

New Vision

Uganda: I Acquired HIV/Aids After My Mum Pushed Me Out of the House

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Life has been tough for Margaret Birungi of Kasubi in Kampala. Her life was thrown off balance after she separated with her parents.

Her mother, Robinah Nsubuga, had to raise her as a single parent. She engaged in prostitution to earn a living. As Birungi was growing up, her mother sent her away from home. That was the beginning of even more troubles.

Dysfunctional home

When Birungi was 14 years old, her father divorced her mother. Birungi and her younger sister, who was only three years, ended up in her mother's care. They rented a small room where a curtain divided the bedroom and the living room.

Because she had no job yet, she had to pay house rent and take care of her two children, Birungi's mother started bringing men into the house every evening. They would give her money after having sex with her.

Birungi says she was traumatised by that situation because she was a grown up girl and understood what was going on.

"I had not begun sleeping with men and felt bad whenever mummy brought men in the house," Birungi says.

Her mother's lifestyle took its toll on the young family. Her young sister died in a fire that gutted their house when their mother left a candle burning as she went to have fun with men.

"I woke up in the middle of the night when the house was on fire. My younger sister died right there because there was no one to help. I am lucky I managed to escape alive," she narrates with tears rolling down her face.

Thrown out

But her troubles were not over. Birungi believes her mother feared her regular customers would sleep with her. So when the girl turned 15, her mother threw her out of the house.

Birungi had not progressed much with education and she thought nobody would employ her. So she resorted to commercial sex on Kampala streets, just like her mother had done.

Birungi got pregnant and gave birth to a girl who, unfortunately, died at the age of two. She also later found out that she had HIV/AIDS.

This happened in the same year her mum chased her out of the house. She was just a frightened 15-year-old abandoned girl.

She cannot tell which man gave her the virus because many had sex with her.

"Knowing that I was HIV-positive added salt to my wound. I felt devastated and wished the ground could open and swallow me," says Birungi, adding that she found no reason to continue living since she had just lost her child and seemed to have lost her life as well.

Birungi says she gathered the broken pieces of herself when the doctor encouraged her to start on ARV (anti-retrovirals) and that they would help her live longer. He also urged her to feed well and avoid getting stressed.

She says at that time, her CD4 count was at 51, but when she started following the doctor's advice, it rose to over 200 within a year. A normal CD4 for an HIV infected person is said to be 500 CD4 cells in the same size drop of blood.

She is grateful to have turned 35, and given birth to another child who she says is now 16 years old and HIV-negative. The doctors advised her not to breastfeed the baby and was also put on treatment before delivery to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

Expert view

Dr. Stephen Watiti, an HIV/AIDS activist says sex workers are not able to negotiate for safe sex with their multiple partners. This is because the lack of institutional protection gives their customers undue power of impunity.

"If they were empowered to use condoms consistently, infections would have dropped," he argues.

New research published in the Lancet, an international medical journal, indicates that 37% of Ugandan sex workers are HIV-positive.

The new study by the public health strategies indicates that HIV infection rate in Uganda has risen from 6.4% in 2005 to 7.3% by 2012.

[See the topic on aegis.org](http://aegis.org)