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**They too need to be loved**

By ASUNTA WAGURA

One of the subjects that most people avoid when we discuss the setbacks that HIV has caused is the emotional void that widows have to live with.

I was reminded about this when I thought about my mother, and about some of things that happened to her after my father passed away. My mother was not widowed by HIV, but she faced challenges that are unique to most widows.

When I visited my mother with my friends to ask for her blessings, we talked about many things. I apologised to her because of many things that I had done wrong.

Today, I want to apologise to her for one more thing that I kept quiet about. When my father died, my siblings and I ganged up under my poorly informed leadership. We vowed that no man would ever step into our compound as our mum’s companion. We swore that no one would take dad’s place.

Any man who dared to visit was treated with hostility in order to discourage any future visits. We were determined to let everyone know that our dad was irreplaceable.

It was not until the Wambui-Mbugua story came up that I realised how mean we had been to our mother, ignoring all her emotional, psychological, and physical needs. No matter how much I loved her or our late dad, we could not have filled the void that had been left by my father’s death.

I now know better, having interacted with women who have been left by their husbands because of their HIV status, and widows who have lost their husbands to HIV-related complications.

Whenever I encourage my mother to get such a friend nowadays, my encouragement is laughed off. It’s now too late. The damage was done when we placed roadblocks in her path to emotional happiness.

Kudos to Wambui Otieno and Mbugua, who reminded us that widows, irrespective of their age, have needs too. Widows too have lives to lead, dreams to chase, happiness to pursue, and physical needs that need fulfilment.

Watching the Wambui-Mbugua story unfold, I was most enlightened.

In my line of work, I have come across widows whose courage has impressed me and made me realised that the challenges in my life are nothing.

The widows I come across have put their happiness on hold for the sake of their children. You will find them doing all sorts of menial chores, like laundering other people’s clothes and earning peanuts for all the backbreaking work. They do this so that they can feed and clothe their children.

I know of widows who have refused to be inherited and have, in the process, been disinherited by their in-laws. Yet, they have not allowed such drawbacks to cook their goose. Instead, they’ve taken all that life has given them and turned stumbling blocks into stepping stones.

Some of these women never went to school, but they are smart in ways that would put a university don to shame. When they stand up to share their experiences in forums hosted by the “learned”, their life stories become set books from which other people, those who are infected and affected by HIV, can learn.

And I know of widows who have not allowed their widowhood, HIV status, and what people say to deny them a chance to get back their groove. These strong ladies have taught me that it’s up to me, because I’m the one who is wearing the shoes and I’m the one who knows when factors like loneliness and needing male company, pinch like hell.

Before Richard came into my life, for a big chunk of it, I was a single mother, but still that can’t equal what my mother has been through. I now know that she had needs, and perhaps she still has them, needs that none of her children could fulfil.

If for one moment I had stopped looking at her as just a mother and seen her as a woman, a human being with unique needs, I would have thought twice before I opened my mouth to give her conditions.

I would have seen the wisdom in that Kiswahili adage that says that all cats, regardless of age, savour milk.

*This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother of three who tested HIV-positive 24 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with Aids (KENWA).*