

## Construction of Risper Otieno's home, May 6, 2017



Risper Otieno, pictured above, as the community puts the final touches on the walls of her new home built on May 6, 2017 in the Seme region of Kisumu County, Kenya. She once lived on this land with her husband and they farmed tomatoes and sold them in the local market. When he died of AIDS, her in-laws forced her off the land and flattened her home, accusing her of killing him. Even though the Kenyan constitution protects women's land and property rights, the law is rarely enforced, understood or even known about in much of the country. So Risper, along with her four children, lived hand-to-mouth in a tiny market stall for the past several years. To evade the authorities, she traveled in the dark of night to a nearby national wildlife park to collect firewood she could sell to support her children. The nonprofit, KELIN, helps women like her by arbitrating and mediating land disputes with their in-laws. But once the cases are resolved, the women rarely have the funds to rebuild their homes. Thanks to our donors, we have built five houses so far in southwest Kenya. We only had the chance to photograph the construction in action of Risper's house, although we talked with and documented the other five widows and cases. About 150 women like them still need homes – and we need the funds to build them.



KELIN staff help raise Risper's new mattress onto the roof of the bus we rented to take Gina, Jennifer and a good portion of KELIN's staff to the construction site.



KELIN staff (and Gina toward the back on the right) ready to get to work. They all personally volunteered their own time to take part in the construction.



The construction is underway when we arrive (our bus broke down along the way!). All of the houses are fit with a corrugated iron roof.



Young men from the surrounding area were hired to build the houses.



A KELIN staff member digging up dirt that will soon become Risper's walls.



Risper, with KELIN staff in the background, scooping up mud for the walls of her new house.



The whole community came out for the construction, and included a feast cooked by local women to celebrate the occasion. We were told it was the biggest celebration the area had seen in memory.





Risper's father-in-law, in the white shirt, took part in the festivities, and is very happy to have her and the grandchildren back on the land. The man in the purple shirt is the local elder who mediated the case.



Locals enjoying the day, with women cooking in the background.



Lunch. Fish caught down the road in Lake Victoria for the house-construction feast. Fishing is one of the main occupations in this region. Widows are often so destitute after their husbands die and their land is taken away, that they are left no choice but to exchange 'sex for fish', a risky phenomenon in this region where the HIV-prevalence rate is one of the highest in the world at around 20 percent of the population. When HIV-positive widows have a home they no longer have to pay rent in an unsafe, unfit market stall, and can instead pay for food, school fees for their children, and importantly, stay on their anti-retroviral medication which helps them live long, healthy lives.



The young men who built Risper's house take a break to enjoy a lunch of fish, goat, spinach and ugali, a type of corn meal that is a staple of the Kenyan diet. The boy on the far left is shouting 'Facebook!'



KELIN staff, Jennifer, Gina and Risper in front of her new house.



Abisagi, and her 17-year-old-daughter Lavenda, also attended the construction. We met them just after Risper's house was completed as lighting and thunder began to flash and boom. They are from the same general region, but traveled a distance to attend. The elder who mediated Abisagi's case paid their bus fare so Abisagi could tell us why she also needs a house. It was a day of celebration but meeting her was a stark reminder that so many widows still need homes in the region. The sky opened up and rain came down in sheets, so our meeting was cut short. Jennifer met with Abisagi a few days later in a small kitchen house she is living in with her three daughters to talk to her at greater length about her challenges and her needs. Right now, there are about 150 widows like Abisagi whose cases have been successfully mediated by KELIN but who don't have the money to rebuild the homes that their in-laws destroyed. We'd like to build her – and as many other widows as possible – a house like Risper's as soon as we have raised the funds to do so.