

# The first lady of handiwork shines

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Caroline Agwanda is living proof that disability is not inability. In fact, she has risen to heights most able-bodied people can only dream of. Agwanda is now a beacon of hope to hundreds of disabled women in the region.

Agwanda, 32, has trained over 200 physically handicapped women from East Africa since she formed Hyacinth Ornament Production Enterprise (Hope) at the age of 21.

She also trains able-bodied women at a fee. She has trained women in Bukoba, Tanzania, Luzira, Uganda, Mombasa, Likoni and several parts of Nyanza Province. "I offer the training to disabled women for free. I want to empower them," says Agwanda, the second born in a family of seven.

And her efforts have paid off — she has won accolades and even a United Nations (UN) award eight years ago for her project.

"Physically handicapped people face widespread stigmatisation. It is worse for women."

Agwanda makes many items including bags, tablemats, jewellery and clothing such as shirts.

"In 1997, I decided to use the hyacinth from Lake Victoria to make my life and that of other women in a similar predicament constructive and fulfilling," she explains.

Most of the women she is training are members of close to 10 groups spread all over Nyanza.



Caroline Agwanda harvests water hyacinth. Left: With some of the household items she makes from the weed. [Photos: James Keyi]

Kisumu Disabled Self-Help Group, with 25 members, is one of the beneficiaries of Agwanda's efforts.

"She trained me three years ago. My life has changed since I am now able to sustain myself," Mildred Auma, 27, says of the trainer.

Auma, a mother of one, says they make many items, adding that they are currently facing marketing challenges.

In September 2000, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) honored Agwanda with the Young Entrepreneurship Award at the World Trade Centre in New York, USA.

"I was overjoyed as the over 1,500 guests applauded. I cried as the plaque was presented to me."

However, she had nearly missed the award

ceremony.

No money for travel

"I was informed of my feat three weeks to the function. I did not have sufficient funds for travel," she explains.

She secured a visa, only a day before she was to leave for the ceremony.

Some people she encountered could not believe that a young, disabled woman could win a UN award.

"*UN hawafanyi kazi na watu kama nyinyi* (The UN does not work with people like you)," a security officer at the US embassy dismissed her.

The treatment she received forced the UN office in Nairobi to give her a representative to take her around offices.

Agwanda says she is glad Prime Minister Raila Odinga has recognised her work.

In 2004, while he was a minister in the Narc Government, Raila bought a portrait she had designed of him — and he paid handsomely for it.

Agwanda says the PM was excited about the piece of art and a friendship developed.

"If we had 10 women in Nyanza like you, life there would be very different," Raila told Agwanda.

Agwanda's other high profile customers include former Vice-President Moody Awori and several current MPs.

"Awori has often bought my shirts. He encourages me to keep assisting disabled women," she says.

Agwanda was motivated to form Hope after reading an article on how disabled women had changed their lives in Asia.

"I came across a newsletter on how physically challenged women in Bangladesh were making items from banana fibre and palm leaves," she elaborates.

She runs Hope Gift Shop within the precincts of Kisumu Airport.

But life has not always been rosy.

Dark period

In January 2003, she conceived out of wedlock. People she thought were close friends renounced her.

"The disownment was shocking, but I gained strength after counseling by a medical doctor," she says.

Agwanda says during this dark period in mid-2003 she met a US Marine officer, who opened the world to her. He was one of the marines working in Seme, Kisumu Rural Constituency.

"He was shocked to find my child lying on the floor and decided to give me some money so that I would employ a caretaker. He then introduced me to staff at the US Embassy in Nairobi." The marine bought doormats, baskets and cards worth Sh7,000.

Since then, she has been exhibiting at the US embassy for a month every year.

On November 13 last year, she exhibited at the venue, and US Ambassador Michael Ranneberger was pleasantly surprised at her achievements.

The medium-sized woman says an American tourist, Joseph Cistone, whom she met at the Kisumu airport four years ago, has introduced her to some of his countrymen.

"Cistone has urged me to come up with a proposal about my work. He has plans for me to supply my artwork to a number of Americans," she explains.

Two South African adventurers, who visited Kisumu in 2004, have recognised her work in their book Freedom Flight.

The authors say about her: "Among the friendly people we met at the Kisumu Airport was Caroline Agwanda, who created a small industry making ornaments out of the invasive water hyacinth and papyrus plants..."

#### Secondary school

When she finished primary school, Agwanda could not join high school immediately even though she had performed well in Kenya Certificate of Primary Education examinations, due to lack of fees.

"I was admitted to Lwak Girls' and Kisumu Girls' (among the top schools in Nyanza) but could not afford to join them," says Agwanda in flawless English.

However, she completed her secondary education at Nyanza Christian Secondary School, after getting a scholarship from Kisumu philanthropist, Mr. Rajni Somaia who also donated orthopaedic shoes.

She has taken several training courses and has been awarded a number of certificates.

Among the organisations that have bestowed on her the array of certificates is the Kenya Industrial Estates.

Agwanda decries the treatment of disabled women, saying some men take advantage them.

"Men will pretend to be in love with them, only to abandon them with the unfair excuse of disability," she says.

Another challenge is some unscrupulous people who use handicapped people for financial gain.

"I have met people who pretend to assist me in writing proposals, only for them to go behind my back and present the same proposal to prospective philanthropists," she says.

Agwanda, a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, says she will not let these challenges dampen her spirit.

Disabled by quack

Agwanda says her disability resulted from a quack's anti-malaria jab, when she was five years old.

She urges the Government to ensure easier accessibility for the physically handicapped to public places. The Government is yet to gazette some sections of the Disability Act that provides access to essential services.

These include public service vehicles, storey buildings, exemption from tax and telephone and TV services, among others.

Agwanda advises people with disability, especially women, not to be dependant on other people.

"Women with disabilities should not seek pity from the society. Let them even sing in market places to raise some money," she says.

Agwanda plans to open another shop in Nairobi and Kakamega Forest, in the course of the year.

"I want to leave a mark in the lives of physically challenged women. I plan to start centres in Nyakach, Homa Bay and Kisumu where potential customers can easily access them."