Aids horror in city slum village

Only a slight tinge of wavering from his voice could have betrayed his inner suffering. But

he was otherwise calm and confident, his face was pleasant, perhaps too mature for his

age His story was as captivating as it was moving.

"My parents died in 1990," a humble-loo~ Wm:,am Owino ~ '

"I am the eldest and there are six other children, he added. m !1 sllDple tone.

His 8,u4ie~ce, participants of the~ Aids Orphan Survey Dissemmation Workshop held last

week, listened keenly.

He went on to tell of the parent-breadwinner

role into which fate has thrust him

despite his being' unemployed. "I had to

leave school but tried to get a job in vain."

To make ends meet he goes ·to Wakulima

market in the city everyday to buy oranges

for sale. He also sells some cigarettes for a

living.

-'At lunch time I have to be home to make

some lunch for my siblings." he added.

His troubles began soon after his parents'

death. The semi-permanent house his father

had built in the Kibera slums became a bone

of contention. An uncle tried to sell it soon

. after the parents died.

•. "My uncle tried to chase us away, but a

• chief in Kibera helped us out."

His uncle's machinations apparently started

while his mother's body was still in the

mortuary. The mother died a month after

the father.

"After we buried my mother, he left us in

the village in western Kenya with an old

grandmother," he added.

But they had to come back to the city:

since the children needed to go back to

school.

At this time Owino had no idea about the

cause of his parents' deaths. It was when he

took his sickly brother to the doctor who had

been treating them that he learnt what he

had least suspected. They had died of Aids.

"I just accepted the tragedy and the new

responsibility," says Owino.

Good Samaritans have come to his aid

including a Kibera nurse/nutritionist and

counsellor, Mrs Florence Ndung'u who goes

to see them every so often, as well as the

local chief. "They have been helpful and I

have managed to add an extra room to the house that my father built."

. An non-govermental organisation Crisco'

'Orphans are

stigmatised

because of .

what their parents'

have died of

*Utumishi kwa Wote* (service for all).has provided the children with school uniform.

But the problem is of meeting of the daily.

needs of six children (the youngest 18 seven)

is no doubt far more than he can manage.

, Owino and his six siblings are some of the

many Aids orphans in this country, whose

plight is beyond description but who may

not have anyone to turn to ..

Indeed unlike in neighbouring countries -

Uganda and parts of Tanzania where Aids is

known to have wiped out whole villages leaving

various children desperate - the problem

in Kenya seems not to have been well registered.

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A few surveys being conducted have, however, given chilling indications of the seriousness of the problem ....

florence Ndung'u, the nurse/nutritionist and counsellor who has been coordinating

health activities in the Kibera slum, says

that at the moment she has been handling 50

HIV positive mothers in the slum.

"So far we have 20 Aids orphans, 13 of

whom are being taken care of by their relatives.

But Owino and his siblings do not have.

good relatives to turn to," she says.

'Florence says that last year, four mothers

in the slum died of Aids and "as I speak

today two babies have been found HIV positive".

A baseline survey carried out by

members of Kenya Women's Medical

Association in Laini Saba, Kibera,

revealed that two out of the 37 patients died

of Aids while seven others were suspected to

have died of the disease because of

contracting tuberculosis and other Aids-related

disease ,leaving behind 81 orphans.

"They may be transported to their rural

homes, they may go into the streets or they

may be infected with the disease," Dr Jane

Muita, one of the researchers said.

Others drop out of school and hardly ever

receive health services or counselling.

One fifth (or 20 per cent) of these children,

were found to be under the care of grand

parents. ,

The survey also found out that some of

the relatives taking care of the orphans were

unemployed or doing some unskilled jobs,

hence they are unable to adequately take

care of the children. '

"In some cases where a family had taken

up orphans, a two bed-roomed house catered

for up to 17 members," Dr Muita says.'

But Aids orphans are also likely to be

stigmatised because of what their parents

died of.

"A mother infected with HIV may be

ostracized or rejected by the family; after her

death the stigma may cling to her orphaned

children even if there is no reason to assume

that any of them is infected," Vincent

O'reilly, a representative of the Unicef country

office told the workshop.

"A whole family may. suffer

discrimination." -

Health Minister Jeremiah Nyagah

emphasised the danger Aids was posing ~-

cause of its progreS8ive trend.

Citing some traditional practices which

help to spread the incurable disease,

, Mr Nyagah said a traditional practice

like that of planting a spear outside a house

so that the owner of the house (husband) can

go elsewhere, was very dangerous.

"The Aids orphan is a victim of circumstances

that he did not contribute to," he

said. .

"We must now ,more than ever consider the plight of 'Aids orphans. I am sure

people can help one or two more children. It

may not be easy, but never-the-Iess It must

be done.", Dr Elizabeth Ngugi, a community h

expert, called for serious approach I !e

problem. "We need to intensify programmes

on Aids awareness to diversify

against these victims at the community level

she appealed.

Dr Ngugi s nine-year survey on 1,501' Prostitutes

indicates that 800 orphans have been left behind by 200 prostitutes who *have died.*

of Aids over that period.

"The grandparents taking care of these- orphans

may soon die and these children, , will

lose a second home, causing another traumatic

experience," she said.

The study was based on prostitutes in

both the urban and rural setting.

A Unicef advisor's estimates on the disease’s

impact on children has revealed that

in the :to worst affected African countries.

between three and five million children will

be orphaned by Aids by the year 2001}.

"Of, this category, some have suggested that the Kenyan case load of orphans could,

in five years alone be 300,000," adds O'reilly.

Last year's estimates indicated that 6,319

Kenyans were suffering from the dreaded

disease and the reported total cummulative

figures of Aids cases in the country since

1984 stand at 21,475. The latest WHO figures indicate that

there will be 30 million HIV -positive

people in Africa, in the year 2000. Of

these 10 million will be children. There

are 10 million HIV people at the moment in ,

the continent.

The traditional family set up which made

every member of the society responsible for

'the other is no longer as functional. This

poses very specific danger to Aids orphans,

particularly those Viho are urbanised.

But all said and done, the reality of Aids

orphans will no doubt manifest itself broadly

in a very progressive manner. And until policies

are laid out and action taken, the crisis

may be unbearable.

Dr Ngugi calls for a quick survey to determine the status of Aids orphans. "The aftermath will affect the society's economic structure.

So should we wait until the problem is

overwhelming?" she asks.

William Owino (standing, right) with his

brothers and sisters and a health worker, Mrs

Florence Ndungu (seated, second right).

"The task of fending for my brothers and

sisters is. overwhelming."