
MIRROR OF HOPE, KENYA

Audio transcript: <https://erf.org.au/bestfootforward/educate/stories/>

This photograph is taken in a small 3 x 3m tin house at the western end of Kibera, the huge urban slum that runs from the centre of Nairobi Upper Valley. It's estimated there are about quarter of a million people living in the slum, but some people say it's as high as a million. Nobody really knows.

One of the huge problems with living in a place like Kibera is health. And one of the big health issues is HIV AIDS. Many women who had tested positive for HIV are shunned by their communities, their partners leave them and they really don't have anybody else to rely on. There's an organisation called Mirror of Hope which provides support for these women. Now, you might think that the best way to help them would be to provide them with money or clothes or food and yes, that would work for a week or two. But Mirror of Hope has a different idea.

What they do is they educate the women to run their own small businesses. These businesses might be something like sewing or in the case of this photograph, making jewellery to sell on the streets of Kibera. The women are taught how to manage the finances of the business, how to make allowance for the cost of the materials they need, how much to sell their product for. Once they feel comfortable with their knowledge, they're also given loans to start the businesses. When the loans are paid back, they're welcome to borrow more in order to try and grow them.

The success of this program is extraordinary. There are now hundreds of women throughout Kibera who are now able to earn a little bit of extra money, which they use either for fresh food or for medical care for their families. And they also know that this is an ongoing situation. If they can keep their businesses going, they can rely on having this income day to day.

I'm very happy with this photograph. For me, it's a very honest reflection of what it's like to be in one of the small houses in Kibera.

They're dark and they're crowded and in summer, they're hot. But they're always decorated, there's always things on the wall in this case, the lace in the background and the throws over the couches. The children look a bit worried about having me there photographing, but Lillian, who's threading the beads, is working intensely, knowing that at the end of the day, when she sells her jewellery, she'll have a little bit of extra cash that she can use to help look after her family.