integrated school for Stephen because she says the carers employed to look after children with special needs don't do a good enough job.

"They do not know how to care for a child with disabilities," she said. "They do the job because they know that they will get 20,000 or 30,000 Kenyan shillings [230 or 350 US dollars] at the end of the month. They do not care about our children."

Millicent said the schools "need trained teachers and caretakers to take care of the children".

SCHOOLS UNDERFUNDED

Maria Omare is the executive director of The Action Foundation, which supports children with disabilities in Kibera. She believes that all children apart from those with particularly severe disabilities should be accommodated in integrated schools.

Omare highlighted the same problems experienced by Mary and Millicent.

"It is true that they are denied entry, that's what happens," she told IWPR. "They are turned away because

the children are hard to take care of. Schools are under-funded [and] teacher-to-child ratios are small. There is no one-on-one attention. The staff are underpaid. They do not give the children enough attention.”

According to Fatma Wangare, the chief executive officer of the Kenya Association of the Intellectually Handicapped, the problem is particularly acute for those with mental disabilities.

“Many children are denied admission in schools, especially children with [an] intellectual disability, the denial is based on disability - for example not being toilet-trained, lack of speech and language - which is very unconstitutional,” she explained.

“There is need for parents to advocate for inclusion in education. Most schools deny admission and are always quick to refer them to special schools which most of them are far [away].”

Lilly Oyare, a headmistress at Little Rock primary school in Kibera, agreed that a lack of government funding was a key factor behind the problem. But she also identified a general reluctance among head teachers to accept children with disabilities.

“Integrating children with disabilities is a great challenge,” she said. “People are not ready to come out of their comfort zone. They don’t realise that they [children with disabilities] can be good in art and music. Some [head teachers] shut their eyes and don’t want anything to do with them.”

PROBLEM HIGHLIGHTED IN KEY REPORT

A human rights report released last year found that educational facilities in Kenya for children with disabilities “face particular challenges”. It noted further that such schools “are few and inadequately resourced”.

The Truth and Justice Reconciliation Commission, which conducted a survey of gross human rights abuses and other long-term injustices in Kenya committed between December 1963 and February 2008, highlighted the issue of education for children with disabilities.

In its final report which was handed to President Uhuru Kenyatta in May 2013 the commission tasked the ministry of education with implementing “robust plans” to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream education. It said the schools should tailor their facilities to suit children’s specific needs.

However none of the recommendations of the TJRC report have been implemented after the government amended the law in December 2013 to enable parliamentarians to first consider its findings. (See **Key Rights Report in Spotlight After Kenya Violence.**)

Kennedy Buhere, a communications officer at the ministry of education, declined to answer specific questions on the issue.

However, he informed IWPR in an email that children with disabilities in integrated schools do receive additional financial support. Parents get 2,040 Kenyan shillings per month (23 dollars) for each child with special needs, double the allowance able-bodied children receive under Kenya’s Free Primary Education scheme.

But critics say that transport alone can cost parents up to 1,500 shillings (20 dollars) each month, leaving little to cover the costs of additional care.

Apart from this funding, “nothing much has been done by the government for the children,” Omare said, pointing out that education is compulsory for all children in Kenya.

“Government should prioritise making sure that children with disabilities get education. It is not something that they have pushed,” she said. “They should strive to get to the level of other countries.”

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