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Weaving a Web of Support for Widows Worldwide



## Woman of Purpose, Hope for Widows

A Community Based Organization– Pallisa, Uganda, East Africa

by Jane Opolot

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Woman of Purpose is a Community Based Organization working with the rural communities in Pallisa District. Our goal is to empower women and communities to live purposeful and purpose driven lives. Our work is mainly with the rural women. We are focusing on the total person; we respond to the physical, material and psychological needs of the poor. We therefore hope that by meeting these needs, we may help some of them find purpose for living.

We have set up an office in Pallisa town (has electricity power supply) and another base in Agule Trading Centre; (one of the remotest places in the District with no electricity). Our focus is on women and at the moment we are putting emphasis on widows and orphans. We use a holistic approach to problem solving. We provide basic counseling, including HIV/AIDS on a small scale, material support and emotional support. In fact, the rainy season sometimes comes on us with a bang, so we get involved in repairing leaking roofs for some of these widows who have no husbands or immediate family to help with the

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repair of the grass thatches. We help by buying the spear grass and getting manual labour to do the needful. We are also helping the poor with accessing healthcare services. With the liberalization of the economy and introduction of cost sharing even in government hospitals, many of the absolute poor cannot even afford medical treatment nor buy the drugs that are prescribed at the Health centre, so we help them meet their medical bills. We also hold seminars and workshops - teach them about hygiene and income generating activities so that they can learn to do something to earn a living. In fact we did this in our last December workshop, which was largely sponsored by friends and well wishers. From the above, you can see that we are a jack-of-all-trades and a mistress of non. But by the grace of God we are managing.

Woman of Purpose receives support from my personal friends and well wishers. For example, I regularly collect items such as old clothes and household items that almost seem useless in the city yet they change lives here in Pallisa! We are also involved in HIV/AIDS counseling and home care but yet again on a small scale due to limited resources. We have volunteers whom we provide with first aid kits and they go out and attend to the helpless and do counseling to the sick and the attendants as well. The AIDS reality is just hitting Pallisa District, especially the rural areas. In August 2005, I lost an adult brother and an infant nephew to AIDS; they passed away on the same day. Their families too are infected. Almost every homestead is now affected with the reality of AIDS. Thus, we are coming out to answer this call in the community.

\_HOPE FOR WIDOWS \_Most of the rural widows are illiterate and believe that they are what the community says they are i.e. carriers of bad luck, witches, unfortunate, etc. When the Pallisa widows learned that Woman Of Purpose had initiated Hope for Widows Project to address the issue of widows' rights, they viewed the organization with mixed feelings. "Why talk of rights? What we need is financial assistance," some said. "Educate us on our rights," others said.

When Hope for Widows carried out small-scale sensitization, beginning with the civic, religious and clan leaders, the widows got excited. Most of them had never imagined that they had any rights at all! They had believed all along that they have to live under the mercy of the clan and more so of the relatives of their deceased husbands. It is quite exciting though challenging, to know that the widows are coming up, not only for financial assistance but seeking how they can come out of the cultural prison regarding their state.

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Over 60% of the widows are illiterate. Their source of income is casual labour i.e. working in the gardens of the more privileged in order to earn some income to support their children. Some of these children are recalled from school in order to help the mothers earn a living. Those who do subsistence agriculture are limited by lack of land because once the husband dies, the land goes into the control of the heir who has the right to apportion it between himself and the widow, or widows, in the case of a polygamist. Most widows are forcefully inherited and for the sake of having land to grow crops and to keep their children, they have to give in. A widow who refuses to be inherited is sent away from the deceased husband's compound and the children grabbed from her.

On a small scale, we try to mediate between the widow and her in-laws. We are also doing sensitization at funerals – encouraging the in-laws and the relatives to respect the rights of the widows and to give them the support they so badly need. In the African culture, almost a whole village turns out for a funeral and this is a good opportunity to talk to them. Of course we try our best to contribute some little money for burial expenses so as to have grounds to say something. Woman of Purpose was able to protect one of the wells at least to make the water a bit safe and there was great rejoicing in that particular community. We are hoping to protect more wells in future as funds become available; water borne diseases are quite common.

We hope that with time we shall be able to expand our operations and reach a bigger number of people and cover more communities. At the moment our activities only cover two sub-counties (that is Agule and Kameke). We hope to get more partners to support our work so that we can be more stable and also hope that time will come when the work will become self-sustaining and stop being solely dependent on donations.

**Comments or inquiries about this story?**

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