News
Ministry



Sr. Yvonne Mwila of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, left, and a class teacher interact with students at the Bauleni Special Needs Project and School in Zambia. (Derrick Silimina)



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Changa Chitabo, 19, and his younger brother, Josephat, 17, stagger and struggle to maintain their balance and walk as their class teacher rushes ahead to give the young lads support.

They had no access to special learning facilities, considering their home village is on the rural outskirts of Ndola town, some 750 kilometers (466 miles) north of Zambia's capital, Lusaka.

Innocent Chitabo, the 45-year-old father to Changa and Josephat, told the Global Sisters Report he used to spend sleepless nights trying to provide for their health care, sustain their basic needs and find a special needs school for his boys. Both live with Usher syndrome, a rare genetic disease that affects both hearing and vision and sometimes causes problems with balance. In 2021, Chitabo finally secured spaces for his sons at the Bauleni Special Needs Project and School facility and is happy to see how they are progressing and responding.

Born and raised in rural Ndola, Chitabo spoke emotionally of how difficult it is to raise disabled children in a rural area. He noted that the young boys faced social and economic challenges in terms of mobility, and lack of access to health care and special education facilities for their severe disabilities.

In Zambia, disability is stigmatized due to negative traditional beliefs, entrenched stereotypes and ignorance. As a result, children and adults with disabilities are often neglected, isolated and discriminated against.



Innocent Chitabo, left, enrolled his sons Changa and Josephat at the Bauleni Special Needs Project and School facility in 2021. The 17- and 19-year-olds have Usher syndrome, which can affect hearing, vision and balance. The family is pictured with teacher Chomba Nakazwe. (Derrick Silimina)

In 1995, the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary carried out a survey in Bauleni township, a poor, densely populated slum about 10 kilometers southeast of Lusaka, to ascertain the number of children with special needs living in that area.

The sisters discovered that more than 100 disabled children between 10 months and 24 years lived in homes, isolated from the public due to their disability. The ravaging effect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the early 1990s also led to an increase in the number of orphans who flooded the streets of Lusaka.

Having started with four classrooms, the school runs two tracks, special needs education and general education, and has grown tremendously. More than 200 children with disabilities from preschool to grade 12 are enrolled. The facility has more than 1,000 learners and has expanded to offer job skills and nutrition training.

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In response to those needs, the Bauleni Special Needs Project and School, managed by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in the Archdiocese of Lusaka, was born one year later.

"We are the only school in Lusaka and Zambia as a whole with classes for children with deaf-blindness and children with multiple disabilities, and that is a huge success for us," Sr. Yvonne Mwila, school director, told GSR.

Mwila said that the facility, in conjunction with the Zambia Institute of Special Education, looks at a child holistically and establishes the need for qualified teachers before learners are admitted to class so they can incorporate into society and participate effectively.

The school provides psychosocial support, physiotherapy, speech therapy, counseling and provision of epilepsy drugs, among other services.

In addition to being recognized as a center of excellence for inclusive, special needs education, the school also offers in-service training for its teachers and support staff who work with children and young adults with special needs.



The Bauleni Special Needs Project and School, managed by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, serves children in Lusaka, Zambia. More than 200 children with disabilities are enrolled there. (Derrick Silimina)

Chomba Nakazwe, a teacher specializing in working with the most severely disabled children at the facility, said it is fulfilling to contribute to the well-being of disabled children.

Her classroom is dubbed *Lowani*, a Chewa language term that means, "Come in."

Driven by her passion for serving, Nakazwe noted that some of the most severe cases among her learners are those with autism. But thanks to the Bauleni school, they can interact with their friends and learn.

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The facility supports parents and families by offering counseling services and free physiotherapy services for their disabled children, along with job skills and training to help them secure a brighter future. The project also runs a home-based education program for more than 200 children with disabilities without access to the facility and in the catchment area of the school and rural areas.

To make the project sustainable and self-reliant, the school runs income-generating ventures, including a bakery, vegetable production, carpentry, tailoring, a shop and a piggery.

With its motto, "called to love and serve," the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary home-based program for disabled youth in Zambia emphasizes child safety and rights. Known for its mission to champion children with severe developmental needs, the school has brought hope to formerly suffering families now receiving care.

Gertrude Phiri, mother of a 10-year-old child born with cerebral palsy, said she was in denial about her second-born's disability.

"But after I got counseled here, I believed that God would see me through the struggle that comes with raising a child that is physically challenged."