A Maasai woman’s

sad experience

It was around lunch time when she arrived.

She was elegantly dressed, though one could

not miss the fact that she is Maasai, with her

statuesque legs. Since it was a meeting for

women living with HIV, I assumed that she

was a facilitator as we started shooting

the breeze. I introduced myself as Asunta.

Period. But my friend Mildred introduced

me “in full” as “Asunta wa Aids”.

“Leave this one alone. They think Aids

is my surname,” I told the guest. “When

I mention my name without mentioning

Aids, they think I’ve missed something

which ought to be included.

“Even Mildred has it, and she actually

got it in the early years when it was

still new,” I told the guest, adding,

“for us we are getting it

nowadays when it has been

duplicated and photocopied

and it has become a generic

version!”

**Aids as the common denominator**

“My name is Laisoi and

it has taken me three days

to travel for this meeting

because of transport problems. Also,

I couldn’t leave immediately I got the

invitation by word of mouth as I had to

wait for my husband to grant me permission

to come to Nairobi. I had

to give a good reason why I

wanted to come to Nairobi

… and I couldn’t

say I was coming

for a meeting

of HIVi

n f e c t e d

women.”

Laisoi lied

that since she is the

treasurer of her village

women’s group, she was coming

to Nairobi because someone wanted to

fund the group to start a bead handcraft

business. She lied to her husband that she

was coming to the city with other group

officials.

I was not done with her yet. I had told

her earlier that we who were in that meeting

were all HIV-infected, including the

facilitators. So I asked her: “What did you

come here for… or, let me be direct. Do you

have Aids?”

This is a blatant way of inquiring if

someone is HIV-infected. It implies the

whole magnitude of the disease and the

baggage it carries. Stigma. Discrimination.

Shame. Embarrassment. Social judgement.

You name it. The phrase “living with HIV”

is a politically correct phrase adopted far

much later. In the early days, we were simply

referred to as Aids victims or sufferers,

which denoted helplessness.

“Yes, I’m infected. I’ve been living with

HIV for almost nine years, but my husband

and co-wives have refused to be tested,”

Laisoi said.

“Now tell us how the virus got through

to you… through all those *shukas* and

*shangas*,” that is Mildred, joking even when

she is not supposed to. “Surely, has the virus

no shame that it can penetrate all those

*shukas*, bracelets, necklaces all the way to

Maasai land? I thought your culture and

distance safeguards you from contamination

from other uncultured people like

Asunta or Mildred.”

**Slave to customs**

Laisoi is wife number five of a 78-yearold

man. She was betrothed long before

she was born and her bride price paid.

She grew up knowing that she belonged

to him. “One time I ran away and joined

school, but after Class Eight I went home

and was forcefully carried to my husband’s.

My co-wives were assigned to stand guard

so that I could not escape. I couldn’t run

away again. I was already pregnant,” she

reveals.

“Whenever a good friend of

my husband’s came home

for dinner, I had to entertain

him overnight in

our matrimonial bed,

as demanded by our

customs. I’m not supposed

to express any

feelings or opinion

on this kind of arrangement

as it’s an

accepted practice,”

Laisoi adds. Mildred

interjects, to which

Laisoi replies in the affirmative:

“I’m sure those who enjoyed

always had a reason to pass

by again and again … late at

night, that is.”

It must have

been in one of

those occasions

that

she got

i n -

fecte

d

with HIV.

Before she

tested positive for

HIV, she had other sexually

transmitted diseases, which were treated

with herbs. She only sought medical help

if they persisted. Now she has to hide her

antiretroviral drugs.

**Voiceless women**

I asked her whether she could discuss

with her husband her HIV status and she

said she would not. She is the youngest

wife and only receives instructions and orders,

which sometimes come through the

eldest wife. The closest she comes to her

husband is during sexual intercourse. There

is no talking and sex is only for procreation

purposes. He is also the one who realises if

there is an STD and arranges for herbs or

medical treatment. This was an interesting

experience — one I had never heard about

before — but we never concluded as it was

already past lunch time.