

## Zoe Empowers Kenya Update: December 2024

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### Mental Health: A Critical Component for Program Success



*Zoe Empowers youth attending training on mental health*

Millions of people are affected by mental illness worldwide each year. In Kenya it is a massive concern with one out of four persons affected. Since a lot of negative cultural beliefs and myths revolve around mental health problems, people hesitate to acknowledge that they have a mental illness and do not seek counselling or medical attention. This has made mental health a silent killer.

A Kenya study noted that adolescents between 16 and 18 years old had more major depressive disorders than those younger. This is the typical age of most youth recruited into the Zoe Empowers program. Further placing the youth and children who enter the Zoe program at risk is that they have experienced many of the triggers for mental health problems such as childhood abuse, neglect, discrimination, social isolation, poverty, and bereavement.

Zoe Empowers Kenya understands that emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing are critical for youth to be able to handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy decisions. All of which are necessary to rise above the conditions of extreme poverty to become self-sufficient. As such, addressing mental health issues is an integral part of the empowerment model.

During the six months from May to November, the Zoe Empowers Kenya program has successfully trained 1,850 youths on mental health awareness. The training is a continuous process for all the participants and includes the Zoe staff and volunteer mentors. Since mentors are most closely and regularly in contact with the youth, it is imperative that they are equipped with relevant knowledge and information on signs a person suffering from

mental health, how to approach them, and which local health facilities can provide assistance. There were 192 mentors who recently completed this training.

Zoe Empowers staff deal with many difficult situations and their mental wellbeing is critical for creating a healthy program. Kenya staff have been able to participate in an amazing interactive session where they learned how to identify mental health issues such as stress or depression (both for themselves and in their colleagues) and how to cope with them so they could work effectively.



*Left, the mentors for Zoe groups attend mental health awareness training.*

*Right, the Zoe Empowers Kenya staff attend their own training to identify and learn coping techniques for maintaining mental wellness.*



### **Program Highlights**

#### **Educating to end FGM**

Although there are ongoing efforts to end the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), this practice on young girls continues, including in some regions where Zoe Empowers Kenya operates. In August, when Zoe staff learned that this dangerous and unnecessary procedure was done to 10 young girls in the area, they immediately responded by holding intense alternative rite of passage training in the areas and the surrounding neighborhoods.

This was a two-day event with 900 youths in attendance along with government officials, religious leaders, and health workers. The training was open to all youths in the community. In addition to expert presentations, the youth were also shown videos and pictures to help them understand the dangers of female genital mutilation and why it is a violation of their rights, health, and dignity. All participants were encouraged to unite to end the practice of FGM and to be ambassadors for the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 5 which aims to ensure all women and girls equal rights and opportunity to live free of violence, discrimination, and harmful practices.

Financial security: Youth benefited during the recent economic recession from training on alternative savings and investment plans. There was also instruction on how to write proposals and access government agencies for grants and additional funding to grow their already existing income generating projects.

Expanding group projects: All groups have shared income generating projects to provide additional income and foster group cohesion. Some groups now in their second and third years are establishing more significant projects. For example, one purchased a porridge making posho mill after realizing that there was a very big market for this service and product since community members were having to pay a transport fee of half a dollar to travel to another town to make porridge. With this new business, not only does the group benefiting, the community is also excited to have the posho mill in their market thus reducing time and money spent.



*Members of C2 2022 Upendo Bweetha Group enjoy porridge milled from their posho mill*

Advanced food security and agriculture: Over 90% of the groups and nearly all households have agriculture projects. Through intensive training on modern farming techniques, even those groups in harsh climatic conditions have been able to do farming. Groups in the Tharaka region which has an extremely hot and sunny climate have grown vegetables for commercial purposes by building water pans using locally available materials. Water is collected in the pans during rainy seasons and stored to use later for their farms and livestock.

Cooking innovation and energy conservation: Zoe facilitated training for 2,160 youths on how to build/install energy conserving cooking stoves called 'jikos' in their households. Since jikos are made from locally available materials, save fuel, and do not emit smoke they are economical, health friendly, and environmentally beneficial.

Already, 100 households have installed jikos and many more youth are in the process of doing so. The project has also benefited others as the Zoe youth have trained several community members on how to build a jiko and even installed jikos for five elderly women at no cost.

*Joyfred of the Imani Anjalu Group with the newly installed energy saving “jiko” stove.*



*Youths of Neema Mwerongundu used their skill and resources to install an energy conserving jiko for an elderly woman.*

“Fun Day”: In the months of July and August, youth from multiple groups participated in and watched days of regional competition in categories of sports, songs and dances, poems recitation, and other entertaining activities. These gave them an opportunity to make social connections which the majority of the youth have never experienced. These competitions were also educational as the messages captured in the songs, poems and dances covered topics such as HIV/Aids, child rights and protection, teen pregnancies, harmful cultural practices among others. On August 23, the regional champions from Meru and Tharaka Nithi counties had an opportunity to battle each other for the Zoe cup in each category.



*Youths from Blessing and Neema Kaene groups present a taarab song, which is from the Swahili culture*



*Umoja, Imani, and Hope groups of the Kirimampio region do a folk dance during the competition finals*

Graduation ceremony: Approximately 500 youths from groups still active in the Zoe program were invited to attend the colorful graduation event for members of the 2021-C2 groups. The graduates were treated to a professionally baked cake donated by Caren of Upendo Kiromwathi Group.



The event was also graced by community stakeholders, national government representatives, and religious leaders who gave words of advice to the graduates. Igembe Sub-County Commissioner Mr. Kibet Tanui expressed appreciation the work Zoe Empowers is doing in the community: *“By empowering the youths, it has eliminated or reduced the cases of insecurity, petty crimes, drug use among others.”*

## Recent Challenges

House fire: Miriam of the Blessing Lukununu lost her family house to fire in May. The Zoe program supported her with funds to purchase materials and her groupmates along with a few villagers assisted her to construct a new house. The group members also supported her with household items, furniture, and bedding

Floods: In the previous rainy season, we experienced excessive rains which caused rivers to overflow and flooding of farmland. Crops were destroyed resulting in a poor harvest that affected the food security of most households.

