Hope for widow 22 years after being disinheritged

The ever smiling and joyful Consolata Otieno portrays anything but the hardship she has faced in her life. The 48-year-old mother of two beautiful daughters, Ida and Stacey, met the love of her life in the early 1990s. He asked for her hand in marriage and they began their life together. Little did she know that their marital bliss would be short lived.

After a short illness, her husband died in 1993. It was a life of sadness which became more frustrating with his demise. Her co-wife took away all her household belongings from their house in Miwani. “Whoever killed your husband will kill you,” she told Consolata. The co-wife did not think she would live to see the next three months.

Neglected and full of despair, Consolata pondered on her next move. Her health condition was deteriorating very fast; as fast as despair threatened to rob her off her will to live and do right by her daughters.

This prompted her to move back to her mother’s house. Her mother encouraged her that God would open a way. She gave her bedsheets, a blanket, spoons, and a ladle to start a new chapter in life and urged her not to pursue the items taken away from her.

Consolata worked in Nyamrerwa selling Panadol painkiller tablets and helping women who had sick children like Dorothy, a fellow widow. This kept her going for 22 years. Life at the market centre was hard. Men would come and try to talk her into relationships or call them names. Stacey, her youngest daughter, would tell them off.

In 2005, Consolata was constantly ill. She did not understand what caused the frequent ailments. A friend of hers advised her to go for a HIV test. She went for the test in February 2005 and the results were positive. She was taken aback and as a result of self-stigma and being in a state of denial, she was not put on care at that time. As a result, her health deteriorated fast. She was constantly in and out of the hospital until when she was put on anti-retroviral therapy (ART), four months after several other tests were conducted at the Kisumu County Referral Hospital. With the support of her friend and counselling at the hospital, she has adhered to her treatment regimen to date and has enjoyed a healthy life, raising her daughters.

In 2009, Consolata learned about KELIN during a community outreach in Masogo, Muhoroni Constituency. At the time, a KELIN volunteer, the late Ruth Odhiambo, was addressing the meeting. She mentioned that KELIN and the elders work to protect widows and orphans from property disinheritance. Ruth then recorded Consolata’s case which was later referred to elder Felix Okal and Elder John Odingo through KELIN.

The two elders initiated the mediation process in 2012. Mediation is an alternative dispute resolution mechanism recognised by the Constitution of Kenya. This is aimed at facilitating access to justice by helping to resolve family disputes and bringing amicable reconciliation. The elders
called her in-laws and their grandfather to a meeting to discuss what had transpired.

The mediation took place successfully, despite various attempts by the co-wife to prevent the meeting from taking place. She recalls how Elder Odingo spoke very well and the family appreciated.

Later on, the Assistant Chief from her home location called her. He had been compromised and said they did not want anything to do with the organisation and her; that she should get out of site. He claimed the organisation was snatching land from people.

“I cried and later called Elder Odingo. It turns out he had gone to the District Officer (D.O) to report what happened. The D.O summoned the Assistant Chief and questioned him for not helping me, for all those 22 years and for not involving the D.O in the discussions,” Consolata narrated.

After Elder Odingo intervened, the D.O assumed responsibility over my case. He came and witnessed the construction of Consolata’s house with support from KELIN.

“From the time KELIN brought me home I have been very happy. I had no more frustrations. Six months later, OGRA Foundation called me about a nursing job. I went and observed for two weeks how the work was done, from managing delivery records, to handling children and drips. They saw I could manage all the tasks and they gave me a permanent job. This has been sustaining our needs ever since,” Consolata recalls.

The responsibility of a widow champion is very big, she says. As a member and secretary of the KELIN Muhoroni Widow Support Group Muhoroni, she is constantly looking out to help other widows at the market centre. Her home is far from Ombeyi, where she works as a nurse but she remains determined to make a difference in that location. The community is fond of her and they call her NyarGem, as she hails from Gem, in Siaya County. “If NyarGem is at the hospital, I will be helped,” is a common observation in the community.

Challenges still abound in the quest to secure property right for widows. The processes at the local land management structures are disheartening with long queues, costly services at KES 500 to conduct a land search, distant lands offices that cause villagers to bear a high cost of transportation. The approach and language used is also difficult for most people to understand. Consolata reckons it is a high price to pay to secure one’s land title deed.

In her opinion, the government should subsidise the costs incurred in the processes of securing land rights and scale down the land structures offices to be closer to the communities to increase accessibility. This will help widows secure their constitutionally guaranteed land rights easily, empower them economically and thus secure their livelihoods and that of their children.

“I use my life experiences to advise my daughters. My eldest decided to get married. I urged her to have a good relationship with her husband and ensure they have a marriage certificate and both their names appear in the title deed or any property deed, to avoid going through an experience like mine. My daughters appreciate me for educating them,” says Consolata.

Her multi-talented youngest daughter wants to be a clinical officer. She tells Consolata that she is no hurry to get married as she wants to study and work hard in order to lift her mother up to live free of poverty.