

GROOTS Siaya



Siaya is located in the Western Province of Kenya, north of Kisumu and Lake Victoria. The population is primarily of the Luo tribe and make their living primarily through subsistence agriculture and small-scale husbandry. The Luo are polygamous and have traditionally practiced wife inheritance, in which a woman whose husband has died marries her brother-in-law. Although this practice grew as a means of supporting a woman and

her children, it is now a rapid and effective method of spreading HIV through a community. A woman who has been infected by her husband and then is forced to marry her brother-in-law often infects him, and he then spreads the virus to his other wives. These cultural practices combined with persistent poverty and malnutrition have left Siaya with an alarmingly high AIDS rate, estimated at 38%.

GROOTS Siaya was formed by four community women concerned about the severe poverty, malnutrition and disease prevalence in their area, particularly the rapid spread of HIV. They began by meeting together to talk about these issues and then began to provide informal

in-home care for some of their sick neighbors. In 1996, they became connected to GROOTS Kenya, and subsequently received training in home-based care. The women in the group passed their training on to others in their community through a workshop. There are currently 17 active members in GROOTS Siaya, providing home-



based care and sharing their meager resources with those in their community who are less well off than they are. Home-based care workers not only provide basic care for the sick, they also perform household chores, such as collecting firewood and they teach family members how to care for their sick relatives. These women are also addressing the root economic causes of AIDS by involving themselves in children's lives and advocating for children to stay in school.

One woman receiving care from GROOTS Siaya is Angel. She lives with her five children in a small housing compound with two other women and their children. The three women had been married to the same man, who passed away in 1998. He also had a fourth wife, who died shortly after he did. All three remaining wives, including Angel, are HIV positive. They do not know how many of their children are also infected. Angel's eyesight

has begun to deteriorate rapidly, increasing her dependence on the women who care for her. Although her extended family is aware of her condition, they do not offer her any assistance. Angel's home-based care worker visits her frequently, helping with household chores and providing counseling. Angel felt distraught and hopeless about her status until the women of GROOTS Siaya began to visit her. She now feels confident that she can live a healthy life and maintains a positive attitude, especially for the sake of her children.



Members of GROOTS Siaya, empowered by their experience as a part of the group, are beginning to have a large impact on their community. Eda has recently started a support group for women who are resisting the practice of wife inheritance. She and several members of her church have started a shelter for women who choose not to take part in the practice so that they do not need to fear being left homeless. Regina is the only group member in her village, but she has enrolled several orphans in her community in a feeding program, and also has managed to pay school fees for one orphan.