



NOTEBOOK CHARITIES

Learning to taste freedom

By Alexandra Frean
Social Affairs Correspondent

HALIMA MWALAMI works seven days a week as a housegirl for a middle class family who pay her only 5,000 shillings (£2.42) a month — a fraction of the legal minimum wage of 60,000 shillings, or £29, a month. She has had only one holiday in six years. But in Dar es Salaam, she has something that many other youngsters do not: an education.

"I love going to school. It makes me so happy. When I go back to my village the people are all so glad for me and so proud that I can read and write. Every minute I have that I'm not working, I'm reading my school books," Halima says.

In a country where more than half the population of 36 million live in extreme poverty and more than four million school-age children have no access to education at all, Halima understands only too well that without the ability to read and write, the chances of her ever moving out of the servant class will be remote.

"When I am grown up and have a better life, I will never employ a housegirl because a housegirl's life is too hard — I will do it all myself," Halima laughs. Her friend, Rebeka Mtumbuzi, aged 17, is more circumspect. "When I'm a famous singer and broadcaster, of course I will have a housegirl of my own. But I will treat her right," she says.

According to Suzanne Simard, of the American Education Development Center, housegirls and boys are often treated no better than slaves. Many are locked up at night and never allowed to leave their employers' houses. Some

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Rebeka and Halima long to escape domestic service

are not paid, others receive only a pittance, and many are sexually abused.

Many of these children are victims of illegal trafficking. "Sometimes the children are sold by their families — who are desperately poor — to their employer or to a middle man," Simard says. "They say that trucks from Dar es Salaam go to Iringa and Mufindi in the South West of the country and fill up with children. The drivers tell the parents they will find the children a good education or get them good jobs in domestic service.

"The children are then sold in Dar es Salaam for between 50,000 and 150,000 shillings

(between £24 and £73). That is good money. Mostly they are sold as housegirls, although some are sold into prostitution. Children from the Hehe tribe are favoured because they are regarded as docile, hardworking and faithful," she adds.

With the help of the British-based charity Freeplay Foundation, EDC has set up a special school in Dar es Salaam to cater for houseboys and girls and other trafficked children in an attempt to better their lives.

"If you take the children away from their jobs, they will be back in two or three weeks, either because they need the money for their families or because it's all they know," Simard says.

So, five days a week, Halima gathers around a big blue radio with a group of 20 or so others in the Tanzania Children's Playing Centre Association in Segerea, a suburb of Dar es Salaam. There, with the help of a mentor, Jacqueline Msigwa, the children take part in a radio distance-learning programme, called Mambo Elimu, Swahili for "education is everywhere".

EDC created the educational programmes and pays the mentor a small salary. The radios, which cost £35 each, are provided by Freeplay Foundation. The radio plays on wind-up or solar energy.

Lumala says that authorities are gradually clamping down on the illegal trade in domestic servants. Attitudes among employers are changing too. When EDC first opened the Mambo Elimu school in Segerea, the children's employers were very wary. But after the school put on a successful show of singing and dancing for the entire community, the mood turned in its favour. Now everyone is clamouring to have a houseboy or girl who can read and who goes to school.

Freeplay Foundation is a beneficiary of The Times Christmas Charity Appeal. Your donation will help to provide more radios for children like these.

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