SSEKITTO DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL FOR HIS SIBLINGS

By Titus Kakembo

The story of bad luck has been piling up with rapid succession of deaths in the family.

Tears well up in many eyes whenever John Ssekitto narrates how he braved all odds to deal with stigma and protect his two sisters from sexual exploitation after his mother died. He was only 13.

Today, Ssekitto, 28, a farmer, is referred to as *eyasoma* (brainy) in Kyotera district because of his resilience.

Ssekitto has ably headed the family since his mother died in 2002. "My mother, Josephine Nakatte, was the pillar of our home. When she died, I saw the family foundation collapse," he says.

The day his mother died is when it dawned on Sekitto that he was now in charge. His elderly and conservative father, Joseph Kasolo, was unable to shoulder the burden.

Ssekitto says his sisters, Sophia Nanjero and Berna Nalukenge were too young to understand the challenges in life.

"But suddenly, things we took for granted such as love, care, food and medical treatment were out of reach. I had no choice but to stop going to school," he adds.

MAKING ENDS MEET

Ssekitto started doing odd jobs such as weeding people's gardens, fetching water at construction sites and harvesting coffee.

"I joined a group where we were equipped with skills in poultry, piggery and dairy farming. But the most annoying thing was being ridiculed for my lefforts. Many thought I was wasting time and whatever I was doing would lead to nothing," Ssekitto says.

For example, when an organisation gave him a cow, neighbours laughed, saying it would die of pneumonia. "These cows need iron roof shelters and special grass," they said.

Eventually, Ssekitto was forced to forego education to farm and educate his sisters.

He feared that they may be forced into prostitution, get unwanted pregnancy or marry early.

"My sisters would return early from school to help me clear the gardens I worked on," he explains.

By 2009, Ssekitto's ventures were beginning to pay off. His cow delivered and the family income increased as they sold milk at sh800 a cup.

"We were getting 17 to 20 litres of milk. With the income from milk, vegetables and bananas, I got a piggy bank where I would put coins that came my way. That way, Nalukenge was able to finish studies as a nurse in Nsambya Nursing School, while Nanjero took a course in hotel management," Ssekitto says.

However, it has not been a smooth journey for Ssekitto and his siblings.

CHALLENGES

"There are times I identified with the Biblical Lot when clients declined to pay for things such as milk or whenever there was a dry spell.

Ssekitto also recalls how life was not easy when he ventured into poultry and goat rearing.

"Fetching water for the birds was not easy. Keeping them warm with charcoal stoves was another challenge," he says.

Ssekitto wonders how his mother always managed to make ends meet and wear a smile on her face.

Today, Ssekitto calculates every move he makes in life.

Ssekitto is now a role model for poverty stricken homes in Kyotera.

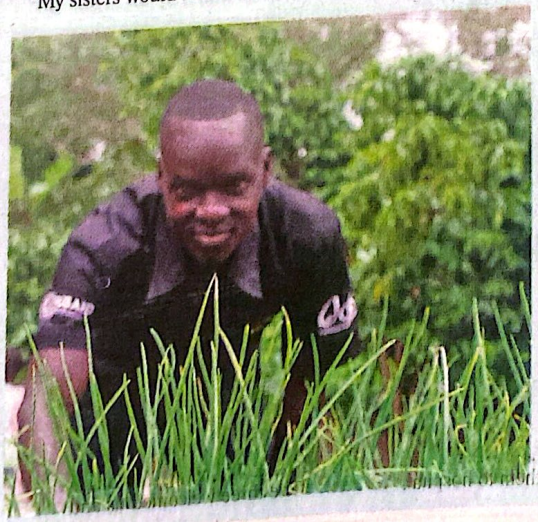
Nanjero, 32, says, being his elder sister, she hated seeing Ssekitto drop out of school to become the breadwinner.

"We suffered stigma and felt like rewriting the story of our lives. There is that feeling deep in my heart that I owe Ssekitto the world. I still consult him before I make any decision in life," she says.

Nalukenge, 26, says those memories are as fresh in my mind as if the sad events happened yesterday.

"Suddenly, our mother was no more. We were told she had gone to God. But I kept wondering why she was taking so long to come back. Soon, I realised that I would never see her again," she says.

"When our father passed on. I started wondering what kind of parents leave their children behind," Nakulenge adds.



John Ssekitto

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