

Gender-based violence

Violence makes one vulnerable to HIV/Aids

In the line of fire. According to experts, violence and the threat of violence can increase women and girls' vulnerability to HIV by making it impossible to set the terms of an equal relationship.

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KAMPALA. In 1991, an 18-year-old Teddy Namuyanja had only one dream - getting married to a man from Kampala. Her mother had tried to arrange three marriages for her in the village but she rejected all the men.

"I came to Kampala to live and work with my sister in Wandegaya. It was during that time that I met and fell in love with Moses Kaweesa. He was 28-years-old. We began living together."

Their marriage was a turbulent one in which they would be together for a few months, and then separate, only to reconcile again. Kaweesa had a child from another relationship who died in their first year of marriage.

"He had been sickly and after he died, my husband also fell ill for a while. I heard people saying that he might be suffering from HIV but this was 1991 and no one voluntarily tested for HIV like it is today. Only the rich could afford to go to big hospitals for a checkup."

Her husband got better and Namuyanja became pregnant. However, her husband - who now runs a shop - had become violent. "Whenever we had a misunderstanding, he would beat me. To escape the beatings, I spent the night on the verandah while he slept inside the house. As the pregnancy advanced, I returned to the village. But the moment I left, he brought in another woman. We only reconciled after I had given birth."

However, even with the reconciliation, her husband did not change his habits. He openly brought women into their home and when Namuyanja complained, he would beat her. She spent most nights on the verandah with her baby.

"I did not leave because I had made a great contribution to his shop. The business had grown and we were really making money, enough to buy a car. Besides, my mother had had 11 children with our father. I wanted to follow her example and remain married to one man all my life."

When she had two more children, her husband's behaviour worsened. He would disappear for days on end. In the end, in 1996, Namuyanja had had enough of the marriage.

"I took my children and



Support. Teddy Namuyanja with some of the children in the Lyt Starz group. PHOTO BY GILLIAN NANTUME

rented a room in Mpererwe. I began selling porridge for survival. I was so bitter at what my husband had done to me that I wanted to make other women cry in their marriages as I had done. I joined a group of wild women and we began going to bars. I began sleeping around and drinking a lot. I lived like this from 1996 to 2000."

In 2001, she decided to clean up her act. She took the children to the village and began working on Katindo Island. As with most islands, Katindo had more men than women.

"For two weeks, I rejected the advances of men because I wanted to concentrate on my work. The island did not have a toilet and we used to use the bush. One time as I was going to the bush to answer nature's call, a man waylaid and raped

me. I had no choice but to become his wife."

Although her new husband was not violent, he later seduced her sister and they had two children. After leaving him, Namuyanja moved to another island.

"In 2004, medical workers came to Kitobo Island and I had an HIV test which was positive. They put me on a dose of Septrin. I had to swallow one tablet per day, but since the island did not have a pharmacy, most times, I missed the dosage. In 2005, I lost my savings, Shs800,000, and the stress of that loss really hit me hard. I fell sick and I almost died."

That same year, Namuyanja returned to Entebbe. During her illness, she was neglected and almost left for dead by her family. After two years her health stabilised and she regained her energy. With the help of a church in Kajjansi, she studied a counselling course.

She became a community Aids support agent for Kaseanyi area with The Aids Support Organisation (Taso).

"I would distribute drugs to HIV patients and counsel them not to give up on life. I also began acting with a drama group and joined a group of women living with HIV. However, I realised that children, especially those born with HIV, suffer more because no one bothers to explain to them the origin of the disease or why they have to take drugs every day."

Namuyanja formed a children's group, Lyt Starz, consisting of about 30 children ranging from five to 18 years of age. It is a drama group which sings and acts Namuyanja's productions. Besides, their acting, the children get together to encourage each other to take their ARVs on time and to live positively.

Some of the children live with her because their parents are dead, and their relatives do not want them.

Namuyanja also has a thriving restaurant business at Kaseanyi Landing Site.

VOICES

"Women who are suffering abuse but are entirely dependent on their husbands are hesitant to walk out of the relationship. We offer counselling and mediation between the couples. The ultimate choice to leave the marriage or remain in it depends on the woman."

LEAH AKOL, ACTIONAID UGANDA OFFICIAL

"GBV and HIV have a close relationship because one of them is a push factor and it is more difficult for women to refuse sex when in a relationship, to get their partners to be faithful, or to use a condom."

MERCY MUNDURU, FIDA OFFICIAL

"Gender-based violence (GBV) is a barrier in accessing HIV prevention, care, and treatment services. It is difficult for a woman to negotiate with a married man who is unfaithful and to ask him to go for a test or use a condom. So usually women become victims of marital rape and are infected. Women who have experienced violence have a substantially increased risk of HIV infection, a risk that is both increased directly through sexual violence or indirectly through inability to negotiate safer-sex practices with a partner."

JOSHUA WAMBOGA, ED OF UGANDA ALLIANCE OF PATIENT'S ORGANISATIONS