

**Dorothy Nassolo**, publicist

# Women as champions in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Uganda

**A**t a time when Uganda is struggling to meet the United Nations' Joint programme on AIDS target of stopping HIV as a public threat by 2030, the role of women in the struggle is a must to cherish. As we celebrate International Women's Day, women in Uganda are celebrated for their utmost contribution to the struggle against HIV/AIDS, one of the most pressing issues Uganda is trying to address in 2018.

HIV/AIDS lies 5th of the Millennium Development Goals. Since the emergence of the epidemic in the country, way back in the 1980s, women have been at the centre of the fight to save lives.

The prevalence of HIV among adults aged 15 to 64 in Uganda is 6.2%: 7.6% among females and 4.7% among males. This corresponds to approximately 1.2 million people aged 15 to 64 living with HIV, while approximately 96,000 children are living with HIV (UPHIA Report 2017).

Young or old, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has affected women more. In the beginning, many young girls were left orphans, and at such a tender age, they were charged with the responsibility of running and fending for their young siblings. Likewise, a number of women were left helpless widows and so was the case with ageing women who had to take care of their orphaned and hopeless grandchildren, some of whom were HIV+.

Such scenarios still happen today, even with the different interventions such as elimination of mother-to-child transmission (eMTCT). As we commemorate the International Women's Day and celebrate the many achievements that women have attained over the years, this year's theme: "*Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls: Opportunities and Challenges*" encourages advocacy for women living with HIV advancement everywhere.

The National Forum of People Living with HIV/AIDS networks in Uganda (NAFOPHANU) is committed to ensure that People Living with HIV live a quality and productive life in a sustainable manner. Young girls and women living with HIV should meaningfully be involved at all levels.

NAFOPHANU is committed to work with relevant stakeholders to address barriers often faced by women and girls in accessing

HIV prevention, treatment and care services as well as sexual and reproductive health services due to factors such as lack of status and limited decision-making power, lack of information, lack of control over financial resources and restricted mobility.

It is evident that many women have responded to the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV in Uganda. Some mothers, however, are still giving birth in community with the help of traditional birth attendants contributing to the existing number of children being born with HIV.

NAFOPHANU with support from Aidsfonds is contributing to the elimination of mother-to-child transmission (EMTCT) programme through the towards and AIDS Free Generation in Uganda (TAFU) programme. Community resource persons were empowered contributing to improved linkages between communities and health facilities thus increasing identification, referral and retention of women in the programme for elimination of mother to child transmission (eMTCT). The project continues to mobilise support for children and women and has addressed socio-cultural and economic barriers faced in utilising HIV services.

Going forward, in order to end AIDS by 2030 as a public health threat, women and young girls living with HIV should be placed at the center; access to medical services by women should be improved and services brought closer to community.

Stock outs of ARVs and other essential medicines must be eliminated to enable mothers living with HIV protect their unborn babies from contracting the virus, health workers or care givers should allocate sufficient time to counsel women to achieve adherence to treatment; girls and women, in all their diversity should be supported to live their full potential, free of stigma and discrimination, sexual violence and abuse.

In addition, sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women should be promoted.

Together for a positive difference!

The writer is the communications and public relations officer of the National Forum of People Living With HIV & AIDS Networks in Uganda



*There are approximately 1.2 million people aged 15 to 64 living with HIV in Uganda*