

Even with stigma, I won't give up!

"I'm not ashamed to publicly state that I'm HIV positive. But sometimes, I regret my decision to go public," says 42-year old Mama Stephen. "At times, the stigma is so heavy, so demeaning and its just so....humiliating!" she adds, her face looking down.

Indeed, many women living positively with HIV are mortified about their status, especially if it's in the public domain. In rural areas, the scenario is even worse, with communities having little access to information about the cause of the disease.



Mama Stephen (center) chats with one of GEMINI's field officers: Stigma still remains a key obstacle in tackling HIV/Aids

"I have been told so many times that I should visit some witchdoctors to check me out," says the mother of five. "But what good will it do now? I knew the consequences of going public with my status. I know what my neighbors murmur about me. I know some of my friends are planning to eject me from the merry-go round. And I also know that some of my relatives want me out of the family land. But quitting is a word that I deleted from my dictionary!!"

Mama Stephen is one among tens of women participating in GEMINI's anti-stigma campaign that seeks to sensitize the community about HIV/Aids, ignite public debate and minimize the effects of stigma. "We have been able to open up discussion. What now remains is for the community to accept that HIV/Aids is not related with witchcraft," says Bernard Madegwa, a Project Officer at the Moi's Bridge field office.

One of GEMINI's approaches includes bringing together community gatekeepers in interactive sessions to educate them on the socio-economic aspects of HIV. We also facilitate high-profile public campaigns that foster acceptance of people living with HIV.

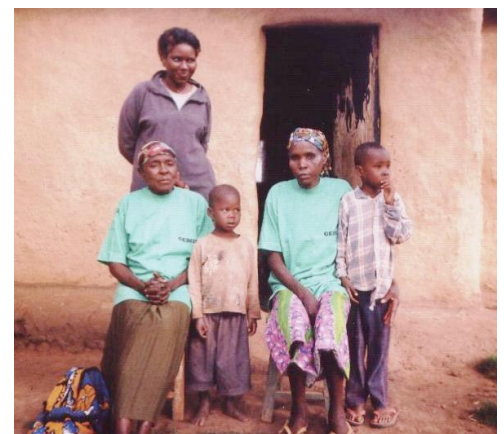
"This is bound to be a long journey. We have made the first tentative step. We now need to move to the next level," says Stella Amojong, GEMINI Director.

In the coming weeks, GEMINI hopes to embark on a series of campaigns that will increase awareness, reach out to vulnerable families and strengthen community safety nets.

We have been able to achieve all these with your support and as usual, we know your support will be instrumental in achieving these goals.

On behalf of the hundreds of rural families, kindly accept our sincere gratitude and we look forward to increased partnership from all of you.

Your comments always strengthen us. And for your donations, keep them coming in!!



Home visits by GEMINI staff increase self-worth among PLWHA. Here, a GEMINI volunteer, Emily (standing) visits Mama Stephen and other families living with HIV.