



Standing Against Stigma

Kenyan HIV/AIDS activist Inviolata Mmbwavi fights for social justice and the right to dignity.

December 19, 2012 By [Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.](#)

Inviolata Mmbwavi is the founder and executive director of the Grassroots Empowerment Trust (GET) in Kenya. GET seeks to empower communities, especially women living with HIV/AIDS. Diagnosed with HIV in 1992 when she was 19, Mmbwavi has overcome much of the stigma and discrimination she has faced. However, her service to others is far from over.

Mmbwavi is running for a parliamentary seat in the National Assembly of Kenya. The general elections for members of Parliament and other key positions are to be held in March. These elections will be the first under the country's new constitution, which was passed in 2010. Here, Mmbwavi shares her passion for helping women and all people affected by the virus.

Why are you standing for Parliament?

By running to represent the Lurambi constituency in the national assembly, I am exercising my constitutional right as described in Article 38, which covers political rights. This decision has been informed by my personal, work and family experiences and international exposure. I have realized that in Kenya you make change in a bigger way when you are in mainstream politics. I am hungry to serve my country at this level.

These elections are important for all Kenyans, but especially for Kenyan women. Kenya is a patriarchal and chauvinistic society. Kenyan women have suffered social and historical injustices for too long. Discriminative political, economic and social opportunities and retrogressive cultural practices have disempowered us.

Women participate in a big way in our economy, but suffer the brunt of poverty and poor health. We have our human rights violated through violence, but decision makers don't give the problem the seriousness it deserves.

The constitution now states that at no time would any public office, elective or appointive, be held by more than two-thirds of one gender. If women in Kenya don't participate in big numbers in the forthcoming elections, then we risk going back to the dark days that demean women. I am afraid this could make matters worse. For Kenyan women, this election is a do-or-die scenario.

Implementing Article 27 of the new constitution is another reason I want to get into Parliament.

Article 27 focuses on equality and freedom from discrimination. It acknowledges the activism work we did for many years when people were being discriminated against by individuals and institutions because of their gender, health, race, social origin, etc.

If I as an HIV-positive single mother and other people facing these forms of discrimination don't stand up and get into Parliament and other spaces available, I am afraid the constitution may not be implemented to the letter. As the saying goes, "There is nothing for us without us."

Fighting stigma and discrimination is part and parcel of me, so I am happy it is now enshrined in our supreme law. Being enshrined is one thing, getting implemented is another altogether.

Tell us about the Grassroots Empowerment Trust (GET).

As the founder and executive director of GET, I head a registered nongovernmental organization whose main agenda is to improve the living standards of the poor in society and to empower communities academically, socially and economically through education, health care, human rights and distribution of resources.

Our vision is to break the vicious cycle of poverty and ignorance among marginalized households by promoting human values such as kindness, honesty, responsibility, sharing, transparency, equity, accountability, unconditional love and care.

Our main objective is to improve access to education for orphans and vulnerable children, empower women and mitigate HIV/AIDS. Our programming is based on a human rights approach. It recognizes and appreciates the power of individuals and communities at the lowest level in making positive change in society for the holistic well-being of humanity.

GET has been involved in addressing stigma facing women living with HIV/AIDS by educating them on their rights as human beings. We do one-on-one counselling of young women on their rights to have a family, pregnancies and family planning issues in relation to improving quality of life and good health. We are also involved with a high school education program for orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS to reduce their vulnerability to the virus.

What is it like for a woman living with HIV in Kenya?

Many women in Kenya depend on their husbands financially, whether they have HIV or not. If a woman tests HIV positive and people know she has the virus, she risks being beaten and thrown out of her marital home. Her parents would not accept her because a woman belongs to her husband. If her husband dies, in-laws take all properties. Many women seek legal support, but they can't afford it. The consequences of disclosure are often not worth it.

Two serious challenges many women with HIV in Kenya confront are forced sterilization and female genital mutilation. Forced sterilization of women with HIV is discriminatory and a violation of their right to have children. It disrespects their right to dignity. We cannot say we are respecting human rights when we are selective in their application. Female genital mutilation of all women is an assault on their right to enjoy their sexuality. It puts them at risk of death during the mutilation

or during childbirth and at risk of infections, including HIV.

What have you experienced with HIV?

After I tested HIV positive in 1992 at the age of 19, I waited for death for more than five years and it did not come. I left my village for Nairobi, the capital city, because there was a lot of HIV-related stigma in the village. Back then, Nairobi seemed to be getting AIDS information very fast and had started responding tolerantly and listening more to the people living with the virus.

The government at that time also started acknowledging that they did not know much about HIV and it was important for them to hear from the people themselves. The ministry of health then decided to have a symposium for members of Parliament to educate them about the virus. When the head of the department asked for two young people willing to speak to the Parliament, I said yes. I was only 25 years old. And listen they did.

I have experienced HIV-related stigma and discrimination many times, but I have learned to forget. However, when I ran for Parliament in 2007, I vividly remember people said to me there was no point electing someone who was dying anyway. Some said I wanted sympathy votes, others said I was cheating. My family also has suffered from stigma because of me.

Despite our new constitution being clear on all of us being equal, during my current campaign a supporter of my opponent was heard wondering loudly why people living with HIV would want to be elected. Until we have a tolerant environment for all, I will continue my obsession with the need for implementation of Article 27.

Having HIV for 20 years and interacting with all types of people with or without HIV, I have learned everyone is struggling with one thing or another. It is hard to compare how it impacts on each of us. I encourage everyone to make the best of your days for as long as you are alive. Be happy, avoid people who are destructive or pulling you down. Think positive, work hard and don't be afraid to achieve whatever you want. There are good people in this world—that I know for sure.

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