

## **Rebuilding Women's Houses & Lives in Kenya: A Progress Report July 20, 2017**

Thanks to everyone who donated so generously to our GoFundMe campaign, we have completed the first phase of our project. In early May, KELIN, our partner group in Kenya, did a phenomenal job organizing the construction of four houses for widows and their children in desperate need of a home. We traveled from our respective home bases in the San Francisco and Washington, DC/Baltimore areas to take part in the construction of Risper Otieno's new house on May 6. It was an adventure every step of the way – including a late night political demonstration on the highway from Nairobi to the shores of Lake Victoria in southwest Kenya – and worth each new twist and turn in the road (literally and figuratively).

KELIN did an outstanding job in organizing everything, from identifying the widows most in need and hiring laborers, to renting buses and even miraculously finding the sunglasses Jennifer lost while taking these photos. We also managed to catch up with Antonine (profiled on our campaign page), to see how she has fared over the last year since we helped build her house.

Jennifer hung around for a few extra days to meet with the other three house recipients, several other widows who still need homes, and a number of community members who have been critical in advocating for women's land rights across Homa Bay and Kisumu counties. The region, which is about the size of the US state of Delaware, has an HIV prevalence rate of about 20 percent, making it is one of the hardest hit places by the epidemic on Earth.

It was on one of these visits that Jennifer met Dorothy. Her situation was particularly bad and it was immediately apparent that a home would drastically improve – and perhaps even save – her life. Thanks to some very generous donations that came in just prior to our trip, we were able to build Dorothy a new home. We're happy to report that it was completed on June 25.

When these HIV-positive widows have access to land and a house to call their own it provides so much more than a roof over their heads. They can now grow vegetables and corn, a staple of the local diet, instead of having to buy much of their food. Many will sell their crops in the market to earn income. They no longer have to pay rent to live in an unsafe, cramped market stall in small local towns. They no longer have to engage in transactional sex to feed, clothe and educate their children – as many of them must do to survive. Back on the land, extended family and neighbors can help with childcare. And importantly, they are much more likely to stay on their lifesaving anti-retroviral medication that will give them and any of their children who are HIV-positive the chance to live a long and healthy life.

Below are some photos Jennifer took and stories she gathered to give you a sense of the hope and the dignity that you have all brought to so many lives. Thank you. Gracias. Asante Sana.

Warmly,  
Jennifer & Gina

## Risper Otieno, New Homeowner



**Risper in front of her new house built on May 6, 2017 in Seme, Kisumu County, Kenya.**

Before Risper's husband died of AIDS in 2008, she was a farmer. They grew tomatoes on the land and sold them at market. Like every single homeless widow I met while in the region, her in-laws blamed her for infecting and killing her husband, demolished her home, and forced her and her children off the land. Since that time, she had been living hand-to-mouth in a small one-room market stall with her four children, illegally collecting firewood in a nearby national park at night to make ends meet.

Risper learned about KELIN's work mediating disputes on behalf of widows from a 'widow champion', widows who have benefited from KELIN in the past and now serve as the eyes and ears for KELIN in rural communities. When they find widows like Risper, they connect her with KELIN-trained community elders who mediate land disputes with the women's in-laws. Over the past several years, they have mediated hundreds of cases across the region. But so many of them – about 150 at this time – don't have the means to rebuild their homes.

The eviction of widows and the HIV/AIDS epidemic feed off each other in the most devastating way. Here is a plausible scenario: a husband tragically dies of AIDS; his family evicts his wife from the land and destroys her home; she might no longer be able to access lifesaving HIV medication that also makes her less infectious; she is left with no choice but to exchange sex with a local fisherman for his catch which she can sell in the market for money she needs to pay the rent, feed her children and cover their school fees; the fisherman then gets married and

infects his own young wife, and the cycle continues. A home can help stop it. Thanks to you, Risper now has one.

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## **Antonine Akumu Oruwe, Homeowner for one year**



**Antonine greets friends in front of her home on May 7, 2017.**

A few years back, KELIN staff met her while she was living in the open, under a tree on her land where her previous house once stood. She had been homeless for several years. She was separated from her children, and on the brink of suicide when they found her and began the mediation process with local elders and her in-laws. Last July, KELIN staff, Gina and a few of her friends and family, including Jennifer, contributed money to build Antonine this house.

Gina, who helped make the walls of the house one year ago, was thrilled to be reunited with Antonine on her farm, and Jennifer was excited to finally meet her. She's a firecracker: warm, witty, sassy and wickedly funny. The house has clearly given her a new lease on life. She said the word 'kabesa' (pronounced kuh-bay-zuh) over and over, which we learned means 'extremely' in the local Luo language. As in, she had been in an extremely bad place, and now things were extremely good as compared to the past. In her home were farming tools and other household items that friends had donated. The house was solid, surrounded by small

chicken coops and lush, green fields of corn just about ready for harvest.



**Antonine with her new chicken coops and cornstalks in the background, on May 7.**

Friends from the surrounding area came and went while we chatted about her life transformation, as did squeaking baby chicks and kittens. When we asked her what else she might need, she didn't hesitate: a goat.



**Antonine with her new goat, Bevvie, on May 8, 2017.**

When Jennifer and Emily Otieno of KELIN delivered a pregnant doe the next day, Antonine shared her simple but profound philosophy – with a characteristically comical twist: “A goat is better than tea. Because you just drink the tea and piss it away!”

Although it can be difficult to acquire livestock, a great source of financial security, land access and ownership certainly helps. Many local farmers – including Antonine – belong to a farmers’ cooperative that provides small loans that can help people like her get on their feet.

## Milka Aoko, New Homeowner



**Milka with her children in front of her partially-built new home. Construction began on May 6 and is now completed.**

We picked Milka up at a meeting point the following day near the closest town market and she guided us to her land. As we wound our way by foot through the bush, she got turned around and said, “Where is my home? Ah yes, it’s down there,” she pointed. She stopped and grinned from ear to ear “Dalana,” she said, which means “my home” in the local Luo language. “That’s the first time I’ve said that,” she beamed.

When Milka’s husband died, one of her brothers-in-law wanted to ‘cleanse’ her through sex and take her on as his wife. This cultural practice has played a part in fueling the HIV crisis in the region. When Milka refused, the brothers- and father-in-law forced her off the land and tore down her house.

Elder Judith, profiled below, mediated Milka’s case, convincing her in-laws to let Milka return to the land. Judith told me that after Milka’s husband died and her house was destroyed, she was left no choice but to exchange sex for fish caught by fisherman on Lake Victoria in order to feed her children and pay the rent in a tiny stall near the beach where fishermen come and go.

This new house will help her and her children lead a much healthier, immensely safer and more prosperous life.

## The Mother-in-law



**Milka's mother-in-law, pictured here,** was the first to greet Jennifer when she and Emily Otieno of KELIN eventually found her Milka's house. "I'm very happy and I'm remorseful about what happened but I had no control and had nothing to do with my sons sending her away," she said. "I am happy with my daughter-in-law here and with my grandchildren close by."

This sentiment was echoed on several of my visits. I met one in-law or another during most of my meetings and the mothers-in-law were eager to show that they were living at peace with their late sons' wives.

Also, they said, having Milka back home is a win-win for both women. The mother-in-law now looks after the younger children, allowing Milka to focus on healthy forms of work. And the older children run errands for their grandmother who is getting on in years.

The Elders





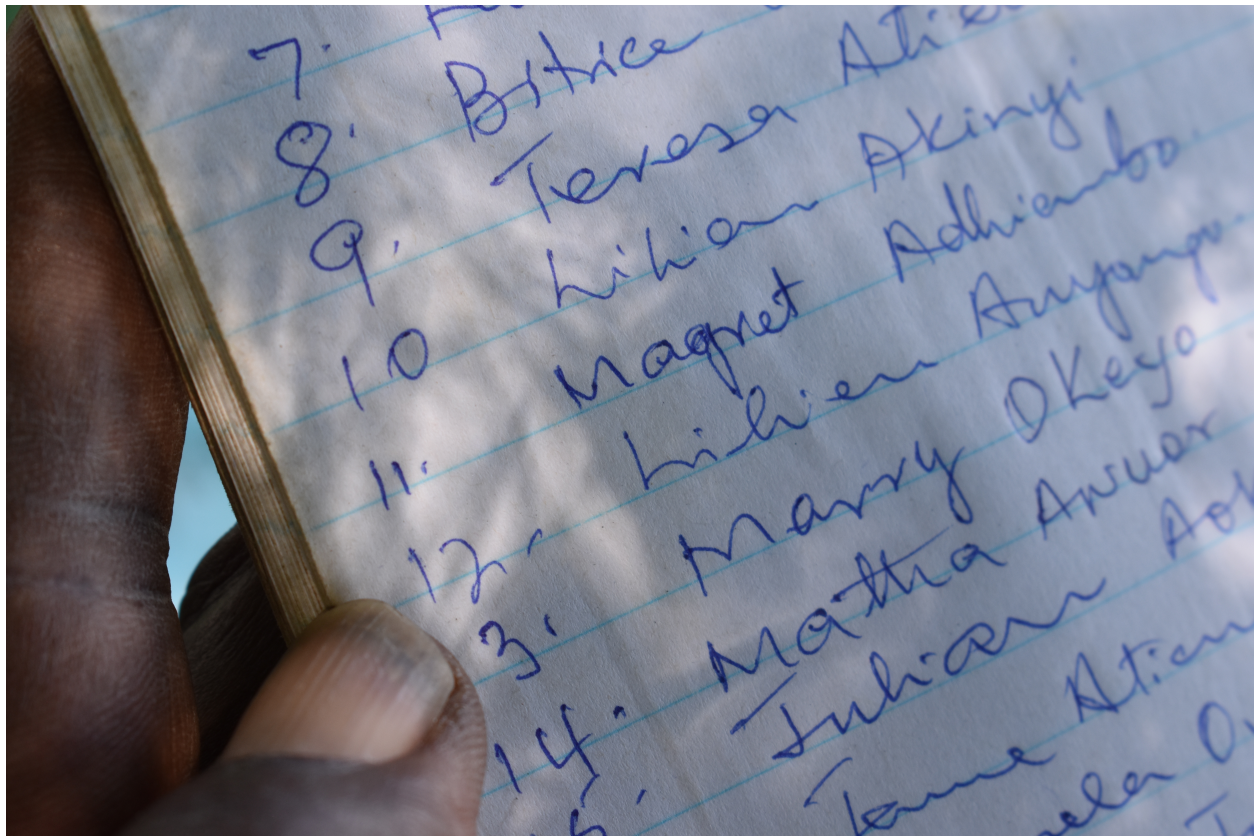


**Previous page:** Elder Judith – one of the few women elders – with her proud husband in their home on May 7, 2017, Homa Bay County, Kenya.

**This page:** Elder Jacob shows Jennifer a list of names of widows who need houses on May 8, 2017, in Kisumu County, Kenya.

Elders Judith and Jacob are just two of several respected seniors in the region who mediate all sorts of local disputes. KELIN, understanding the importance of their role in society, began training them on widows' land and property rights several years ago.

The elders explain to the in-laws why their behavior was wrong, that it goes against their culture and traditions, and that the country's bill of rights protects widows' rights to inherit their husbands' land. They explain the benefits of having their grandchildren on the land, dispelling superstitions about HIV/AIDS and clarifying misunderstandings about their own cultural traditions. It isn't always easy; it takes several meetings until the in-laws soften and change their position. Judith said that in-laws sometimes show up with pangas – machetes – at first meetings. But, she said, "We still press on and eventually convince them."



**Jacob's List.** The elders told me that through their work, communities in general are becoming more aware of widows' land rights and they have seen a drop in evictions. But for now, as I learned on the ground, there are so many widows and their children who still need homes.

## Beatrice Auma, New Homeowner



**Beatrice in front of the rented room she had lived in with her five children for many years, on May 8, 2017.**

Beatrice said that she and her husband had a good, peaceful life before he passed away in 2009 from an AIDS-related illness. They lived in a house and were farmers who grew corn that they sold in the market.

“We lived so well until he got sick. After, I could no longer grow and sell maize because my in-laws took everything from me claiming I gave him HIV and AIDS. They took the stock, the tools, everything,” she explained. “My life changed drastically, my kids could not go to school. Sometimes I could find work, a day here or there, in the fields. But when I did it was less than

100 shillings a day (about \$1), so I had to pull my firstborn from school to work with me, but 200 shillings was still not really enough to get by.”

The rented room they lived in cost about \$10 a month – an exorbitant amount for a landless single mother supporting five children. We bought several of the widows who are still awaiting houses one grocery bag-worth of basic goods – cooking oil, a small sack of sugar, fruit juice, soap, bread, among other items – and it cost about \$15-20. Doing the math, the widows simply can’t get by without taking drastic measures like pulling their kids from school or engaging in risky behavior to support them.



**Beatrice in front of her partially-built new home. Construction began on May 6, 2017 and was completed shortly after this photograph was taken on May 8.**

“I’m still in shock, I can’t believe that I actually have a home,” Beatrice told Jennifer after trekking through the bush to arrive at her new house.

“When I first broke the news to my kids they were shouting and running all over town saying, ‘finally we are leaving you guys! We finally have a home!’”

She said that the whole community was happy for them and pitched in for the construction; it had not yet been completed as they were waiting for us to arrive to make the walls – but we were waylaid at Risper’s construction site due to a rainstorm that churned the dirt roads into thick, muddy pulp.

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### **Liliane Agutu, New Homeowner**



**Liliane with her young daughter in front of her new home in Homa Bay County, Kenya. It was built two days prior on May 5, 2017.**

Liliane’s husband died in 2012. Soon after, her in-laws told her they wanted her to leave. One day she came home from selling tomatoes in the market and found all her clothes and her children outside. “Where am I going to go?” she asked. They shunned her, accusing her of killing their son and brother. They demolished her house and sold her belongings.

She was able to stay with a friend for a couple of weeks until she could find a small stall to rent in the market as shelter for her and her children. It cost nearly \$20 per month. She continued selling vegetables in the market but it was not enough to support them. Elder Judith, who mediated Liliane’s case, told me that she was fairly certain that, with no other options available, she had engaged in transactional sex to feed her children.

In 2014, a widow champion became aware of Liliane’s plight and connected her with Judith who successfully finalized the mediation of her case last year. The in-laws allowed her to move back onto the land, sharing a small house with another family, but this was only a temporary solution. Now that she has her own house, Liliane said that she is looking forward to getting back to tilling the land and earning a living again, and is incredibly happy that her children now have a safe, secure place to grow up. She hopes that her sons will be doctors – and that her daughter never goes through the suffering that she has. Their chances are much greater now that they have a home of their own.

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## **Dorothy Adhiambo, New Homeowner**



**Dorothy in front of her what a market stall where she lived with her three children, on May 8, 2017 in Ombeyi town in the Muhoroni region of Kisumu County, Kenya.**

Jennifer met as many widows who still need homes that she could in the limited time she had on the ground in Kenya. Dorothy's situation appeared to be the most serious. She was living with her three children in a dark, sweltering space, maybe 6 by 10 feet in size. Basically, a prison cell.

The space, as you can see on the previous page, was a book stall once upon a time. Next to Dorothy's room is the town corn milling station. Every 30 minutes from dawn until late at night, a generator kicks on to power the mill. It sounds and feels like a helicopter is taking off in the room, which is positioned on a large dirt square that is rimmed with sagging market stalls and saloons with men sitting out front. We saw no other women. Dorothy has no bathroom facilities other than a municipal bathroom that is a distance away and that is neither safe nor hygienic. She has managed to keep her oldest son, Godfrey, in school. We meet him toward the end of our meeting. He was bold blue shorts and a crisp white button-up shirt, the school uniform that parents must buy. He says he wants to be a pilot one day.

Dorothy couldn't look at us in they eye as she recounted her story – she was too upset. It became clear she was doing everything in her power not to break down in tears. So, we kept the conversation as brief as possible. But the thread of her story is similar to the others' I met.

Life was good, as was her relationship with her in-laws, when her husband was alive. They grew corn, beans and cow peas. They had a small business selling their crops in the market and sold fish from Lake Victoria. Everything fell apart when her husband died from an AIDS-related illness.

One of the brothers-in-law wanted to 'cleanse' and 'inherit' her but she refused. So, they chased her from the land and flattened her house. She rented the space in the market, and has been working for years in nearby rice fields when work is available but it isn't enough to live on. A widow champion I met shortly after, who knows Dorothy well, told me that she had almost certainly been forced to engage in transactional sex to survive.

"Now it's very difficult. I don't even have time for my children because I have work 24 hours to fend for them," she whispered.

"I pray I can manage to educate my children but first of all I'm really praying for a home. I want a place to call home, somewhere I can go home in the evening after day of working hard, somewhere I can plant trees, somewhere I can have chickens and somewhere the children can call home."



**There's no place like home. Dorothy and her children in front of their new house.**

Thanks to a few generous donations that came in shortly before our trip, we had enough funds to build one more house. After visiting Dorothy, it was clear that she was in the most urgent need. The construction of Dorothy's house began on June 20, 2017 and was completed 5 days later. This photograph was taken and sent by our friends at KELIN who oversaw the construction. They tell us she is happy, healthy, and extremely grateful for the support.