PLEASE DON’T CALL YOURSELF A SUFFERER

It’s wrong to use your HIV status to get freebies

Depending on donor aid, our organisation gives food and other forms of support to people living with HIV

who are in dire straits. This is an effort to help them regain their footing. Also, depending on the availability of funds, we give them seed money to start income-generating activities.

We realised that many of our members, most of whom are women, become sole breadwinners due to a

number of reasons. Some because their husbands become bedridden and cannot provide, or their spouses lose their jobs due to HIV-related complications, or they are widows and grandmothers caring for orphans and vulnerable children.

What is worse, some of these women have to endure the trauma of their in-laws taking all their property after their husbands die.

**Desperation**

This required urgent attention because our members were becoming destitute and desperate by the day.

Someone once said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. With time and experience, we found that our good intention was, in some cases, creating a dependency of sorts and turning us into enablers.

When I tested HIV-positive,

I could have done with some seed money. There were no employers out there — at least I never came across any

— who were prepared to give a job to an HIV-positive single mother. We had to be creative

and, like Hannibal said, “Find a way or make a way.”

Watching my friend Joe

Muriuki, who is one of the longest HIV survivors I know,

and others being sworn in as

members of the HIV/Aids Tribunal

the other day brought

back sad memories of yesteryears.

In the dark old days, there

was what you could call institutionalised

stigma. It was as

if PLWHs were deemed to be

unfit for anything save stigma

and discrimination.

**Positive change**

And the fact that I can now

be called for a job, locally and

internationally, because of my

HIV status just goes to show

that things can change. But

this can only happen if we do

our part.

“It’s up to you now,” I always

tell the members that we

give seed money to, “because

we can only support you to a

certain extent.”

Trust me, teaching folks

who were used to fish handouts

how to fish is one tough

assignment. I believe that one

of the things that is robbing

some PLWHs of their financial

independence is Aids. Nope,

not that Aids.

I am talking about Acquired

Immune Dependency Syndrome.

There are some who

see their HIV sero-positive

status as a meal ticket. They

refuse to work and instead let

the virus work for them.

Our community health

workers (CHWs) used to tell

me of some PLWHs who were

members of several HIV service

organisations.

“They are card-carrying

members of all these NGOs

and they know the days when

each organisation gives food

and will be there on time,

every time.”

Individuals like these give

PLWHs a bad name. I have,

multiple times, had to caution

our CHWs to guard against

giving seed money to the

same members. There is only

so much that we can do for

one person.

What disheartened me

was hearing reports from our

nurses about people who

were, literally, asking for it.

“We’ve had cases of some

people who are HIV-negative

begging us to say they are

HIV-positive just so they can

be put in our food support

programme.”

“These people don’t know

what they’re asking for,” I

said.

**We have a choice**

I am a firm believer that

work is ordained by God and

that it is a blessing. There are

days that I drag myself to the

office, even when I am feeling

unwell, because I know that

my line of work deals with

human beings. It touches on

matters of life and death.

Years ago, the HIV community

fought against being

called victims or sufferers. We

reasoned that those monikers

demeaned us and made

us look like we did not have

a choice. That is why it saddens

me to hear some of our

people who are able-bodied

calling themselves sufferers.

Through saying and doing,

I am trying to teach my children

that work is honourable

and rewarding. I know there

is a sub-culture in our country

of folks waiting for things to

happen. Sufferers, if you may.

Guys who wait for the government

to do. Or, tragically,

some lying that they are HIVpositive

so they can be given

things without sweating.

Today being Labour Day, it

has just occurred to me that

since I started my HIV work,

I have never gone on annual

leave.