LUCKING OUT, STRIKING OUT AND BAILING OUT

Who will water the

seeds of hope?

WHEN CATHERINE\* CALLED ME saying she wanted to see me because no one

understood her, I granted her audience. Catherine is a mother of two boys: a nineyear-

old who is HIV-positive, and an eight-year-old who is negative.

Coming from an underprivileged background, Catherine lucked out, or so she

thought, when she met a *matatu* driver.

“I sat in the front seat, and the driver was quick to strike up a conversation. Before

long, we were chatting like old buddies.”

As they say, “one thing led to another”. Soon, they were living as husband and

wife, despite her parents’ protestations.

At Kenwa (Kenya Network of Women with Aids), we’re keen on economically

empowering our members. Through seed money, we help underprivileged clients to

start income-generating activities (IGAs).

Our IGA programme has myriad challenges though. One is greenness. Most

clients who access seed capital don’t have the basic know-how to run sustainable

businesses.

The other one that comes quickly to mind is the usual suspect: HIV. When we

give our members seed capital, most have just recuperated from opportunistic

infections. Or, they’re caring for

loved ones living with HIV. Caught

between offering care and support

and minding a fledgling business,

the former always wins.

**No free rides**

Catherine’s husband was extremely

loving and kind… until she

announced that she was pregnant.

“Why are young girls so careless

nowadays, getting pregnant

anywhere and anyhow simply because

they’ve been offered a place

to stay?” the man raved.

Catherine was beaten and ordered

to pack and leave. Her parents

took the matter to the *wazee*,

and the man was fined Sh50,000

and ordered to keep his wife and

unborn child. He paid Sh20,000

and they went back home.

When she was three months

pregnant, Catherine started to

attend antenatal clinics. She was excited

about having her baby, even if

the timing had not been planned. After

a few visits, it was time to get the

results of her HIV test, which is mandatory in prenatal clinics. Everything had been

explained to her but still, “as far as I was concerned, I was very far from HIV”.

Catherine was shocked when the nurse-in-charge told her she was HIV-positive.

On breaking the news to her husband, he accused her of having known it prior to

their meeting.

“Why else did you go for the test?” he berated her. “It was so that you could

blame me, and I’m not going to take that.”

At week 28, Catherine was put on medication to prevent mother-to-child transmission

of HIV. She packed her things and returned to her parents’ home but she

never returned to the clinic. When the baby was born, he tested HIV-positive.

“After I shared this with my family members, they quickly sent me back to where

I had ‘collected it’. I returned to my husband and forced myself to stay as I took care

of my sickly son. And then I conceived again.”

Someone had misinformed her that she could not conceive while breastfeeding.

“My husband lost it. He expected me to ‘take care of things’ and not get pregnant

again. He sent me packing once more.

“I spent cold nights on the streets before someone referred me to Kenwa.”

**Three strikes**

We have settled Catherine in a small room. However, for the second time her grocery

business has flopped. I know where she’s coming from: when her son falls ill,

she abandons everything and solely focuses on him. That’s what mothers do.

I don’t know how to communicate this to those who fund us. At times, no matter

how determined a client is to succeed, things don’t always turn up trumps. Besides,

Kenwa’s economic empowerment policy is firm: you can’t be supported multiple

times if your business fails.

In fact, I’ve had to support Catherine from my own wallet for the second time.

She’s coming for a third helping, and I don’t know how to proceed.

This isn’t just about Catherine, though. It’s about us. Catherine is merely the human

face of issues facing millions of underprivileged Kenyan women.

This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother-of-three who tested HIV-positive

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