

Living in an orphaned generation

By Jennifer Bakyawa

JOHANNESBURG- To get to Kliptown is a 25 minutes drive from Johannesburg city centre.

Unlike Johannesburg, which has sprawling shopping malls with international trade names such as Woolworth, Shoprite, Kliptown doesn't. Its main features are shacks of two rooms, which serve as living room and sleeping quarters for families with members as many as six, eight or more.

At 57 years, Winnie is living in this neighbourhood. She was taken in by a male friend who of the same age because she had nowhere to live. Together in his two-roomed house, they look after Tumi.

Accommodation is not only Winnie's problem. She is unemployed and has Tumi, an HIV positive baby to cater for. Tumi, now seven months old, was left in Winnie's care when his mother died in mid November.

It was after she died that Winnie got to know that Tumi has the virus. One day, a

doctor revealed his status to Winnie when she had taken him to hospital for treatment.

"She didn't tell me what was going to happen," she says, tears rolling down her face. "As a friend, I used to ask her to be straight with me about what she was suffering from but she would say she was suffering from arthritis. Now look! Who has the baby?"

Winnie depends on government support to cater for Tumi. Because of this support, Tumi's paternal relatives now want him back. She has refused to give him up because she made a promise to his mother. Though his relatives want him back, they have not provided him any support up to today.

Winnie is among the estimated two percent of people in South Africa who are taking care of orphans not related to them, according to a UNICEF report launched on Wednesday in Johannesburg.

The report titled: Africa's Orphaned Generations reveals that about 62 percent of orphans are living with a

grandparent. The report estimates that there were 6.7 million orphans in South Africa by the end of 2001. About 3.2 million are estimated to be orphaned by AIDS. The number is expected to escalate to 9.2 million orphans by 2010 but the number of those whose parents would have succumbed to HIV/AIDS would have dropped to 6.3 million.

According to a UNICEF report: "In nearly every sub-Saharan country, extended families have assumed responsibility for more than 90 per cent of orphaned children. But this traditional support is under severe pressure- and in many instances has already been overwhelmed, increasingly impoverished and rendered unable to provide adequate care for children."

Such is the case with Bhengu. She is 50 years old and unemployed. She too lives in Kliptown in a two-roomed shack made of wood, with her four grandchildren.

Her youngest grandchild, Lucia is eight months and HIV positive. Her mother,



Gloria Johnson holding one of the children of AIDchild, an NGO dealing with HIV/AIDS affected children (File photo).

Sarah died in June leaving her their grandmother to take care of her and her sister. Bhengu also has another two grandchildren of another daughter to care of.

She is receiving a disability allowance from government, which she uses to care for the children. Only Sarah's children are entitled to a monthly allowance from government. The other two are of Botswana nationality and cannot receive social security

help from government. They have to depend on the good will of organizations such as Sinelungero Children's Project.

Sinelungero located south of Johannesburg was started about three years ago to cater for orphans and other vulnerable children.

The coordinator of Sinelungero, Ms. Linah Khumalo says that the project has catered for about 30 children since its inception. Every Thursday, they provide a meal for street children. They are also encouraged to take a bath when they come for the food.

The project also offers counseling to orphans and children who have also been physically or sexually abused.

"There are organizations which are providing psychosocial support but they are not doing it on a national level," said Ms. Kathleen Cravero from UNICEF. "These efforts need to be scaled up."

According to a report by the Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) AIDS is increasing the number of vulnerable, malnourished, poorly socialized and uneducated young people. The report titled: Children on the Brink July 2002, adds that this in turn heightens the prospect of social instability.

"With scarce resources stretched well beyond their limits, the impact of the pandemic is placing tremendous strains on families, communities and governments who are attempting to help," says the report.

"The magnitude and complexities of the problem of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS demand that more resources and various stakeholders be involved," Ms. Graca Machel, a Child Rights Activist said at the launch of the UNICEF report.

Machel says because poverty and the breakdown of African social systems, stigma and discrimination have increased.

"We have to review our value systems on how we look at PHAs especially orphans," she said. "We have to pay a lot of attention to their emotional needs. It is high time communities changed by joining efforts to address the issue as a nationwide problem."

So far Bhengu has not received the help she requested from government to cater for her daughter's children.

Yet, it is paramount for governments, social workers and organizations to intervene immediately in cases such as for Bhengu and Winne; assist them offer emotional and material support to these children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

The writer is an IPH/CDC Fellow

WORLD AIDS DAY

1st December 2003

"Fight stigma love young people"



Straight TALK
FOUNDATION

- the answer to your communication needs!

Straight Talk Foundation, P.O. Box 22366 Kampala UGANDA
45 Bukoto Street, Kamwokya, Tel: +256 (41) 543884 / 543025 / 530088, Fax: +256 (41) 534858
Email: strtalk@straight-talk.or.ug, or strtalk@imul.com, Website: www.straight-talk.or.ug