MARY (STREET FAMILY/ DURATION 37:37

I: You were brought up in a family consisting of a father, mother, sisters and brothers.

M: Brought up?

I: yes, in Nakuru when you were born.

M: I’ve been brought up without a father

I: did you have other people with you or were you alone?

M: I have sisters and one Brother?

I: So you're just the three of you?

M: We have four sisters and one brother

I: Isn`t your brother looking for (unintelligible) with them

M: Yes, that's true

I: How were you able to get to Nairobi?

M: I came to Nairobi with a friend. He told me to come to this side of town where we can start hustling.

I: to make a life for myself.

M: yeah, trying to make a life here in town. My friend had accompanied me, she paid for transportation to town

I: how long have you been here?

M: I've been here since March, April this year

I: This year? You've not been here for long

M: So I've not been here that long

I: Ah okay okay, you came to…

M: last-not this year, by last year around April, I've been here. I come spend time here a bit then go back home, but I come back.

I: Now, do you live on that street where I found you?

M: Yeah, That's where I live

I: whom do you live with over there?

M: I live with my friends, they are like my brothers and sisters. That`s how we get to help each other. Someone can get sick on the streets, they don't have a family, brothers and sisters to look after them, so you adopt them.

I: How many are you over there?

M: We are about 10, 16, 17 approximately. We are many but the number keeps reducing.

I: They come and go?

M: Yeah

I: And at night, how do you guys sleep? Do you guys sleep together as a group or do you sleep separately?

M: Now we don't sleep as a group. We have divided ourselves so each one has their own individual space. A space they can come back to in the evening

I: You mentioned that these are now your brothers and sisters, so this is like a family to you,correct?

M: Yeah they are like a family to me because they are closest to me.

I: Is there a difference between a family related by blood and your kind of family?

M: What?

I: is there a difference between your family in Nakuru and the one you have here? Is there a difference to you?

M: Yes, there’s a difference.

I: How?

M: Yes there is a difference because in the family back home. I have a sister whom we are connected by blood. This other one is just a sister by way of friendship. She is your closest friend in times of need. You know, this is my real sister, my close sister she’s always ready to help with the little that she has unlike my blood sister back at home.

I: Oh okay okay, and now you have a baby, a daughter. Please tell me her name

M: Her name is Presi Muthiru

I: How old is she? I mean how many months?

M: She’s 2months old.

I: She’s very beautiful

M: yes she is.

I: how did you decide to start your own family?

M: The moment I decided to leave home, I found out that I was pregnant. I immediately knew that I couldn't stress my parent back home considering how she raised me.

I couldn't rely on my parent as my child is relying on me. This is when I decided what to do with my life. Then I came and joined the rest on the streets. Now we stay with them like this. They showed me how life is. That's how we can push through life. I joined them and that's how we became a street family.

I: what sort of things did they teach you?

M: They taught me that I need to raise my own child. I can't take her back home as I will be adding on an unexpected baggage. i need to accept that I have a daughter and she’s mine. You have to accept yourself and the fact that you brought another life with you.

I: Life

M: you've brought forth a child at your own accord, you need to decide how to lead your life and that of your child.

I: Are they helping you in any way? Like get you pampers, or food, anything?

M: With the 2month old baby I rely on good Samaritans, or any public good will for food and pampers. People will take pity on the baby and give us 20shillings, 20shillings, 5shillings, with which we get to buy food and diapers because I do not have a job.

I: Now the way you live in your group, apart from the sleeping arrangements is there a way you have organized yourselves, for example have someone in charge of the sleeping area to make sure that it’s clean? Or is it an individual effort?

M: Like, now,... There’s a way we organize ourselves individually. Each individual is in charge of their own cleaning. You can't take charge of someone else’s cleanliness, it is the individual’s responsibility to make sure her sleeping space is clean or not.

I: What about food and cooking? Do you make meals together?

M: We don't cook together. You just have to look for your own food to eat. However in some cases whenever individuals don't have enough food and or money for food, they come together as a group to raise money from the little we’ve got, we make food for the whole group that's how we eat.

I: Have you ever done that?

M: yes

I: tell me about that day. Who was it? Who did you see outside?

M: We were a group of women. We asked everyone to contribute 10 shillings, 20 shillings, even 30 shillings, to buy maize flour and vegetables, we cook and eat together.

I: Now you have clothes that you and your baby change into, where do you store yours and your babies’ clothes?

M: The changing clothes. We don't have anywhere to store the clothes so we carry them with us. Right now you see, we all have our clothes with us. I am carrying my luggage with me you see. You just have to carry the clothes because you might leave them somewhere only to have them stolen.

I: Yeah we can´t just leave them.

M: Yes you'll find someone has taken them.

I: It´s not a good feeling. I’d like to know what you think about your child being raised together with the other children, at the same time the children watching over your child and playing with her.

Also I´d like to know if there’s anything you do together, anything, like playing, keeping watch of City council askaris, is there anything you do together?

M: Now this is the point where we help each other out, there’s no way one can manage alone. You must have someone to help you or rely upon. You will need someone. You see sometimes when we get into altercations with the askaris, we have our children, and clothes lying around, and in haste you can't decide what to grab. Having a close friend helps in times of need. That is how we help each other.

I: do you go to church? Rather, do you believe in God?

M: Yes I believe in God

I: How is God manifested in your life? Where do you see him?

M: I have seen manifest God in my life because when I look back from where I’ve come from to date, it is not by my own strength but by his might. This is where my hope is, I honor and thank God for walking with me through tribulations. For example: this life that we live is not a normal life, we are out in the cold, surrounded by danger and uncertainty but God protects us. We live in faith believing that Our God is mighty and he´s a winner, he fights for us day by day. He has protected us from evil. You know there are some people who are really going through a hard time, Life takes a turn on other people. But we have faith that God is our protector and savior of my life.

I: Do you go to church? Were you going to church before CORONA?

M: I haven't been to church since Corona began. Yes, I used to go to church before corona began.

I: Where?

M: I was attending church back home, before I came here.

I: Okay, okay, back in Nakuru, did you attend church on Sundays?

M: Yes

I*:* Now tell me about life in Nairobi, you said you are currently not working, yes? Before you got the baby, how were you getting by? How were you sustaining yourself?

M: Before I got the baby?

I: Mmh

M: before the baby I used to do manual labor like wash clothes for people then get paid. That's the work I was doing. By mistake, I started messing around with my friends and suddenly I realized I was pregnant. By the time I found out about it, it was too late to do anything. So I just came here and continued raising this baby.

I: How old were you when you got her?

M: This child?

I: Mmh..

M: I got this child at 23

I: You're a grown up you can change your life because I´ve heard of others who’ve gotten babies at a very young age and they are going through a tough time.

M: Yes, they are going through a tough time.

I: Here in town have you seen other street families?

M: Street family? They are there. There are some that are really huge, not one or two children, children like mine. One can sire a child while still a member of the street family

The street families are huge and many. They raise their children in street families, of course there is always that one with many children. As for me, my friend came and I suddenly fell pregnant. But now there are others who have gotten married to the life of the streets.

I: Ah, like father and mother?

M: more of father, mother and children

I: And this is now a family related by blood?

M: Yes

I: Ah okay, okay. Because I’ve looked at your group which consists of women only, I am wondering if there’s something else that bring you together-

M: There are some who are related by blood, like Father, mother and child.

I: And they too hustle on the road?

M: Yes they hustle by the road

I: the members of your group are all women, when you came here for the first time, who ushered you into the group?

M: The first time I came here I was by myself.

M: While alone I met one friend of mine while stranded somewhere. She came, she was a lady. She looked like she was from the streets. She was a street urchin, she tried to reach out to me before I left home but i ignored because I knew she was from the streets. So when i got to Nairobi, I got stranded as there was someone I was meant to meet.

I: You had just come from Nakuru?

M: Yes, and I didn`t find him. I called but the subscriber was not reachable. So

I: And darkness was creeping in.

M: and the darkness is creeping in. So the friend said to me “ Sister, you can't be alone here, people might come here and do bad things to you.

I: And where were you?

M: We were just in town

I: Oh okay

M: So this sister said to me “We can be partners, I can show you the ropes, as this is not new territory to me. So we stayed with the lady, lived together. But I don't see her now. Maybe she changed her life, I don't know where she disappeared to, I haven't seen of late.

I: Oh? Was she the one who brought you here? Here, at Jevanjee, or where were you?

M: Yeah she brought me to Jevanjee

I: That´s how you got to know these other women?

M: Yes, that´s how we met with these other women. That`s how we got to stay at one place like this.

I: The space you currently call yours, who allocated it to you? Did you just decide to stay here, at that small space?

M: My small space?

I: Yes

M: One of the women showed me this space. We sleep on people's corridors. So the woman told me ”If you put your things here, your blankets, your child’s clothes, there is a watchman. We are many and we hang around the area so they won't be taken. If you put your luggage at a random place, you'll find the blanket gone and the child’s clothes stolen. Where will you get them?”

I: Oh, so she was the one who welcomed you?

M: Yes, and gave me a space. And that's where I've been since.

I: ah, Okay. So when you sleep, do you sleep like this? Separately in your own space or close to each other?

M: We each sleep in our own individual space.

I: Even when it’s cold.

M: even when it’s cold. Now…

I: And when it rains?

M: when it rains…?

I: Where do you go when it rains?

M: We go deeper into the corridors, somewhere.

I: Oh, So you move from the road side at Jevanjee and go inside the corridors?

M: yes we go inside the corridors

I: Ah, okay. Because the weather has changed today, and now at night, with a child.

M: Yes. You wouldn't want to live here, because the baby shivers.

I: Yeah, it's freezing. Among you I have seen a number of older women, there are young ones as well. Do you feel like the age difference is a little wide?

M: there's an age you can distinguish between an elderly woman, there are new mothers and women with children.

I: What about children?

M: you might find a woman with her own family and there is a way she responds to them and they respond to her, so and so’s mother. They are a family now, not just friends, they are connected by blood. Children of an individual family are referred to by their family name.

I: Seems like you guys love each other, the moment we entered with blankets they began calling each other.

M: They love each other because when you’re not in good terms and a potential opportunity pops up they might not call you to be part of it. Or they might not inform you about it and you'll be labeled as selfish for wanting to be a sole beneficiary of the opportunity. We must inform each other of looming opportunities and plans that might pop up somewhere.

I: You must inform them of the opportunity. Now that you got a baby, when it was time to deliver, did your friends help you or did you go to hospital? How did it play out?

M: when time came, my friend helped me. I was in a critical condition as the baby wanted to come out. They came together, called a vehicle to ferry me to hospital. I delivered in hospital and discharged myself, because

I: It was tough

M: Yes, I discharged myself and came to the streets. I went back to the same old spot because I did not lead a different life before the baby. There are people who had their own lives going before they came to the streets. Like my friend whom we began the street life with, I cannot trust her. She can pretend to be a friend but she is not.

I: She’s not a friend?

M: She is not a true friend. This friend ran away with the household items because she doesn't want to pay rent. She doesn't know where she is going. I haven't seen my sister in a while too. So you see this is still a challenge. I found myself on the street.

I: Now in the group that you're in currently, is there a leader in charge or do you get by on mutual respect?

M: we have a leader, who helps us settle disputes. If anyone bullies you, she’s the person to report to.

I: Oh?

M: To send a warning or have a conversation with the bully.

I: Who is that individual? What´s her name?

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M: She’s called KANDUGU

I: Kandugu and how old is she? Tell me about her.

M: She’s elderly. I found her as their leader. There are leaders who've been voted in and these are the people we take our grievances to. If someone has done wrong by you, a young man bothering a lady older than him, the lady can pass by Kandugu’s and report the incident, where she sends an appropriate warning or word to the perpetrator.

There are also leaders that we stay with. When the leaders live together, they can't impose rules on each other.

I: At Least you have a structure. Now you have your child Blessing. You seem to be bringing her up well, and quite healthy. What have you learnt from life that you'd want to teach her?

M: How do I view my life? What is it that I can teach her from my life?

I: From the way you were brought up back home, how you´ve lived in Nairobi, gotten to know people in your new family. What would you like to teach your child about life, what kind of person would you like them to become?

M: I would love my child and I when God enables me to leave this place. Depending on what I’ve seen and what I see happening I would not like her to go through such things. I would like her to change her life and experience different things, not go through what I've been through. I would like her to have a better life than what I have today. I would want her to grow up and have a street family right here, because she was born in the street.

I would love her to have...you know…

I: A good life

M: a good life, where she can fend for herself, or her family. Let it not be here because this is not a nice place. There are girls who are abused, their fathers do things to them. Others lack freedom. You are as good as dead when you're abused. We have different people around here. People with substance abuse might find you innocently alone or in a group and decide to abuse you. So you see I wouldn't like her to have a life like that, I´d love her to lead a completely different life.

I: Now when you look back to the way you were raised, and now that you live here, have you had any good days? Is there a day you look back at and say “that was a good day”. You, together with the women and children, do you remember a day like this?

M: It was a good.

I: I am asking if you remember a good thing that happened to you while living with your street family? Do you remember anything like that?

M: A good thing happening to us?

I: Yes

M: A good deed would be someone being empathetic of our situation, where we are, the women with the children and understanding that this is not what we choose for ourselves. You feel cared for.

I: He has remembered us.

M: or the individual sees us and remembers us. That´s what makes us celebrate because we see it as a good thing. But there´s nothing more to that. Nothing. If someone from outside comes to us like you did with the blankets, we get to celebrate toge…

I: Together.

M: because some of us who don't have blankets get to throw themselves inside a sack. Things like this. Or uses a loose cover ”LESO”. A blanket will do her so much good.

I: And the blankets, did someone bring these blankets or were they gifted to you?

M: I was given these blankets. But there is a way you can save 10shillings as often as possible such that you can buy a blanket.

I: Do you have enough savings to go buy stuff?

M: yes right now I have enough, because we barely get enough to satisfy all our needs.

I: Oh yes, that´s true,

M: You try as much as possible to do the best we can with the little that we have, the rest will come later, and we appreciate it.

I: [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

I: (UNINTELLIGIBLE)

M: they have eh…

I: I would like you to narrate your day for me, how does your day look like? What time do you wake up, what do you do? How do you spend your day?

M: I wake up at 5am in the morning at the place we sleep. We can't just hang around that area. I change the baby from the previous night’s clothes to fresh ones. From there I pack my belongings and move them to the other side.

I: Which other side?

M: Where i sleep is not were i hang around during the day. We can´t sleep at the area where you found us. Doesn´t matter if you have a child or not someone under substance abuse might just pop out of nowhere and does something bad...

I: Bad

M: They can rape you, he doesn´t care whether the child is present. If he is under the influence of something he’ll come and do horrible things like this. So we ferry our belongings every evening and morning, everyday. So we wake up at 5am so that the owner of the shop can find his entrance clean like he left it and I have cleared off of his premises. He can't open his shop with us still there.

I: Now where do you stay all day?

M: We hang around here at Jevanjee.

I: you can just hang around that area without being chased away, without any disturbance?

M: Yes, this is a safe space we don't get any interference from people and the like.

I: That’s a relief man. And do you still carry your belongings with you or do you leave them with the watchman?

M: Once he closes the shop in the evening, we take back our things and go to sleep, things like this.

I: what do you sleep on?

M: to Sleep?

I: What do you spread on the floor to sleep on?

M: To sleep I spread a carton on the floor. We look for items that can build a makeshift mattress so we don't get to sleep on the naked floor.

I: It´s usually really cold, you can get sick.

M: yeah, after using the carton, we pack them up and stack them in a place where we can find them in the evening. Sometimes…

I: Now the baby has completely changed your life, right? I'd like to know, what is it that you had before, no… What is it that you did not have before that you have now, good or bad, and what do you want to bring into her life?

We have spoken about the life you'd love to give her but now I’m curious. In your life, before you got the baby, and now that you have a child, what good has come into your life thus far?

M: before I got the baby I thought I knew myself. You don't know who you are until you get a child. You just think that you're still a young girl. You do not have as many needs but now that i have this child, I figure I can't go back to my former life, I'd be taking my child’s life backwards instead…

I: It needs to move forward.

M: You have to isolate the wants from the needs. Sometimes we have to ignore our wants and do what's best for the child because she is my responsibility now. Your thoughts and deeds revolve around the needs of your child and her upbringing and nothing else.

I: You just have to be responsible. Let me ask, don't you have your own family in Nakuru?

M: Yes

I: Have you thought of visiting them?

M: Yes I have thought about visiting them but I have not managed yet.

I: And do you speak to them on the phone? When’s the last time you spoke with them?

M: Let’s just say that I haven't spoken to them on the phone. The last time we spoke was the day I left home for the streets. I don't even remember their phone number. Unless I take myself back home the way i left…

I: you left: Do you see yourself going back, what plans do you have for your life?

M: If I´m able to go back home, and plan my life, I have strength, there is something I can do now to take care of my child, as a family., how life can change so she doesn't have her family on the streets again..

I: This year began horribly with coronavirus, you maybe have plans for next year, or the year after that, when do you think these plans will happen? Or does it feel like a far-fetched dream for now?

M: Right now it's like a dream to me, I don't know what day that might happen.

I: Okay, we've had a good conversation, I'm glad. I'd like to conclude by explaining to us what we don't understand about the street. The rawness and grit that we have never experienced but you'd like us to know

M: The once who don´t…?

I: those who don´t know anything to do with the street life. What would you tell them about this life?

M: By the way this street life, it happens when you have no direction in life, you just exist. Someone with no role, a stand or position to play in society. Someone who doesn't know where they are going, or aware of where they’re from. You don't know what you want in life. You make something out of life when you take a stand.

I: A Stand

M: you need to take a stand and decide as an individual, and with God’s help you, you can get out of here.

I'm saying that people show up because street life is good. It`s really cold out here. You fight with God, he protects you from diseases, enemies. But we are healthy and we are grateful. The street is not a nice place, it's a place of risk. It's similar to a person with no stand that slides along. It's like (UNINTELLIGIBLE). When a person finds a better place than where you're from you wouldn't want to go back.

I: Now we have understood the problems you face, the reality of life on the street. What would you like us to know about you, it seems like we have forgotten you.

M: People have forgotten us?

I: But now please answer in your own way. Ignore my question, answer how you see fit.

M: You will find someone who is used to the street life, and as a newbie, you find yourself entangled in some bad stuff that you were not aware of. You see. You find yourself in a position you wouldn`t expect yourself to be.

I: to be…

M: you find that your life takes a turn, not like before.

I:and now, these people, let´s say for example the way I came to talk to you about your lives, what would you like to tell the everyday individual who pass you by, people who maybe don't talk to you, those who help when you ask, what would you like to tell that individual about the street life?

M: our life in the street, we go through hardship, because we are surrounded by violence. It's not where we are supposed to be, it's a place you find yourself and decide to live with it you see. There are people who throw words at us on the streets. When they walk past us they call us street urchins, homeless people, others call us thieves. Many are scared, freaked out by those things. Someone can blame you for someone else’s actions.

I: Someone else

M: That's how people see us, so it's not easy for them to help us. Someone might have done something wrong to someone else and they got upset, you see? Things like this now bring hatred. And it's just a few people. We can't all be bad. That one evil individual might be the one causing these things.

I; these things

M: now if you just find the means and God helps you evade it all, you might find a way out of poverty

I: remember us walking with Sony in that group around Jevanjee, there was another group of women next to you, do you guys interact with those women too?

M: Which ones?

I: Do you guys live separately? The group of women at the entrance. There's another group of women, or is it not a women’s group.

M: which group of women?

I: Can`t remember her name but she’s there. There is this and this on the gate.

M: When you enter the first group?

I: yes, is that a group of women or a mixed group?

M: They are still a group of women.

I: do you interact with them?

M: Yes, we interact when we get lucky, for example, you might be lucky and find one to help you. We have fake friends or even your enemy who pretends to be your friend, she is not happy, She gets very sad.

I: Oh, must you live side by side?

M: She still feels that you deserve this life, a life of poverty. Personally were it not for God giving me a place i ha…

Because I was using a lot of substances, things that are not good for me, but the moment I got this child, I figured my child is more important. The substances I was on made me lose myself, forget about even my child. So I decided to drop the habit and take care of my child. So you'll find someone is envious of your endeavors but pretends to get along but they each lead separate lives. They speak but they are not one.

I: Do they maintain their groups?

M: They maintain their groups, yes

I: are the women allowed to change groups or must you have a conversation with someone? Like now for example, the individual who joined the group recently, where did she come from, how did she get to join the group?

M: Do you mean the person who represents them?

I: I mean the person who joined your group recently, let´s say, just the other day, or last week, the newest member of the group, how was she brought in? How did she get in?

M: Now someone can come for example, I can come from nowhere with all the confusion in life. You meet a friend who asks you to join their group, they will help you get by while you help the group as well. That`s how you join.

I: alright then, thank you.

M: Okay

I: truly, thank you so so much