

FEATURES



Aids trail... Armed with Sh500 notes and a vow not to die alone, a man set out on a sex spree. Before he died, he asked for a paper and pen and wrote down 100 names of women who he had had sex with. The note read: "Behold these women will also die like me!"

By KWAMBOKA OYARO

Mission to kill...

They are known. They infect people with Aids maliciously, others rape virgins in cleansing rituals and leave an Aids trail... Why are they allowed to walk scot free? For how long shall we watch helplessly?

In a dilapidated hut at the Madiany Beach in Uyoma, Bondo District, a woman stretches herself on a mat weakly munching a dried *mbuta*, hoping to be stronger tomorrow and live more days and see more men before she finally succumbs to the Aids scourge.

She came to the beach two years ago after her husband died of Aids. Many men weighed down by poverty have also come to the beach in search of a livelihood for their families back home and have found themselves in her warm arms, forgetting the mission they came to accomplish.

A few metres away, a *boda boda* strapping a coffin on its rear is being pushed slowly to its destination - the burial ground of another person who has died of Aids. In the evening, just as it has been for many evenings prior to the burial, youth dance and make merry ensuring the scourge reaps more each month. During funerals, children escape the watchful eyes of their parents as this time for mourning and the daily routines are forgotten.

Tradition and custom subjects widows to search for inheritors, for if they are not inherited after their husbands die, they remain unclean and are not allowed to socialise. To them, getting inherited overrides the fear for Aids. Professional inheritors have taken advantage of this state of affairs and readily come to the desperate widows' aid by inheriting them. These inheritors are usually HIV positive and they know it.

"After a 'cleansing' ritual, the professional mourners move to another village to cleanse another widow and in the process leave a trail of death," says Okumu, a Bondo resident.

In Busia, the story is the same. Mary Makokha tells a heart rending incident where a woman whose husband had died of Aids forced her mad brother in law to sleep with her so that she is cleansed.

"The custom makes a widow who is not inherited an outcast and she can't mix with other

people. This makes them take any man willing to inherit them, whether he has Aids or not, as long as they are cleansed at the end of the day... says Mary who educates her community facts about Aids

In Kisii District, the story is known of this man who quit his job because he was HIV positive. Armed with plenty of money, in Sh500 notes and a vow not to die alone, he set out on a sex spree. In the village, Sh500 is a lot of money and those willing to get that amount were numerous. Before he died, he asked for a paper and pen and wrote down 100 names of women who he had had sex with. The note read: "Behold these women will also die like me!" This sent panic waves in the village as deaths were avoided like the plague. In Nakuru, an unfaithful husband slept with the housegirl who in turn slept with the man's 11-year-old son. The man, maid and son are now dead and the wife is counting her days. She will leave behind two orphans.

In Nairobi, a nurse is determined to infect as many men as possible. Ten years ago, she was diagnosed with HIV and swore to avenge. She was heard saying: "Wasn't I young and innocent when I was infected by my boyfriend? Don't men and women deserve to pay for what has happened to me? Why not, my boyfriend must have gotten the infection from a woman and his mother is a woman! With this supposed justification, she set out to see

them suffer for 'causing' her state of health. Though the boyfriend died two years later, she is strong and she looks just like any other girl. A colleague says of her:

She is beautiful, talkative, smart and endearing. Many men find her irresistible. One day I told a friend who was interested in her about her state of health but he shunned my advice saying I wanted to discourage him so that I can have her instead. I was bitter because I knew he was going to die and there was nothing I would do to prevent the wave of death that was approaching." The friend was buried last June, 11 months after knowing her. But he is not the only one who has been trapped by her beauty charm.

"A married man started an affair with her last year. The man has already lost a child born four months ago and the wife is sickly and frail. That is not mentioning the many men I know who have spent with her."

In newspaper pages, stories of men with Aids raping minors abound. The cases are rampant because they also do not want to die alone but with others, even the innocent.

Can this tide of death be curbed? Why are these people who are known to spread Aids intentionally left scot-free? When will the government step in to protect her people and stop this Aids trail? What does the future hold for us when an HIV-positive man rapes a woman and is acquitted because of lack of

evidence or when he is imprisoned for only two years? What happened to the sessional paper on Aids tabled in Parliament in 1997?

Justice Lady Owuor of the Appeal Court recently said in Chemilil that although many people had called for the government to take legal action on those who deliberately infect others with Aids, it was difficult to establish malice or bad faith in such a case.

"It is very difficult to ascertain any preconceived intention when HIV/Aids is passed from one person to another. One cannot be guilty of an offence unless they are proved to have had the intention of doing it."

But what happens in a case where relatives and friends know that someone is intentionally doing it by the death trail he leaves?

To address this sensitive issue, volunteers in Madiany have come together to create awareness among the people who are prone to fall prey to the whims of the predators (people intentionally spreading Aids).

Volunteer Sarah Ayot, a teacher, says they show people films of true life experiences of those who have died of Aids.

"Another day we showed a video in which people with Aids confessed. After the show that left many with wet eyes, I asked what they thought of the video and they quoted the Luo saying *Dhiang' tho gi lum e dhoge* (a bull dies with grass in its mouth). But this has not discouraged us from giving them facts about

There are many people who watch their relatives marrying or being married by HIV positive people but they remain silent because they do not know what to do. If there was a law in place, maybe they would report such people to the police and lives could be saved.

"I have a cousin who was diagnosed HIV positive in 1994. He is of bad reputation and hops from one woman to another. I have seen him with five women so far and he calls them wives. Two have already died. The other day he came home with a young girl who had the symptoms associated with Aids and I felt so sorry for her. That is all I did because what else could I do?"

Joseph Ojwang' says the government must act now to save people from falling into the traps of the marauders.

"They are worse than murderers because the kind of death they inflict on people is slow and painful. They should be sentenced to death," says Joseph who has lost some friends to the callousness of the Aids trail.

A spokesperson of National Aids and STD Control Programme (NASCO) says these people have given the organisation a hard time in its effort to control the spread of the virus. The people doing this sometimes become defiant and continue despite undertaking counselling sessions.

"Such people should be arrested to prevent them from spreading the virus to more people," he says.

The Sessional Paper on Aids states: "In order to overcome these challenges there is need for a strong political commitment at the highest level."

However, there is also need for education to sensitise the society to accept people with Aids.

Many people living with HIV/Aids are at risk of infecting their partners because of stigma associated with the disease, according to experts at the International Conference on Aids and STDs in Africa which ended in Lusaka last month. Stigma discourages the infected and affected — people with HIV and their families — from seeking counselling. When segregated they go underground and become more dangerous than the virus itself.

Aids."

And lab technician Juma has taken it upon himself to advise people who test positive that it is not beneficial to infect other people.

"But after talking to one man who tested positive I saw him a few days later with a girl I knew. I was so scared for her that I decided to advise her on the advantage of both of them being tested before marrying. Of course I didn't mention the health status of the man. Then she said to me: '*Juma, maisha ya siku hizi ni bahati ukipata mtu ambaye hana ukimwi*. (You will be lucky if you meet somebody who is not suffering from Aids.) Anyway, thanks for the advice.' That was the last time I saw her alive. The next time she was in the papers' obituary pages."

Ms Ayot says that the culture of her people makes them reckless in issues like wife inheritance even when it is obvious the man died of Aids. "For Aids trail to be derailed, a complete attitude overhaul is required but if the people remain deeply rooted in this culture, then it will take a long time before total change is realized and by that time many people will have perished."

"In Bondo, 30 per cent of the population is HIV positive. As a community, it is good to be concerned with the lifestyles of our neighbours so that a few months later we don't find that we are staying in a graveyard, as the scourge wipes out more people every day. That is our concern now," she says.