

Springs Ministry



Kisumu, the third largest city in Kenya, lies on the shores of Lake Victoria in the Nyanza Province. The dominant tribe here is Luo and cultural practices have proven especially harmful since the advent of the AIDS epidemic. 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 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. Stigma is also high among the Luo, as the symptoms of AIDS are often attributed to an ancient curse called *chira*.

One organization working to support women in Kisumu is Springs Ministry, a partner group which was founded by one woman, Margaret, who was concerned with the plight of widows and orphans in her area. Springs is focused on promoting self-help among widows and orphans.

The director of the group organizes conferences for widows to share their knowledge and morally support each other. The widows in the group have often taken the lead in caring for orphans in their communities. When they are able, Springs Ministry provides vocational training and school fees for orphans so that they will be able to care for



themselves. Many of the widows are also actively involved in halting wife inheritance, seeing it as a death sentence for many women in and around Kisumu. These widows are at the front line in the battle against HIV and the practices that spread the virus. Although many of them have very little, by banding together they are able to support each other and strengthen their communities. In order to care for some of the orphans who have been left without even extended families, Springs Ministry has founded an orphanage in the hills above Kisumu, called the Jehovah Shammah Restoration Centre. Some of the widows' groups donate food and clothing for the children who live there, who otherwise have very little.

One of the small member groups of Springs Ministry is St. Stephen's Widows Group. These women are playing a leading role in breaking harmful cultural practices from the ground up. They realize, as many people do, that one of the reasons HIV is spreading so quickly in Western Kenya is because of the dual practices of polygamy and wife inheritance. With this realization, these widows have formed a support group in order to fight the practice of wife inheritance by supporting new



widows to resist the practice. This is of course quite difficult as women, who are often dependent upon their husband's families for livelihoods, are subject to extreme pressure to give in to the practice. But because groups like St. Stephen's are forming such support groups and raising awareness about AIDS, more women are finding the strength to resist. They are seeing a cultural change, one family at a time.

Another member of Springs Ministry is the Orinde Widows' Group, located in the green hills above Kisumu and Lake Victoria. The members of the widows' group, which was originally founded for moral support and resource sharing for the widows, realized that many of them were caring for relatives and neighbors who were infected with HIV. Springs Ministry

arranged for the Orinde Widows to receive training in home-based care. The Orinde Widows' group is currently the only group in their community that is responding to AIDS. The group has 21 members who officially care for six people. Springs Ministry used to channel funds to this group in order for them to provide food and medicine to their patients, but since those funds have dried up, the widows primarily provide encouragement and prayers. When they have extra resources, the caregivers do share them with their neighbors. Although the Orinde widows sometimes feel discouraged because they have so little, they are encouraged by the appreciation they receive from the community. They have seen a reduction in stigma due in part to their efforts.

