Losing her husband was the most difficult experience for 37-year-old Dorothy Oito. At first, it was the grief that accompanies loss, and then it rapidly developed into something different and wild, and from the most unexpected quarters. Family! Her family, the people she expected to draw comfort from in her difficult moments instead drew daggers ready to rip apart her future and the future of her little children.

Dorothy who hails from Kisumu County, Muhoroni sub-county, Ombeyi centre, Ramula location was just beginning to come to terms with her loss when the rug was pulled from under her feet. She had failed to spot the warning signs. Immediately after the burial, endlessly she found herself at the centre of baseless conflicts with her in-laws. She woke up to humiliating insults every morning, sometimes even in the presence of her children.

One morning at the height of conflict, Dorothy was ordered to vacate her matrimonial home. The home, which was at the time in a dilapidated state, was the last place she expected to be kicked out of. Hers was a simple house, one suffering from cracked walls, a leaking roof and a near-collapse state. It wasn’t much, but it was everything for her. Often when it rained, she would cover the leaks with polythene bags to prevent the house from flooding. Yet even with this level of deprivation, here she was still being evicted. The only source of peace at the home was her father-in-law who opted to stay out of the wrangles; but this wasn’t enough. He was outnumbered.

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STORIES OF CHANGE

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This was something that she was not ready for, for other reasons but primarily because her three children were very young and she desired the best environment for their upbringing.

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When pressure imploded, she finally made the decision to leave and rent a small house at the nearby Ombeyi shopping centre where she began a new life with her children. The children continued their schooling at Ombeyi Primary School, a public school which was reasonably affordable. Even as this move solved her immediate hurdles, it introduced a new set of problems. The new house was next to a noisy maize milling premise. This made it difficult for her children to study. They had to wait late into the night for the business to close so that they do their homework. Additionally, the smoke from the miller also affected the children. The alternative was for them to study from their friends’ homes which was a more intricate option as it exposed them to security risks whenever they came back home at night.
It is while here that she made her first contact with KELIN. KELIN was running the Women Land and Property Rights programme and one of the early beneficiaries of the programme was Consolata Otieno. She was serving as a widow champion and the secretary of KELIN Muhoroni Widow Support Group. As she fraternised in her new community, Dorothy met Consolata who had through the widow support group been tipped about the case involving the former. They took her details and channeled the case to KELIN for intervention.

The Luo Council of Elders, an intermediary endorsed by KELIN, from Kisumu County mediated the case successfully. A resolution was arrived at with elders Eunice and Jacob Oliech as the chief mediators. They opted for diplomacy to bring the relatives close together to discuss the matter. The in-laws agreed with the goal of the elders which to everyone’s understanding was to establish peace and protect the welfare of the children. For posterity, reference was adduced to the legal position of the matter. They were consequently made to understand that the law protects the rights of widows to inherit from their deceased spouses, to be able to educate and take care of the children. The parties reconciled and Dorothy was given back the half acre land that belonged to her husband. She, however, had to go back and live at the market centre since she did not have money to build a house. Her new friend Consolata continued to pay her numerous visits to encourage her. “I do not know where I would be without her wise counsel,” Dorothy remarks.

Two years later KELIN with support from well-wishers was fundraising for the construction of houses for the most vulnerable widows, through the GoFundMe platform. As a matter of follow-up, the organisation retraced to Ombeyi Market and paid Dorothy a visit to assess her living conditions. The family of five lived in a small shack. Their bedding was a pile of boards which spoke to how dire their situation was. There was no dignity around her, not in her home or at her community. In fact, people often called her a prostitute and men would poke her to see if they could engage her in sexual transactions. It was not a good place to raise her children. Consolata would encourage her to stand her ground and do casual jobs to provide for the children.

Through KELIN, Dorothy learnt a lot, especially on the empowerment of widows. A lot of widows now look up to her for counsel. She now understands and talks about the need to speak and stand for oneself, and to advocate for one’s rights. The DREAMS Project, another project implemented by KELIN in the county, has also taught her how to take care of her children, how to be there for them and guide them in their day to day lives. Through that, her children are growing up with proper discipline. In retrospect, Dorothy thinks it is not fair that men and women do not traditionally have equal rights to land. When the husband dies, the widow is left very vulnerable as she has no say over the land. She strongly feels towards and advocates for the importance of helping widows acquire title deeds to secure their land rights and the future of their children.