

Profiles of Widows Who Still Need Homes Built

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Emily Otieno of the nonprofit, KELIN, who navigated muddy stretches near Lake Victoria on crutches to help Jennifer get these stories in May.

The Kenyan constitution protects women’s right to inherit land when their husbands die. However, in practice, this right is not always realized and there is little enforcement, especially in rural areas like these. The six widows profiled here have all won back their land rights thanks to the efforts of KELIN – but they don’t have the means to build a new home. They represent about 150 women in the region who are in a similar position: they all lost their husbands to HIV/AIDS; they were all unfairly blamed for the deaths by their in-laws; they were all chased with their children off of the land and their homes demolished; they’ve all struggled immensely to survive for years; they’ve all been helped by KELIN and the community elders they have trained to mediate their cases; they’re all now at peace with their in-laws as a result; and they all lack the funds needed to rebuild their homes – and rebuild their lives.



Alice is a young mother of four in the Nyando region of Kisumu County, Kenya, pictured here on May 8, 2017.

It is quite critical that we raise enough funds to build Alice a house at the earliest moment. She had been on our original list of women who needed homes but her in-laws only agreed to the construction if it took place after the summer harvest. Because there are so many other widows in immediate need, we invested those funds into building a house for Dorothy instead (see report on house beneficiaries). “I am in desperate need of a house,” she told Jennifer. “But all I want is peace with my in-laws so I will be patient and wait, and pray that I will get a house soon.” She is currently staying in the empty house, pictured above, of one of her in-laws while the family is away, but will have nowhere to go when they return. Thanks to the mediation, she no longer has to pay rent and she can keep her kids in school for the time being. She currently works in nearby rice paddies, earning about \$1 a day. She hopes to eventually save enough money to start her own business selling food. A new home will provide her with the foundation and security she needs to do that.



Abisagi in the small kitchen room on her in-laws' land, about 6 by 9 feet, where she lives with her three daughters and a grandchild, pictured here, in the Seme region of Kisumu County, Kenya, on May 9, 2017.

The child's mother is Abisagi's 17-year-old daughter and was in school when we visited. She is in only in the 8th grade – Abisagi had to pull her out of school for several years because she could not afford to pay the fees. Instead, the money went toward paying rent. Prior to mediation, Abisagi lived with her daughters in the market center and were often 'taken away' by men, causing Abisagi great distress. She first heard about KELIN's program on a local radio program and after her case was mediated, her in-laws agreed to let she and her daughters temporarily move into the family's small, smoky kitchen house. She's not sure how much longer they can stay there. A house of their own would greatly improve their lot. It would increase chances that anyone who might be HIV-positive in the household stays on lifesaving anti-retroviral medication. Crucially, it would also help her daughters' stay in school – and stay healthy and safe.



Lillian, a 32-year-old mother of two, at the entry of the small market stall she is renting in the Seme region of Kisumu County, Kenya, on May 9, 2017.

When Lillian’s husband got sick and they learned that he was HIV positive, his brothers “became very wild,” Emily Otieno of KELIN told Jennifer. When he died shortly thereafter, Lillian was very traumatized and did not know what life held in store for her. It wasn’t good. The situation got worse. Her in-laws demanded that she explain to them why and how she infected their brother with HIV – not once considering maybe the reverse had occurred. Not long after, they physically dragged her away and demolished her house, accusing her of being a prostitute and a witch. Like both Abisagi and Alice, she heard about KELIN and the work they were doing to help widows like her, on a local radio talk show program. After four years of extreme uncertainty and hardship, KELIN community elders successfully mediated the dispute and she is now at peace with her in-laws. They have agreed to let her back on the land – which is rightfully hers by Kenyan law, as is the case for all the other widows – but she does not have the funds to build her house.



Eunice and her mother-in-law on May 9, 2017 in Kisumu County, Kenya.

Eunice lost her husband to AIDS just one year or so after marriage. Her two daughters (she was pregnant with the second when her husband died) came home from school shortly after this photograph was taken. One wants to be a doctor, the other a lawyer. Many barriers must be overcome to reach their goals, but at least one will be removed if they have a home to call their own: “My main challenge is affording both rent and school fees. With a house, I can channel all of my work into making sure they stay in school,” she said.



Sarah in the Seme region of Kisumu County, Kenya, on May 9, 2017.

Sarah's story is a bit different than the others. Polygamy is not uncommon in this part of Kenya, and Sarah was the second wife to her late husband. When he died of what she believes were AIDS, everyone blamed her for infecting him because she was the second wife. The first wife as well as her in-laws violently removed (she showed us the scars on her leg) Sarah and her four children from the land where she used to live well as a farmer. She has been living on and off with eight people, including children and grandchildren, in this market stall since 2005.



Mary, pictured in front of the kitchen house where she is currently living in the Nyando region of Kisumu County, Kenya, on May 9, 2017.

When Jennifer asked Mary about the circumstances of her husband's death, she said, "He died of *that* disease." Emily prodded her further. "Which disease?"

"The big one," Mary answered, reluctant to answer, as HIV/AIDS is still stigmatized despite its pervasiveness. The Kisumu region of Kenya has one of the highest prevalence rates in the world at around 20 percent of the population.

After her husband died and her house was destroyed, Mary lived in a market stall with her children for 15 years. Her case was successfully mediated in 2014 and her in-laws have allowed her to temporarily stay in this kitchen where she now lives with her 12-year-old daughter. Her two teenagers are living elsewhere as there is no space. Although her health is suffering from the smoke inhalation, Mary remains strong-willed and hopeful: she calls Emily almost every day to see when she will get a house. She is determined to bring her children together once again, to keep them in school and to give them a better chance in life.