

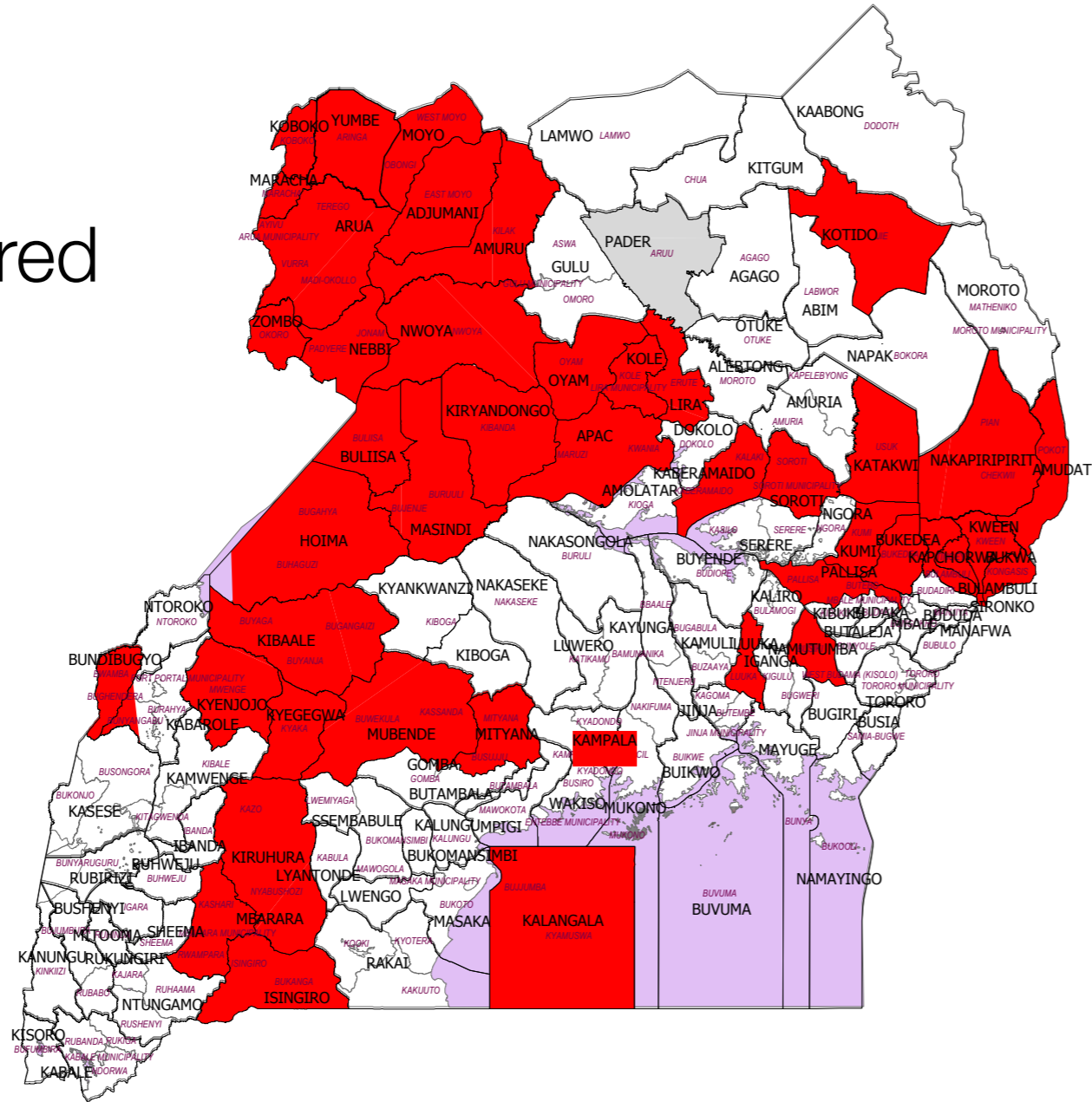
A close-up photograph of a woman with a joyful expression, wearing a black and white striped headwrap and a patterned shawl. A young child is seen from behind, resting their head on the woman's shoulder. The background is slightly blurred, showing an outdoor setting with other people and a large metal pot.

Stories of change: One Woman at a Time.

Empowering women project
supported by Civil Society Fund in Uganda

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End poverty. Together.

Districts covered by ActionAid's work in 2010



Key:
■ Districts covered by ActionAid's work
 ■ District of planned expansion
 ■ Lake



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Delayed justice **cripple's women...**

Asuckling mother in Pallisa, Jennifer Alupot, was forced by her husband to breast feed the puppies of his hunting dogs in 2009. Fuming with rage, he threatened to punish and send her back to her parent's home - if she dared to disobey his order.

Like tradition has it, the consequence would be, her financially crippled rural family, paying back the dowry as compensation. Such spine chilling cases of gender based harassment and violence against women are a common occurrence.

This is evidenced by regular reports in the print, visual and audio media. According to a study carried out by Action Aid in northern Uganda, the blame is put on the inefficiency in the national court systems and procedures which lack resources and are not able to deliver justice in time using archaic laws.

Action Aid country director Charles Businge says, in Uganda, the plight of women is more than just being mistreated by a naughty husband.

"Unfortunately, it has been established that the spread of HIV/AIDS and wife bartering are plaguing the lives of numerous women in Uganda," asserted Businge. "A majority of the women and girls continue to suffer various forms of violence including defilement, rape, denial of property, spouse battering, forced and child marriages, which indirectly or directly predisposes them to HIV/AIDS infections."

The situation is not any different elsewhere in Uganda. Currently, the districts of Apac, Lira and Oyam districts of Lango sub-region in Northern Uganda are unable to effectively address violence against women and girls. The women there are often accused of infecting their husbands with AIDS even when they have never cheated on their husbands.

"A wife may be found HIV negative and her husband is positive. But she is accused of infidelity," says Businge.

To make matters worse, the women and girl victims of violence talked

Delayed justice cripple's women...

Charles Businge
Country Director
ACTIONAID

By Titus Kakembo



to by Action Aid, described court procedures as being terribly discriminating and intimidating.

"This situation is made worse by the under-representation of women in the justice institutions" said Businge. "And there is lack of concern for the special needs of women by the male-dominated institutions and the high medical charges make justice beyond their reach."

He explained that the patriarchal family systems hinder women's access to justice as most clan courts' are presided over by men who perceive women as secondary citizens.

To address the appalling state of event, Businge says Action Aid reception centers, The Police and District Probation Officers in Mubende, Soroti, Nebbi and Pallisa are overwhelmed by the volume of reports being filed by victims.

"They link up with our project officers to talk to the victims," says Businge. "On top of that, Action Aid is rolling out another project in Lango and Kalangala."

Businge conclusively said there is an urgent need for lobbying and policy advocacy for the enactment of specific laws including,

family law to effectively address the issues of violence against women and girls.

"There is also need to, build the capacity of the law enforcement officers, the justice institutions, and the judicial systems," said Businge.

"More efforts are also needed to engender and transform the archaic cultural and religious institutions to recognize women rights as human rights," Businge adds.

There are local, regional as well as international frameworks that Uganda ratified and Action Aid wants them to be domesticated and reinforced to benefit women and girls.

Currently the volume of cases being reported to probation district officers, The Police Stations and addressed by Action Aid project offices has remarkably shot up. And there are rape, HIV/AIDS and battering victims who are currently getting psychological assistance at ACTION AID project offices.

"And there is lack of concern for the special needs of women by the male-dominated institutions and the high medical charges make justice beyond their reach."

Highlighting the link between HIV/AIDS and Domestic Violence...



Harriet Gimbo Women's Rights and HIV/AIDS coordinator is the ActionAid Uganda.

By Patience Akumu

Enthusiastic- if there was one word to describe Harriet Gimbo that would be it. Gimbo is the ActionAid Uganda Women's Rights and HIV/AIDS coordinator. She is also in charge of the project Women Won't Wait an ActionAid program that links HIV/AIDS and domestic violence and operates in the six districts of Mubende, Mityana, Nebbi, Pallisa, Namutumba and Kalangala. These particular districts were chosen for the project because of their high prevalence of HIV/AIDS and domestic violence. The project that started in 2009 used funding from the Civil Society Fund to reach out to communities through STAR

circles which is short for Societies Tackling AIDS Through Rights another ActionAid initiative.

These STAR circles comprise of those affected and infected with HIV/AIDS and have proven to be an effective tool in fighting HIV/AIDS stigma as well as socially and economically empowering those living with HIV/AIDS. The project specifically targeted women who are affected adversely by HIV/AIDS and domestic/gender based violence. Gimbo puts it aptly thus:

"Women are a key link in development. Yet they suffer the most when it comes to HIV/AIDS and violence. As seen in most arenas, they bear the biggest brunt."

It is in this vein that Actionaid went to work in the six districts to raise awareness and advocate for the rights of those with HIV/AIDS, particularly women. Gimbo observes that essentials such as counselling and Anti Retroviral Treatment that were not available have now been brought closer to the people, thanks to the project. People who participate in the programme have also been economically empowered through saving schemes such as modern farming methods, weaving and the introduction of livestock and piggery. But above all, women, men, youth, children and entire societies have come to understand human rights and how they are central in ensuring justice for everybody. Those with HIV/AIDS are no longer relegated to the periphery of their communities. Instead, they take an active role in their society. Like Kizito Henry, Coordinator of Kalangala Forum for People Living with HIV/AIDS Network says, PLHAs (People Living with HIV/AIDS) have ceased to be no more than a burden to their society. Because of interventions such as this, they are now active members who are economically empowered and champion transformation.

"Before, people used not to even talk about HIV/AIDS. Now more and more people are revealing their status and are choosing to live positively," says Gimbo.

Gimbo however observes that while the project has accomplished so much, a lot of work remains to be done. For example in most areas, police and other law enforcement agencies such as the courts are ill facilitated. In places like Pallisa district, Actionaid partners with Women Won't Wait and other women centres to operationalize justice and ensure that it is delivered to women expediently. Not every district however has a women's centre, and there is no mechanism to ensure that perpetrators of abuse or violence against women are brought to justice.

"Sometimes the police tamper with evidence or fail to preserve it. This is particularly true of sexual violence cases," explains Gimbo. The result is that most cases are dropped and the women go back to the abusive situation.

Another challenge is the high poverty levels in the districts. Over half the population in Uganda lives below a dollar a day. The hardest hit are the women in rural areas. These do most of the work like tilling the land and raising the family, yet they benefit the least from their hard work. With such widespread poverty, efforts like those of Actionaid are but a drop in the ocean.

"They may now be able to access ARVs. But of what use is this if they do not even have food to eat?" is the example Gimbo gives, adding that some even give up the drugs due to the extreme side effects exacerbated by hunger.

The future: A holistic approach

To Gimbo, the solution lies in not just one but several approaches that combine the economic, social and political factors. Here, it is important to note that discrimination against women is deeply entrenched in the cultures of different societies by centuries of social construction. Such discrimination cannot thus be uprooted overnight. Gimbo sees a future where stronger links with government programmes such as NAADS where women can be beneficiaries. To Gimbo, economic empowerment is a very important step in eradicating HIV/AIDS violence and stigma. Also important to do is to create links with the justice system such as building relationships with the police and the courts of law. For example, police officers could be trained on gender sensitive approaches when dealing with crimes against women. In the meantime though, the work of advocacy and empowering people through adequate information continues. The districts of Mubende, Mityana, Nebbi, Pallisa, Namutumba and Kalangala have seen a drop in cases of violence against women who are infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS.

Also important to do is to create links with the justice system such as building relationships with the police and the courts of law.

Kalangala District's **unique HIV/AIDS** challenges

Kalangala district is a place of hardship. The fishing community does not see HIV/AIDS as a threat compared to their risky lifestyle at sea. They thus live recklessly and sex work thrives in this place where men outnumber women. Kalangala district has the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS infection in Uganda at 28% that is more than four times higher than the rest of the country. Actionaid has worked in the region to attempt to change attitudes, and to show that AIDS is indeed a threat to people's lives as many are dying. Through its partner organization (Kalangala Forum of People Living with HIV/AIDS Network KAFOPHAN), more and more people have been able to access ARVs. Others have been able to explore alternative means of livelihood such as piggery and farming...

Kalangala district, with its 83 islands, faces unique challenges when it comes to HIV/AIDS. The HIV infection rate stands at 28%, much higher than the national average that has in the past couple of years stagnated at 7%.

The high prevalence rate is mostly attributed to the lifestyle of the fishing community. Because the job is by its very nature high risk, most feel like HIV is not a threat compared to being at sea. With one Sentongo, a fisherman, putting it thus:

"You do not know if you will make it back if you leave. AIDS is like a baby in comparison." Sentongo adds that sex with the women is well-deserved payment after a hard day's work. Inhabitants of the islands do not have access to things such as television, Internet, clubs and games. This leaves sex as the sole form of entertainment. It is probably for this self it reason that sex work thrives on the island where the women outnumber the men.

Henry Kizito, Coordinator Kalangala District People Living with HIV/AIDS Network (KAFOPHAN), an NGO that partners with Actionaid to fight HIV/AIDS stigma in the district, identifies the major hardships as being those of accessing the different islands and also the people on the islands accessing HIV/AIDS treatment. Kalangala Health Centre four has an HIV clinic every Tuesday and Thursday. People come from all the 83 islands to receive treatment from this one clinic.

There are however people who cannot afford to raise the minimum

fee of Shs 20,000 to go and get medicine. Transport from some islands is as high as Shs 40,000. Those who cannot afford the fee would, without the intervention of organizations like Actionaid and KAFOPHAN, not be able to access the life saving drugs for months on end. This would eventually lead to a decline in their health and quality of life and could be fatal.

KAFOPHAN encourages HIV positive people to organize themselves in groups where they can get economic, social and emotional support. In these groups, they are counselled on how to live positively and educated about the virus and how they can be proactive in preventing its spread and living longer with it.

Above all, they can fundraise and transport themselves to the clinic. Those who cannot raise the money for transport send the group leaders to pick for them their medicine. While this is a less healthy option, it is probably better than doing without the drugs at all.

Kizito says that KAFOPHAN, which has been in existence since 2005, has benefitted from its partnership with Actionaid in that they have become more visible. Actionaid has been able to harness leadership and organization within the groups and also encourage accountability. The funds received from organizations like Actionaid are supplemented by the proactive men and women in their respective community PLHA groups. For example they weave baskets and other crafts which they sell to tourists.



Kalangala landing Site.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

Lwabwaswa
landing site
Bujumba Sub-
County Kalangala.

By Patience Akumu

The money is used to transport people who need treatment to the clinic and also given to individuals to improve their livelihoods.

Afraid to reveal status to her partner

Oliver Nazziwa, 32, ran away from her husband of six years after finding out that she was HIV positive. She reminisces that she was very scared because she thought he would accuse her of bringing the virus into the family. She ran to her maternal aunt's place in Masaka. There she met another man, fell in love and they moved to Kalangala islands. She says she had to leave her three children from the previous marriage with her aunt so she could go and see for herself the opportunities people said could open up for those who moved to the island.

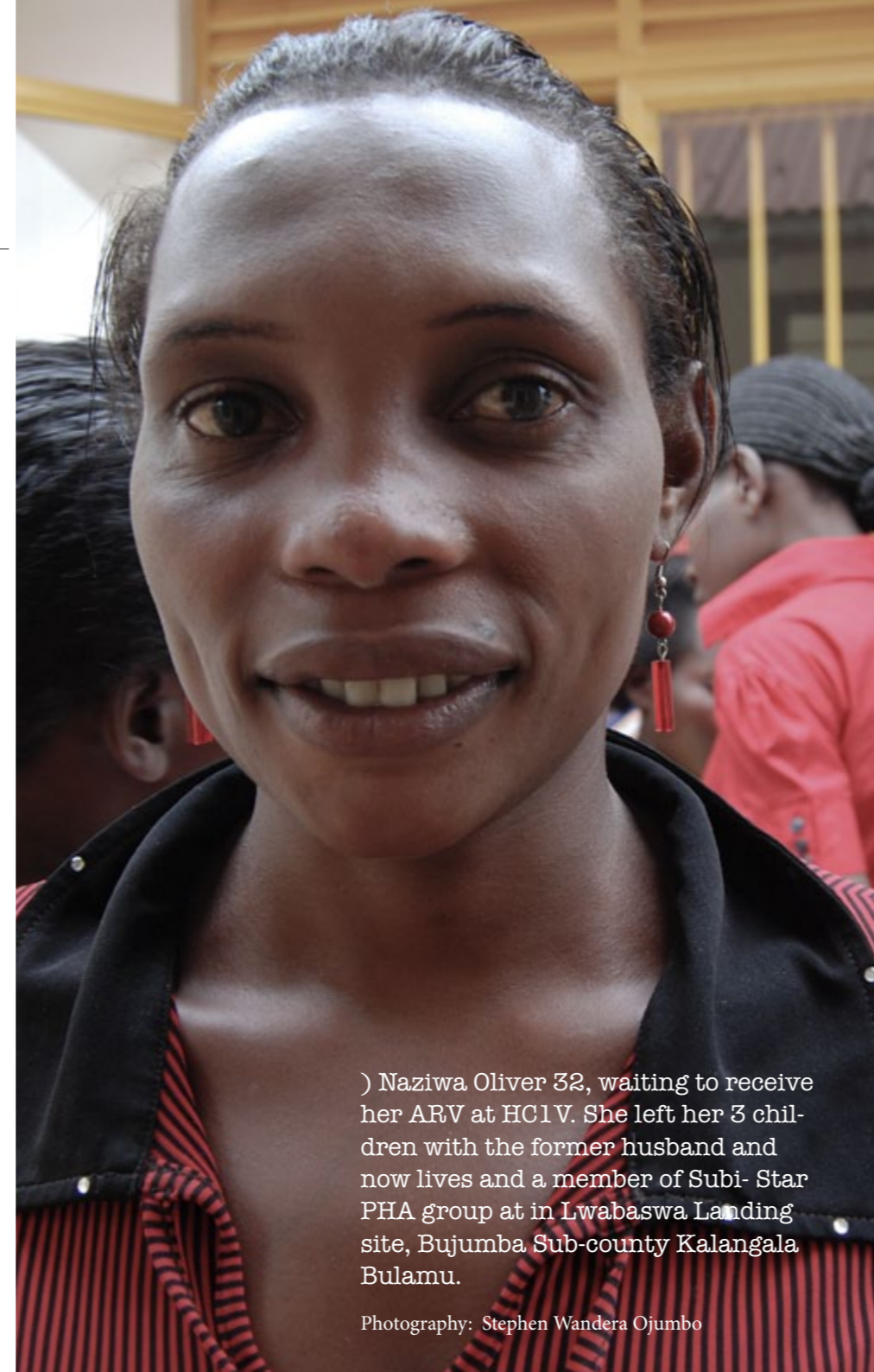
There was not enough time to explore these opportunities though because the moment she got to the island she fell very sick and was bedridden for three months.

"I lost appetite, had a lot of rushes and grew very thin," she says. "That is when people advised me to go to the HIV/AIDS clinic and get treatment."

By her side were members of Suubi Bulamu PLHA group. They encouraged her to seek medical attention and join the group for moral, emotional and financial support.

She took heed and recalls that at first it was very hard for her because the medicine she received made her so weak. The doctors however advised her to continue taking them, and that the side effects would subside. True to their word, she got better and better and now she is perfectly healthy.

She also became one of the beneficiaries in her PLHA group. From KAFOPHAN, she received two goats, which she is now rearing. She hopes that they will multiply and she can sell them and give



Oliver Nazziwa, 32, waiting to receive her ARV at HC1V. She left her 3 children with the former husband and now lives and a member of Subi- Star PHA group at in Lwabaswa Landing site, Bujumba Sub-county Kalangala Bulamu.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

to other PHAs.

In the mean time, she has chosen to live a healthy lifestyle, keep taking her drugs and not to have any more children. Unfortunately, she has not told her current partner she is HIV positive even though the relationship has been going steady. She says she does not know how to approach the subject. Then how is she able to protect him and herself?

"Sometimes I convince him and we use condoms, sometimes he refuses," she says. She adds that she has seen many women tell their husbands only to be beaten or divorced.

Not using protection regularly places her at risk of re infection and her partner at risk of infection or re infection too. Like all other societies in Uganda, Kalangala is deeply patriarchal. While in these PHA groups they are at least empowered with knowledge about their health and human rights, the long term solution is to work towards changing the attitudes of the members of the community to realize women are not subservient but rather human beings who should have a voice not just for their own good but also for the good of the men and entire community.

Shortage of Condoms in Kalangala

The residents of Kalangala district now report that there are not enough condoms to meet their needs. The island with its estimated 34,000 inhabitants comprises a large migrant community, and most stay on a particular island for only a while. The population is thus large and fluid as more and more people move onto the island, and a few out of it. With the high HIV/AIDS rate of 28%, there has also come a high level of awareness of how it is spread

and how people can best protect themselves. This awareness has further been spearheaded by efforts from NGOs operating in the area such as Actionaid and its partner KAFOPHAN.

Unfortunately while people are aware of the need to protect them from infection and re infection through correct and consistent condom use, they do not always have access to these condoms.

Richard Mugisha Magezi, 32, a resident of Lwabaswa bubembe and a member of Suubi Bulamu PHA group, says that in most cases people get free condoms from NGOs like Actionaid. However these condoms run out fast and people have to buy them. Yet even at the shops it is common to find that condoms have run out.

Most people thus go without condoms as they look for quick pleasure on the islands. Because they are enclosed and transport from one island to another is very expensive, there are very few alternative sources of entertainment for the people besides sex. It thus becomes hard for them to reconcile the need to use the condoms, which are not available when they need them, with their physical needs.

Magezi suggests that the solution to the high HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in the district would be to continue imparting information so as to change the reckless attitudes of the fishing community. He adds that it would also help if people had alternative sources of income besides fishing so as to reduce the poverty levels.

She left her 3 children with the former husband and now lives and a member of Subi- Star PHA group at in Lwabaswa Landing site

"Sometimes I convince him and we use condoms, sometimes he refuses," she says. She adds that she has seen many women tell their husbands only to be beaten or divorced.



Richard Mugisha Henry 32, member of Suubi Bulamu PHA group at Dajje, Bujumba landing Site Kalangala.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

Magezi was given a chance to have an alternative livelihood by KAFOPHAN. He received pigs that he rears and hopes to multiply in order to sell and give to other PLHAs. He is also a farmer. He says that he and his wife, who is also HIV positive, have a relationship where they are equal partners in the marriage. Together, they decided to postpone having children until when the medical workers advise them that it is safe and healthy to so. When they have children, they plan to space them and have only a few. Say one or two, a number they believe they can comfortably look after. Magezi is concerned about the health of his wife and says he does not want her to have so many children that would

strain her.

“We were advised that having many children is not good for my wife,” he says.

Even in the midst of poverty and challenges such as lack of necessities like condoms, people like Magezi eke a way out and continue living as healthy a lifestyle as they can. Through PLHA groups, they reach out to others and try to improve their livelihoods. For example fish drying nets have been put up on the islands where people dry the silver fish to preserve it and sell on the market to earn a decent livelihood.



Nakayenga Harriet 25, fishing woman pushes her boat to the shores at Dajje, Bujumba landing Site Kalangala. She is a mother of 2 children.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

Turning over from **Child Sex Work**

Nebbi district in Northern Uganda struck the ActionAid team with its resilient attitude in the face of adversities of dire poverty. From saving schemes to empowering sex workers, the effects of the PLHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) STAR Groups are tangible and visible in the area. Walk with us through the tales of triumph in the uphill task of bringing an end to stigma associated with HIV/AIDS

Akello Jamillah, 16, looks like any other girl her age. You can see that she has taken time to apply her face powder and lip-gloss, as well as pick out her favourite tank top and black skirt for the evening. She is fussy about little things, likes to look good and be the centre of attention like many other teenager her age. On an ordinary evening, Akello can be found in Nebbi town with her peers wearing the latest fashion and listening to the trendiest music. About a year ago, the story was different. At only 15, she would instead be soliciting men to have sex with her in exchange for money.

She traces her genesis of her troubles back to her parents who were being unable to give her the basic necessities of life. Her mother sells bananas in Nebbi town while her father is a construction worker in Sudan. Her father and mother are separated. Akello says that for most of her life, she felt abandoned and unloved.

"Sometimes I would not even have soap to bathe," she recalls. "There was not always enough to feed all the seven of us." She dropped out of school and found an easy solution in sex work. Or at least what she thought was an easy solution. She says that most of the time she felt bad and used by these men



Akello Jamillah 16, a former child sex worker-Nebbi.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

but she was driven by anger against her parents to continue. Besides she could not envision any other source of income. There was however light at the end of the tunnel for her in the form of an intervention from the People living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) Role Model group in Nebbi funded by Actionaid. According to the group coordinator, Omodo Wilfred, the major target of the group was to transform the quality of life of sex workers. This was done by encouraging them to find alternatives to sex work. They were also encouraged to test for HIV so that they would know their status and live a positive life whether they were found to be HIV positive or negative.

Akello tested HIV negative in August 2010. Unfortunately many of her colleagues tested HIV positive. She says she feels very lucky to have escaped the virus in spite of being a member of one of the high-risk groups. This was just the wake up call she needed.

"I decided to change my life afterwards. Through the support of the group and my elder sister, I have been able to stay away from sex work. I realise it is something I don't have to do."

Reformation is only the first step in Akello's metamorphosis, and the challenge remains how to keep her off the streets. She says while her sister, a school teacher who tries to look after her, the money she makes is not enough to sustain the entire family. Akello only studied up to primary five. Her plan is to someday start selling matooke at the trading centre to supplement her sister's income.

When still in school, she especially enjoyed studying science and mathematics and she dreamed of becoming a nurse.

"If someone could sustain me I would go back to school," she says.

In Uganda it is illegal under the Penal Code Cap 120 to have

sex with someone below the age of 18 years. The Children's Act Cap 59 as well as the International Convention on the Rights of the Child to which Uganda is signatory, protect the basic rights of the child such as education, family love and protection as well as the duty of parents to maintain their children. However because of the biting poverty under which half of Ugandans live, many parents fail to provide for their children. This is responsible for the increasing number of child sex workers in upcountry towns in Uganda. The major consumers of their services are truck drivers who pass through these towns. Truck drivers have also been identified as a most at risk population HIV and AIDS. For girls like Akello, there is hope since many of them are determined to turn their life around. In the support group, they find encouragement and share ways to overcome their challenges. For hundreds of others though, sex work is a necessary evil. A stark reality they have to negotiate with each day.

Eking a way out of sex work

Sex work is the only job Lamina, 26, has ever known. Orphaned at an early age, her affair with the lucrative trade began when she was only sixteen. While prostitution is illegal in Uganda, rampant poverty and lack of professional skills are some of the factors that perpetrate it. Most of the prostitutes are not aware of their human rights, in particular their health rights. Miremberelde identifies violence as the biggest problem faced by sex workers.

"Sometimes they force you to have sex without a condom. Others beat you up when you ask for money and they go off without paying."

Because sex work is both illegal and socially frowned upon,

Akello Jamillah 16, a former child sex worker-Nebbi.

"If someone could sustain me I would go back to school," she says.



Ramla Maneno 26 is a former sex worker in Nebbi. She is mother to 2 children (Left) Ismail Musoke and Sunday Musinguzi.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

people like Miremberelde have nowhere to report such sexual abuse and physical violence. Their disadvantaged negotiating position is further fortified by patriarchal notions that make men feel justified to treat sex workers in this way. To them these women are not only women subservient by their gender, but are also prostitutes who deserve whatever they get.

“What do you mean rights of sex workers? Who tells them to open up to everybody?” expressed a truck driver who the writer met at one of the popular guest houses.

The inherent hardships and stigma associated with sex work is what made Miremberelde decide it was time to quit. But quit to do what instead?

Her opportunity to make a meaningful turn around in her life came when ActionAid Uganda in partnership with the Role Model Group took her and other sex workers for a workshop on their health, human rights and HIV/AIDS.

“We were encouraged to test and know our status,” Miremberelde says. “They then asked us for ways on how they could help us leave sex work.”

She tested positive in August 2010 and immediately started on ARVs (Anti-Retro Viral Drugs). She says that at first she was disheartened and did not know what to do. She also felt she could not start a job that was responsible because she had contracted the

virus.

She was welcomed into Role Model PLHA Group. There she met other women like her. The experience of sharing with them, she says, lightened her burden and bitterness.

Her financial burden however remained. From sex work, Miremberelde estimates that she would earn about five thousand shillings each time she had sexual intercourse. On average she would have intercourse twice with one man per night and this translated into ten thousand shillings per man. She would get about four clients on good day, bringing her a total of forty thousand shillings.

Now the sex work has been replaced by a juice-making project. Miremberelde can either serve you concentrated or ready to drink juice. She learnt to make the juice from her HIV/AIDS support group. She packs the juice in a 500ml used water bottles and sells it at five hundred shillings a bottle. In a day, she sells about ten to fifteen bottles mostly to parents with sick children who come in from the neighbouring nearby pharmacy. This translates into an average of twelve thousand shillings a day.

Miremberelde has two children to look after, one of whom is HIV positive. She says life has been very hard since she left sex work, but she is determined to earn a more dignified living.



Sophie Oduba, 48, Member of Meriber saving Scheme PLHA Group Nebbi

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

Akello Jamillah 16, a former child sex worker- Nebbi.

A group of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHAs) empower women economically

Uganda has often been ranked as one of the countries with the poorest saving culture. The twenty-four members of Meriber Saving Scheme in Nebbi have however managed to beat the odds.

In partnership with ActionAid Uganda and the private sector, they underwent training in bookkeeping and business skills. This was meant to empower them with the knowledge and skills to save and invest.

By the end of November, the group had saved up Shs 5.6 Million to be re-distributed amongst the members who had initially contributed. Sophie Oduba, 48, was one of the first beneficiaries of the ActionAid project that started in 2005. At the time, the group received Shs 400,000, which they used to buy goats, and distributed them to sixteen members of the group.

Oduba who first received two goats now has thirty. She says that some of them died while others were stolen but she did not allow this to deter her.

She and her three children are one of the lucky few people in the village who sleep under a tin roofed house instead of a grass-thatched hut. She put up the house using money she borrowed from the saving scheme. It cost her over two million shillings.

"I put up this house so that when I am gone my children have a place to stay," she says fondly.

She also owns three acres of land on which she grows crops like cassava and millet. To her the biggest benefit of being a member of the savings scheme is the sisterhood and fondness she found there. After losing her husband to the then mysterious HIV/AIDS in 1994, her life was seen by many as a foregone conclusion.

"At the time they thought anyone with AIDS was going to die soon,"

she recalls. "My husband was very sick and bed ridden. I had to take care of him and our children yet we did not have much."

Today, Oduba sings another song- One of hope and comfort that she has found in her PLHA family and, above all, one of economic independence.

Akumu put herself through tailoring school

The news that Jacklyn Akumu, 38, was HIV positive did not sit well with her husband. "He used to be very quarrelsome and beat me. But it got worse after I tested HIV positive in 2002," she says.

Her decision to take the test was prompted by endless bouts of fever and cough that would not go even after treatment. She did not have any source of income and had to rely on him for money for buying cough medicine Septrins.

"Whenever I would ask for money he would beat me and say it is none of his business," her voice gets shaky. "I decided to leave Kampala and come back to my home in Nebbi."

Akumu's situation is not unique. 81% of women with HIV/AIDS experience violence. Their husbands often accuse them of bringing the virus home since they are the first ones to undergo the test. Most women find out from the compulsory HIV test given during pregnancy. The men on the other hand are reluctant to get tested. Akumu, for example, says that to date her ex-husband has never declared whether he is negative or positive.

So with her two children in tow, on December 2003, Akumu made the journey back home. In 2005 she joined the Meriber savings scheme, a support group for People living with HIV/AIDS funded by Actionaid Uganda. She immediately started saving money with them.

When she got her first payment of Shs 400,000 at the end of the year, she paid for tailoring school. Now she is the proud owner of a tailoring shop. She makes clothes for the young and old, and for all sorts

Akumu Tailoring school- story) Akumu Jackline 38 is a tailor at Nyarabur trading centre. Mother of 2 boys was divorced due to HIV/AIDS. She is a member of Mer Ber PHA Group and -Nebbi.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo



of occasions. On the day the Actionaid team visited her, she was making uniforms for the Meriber drama group that was set to stage a play on HIV/AIDS in two weeks.

An adult's piece of outfit is tailored at Shs 6,000 while that of a child at Shs 3,000 to Shs 4,000. In a day she makes about three clothes that bring in an average of Shs 15,000.

"This is enough for me. Plus I have a cow that gives me and my children milk. I am a happy woman," she beams.

All Akumu sees is a bright and violence-free future. Also, somewhere on the horizon is that dream of mabati (brick) house that she plans to start building with her next payment from the savings.

Fighting HIV/AIDS stigma through music... But ignorance still rife

If music is the food of life then play on.

The sixty-five men and women of Periniyo PLHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) circle have taken this Shakespeare saying and made it a reality in their lives. Periniyo is one of the STAR (Society Tackling AIDS through Rights Approach) PHA circles in Nebbi funded by Actionaid. Through music, they spread messages of comfort, hope and love in the face of HIV/AIDS. They also spread messages of caution, resilience and positive living.... And this is what has kept a community ravaged by HIV/AIDS from falling apart.

"At first there was a lot of stigma and violence due to HIV. So many people were dying because of this mystery disease, and those who had it were the laughing stock of the village."

There was dire need for a solution. Singing songs laden with messages, Periniyo moves from door to door preaching the gospel of nonviolence and non-discrimination. The men play instruments like the adung, dingidi, and drums. The women sing and dance to the melodic sounds.

Oyuda Okweng, 45, and his wife Beatrice Aweko, 28, are some of the people whose lives have been changed by the sweet sound of music. Before the transformation, Okweng, like most men in the area was polygamous. "I had three wives and they were always quarrelling," he recalls. "There was also no money."

Aweko says that at the time there was a lot of tension and strain in the home. This was worsened by HIV positive results she received when she was pregnant with her fourth child.

"I remember when I brought the news home. My husband beat me and accused me of having infected him," she says.

In spite of the experience, Aweko is looking towards reconciliation and living in harmony with her husband who she says is a changed man.

"Ever since the other women left and we joined Periniyo life has been sweet. There is no more petty envy and quarrelling. We also have more family resources."

There is one cloud threatening to drown their silver lining in the form of their sick last-born son. At three years, he can neither walk nor talk. He nestles his painfully thin and wounded body in his father's chest. He moves his hand weakly to ward off the flies that are fighting to feed on the wounds on his ear.

His father says that at first they believed that he was suffering from 'two rich' which when translated literally means "fish disease"- A disease they believe is as a result of witchcraft. They thought they would get rid of the sores on their son's ears, armpits and his private parts by performing the simple ritual of burning down their hut and building another. Unfortunately, the sores persisted. Asked if they had tested him for HIV, they reply that they believe he is not positive because Aweko underwent PMCT treatment.

While PMCT treatment is an effective way of preventing the virus from being passed on from mother to baby, sometimes even with

it the baby could still get HIV. This is especially true if the mother continues breastfeeding. Most mothers in developing countries cannot afford the formula milk that is an option to breast milk. They may also lack access to clean water to prepare this milk and thus expose the child to other fatal infections.

Aweko and Okweng's son only gets worse each day. Members of Periniyo say they are going to try and get the child treatment as soon as possible. The task remains to collect the seven thousand shillings that is needed to transport the child to the clinic 15KM away.

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Okweng Oyuda- 45yrs, Pakwero Village, had 4 wives now having one wife, Aweko Beatrice 28yrs. Member of Periniyo (PHA) Star group, Otwikende Village, Panyango Sub- County- Nebbi District.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

"I remember when I brought the news home. My husband beat me and accused me of having infected him," she says.



Entertaining to Fight Domestic Violence
Members of Periniyo (PHA) Star group,
Fighting domestic violence and HIV/AIDS
through music, Otwikende Village, Pan-
yango Sub- County- Nebbi

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo



Aisha Nanyonjo 36, A member of Asika Obulamu Star Group mother's 3 children and takes positive attitude so as to live longer in Kyenda Village, Katenga sub county- Mubende.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

Determined to live **positively**

Our first stop was Mubende district. We visited the different PLHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) groups funded by Actionaid Uganda (Here after referred to as Actionaid). Being members of these groups have changed the lives of these women and men. More and more people have chosen to reveal their status, including some prominent members of the society like councillors and LCs. We also visited Mubende barracks and met the men who chose to serve their country in the military and their wives. At the barracks, we explored the HIV/AIDS and violence situation among the rehabilitated soldiers and found that Actionaid had done a lot to change the perceptions among this group that had a high incidence of domestic violence. From the neighbouring Mityana district, we bring you stories on the far-reaching consequences of patriarchy on the rights and livelihoods of women. Here are some of the amazing experiences.

Aisha Nanyonjo's brick and mud house nestles in the hills of Mubende district. Here she lives with her four children. Her husband, a builder comes home every six or so months to check on the family. He lives in Mukono where he does most of his construction work.

As a constructor, Nanyonjo's husband falls in the category of the most at risk populations when it comes to HIV. This is further emphasized by the fact that he travels from place to place looking for work. Many men in the district are involved in this kind of work because it is relatively lucrative and does not require high education levels. Another substantive number of the men are involved or have been involved in the military service, which is another high-risk group.

Nanyonjo, who admits that most times she misses the company and moral support of her husband who is not always there for her, discovered she had HIV/AIDS in 2008. She was then pregnant with her third child and had to undergo compulsory HIV testing. Her husband refused to take the test. The results while shocking, she says, did not worry her. Besides she received good counselling and was told that with ARVs she could live a long and healthy life. She immediately disclosed her status to her children who she

describes as very supportive.

"They are the ones who remind me to take my drugs on time every single day," she says.

The second child who is seven years old sits next to her throughout the whole interview, smiling and waiting eagerly for whatever instructions her mother may give her. Whether it is to feed the chicken or go and serve a customer at the stall, the little girl gathers her blue tunic like dress and runs to do her mother's bidding like her life depends on it.

The chicken and the tomato stall are her major source of livelihood. The old Zain airtime pin up on her house is testimony that she is not the kind of woman to just sit around and wait for hand-outs. Before the chicken and the stall, she used to sell airtime. Unfortunately thieves broke in and took all her capital and she could not continue with this business. She also single-handedly built the house where she and her children live.

Upon discovering that she was HIV positive, Nanyonjo made the epic decision to join an HIV/AIDS support group. The group known as Asiika Obulamu, like its name suggests, encourages its members not to give up on "roasting" their lives lest it gets burnt. The members are encouraged to live a healthy lifestyle, feed well,

Highlighting the link between HIV/AIDS and Domestic Violence...

By Patience Akumu



Aisha Nanyunjo 36, at her stall selling tomatoes. A member of Asika Obulamu Star Group mother's 3 children and takes positive attitude so as to live longer in Kyenda Village, Katenga sub county- Mubende.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

take all their medicine and maintain a positive attitude so as to live longer.

These aims were made a reality in Nanyunjo's life when she received chicken from the group that she rears in the small room that is an extension to her house. To date Nanyunjo has 15 hens and 24 chicks. Her future plans are to expand the place to make more room for the fast multiplying birds. She also reveals that at the end of the month, she will get four birds and give them to another person living with HIV in the group.

Nanyunjo is very grateful to her support group where she says every member freely shares their experiences, successes and challenges. The only moment when she appears anxious is when she is asked about the future of her children in case she passes on. The moment is however quickly pushed aside as she emphasizes her determination to work hard and leave her children with some property. "They already have this house," she points out before adding that with ARVs, she will not be dying any time soon.

Mubende STAR Circles helping youth deal with HIV

Laura Rukundo, 16, was born with HIV. Her parents died when she was only nine years old. She then moved in with her aunt who took care of her like she would have her own child. She tested positive immediately after her parents had passed on. Her aunt tried to ensure that she leads a healthy and stress free lifestyle. Thanks to these efforts, she looks stunningly beautiful and healthy. Her white doe eyes offset

her dark lovely skin and her shy smile.

You would never believe there have been times that this beautiful young girl would ever feel like taking her own life because of her HIV/AIDS status. Agaba Francis, a Counsellor with Mubende District Network on HIV/AIDS (MUDINET) says that youth face unique challenges when it comes to HIV/AIDS. Yet many of the government and Civil Society initiatives often ignore them. Actionaid has partnered with MUDINET and one of their main focuses is the youth.

Rukundo says that her biggest worry she will never be able to get married and have children. To make matters worse, her classmates started to treat her differently when they learnt about her status. The incidences when teachers and students gave subtle hints about "her AIDS" are very numerous and Rukundo hates to think about those memories-It was simply too hurtful. Even her friends and the senior lady teacher who she thought she could trust also started to whisper and point fingers behind her back. It was then that she felt that her life had really come to an end.

"I was filled with a lot of despair. I felt that no one could love or even understand me," she recalls.

Agaba says the situation of the youth is sometimes worsened by parents who fail to relate to their children and fail to guide them appropriately by instead imposing stringent rules upon their children- For example some forbid them from associating with the opposite sex and thus compounds the stigma by painting HIV/AIDS as a disease for the promiscuous. In these circumstances these

"I was filled with a lot of despair. I felt that no one could love or even understand me,



Agaba Francis 25, on the youth sensitization, counseling and guidance on HIV/AIDS during Star Circles Radio programme. He is a counselor with district Network on HIV/AIDS (MUDINET) in Mubende

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

children will fail to empathize with their infected peers. Also, children who do get infected may fear to disclose their status to parents and chose to suffer in silence. Infected youth may fear to be identified as belonging to HIV/AIDS support groups such as MUDINET/Actionaid. Agaba and his team of peer counsellors have grappled with the task of bringing these youth on board. They do this through advocacy work, equipping the young people with life skills, mobilization and radio programs. They integrate entertaining and educative approaches in their HIV/AIDS campaigns. This, they say, is a good way to keep the youth interested.

Rukundo is one of those people who has benefited from the MUDINET youth wing. After being counselled and integrated into the program, her life changed drastically. "Because of counselling I got to realize that I am not the only one living with HIV/AIDS. I also realized that there is a lot in life worth living for and AIDS is not the end." Rukundo is now in her senior four vacation and looks forward to studying History, Economics and Geography at A' level.

Nabatanzi... the woman who holds other women's hands

Fifty-three and HIV positive, Nabatanzi is a strong and jolly woman. She walks around without even the slightest stoop as she feeds her healthy pigs- a gift from members of her HIV/AIDS support group Asiika Obulamu. The PLHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) group is funded by Mubende District Network on HIV/AIDS in partnership with Actionaid. As one of the first beneficiaries, Nabatanzi has



Nabatanzi Mary 53 feeding her pigs. Widowed to HIV/AIDS she is member of Asiika Obulamu HIV/AIDS support group at Mukyenda Village in Mubende.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

managed to multiply the number of pigs she received from four to twelve adults and several piglets. She goes about life with so much gusto and pride because she realizes that she has achieved no mean feat.

Her husband dying of HIV related symptoms, at a time when the disease was still surrounded by myth and mystery, immediately placed her at the centre of stigmatization by her neighbours who declared that she would not live much longer. But Nabatanzi beat the odds and has survived to date. She suspects she has lived with the virus for almost two decades, but she only got the courage to take the test and confirm her status in 2003.

Since then, she turned from the road of fear to one of courage, resilience and support for herself and other women who are living with HIV/AIDS.

She is especially concerned about the young women who she says face a lot of stigmatization and violence from their partners who blame them for infecting the family. Nabatanzi explains what the HIV attitudes were like then and what they are now.

“It was a death sentence. Everybody would run away and leave you to die. But now with these new drugs, there is hope,” she says. “I advise women that it is only by taking these drugs that they will survive.”

Those who know Nabatanzi refer to her as a counsellor and comforter. She is to them a testimony that it is possible to live a long and healthy life with HIV/AIDS. Her advice is for everyone to test and know their status as soon as possible so that they can access early treatment.

Nabatanzi has over ten children and grand children under her care. The piggery provides some of the family income. A piglet goes for about Shs30, 000 while an adult pig goes for Shs170, 000 to Shs180, 000. She supplements this income by growing coffee. With these she believes her children’s future is secured.

“I have managed to ensure that each one of them has a piece of land where they can start their families even when I am gone,” she says.

Organization at the core of Ensozinga's success

It is hard to think of Ensonzinga-People living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) Group in Mubende district in terms of its individual members. Instead, what you see is a tightly knit community with members who know each other intimately. Ensozinga is one of the STAR (Society tackling AIDS through Rights approach) groups in the district that is funded by ActionAid Uganda in partnership with Mubende District Network of People living with HIV/AIDS (MUDINET). The group that started in 2007 has 25 members. Of these 25, 15 are female and 10 are male. On the day we visited them, they had prepared for us a real mini fete.

The women dressed in their most flashy gomesis while the men put on their most impressive suits. The best chairs and the prettiest mats were taken out for us, which made us feel like esteemed visitors. Most impressive however was the fact that the mats are the result of the handiwork of the women in the group. This is their specialty. They also make baskets of varying sizes and tablecloths. All the handicrafts produced by the women are also taken to the highway and sold to travellers.

Do not be fooled by all the beautiful things and the artistic façade. Beneath it is a level of focus, strength and resilience of people determined to see that HIV/AIDS and women discrimination come to an end. The weaving is but a first step in the direction of empowering those living with the virus and helping them live a positive and productive life. Members also grow avocado and mangoes (to sell, share amongst the group – lets specify?).

“I have managed to ensure that each one of them has a piece of land where they can start their families even when I am gone,” she says.



Members of Ensonzinga Star (Society tackling AIDS through Rights approach) groups of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) display their mats, tablecloths and baskets for sale at Nsonzinga village in Mubende.

Photography:
Stephen Wandera Ojumbo



Agnes Lubyayi widowed to HIV/AIDS. Ntanda Tusitukire wamu PHA group helped her approach police child and family unit to protection on inheritance.

Photography:
Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

Members of this group are taught the basics on HIV/AIDS like the importance of testing, condom use and adhering to treatment. In addition they conduct adult literacy programs to learn how to read and write so that the participants can better understand their medication and treatment regimen as well as initiate other useful skills such as budgeting and book keeping. The records of the group, dating from its inception in 2007, are well kept and in perfect condition.

Katalina Nanteza, 40, is the Chair of the group. She talks about her experience.

“When I tested HIV positive in February 2004, I felt very depressed. I thought I was going to die in no time. But my group has made me strong,” she says. “I have also been able to get support and look after my two children.”

On remarking that she looks young for her age, Nanteza lets out an infectious laugh.

“Of course I look young. I sleep under a mosquito net and take my Septrin (AIDS medication) regularly,” is her reply.

When children **disinherit their mothers**

African societies are often composed of rigid hierarchies. This societal structure could be translated as follows: At the top are the men who are seen as household heads, breadwinners and protectors. The women and children in the households are usually subservient to the men. That said the children are subordinate to their mothers. The twist comes when male children grow up. They then take a higher place in the hierarchy than their mothers. In fact, before a 2007 Ruling brought by the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) that challenged the application of the Succession Act, the law itself upheld the subservient position of women preferring male heirs to daughters and widows.

The custom of relegating women to the periphery of society is deeply entrenched and Agnes Lubyayi from Mubende has experienced its effects first hand. When her husband died in January 2010, her life nearly fell apart as her stepsons threatened to take all that she owned.

“They were particularly interested in the land and cows,” she says. “One of them wanted to be a heir yet a different person was named in the will.”

While a will often guarantees that the deceased’s wishes shall be respected, in Lubyayi’s case her sons were willing to side step the will in the name of culture. They also forbade the widow from carrying out last funeral rights.

“There was a lot of chaos with each one wanting things done their way,” she recalls.

It took the intervention of the leader of Ntanda Tusitukire wamu, from her PHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) STAR Group, to finally put things to rest. The group, funded by ActionAid, works

to protect the rights of vulnerable children and women like Lubyayi. HIV/AIDS widows are often denied the right to inherit their husband’s property. The relatives of the deceased husband blame her for his death and seek to take everything that the couple had accumulated while he was still alive. They also argue that being a woman, she is likely to marry someone else and take with her what they believe is the deceased’s sons rightful property.

Caught in this vicious circle of blame and oppression, Lubyayi sought advice from her PLHA group leader. Together they approached the Police Child and Family Protection Unit in Mityana. With the help from the unit, they organised meetings with the clan heads and an agreement was reached. The last funeral rites were to be carried out and the decisions of the deceased, as articulated in the will were to be followed. Even though she still does not have direct access to her land and/or any other property, her sons do and they try and provide for her. She however says that she wishes she owned her own land and did not have to rely on her sons to access it. Thanks to being a member of Ntanda Tusitukire Wamu, her dream is about to come true. She is one of the lucky beneficiaries in her STAR Group to have received pigs which she hopes to sell to buy land on which she plans to build a house. This is the one legacy she vows to leave her six children.

Rehabilitated soldiers fighting **HIV/AIDS**

The aura around Mubende Rehabilitation Barracks is that of unsettled calm. The last ten kilometres or so before reaching the place is littered with men in uniform, walking either towards

“They were particularly interested in the land and cows,” she says. “One of them wanted to be a heir yet a different person was named in the will.”

or away from the barracks. Along the tarmac driveway, we meet yet more army men, looking watchful and cautious. Their duty is to guard their injured colleagues.

A lone one-legged man stands at the door of his mud hut and stares at our Toyota Corona that whizzes by. The barracks is one of the rehabilitation centres in the country for soldiers injured in battle. Service men either go there temporarily until they are well enough to go back to battle or go home to their families.

Umoja, the Swahili word for the number one, is the name of their PLHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) group. It comprises 36 women and 48 men. Umoja is one of the STAR (Society tackling AIDS through Rights Approach) funded in by ActionAid in partnership with Mubende District Network of People living with HIV/AIDS (MUDINET). The group that started in August 2009 has so far given its members 15 hens and 16 chicks. The first lot of new chicks to come is set to be given to other members of the STAR Group. Other members of the group also grow crops like maize and rare pigs.

According to the group facilitator James Olworo, the economic benefits of being in an HIV/AIDS support groups have encouraged several people to join the group that initially started with only twelve members.

The poverty afflicting the army men and their wives is very visible. Annet Munezero's husband, Ogino Tunyai, for example sleeps on a bed without a mattress at the police sick bay. A former member of the PLHA group, he has been bedridden for two weeks. His wife Munezero bears the burden of looking after him and their family of

four children. She does not have that much to make a living except the piece of land that belongs to the barracks. She eagerly awaits her turn to receive chicken so she too can get some extra income.

The heavy burden of looking after the family has also rendered her unable to create time for digging other people's gardens in exchange for money.

When she first found out she was HIV positive in May 2007, the reaction she received from her husband was very violent.

"He would get drunk, come home and beat me up," she recalls.

He also forbade her to taking the Septrin (Anti-retroviral medication) that the doctors had prescribed her so she resorted to taking it secretly. He accused her of bringing the virus to the family and killing him. In 2009 is when she decided to join the then newly formed Umoja.

"They are my family. They support me all the time," she says of the group.

Munezero is one of the 81% of HIV positive women in Uganda who experience emotional and physical violence as well as economic or financial abuse. For her, patriarchy did not deliver the promise of protection and provision.

HIV/AIDS puts an extra burden on her because she looks after not only herself but also her husband and children. Umoja HIV/AIDS Support Group provides a support system that is much needed in the face of such immense pressure.

"He would get drunk, come home and beat me up,"



(L-R) Onoma Augustine 44, Eselu William and Katungi David all Members of Umoja PHA Star group at Army rehabilitation centre for soldiers in Mubende.

Photography:
Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

One woman's battle for land

Pallisa district in Eastern Uganda is one of the most patriarchal in the country. The huts surrounding one main house are a common sight in almost every household, and tell a story of their own – a tale of polygamy. The women too tell their story - That of injustices meted out to them in the name of culture. But with intervention from those dedicated to change like Actionaid, slowly by slowly the winds of justice are blowing, and change is coming to one woman at a time. In the neighbouring Namutumba district where we met Juliet Kambeda, a woman who was forced to share a house with her co-wife, Actionaid's partner organization Nsinze Sub-County HIV/AIDS Workers Association (NSHAWA) has embarked on educating and transforming the entire community.

On a sunny Thursday afternoon, Samalie Naizuba, 58, sits on a reed mat under a large grass thatched shed. She is joined by five other women with whom she shares a homestead and a husband. The wives' grass thatched mud-huts surround their husband's big brick tin roofed house. This family setting is typical of Pallisa district. Almost every home is made of two to six small houses or huts for the various wives and a big one for the husband. Here, polygamy is the norm and the man is expected to be the breadwinner. In practice though, most men spend their days drinking at Kibale trading centre, while the women look after the children and undertake all the household chores.

On this particular day, Naizuba and her co-wives are peeling cassava to be served at sunset with beans, the family's only meal for the day.

The cassava is harvested from an adjacent piece of land that spreads over eight acres. On this land is also some cotton which Naizuba hopes to sell so she could pay tuition for her daughter who just completed P.7.

The land has been Naizuba's major source of livelihood for all the 45 years she has been married. Such family land is protected under the Land Act 1998 and cannot be sold without the consent of a spouse or children above 18 years. Complications however arise

in a polygamous setting because the law is not clear on which wife would have to consent.

And while most women wouldn't know about their right of consent, Naizuba does, thanks to NGOs like Actionaid which operate in the district to sensitise and empower women to fight for their rights.

Thus, when in June last year Naizuba's husband decided to sell the eight acres of land for two bulls, each valued at Shs 700,000, she was not willing to let her only livelihood go. She challenged him, asking how he dared sell the land without her consent or that of her children. Because he wouldn't listen, Naizuba sought the intervention of clan leaders, but she was disappointed when they sided with her husband, pointing out that culturally, the land belonged to him.

The LCs, who at first were of help, caved in due to social pressures and it was only when Naizuba reported the matter to Women Won't Wait (WWW) Centre that the issue was reconsidered.

Women Won't Wait Programs (WWW) deal with women's rights, domestic violence and HIV/AIDS.

In November 2009, WWW compelled Naizuba's husband to return the bulls and desist from selling the land. This inevitably strained Naizuba's relationship with her husband. Today, she is something of an alien in the homestead. While some of her co-wives were supportive because the land benefited them as well, others berated

Highlighting the link between HIV/AIDS and Domestic Violence...

By Patience Akumu



Polygamous family Samalie Naizuba, 58, joined by her co-wives, peeling cassava for dinner in Kadesok village, Kamuge sub county Pallisa district.

Photography:
Stephen Wandera Ojumbo



Polygamous family Samalie Naizubaposes for a photograph with a cow she got from (NCWOLA) Kadesok village, Kamuge sub county Pallisa district.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

her for daring to challenge the head of the family. Following the ordeal, Naizuba was among the more than 400 women picked to attend the launch of the Women Land Movement conference at Speke Resort Munyonyo in October. The mood was celebratory as the participants highlighted the milestones in regard to the land rights movement for women in Uganda. Unlike a World Bank report, which showed that women owned only 7% of the land yet they tilled over 80% of it in the 1980s, today the percentage has more than doubled to 18%. The number of women who co-own land with their spouses has also increased.

Naizuba says the conference taught her a lot about her land rights.

However, even if she now has access to land, she admits she is not at peace. Once, her husband threatened to beat her up, accusing her of receiving lots of money from the Women’s Land Movement. She was only saved by her stepson’s intervention. Yet giving up her land rights is not an option; land is her life.

“What about my children?” she asks.

“I would not be here if it wasn’t for them.”

Polygyny compounds the effects of HIV/AIDS in Pallisa

Pallisa district is a deeply patriarchal society where women are expected to be unquestioningly subservient to men. This subservience is best exemplified by the polygynous unions that are part and parcel of the culture of the people of Pallisa. Margaret Akello and her husband Simon Otule live in one room in Kibale town Pallisa district. Attached to the front of the house is a small retail shop. This shop, which brings about shs20000 a day, is the major source of sustenance for her, her

three children, her husband and his two other wives and of their respective children.

Akello started the shop in 2005 using savings she got from selling local brew. Then the money would be used only to feed her and her children, and their quality of life was better. When her husband retired from the army in 2008, he decided that money from the shop should be used to look after the families of the other women too. It was around this time that she also discovered that she was HIV positive during compulsory testing for pregnant women.

Her husband reasoned that it was a situation out of his control since it is only fair that other members of the family should also be looked after using the business money. Asked if he thought it was fair for him to marry three women he does not have the means to adequately look after, Otule answers that he is an African man and his culture dictates that he marries many wives.

Unfortunately having many women has translated into the extreme poverty that Otule and Akello evidently live in. Akello talks about her ordeal with tears in her eyes.

“Sometimes I go to the shop and find that something has been sold yet I do not see the money,” she says. “When I ask my husband he beats me and kicks me and throws me on the ground. He even threatens to kill me.”

She adds that she would like justice but cannot report her husband who is very well known in the area. Leaving him could be an option, but for her there is one enduring question: What about the children?

For women like Akello, polygamy creates a catch twenty-two situation. Their negotiating power is very weak. Akello for example admits that it is hard for her to negotiate condom use with her husband. This in turn exposes her to the risk of

She is joined by five other women with whom she shares a homestead and a husband. The wives’ grass thatched mud-huts surround their husband’s big brick tin roofed house.



Akello Margret, 33, lives and has 5 children in marriage of domestic violence in Ongoria village, Opwatela sub-county, Pallisa district.

Photography:
Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

re-infection from him and the other women. Polygamy also exposes women to economic, emotional and physical violence and generally reduces their quality of life.

In the midst of this bleak picture is a glimmer of hope for Akello who is a member of National Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (NACWOLA) in Pallisa. NACWOLA works in partnership with Actionaid to improve the quality of life of women living with HIV/AIDS. With the group, Akello first heard of women's rights- like the right to property, to equal dignity and treatment and a proper livelihood.

"I did not even know these rights existed. I did not know there was justice for women," she says with the slightest smile.

There are more pressing issues for Akello though, like accumulating property for her three daughters before she passes on. She says this has been impossible because whatever she gets her husband sells.

"I have no goats or cows. Not even a single hen. My husband says I do not need this property because I have only girls."

The issue goes beyond that of human rights to that of a society where women have to do their husbands bidding or face the consequences. Amuron Stella, the Program Officer at NACWOLA describes these cultural issues as sensitive and so deeply engrained, making it very hard to get rid of them.

Child marriages a raw deal for women

Clare Baluka, 28, got married in 1995 at the tender age of thirteen. Growing up in a society where a girl marrying at the offset of puberty was the norm, for Baluka marriage was a promise of security, companionship and respect from the community that expected it.

When she turned thirteen years old, the then Primary Four student at Opogomo Primary School in Pallisa District decided to move in with her fifteen year old boyfriend who was in Primary Six at the same school. Bride price was paid to her father and they started living together as husband and wife.

The promises of security and amiable companionship never materialized

though. It begun with subtle insults and her husband calling her stupid for dropping out of school to marry him. Baluka endured this because in the society she lives in, like most in Uganda, terminating a marriage is taboo.

During early years of the marriage, she and her husband worked hard at digging people's gardens and were eventually able to buy a cow. It was this cow that Baluka's husband used to marry a second wife. This made Baluka very bitter because she had contributed most of the money that they had used to buy the cow. Five years down the road in 2005, she decided to leave him. She was however too embarrassed to go home because of the stigma associated with divorce. She opted to marry another man. She did not mind the fact that he already had four wives since most people in the district are in polygynous relationships.

In addition to the three children from her previous relationship, she bore two others in this new marriage. It was in 2009, when she was pregnant with her last-born daughter, that she discovered she was HIV positive.

"I cried on the spot. It was unbelievable. I thought I was going to die," she recalls.

Being the first in the marriage to find out her status marked the beginning of a lot of stigma and discrimination from her co wives. "They used to call me "slim". I could not go to cut grass with them because I am positive. They also advised me to tie my baby to the hut pole so that she would not play with other children and infect them."

Baluka says these were the unhappiest times in her life because she felt so alone and unloved. Sometimes her parents would send her food from their garden, but she did not have the appetite to enjoy it in this environment.

In 2009, after visiting her parents, they vowed not to let her go back to the man. Her mother says she looked too thin, pale and

unhappy. It was time to pick her children and come home.

At home, she found a whale of support not just from her family but also from The National Community of Women Living with AIDS (NACWOLA), which operates in partnership with Actionaid within her village. Today she and her daughter are able to access treatment. They both look healthy and the horrific tales of the stigma she faced are in the past.

"They are my friends and family. They let me know there are people like me," says Baluka of her support group.

NSHAWA working to fight the stigma of HIV/AIDS



Nsinze Sub-County HIV/AIDS Workers Association (NSHAWA), a PLHA group with thirty members, has for the last nine years dedicated itself to fighting the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS in Namutumba district. Started in 2002, their vision is to have

"They used to call me "slim". I could not go to cut grass with them because I am positive. They also advised me to tie my baby to the hut pole so that she would not play with other children and infect them."



Clare Baluka, 28, got married at 13, produced 5 children from two divorces due to domestic violence in polygamous marriages. She now lives at her parents' home in, Kadesok Village in Pallisa district

Photography:
Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

a healthy society that is economically self-sustaining where children, men and women can uphold and demand for their rights. This they do through mobilization, advocacy, sensitization, counselling and home-based care and resource mobilization.

According to Sam Nkenga Nassa, the programme coordinator for NSHAWA, the group has managed to significantly reduce violence against women and girls in the region. This has been done through sensitization meetings. Actionaid Uganda has been able to finance thirty-one of these meetings in five Parishes of Nsinze Sub-County. In these meetings, information on HIV/AIDS has been passed on to the PLHA workers who go out into the community and share what they have learnt with others both HIV positive and negative.

Financial support has also been provided to members, in line with their vision of seeing an economically empowered society. Thanks to links to government programmes like NAADS, four circles have benefited from a poultry-rearing project where 400 chicks have been given away while five Circles have received improved cassava stems.

Thirty PLHAs have been trained in horticulture and another thirty in mushroom growing. Seventy-three local goats have been given to seven STAR (Societies tackling AIDS through Rights Approach) circles. Members have also received chickens, pigs and oxen to plough their gardens.

“All this has been achieved through the support of Actionaid and the community has been empowered and incomes have improved,” says Nassa who also recognizes that while organizations like Actionaid have done a lot to transform lives, there is much more still to be done.

He adds that it is the entire community’s job to empower the disadvantaged and reduce poverty, and this can only come about

after a fundamental attitude change. NSHAWA that is educating large numbers of PLHAs who in turn educate the community, is moving in the right direction of bringing about this change.

Kisembye is now able to pay school fees for her children

Monica Kisembye, 51, dons on a Civil Society Fund t-shirt and her favourite long skirt on the day she is told that the Actionaid team is coming to her home in Namutumba. The first thing she does is lead the team proudly to the poultry project that changed her life. She tested HIV positive in 2002.

“I lost hope but was counselled. I was advised to form a REFLECT Circle for support – and Actionaid approach that links adult learning to empowerment,” Says Kisembye who is now the Chairperson of Nsinze Sub-County HIV/AIDS Workers Association (NSHAWA).

From the group, she received training in home-based care and counselling. Now she talks to and encourages others who, like she did, are finding it hard to come to terms with their HIV status. The group is also what empowered her to become the proud owner of a poultry farm that currently has 32 local chickens. To supplement her income she gets from the chicken, she also grows mushrooms and groundnuts. The result of this? A permanent house that stands erect in her compound.

“I am very comfortable and happy with my family,” Kisembye says. But above all, she is thankful that she has been able to pay school fees for her children, one of whom is set to finish her A’ levels this year.

Kisembe confesses that she was one of those people who thought that HIV/AIDS was the end of the world. At first she refused to believe the positive results, thinking that her husband’s

Financial support has also been provided to members, in line with their vision of seeing an economically empowered society.

Monika Kisebye- Chairperson NSHAWA Star group, 51yrs, Widow, 6Children, Farmer. Nsinze Village, Nsnzi Sub-County, Namutumba District.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo



“I was very depressed. They accused me of trying to kill them with the virus,”

relatives had bewitched her. Ever since she joined the PLHA group though, she is a changed and empowered woman who lives to preach the gospel of positive living to others.

When he cannot provide separate houses for his wives

Polygyny is a practice that abounds and is accepted by our African society, with most seeing it as a cherished culture they have to stick to. Thus Juliet Kambeda, 38, like most women in Namutumba district in Eastern Uganda found she was married to a man who already had a wife.

While most men in the area build separate huts for their wives, Kambeda’s husband was unable to build his wives separate homes. So for the first years of her marriage, Kambeda had to put up with sleeping in the same hut as the woman she shared with a husband.

She describes the experience as emotionally draining and punctuated with constant quarrels between the two women as their husband simply stood aside like a spectator. To crown it all, she tested HIV positive during compulsory HIV testing for pregnant women. Her husband and the other woman tested HIV negative.

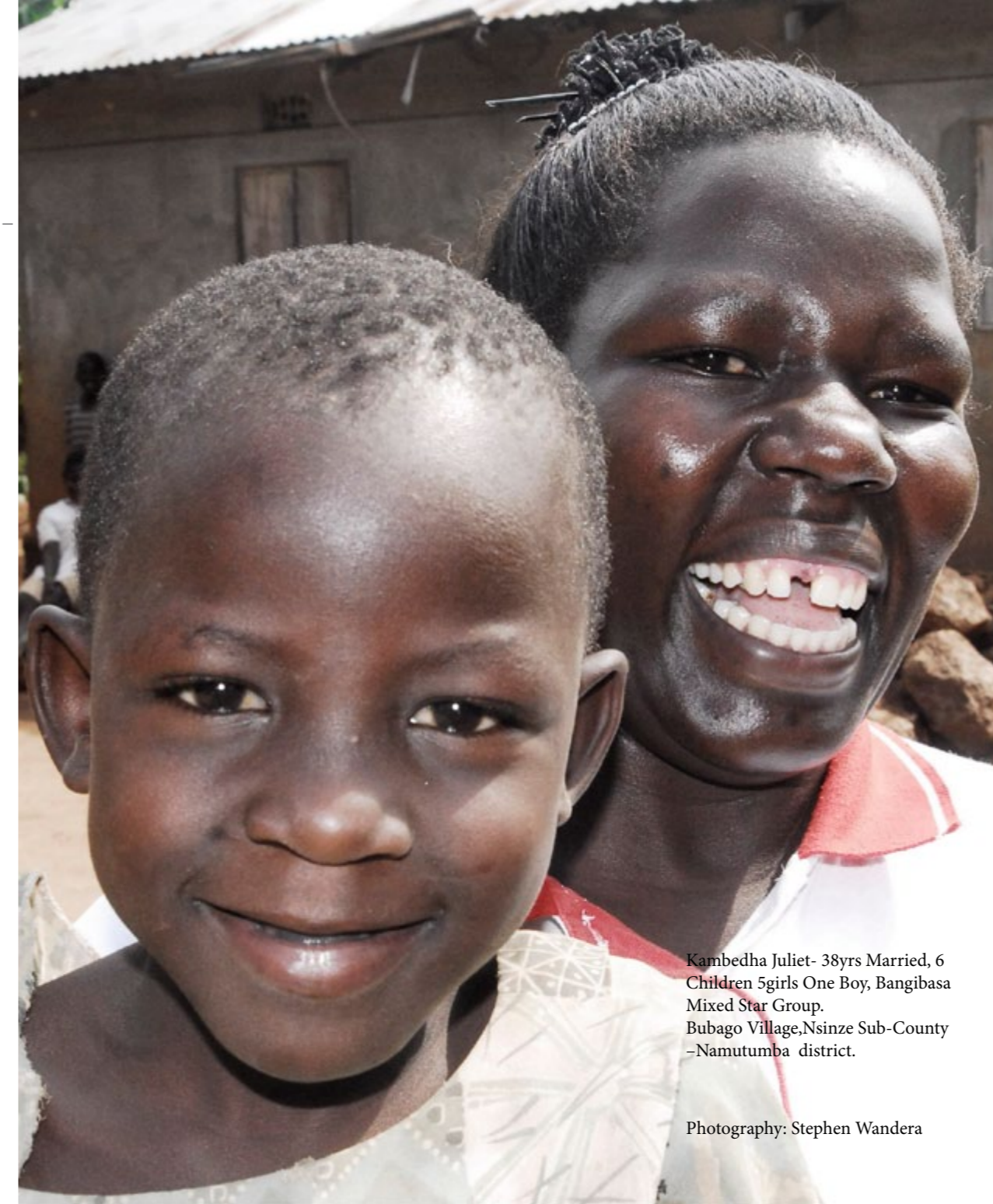
“I was very depressed. They accused me of trying to kill them with the virus,” she recalls the ordeal.

Also Kambeda, who has five daughters and one son, was only giving birth to daughters in a society where male children are more cherished as they’ll become

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heirs to carry on the patriarchal lineage. For her, it was a double tragedy so to speak and she faced stigmatization from all fronts. As an HIV positive woman in a discordant relationship who could not give birth to boy children, she had no voice or right to air out her grievances. “Everyone said I did not deserve to stay with my husband,” she says.

Hope was most grateful when she joined an Actionaid financed PLHA group. Here she hoped to find comfort from other HIV positive people. She also started to receive financial support and has been able to grow cassava and rice. Also within a year of joining the group, Kambeda put up her own house and says she is relieved that she does not have to share her house with another woman. She pays school fees for all her children and vows to bring up her daughters to be financially and socially empowered and informed so that they do not go through what she went through. She is also a community educator with NSHAWA and uses her experience to preach against discrimination and stigmatization on grounds of someone’s HIV status.



Kambedha Juliet- 38yrs Married, 6 Children 5girls One Boy, Bangibasa Mixed Star Group. Bubago Village, Nsinze Sub-County –Namutumba district.

Photography: Stephen Wandera



Dajje, Bujumba landing Site Kalangala.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo

Abbreviations

AIDS Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

ABC Abstinence, Be faithful, use Condoms

ARV Antiretroviral

CSF Civil Society Fund

CFPU Child and Family Protection Unit

KAFOPHAN People Living with HIV/AIDS

NAADS National Agricultural Advisory Services

PLWHA People Living With HIV/AIDS

PMTCT Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission

STAR Society Tackling Aids Through Rights

TASO The AIDS Support Organisation

UN United Nations

VAW Violence Against Women

WWW Women Women Won't Wait



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(L-R) Kayen Jane 27 yrs, Ngamila Doreen 30yrs, Akello Jamila and Maneno Ramla, 26 yrs

Members of People living with HIV AIDS role model (PLHA) S tar group- Nebbi.

Photography: Stephen Wandera Ojumbo



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Strengthening civil societies for improved HIV/AIDS and OVC service delivery in Uganda



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