

Report by Martina Hopp, Kenya 2004

Four weeks in Kenya as a social worker

In March 2004 I participated in a four weeks' study program for social workers in Kenya.

Diary:

Only three days before departure. The bureaucratic and organisational preparations have taken months and are finished. E-mail contacts with my first host family. Have found a video about Austria and Vienna in English at last. Read a lot about social work in Austria, I am still anxious about presenting my work in English.

Don't know how many people I will have to talk to. Don't know much about living conditions in Kenya, but have, of course, pictures in my head from TV and literature.

Arrival in Nairobi. In my luggage enough clothes, many brochures, information material to give away to social workers in Kenya and presents: cooking books with Viennese specialities, and snowstorm globes with St. Stephen's Cathedral and the Riesenrad. Now I know that next time I will bring tea towels, a rare commodity hardly to be found in Nakuru.

Pastor Olekimiti is waiting for me, instead of formal greetings I get a heartfelt hug. Next day at the bus station dusty, masses of people trying to catch the next Matatu (minibus) to go to the rural area to visit their families. Streets are rough. Saw the first zebras.

I arrive at Nakuru late, the introduction seminar has already started, I meet Laina from Sweden, the second participant, and ten members of CIF Kenya. The introductory statements about role and methods of social work in Kenya and the economic and political situation are very informative, although I am very tired. The remarks about family structure are very interesting. The family is the basis, the father is the main authority and main provider of income. Although the mother is responsible for the education of the children, the father is the one to decide about the future of the children (nothing really new). In practice it is like this: The father was not present in both of my host families. My first host family seems economically well off, the father is working in Nairobi and does not come home often, if decisions have to be taken he has to come home. In my second host family the father is present at all. After a long lawsuit the mother got maintenance for both of her children, so they can go to boarding school. One is never sure if one earns enough money to pay for rent, electricity and food. Water has to be brought from far away and is the traditional responsibility of the wife in the family.

Daily prayers before and after everything is rather strange to me, prayers before eating, before the seminar, before giving a statement, etc.

Religious practice is part of daily life. Communal religious life is an important aspect of people's lives. Christianity was forced upon people during colonisation, in the meantime it is part of their lives. Religious communities take over many traditional rites and are an important part of society. Most social projects are supported by the Catholic Church, public funds are very rare.

I visited many institutions and projects. The social workers are highly motivated and take on a lot of responsibility. The difference to my work is in funding, not in the methods of work. Many projects can only exist because of volunteers. These are young people who are economically secure and care for other people. Many projects have to fight for funds on a daily basis. Not enough money means that institutions cannot buy daily necessities for their clients, e.g. water, food, hygiene articles, clothes, things needed for school. So many kids go back to the streets to beg and steal for their daily needs. Streets are full of kids, some of them are drug addicted. I am warned not to go out after 19.00, after that time nobody goes out on the dark streets without city lights.

Economic dependence on global players, corrupt governments and institutions like the World Bank and the WTO create poverty, high unemployment and the loss of land.

The slums around Nakuru get bigger and bigger. Nakuru is situated next to the famous national park where tourists watch the many flamingos. Three young men show me a slum school which they had founded. Children aged 3 to 6 years get food once a day and are taught by a teacher. All these kids are orphans, their parents have died of Aids. The HIV/Aids rate in this slum is around 50%.

Many projects try to lower the infection rate through education and tests. People cannot afford condoms and medical care, there is no social security. Social workers tell me that success can be seen in a lower infection rate of the young people.

Governmental children homes are full of children who have been arrested by the police after minor offences. Boys and girls with shaven heads sit around and have nothing to do. There is no furniture, nothing to play with. I get to know a lawyer who tries to find a family member of the children or to put them into "better" homes.

The prison for girls is funded by the government. There is no fence, and the doors are open. Most of the girls are there because of stealing at their work places where they worked as maids. I am shocked to learn that some girls are in prison because of abortion. Many girls are there for a long time, away from their families. They do not have a place to go to. There they have the possibility to get some education.

Police station: a man beats his wife, blood on her face, nobody interferes, we try to get a police woman interested in the matter, nobody cares. The patriarchal potential of violence against women is very high.

FIDA, a union of lawyers, who stand for women's rights, can only care for the most severe cases because the amount of violence against women is so high. Corporal and sexual violence in the family is forbidden by law, but many women, economically dependent on their male partners, do not have a place to go to. The police does not care. There is one shelter for beaten women in Nairobi which can offer shelter for beaten women only for a few weeks.

During my stay in Nakuru I get to know many women who are active to improve women's rights. Some women of the Gender-University and of a family consultation centre of the Catholic Church are very interested in the concept of a shelter for beaten women. We exchange e-mail addresses. After some weeks, now back in Vienna, I learn that these women have established a counselling centre dealing with domestic violence against women and children. Their next project is the foundation of a women's shelter.

(I was very surprised to see that the people at Nakuru are able to found projects out of nothing. For us it is impossible to imagine to establish a project without any money, go through all the bureaucratic hassle and make it work.)

At the end of my stay I visit a project dealing with girls living in a slum. The project members try to help young mothers who live next to a garbage dump and earn their living by sorting through the garbage for food and for things to sell. If they, for example, had a sewing machine and the knowledge how to use it they would not have to sort through the garbage.

I am unable to compare the poverty I have seen there with anything similar in my country.

Centuries after independence from colonialism Kenya is still facing exploitation. Most of the industry, the land, and know-how is in the hands of Western capitalism. Tea, coffee, fruits

and vegetables are exported. This creates poverty which has to be seen on a global level. As long as these conditions stay the same living conditions of Kenyans won't change.

Today social workers in Kenya face the following problems:

- drug abuse and alcoholism
- HIV/Aids, 500 Kenyans die per day
- poverty
- cultural rites and practices, like genital mutilation
- low education and illiteracy
- domestic violence, a high rate of murder, a high rate of suicide
- single mothers with many children who have no income
- unwanted and unplanned pregnancies
- massive unemployment rate

You cannot compare social work in Kenya with ours because there are no resources. Social work in Nakuru would not be possible without the high motivation and engagement of the social workers there.

The experiences I made in Kenya are very valuable for me personally as well as professionally. I gained many different insights into the cultural background of African women. These insights enable me to see the way we deal with problems here in Austria from a different perspective.