

Mityana girls get second chance

By Jackie Nalubwama

There is nothing to write home about Mityana town. It is like most towns away from the capital, Kampala. It has shops lined along dusty winding streets. Situated 74km west of Kampala, Mityana is battling a notorious enemy – HIV. Its main victims are girls and young women between 13 and 25 years of age.

Teopista Nalumansi, 24, is one such young woman with a harrowing past. Born and raised in a lowly family in Naama village in Mityana, Nalumansi says her parents did not give her adequate care.

"My mother was a hired labourer on farms and when she had some money, she would take alcohol. My father used to dig pit latrines and when he was paid, he, too, would drink. They were both drunkards," she says.

So after Nalumansi had sat Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) in 2005, her parents could not afford to send her to secondary school. An old man in the village offered her a job as a maid at his daughter's house in Ggaba, Kampala, which she gladly accepted, to escape her predicament.

"I was paid sh20,000 per month. My work included looking after chickens as well. It was hard work," she recalls.

Nalumansi worked for

the whole of 2006, saved money and went back to school at Naama Secondary School for S1. However, in S3, she dropped out. Her parents had separated at the time because of incessant quarrels.

"I dropped out of school and met a guy because I was hard up. He impregnated me and I later gave birth to a baby boy in 2010," she says. Nalumansi then left her 20-month-old son with her mother and went to work at a restaurant in Kiggungu landing site. While there, her friend told her their duty was to please the boss and customers.

"My friend always had money on her yet we were paid sh2,000 per day. She told me about her nightlife as a commercial sex worker. She wooed me into the business and I started sleeping with different men," Nalumansi narrates.

Soon, word reached her home in Mityana that she was trading in sex, which prompted her family to distance themselves from her.

Life became difficult for Nalumansi as some men would rape her or not pay for her services. "I had lost my humanity. I was wild and disrespectful to my family. Sometimes, we would smoke drugs with cigarettes to gain courage to deal with clients at night," she recalls.

A new chapter

When she returned to Mityana to look after her

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father, whom thieves had accosted in his drunken state, another friend told her about Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL), an implementing partner of the DREAMS project.

"She told me that at DREAMS, they test for HIV yet I did not want to because I thought I had a lot of HIV. However, she convinced me and I tested. I was negative!" she says.

Nalumansi was enrolled into the programme and received counselling and knitting skills. She now makes sweaters for sale and has acquired communication skills too. She now trains other girls at the safe space in knitting.

Singing praises of the project, Nalumansi says: "I can speak up for myself and also learnt to save money. My relatives and I were rehabilitated under the DREAMS' SINOYUYO model. I used to attend it with my aunt because I had stopped respecting my elders."

Sitting on a chair in a dusty compound at Naama, with her son interjecting her, Nalumansi says DREAMS has given her a new outlook on life. "I now have hope because despite all the men I slept with, God saved me from contracting HIV," she says.

Genesis of DREAMS

Mildmay Uganda started the DREAMS project three years ago to empower girls and young women with skills and hope for a better future as a way of reducing the risk of contracting HIV.

Mildmay provides quality HIV/AIDS care, treatment, training and education.

Tadeo Atuhura, the Mildmay communications and partnership manager, says DREAMS is a PEPFAR-led public-private partnership designed to help girls in 10 sub-Saharan African countries develop into Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe (DREAMS) women.

Mildmay is currently running the DREAMS project in two districts: Mityana and Mubende. It has also partnered with the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, among others.

Sarah Victoria Kabasoni, the DREAMS co-ordinator, explains that since girls are usually confined to the kitchen as well as other house chores, they are not meaningfully engaged.

"DREAMS came out to enhance their social capacity because they are very naïve and have no information," she says.

Under DREAMS, the young women meet at centres called safe spaces to talk, share experiences and acquire skills such as tailoring, knitting, hair braiding and making crafts. Kabasoni says the skills give girls an opportunity to earn a living rather than depend on men to pay them for sex. These skills and training offer them a comprehensive HIV-prevention package to reduce the risk of HIV infection.

"They can sell sweaters and plait hair," she says.

Kabasoni says DREAMS arose following global studies that found HIV infection was rising among girls aged between 9 and 25 due to lack of financial strength, yet they have needs.

So far, the project has helped 36,000 girls, who Kabasoni says, are recruited using existing structures. "We work with LCs and village health teams, who

know the girls and their situations. They help in mobilisation and they know the homes," she says.

Kabasoni says DREAMS targets girls in school, pregnant girls and those involved in commercial sex.

"DREAMS focuses on HIV negative girls to keep them empowered so that they do not contract HIV. However, when we find positive ones, we link them to health facilities to receive treatment," she says.

According to Kabasoni, the HIV negative girls are enrolled in the project and grouped according to their different segments: pregnant girls, girls in school and the transactional sex group, because they have different needs.

New life, bright future

Atuhura says the project offers services and training, which comprise social assets building to help girls socialise, Stepping Stones, a module about HIV prevention and gender-based violence and HIV testing and counselling.

The project also has a South African model called SINOYUYO, which nurtures relationships between the girls and their parents or guardians.

Given their sordid past, the girls look happy at Kigoogwa and Naama safe spaces because the project has breathed new life and a sense of a future in them. They are now their young selves again.