



**MMS Bulletin #109**

*"AIDS and livelihoods"*

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***HIV and AIDS, stigma and poverty***

**The bonanza is over**

Von Kidan Felomon

My name is Kidan Felomon. I am a 47-year old widow and I live in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. I have nine children. The oldest is 20 and the youngest 7. My husband died of AIDS in 1999. He was a well-to-do merchant who traveled between Eritrea and Ethiopia. He did not tell me that he was infected with AIDS. Three years before his death I asked the doctor who was looking after him to tell her the cause of his sickness and he told me that my husband was suffering from liver cancer. But later, one of the nurses who were coming to my house weekly told me that my husband was infected with the virus. When I heard that, I was shocked and cried until my husband died. When I found out that I was HIV-positive too, I felt like killing my children and myself, but the nurse helped me to accept the problem and to look after my children.

**...despite our efforts, our family is underfed**

I told my eldest son and daughter that I was HIV-positive. At first it was so difficult for the children to accept it. They cried for three days and nights. But slowly they started to support their mother. My daughter undertakes all activities that involve sharp instruments and I do everything that is done with water, like washing clothes, cleaning the house, etc. The eldest boy undertakes income-generating activities. I sometimes participate in the informal sector, selling vegetables, soap, and matches. But, despite our efforts, our family is underfed. Recently, we started receiving food aid from the government.

The illness of my husband totally impoverished our family. I sold all our furniture and jewelry to support my family and pay for my husband's medical expenses. I had 70-80 grams of gold, which my husband had bought for me, but I had to sell that, too. There were times when I could not give food to my children. Once, my children went without food for the whole day. In the evening I gave the last plate of pasta to my husband and did not know what to give to the

children. I was going in and out of the house the whole evening, until finally a neighbor realised my situation and left me five pieces of bread, which I divided among her eight children. The eldest shared his piece of bread with me and then we all went to sleep.

I am a member of the association of people living with HIV and AIDS. However, I am not an active member, because most of the members are commercial sex workers and I do not want to be associated with them. I thus fail to get the benefits that I could get from the Association.

Before my husband got sick, people used to come to our house and spend the night with us and enjoy the bonanza we used to have. But after he became ill, people started refraining from coming to our house. One day my husband vomited and asked his mother to help him. Instead of helping him, however, his mother called me, because she was afraid of getting infected. Then my husband told his mother to leave the house for good. She went back to her natal village.

I have some friends who have similar problems. Among them is a woman whose husband died in 1998. The family depends on farming for a living. They had a plot of land on which they used to plant barley, maize and potatoes. As she could not plough her land, she used to give out the land to sharecroppers who were ploughing the land for her. She was responsible for weeding and harvesting. The sharecroppers used to give her half of the produce but later, as she became weak, she could not weed, so the sharecroppers gave her only a quarter of the produce and, since this could not support her, she decided not to have her land ploughed and she now depends on food aid. In Eritrea, women do not plough land. Traditionally, ploughing is a male task and ploughing for women is an unacceptable task that has a stigma attached to it.

*\*Kidān Felomon is a pseudonym. The woman was interviewed by Worku Zerai, Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association*

### **Source**

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