

# Women Have to Cope as AIDS, Economic Woes Afflict Zambia

By Jack Zimba and Benedict Tembo

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is taking its toll; unemployment is soaring. Husbands are fleeing from home, and women have to fend for their children. This is the grim scenario taking place in many African countries south of the Sahara.

When Chuckie Kasoka married her husband 11 years ago, it was a time of

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joy. She never imagined that one day she would have to stand up to the challenges of life alone as a single parent, with five children to raise.

"When you get married, it is a time of joy and you don't have time to think about any negatives; you don't think about separation or divorce. I never thought that he would die and leave me, I thought that we would die together in a car crash

someday... or something," Chuckie says.

"It wasn't even on my mind," says Towela Banda, who is separated from her husband. "When you enter marriage you think everything will be just okay." Towela was married to her husband for two years and is now raising their two-year-old son.

For Edna Lungu, 70, having brought up 12 children—eight boys and four girls—appeared to be a big blessing because she looked forward to being looked after by her children some day. Her husband, a truck driver, died when she was 60.

And then all her 12 children were wiped out by the dreaded HIV/AIDS. Today, Edna is all by herself, a sad grandmother of 20

grandchildren—whom she has to look after by meeting their school needs and other basic necessities. She has to pay rent for the one-bedroom house she occupies in a sprawling compound in Lundazi, a town almost 700 kilometres from Lusaka, the capital of Zambia.

After being forced out of school by a man who promised to marry her, Veronica Nsama has sampled the harsh reality of life. Her husband, an accountant with one of the international banks in Lusaka, just abandoned her with three children to live with a girlfriend in one of the townships. He does not support her at all.

Chuckie, Towela, Edna and Veronica are not alone in this situation. Many women have found themselves saddled with the unenviable task of being the family's sole breadwinner following the demise of either their husband or children, or just the abandonment by somebody else of the responsibility of looking after their own children.

For most women, being a single parent is not something they dreamed of or planned to be. They were

forced into it by circumstances over which they had little or no control. Although there are various reasons that lead to single parenthood, such as separation, divorce, death or indeed just the absence of marriage—nowadays more young women are having children by men they never get married to—the challenges that these women face are the same.

Still, in Zambian society, you are better off having a child than not having any because people think there could be something seriously wrong with you. Being single is even worse because married women are always suspicious of single women.

The advent of non-governmental organisations headed by women has seen society changing its perception of single women, because some successful women in society are single and are role models.

Even then, single women are still generally distrusted. They get little respect from their colleagues while their children are scorned in school. In Zambian society it is quite difficult for a single mother to get married.



If being a mother is a great and challenging responsibility, then being a single mother is an even greater and more challenging responsibility.

"It is like carrying two buckets of water on your head, with no one to help you," says Towela under a deep thoughtful sigh when asked about her experience as a single mother. Towela has trained to be a secretary but she just cannot get employed anywhere because there are no jobs. And so because she cannot support herself and her son, she moved in to stay with her brother.

In a country like Zambia where the unemployment rate is soaring, especially among women, and where 85 percent of the population live in abject poverty—surviving on a meagre US\$1 a day—single mothers face an uphill battle in raising their children.

"It's difficult to manage. You need two people who are working to lighten the burden for each other," says Chuckie, who is also unemployed.

But even then, Zambia's number of households headed by females is rising steadily due to factors such as HIV/AIDS and poverty. Currently, such households account for about 24 percent of a total 1.9 million households—the

figure was 16 percent in 1996 and 22 percent in 1998.

The number of divorced or widowed females is at 15 percent.

Since being widowed, Chuckie says, "I had to be a father and mother at the same time...it is very difficult being what you are not." The positive aspect is that "women have now learnt to stand on their own, unlike in the past when they had to depend on their husbands for virtually everything, so they would rather be on their own than with an abusive husband."

With the spread of HIV/AIDS in the mid-1980s, there has been a sharp increase in the number of single-parented households, most of them run by women (widows) whose husbands have died of the disease.

The AIDS pandemic has had a huge impact on the Zambian family and social set-up. With one in every five persons infected with the deadly virus and about 300 people being decimated daily—mostly breadwinners of households—the women have been left with the responsibility of taking over as the family head. They face an even greater challenge in looking after a dying child, as is the common trend.

Melina Zulu, in the Eastern Province of Zambia

lost her husband to AIDS a couple of years ago. Herself battling the disease, she also has to fend for her two sickly, malnourished children aged two and four. But with the current acute food shortages, life is unbearable for her.

"Life is easier for a single person than for a single mother...because if you are single, you only think about yourself but as a single mother, you have other people to think of as well," she says.

In a society that still upholds its traditional values, single parenthood is still something frowned upon by many. Women, especially those who bear children outside marriage, are still victims of old stereotypes. "They all think that I was a naughty girl. But I was gone from home on business, and only for three months, when he decided to leave me," Towela says.

What exactly goes on the mind of a single mother?

"There is so much asking of the '--why' question; why did it have to happen to me, why at that time...sometimes I wish I had never gotten married," says Chuckie.

Asked whether she wanted to get married again, Towela just chuckled, as if the whole suggestion was completely absurd and

laughable. "No," she says, shaking her head. "I don't want to go through what I went through again, I would rather remain the way I am...it's better."

There is yet another women's sector whose interests have not been addressed. Although a lot has been discussed at seminars and conferences and written in popular and academic literature on the problems and roles of women, very little attention has been given to the challenges and roles of older women as heads of household.

The older women are a fast growing population group in Zambia as well as in other parts of Africa. In 1990 there were 93,120 women aged 65 years and older and 123,076 older men in Zambia. Demographic projections show that this number is expected to increase to 152,221 in the year 2010. In 1990 about 37 percent of the older women or 32,605 were heads of the country's households.

The majority of these women had low educational levels, no employment, little or no income and were living below the poverty line.

On the other hand, the extended family—comprising the adult children, spouse and other relatives, which is the primary social unit for looking after older people—is weakening be-



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cause of industrialisation, urbanisation, mass education, social and economic pressures.

Some of the older women are complaining that their adult children have abandoned them and are not giving them the respect, love, affection, and support that they expect.

Some adult children, on the other hand, complain of the economic pressures they are experiencing and that some requests for help are beyond what they can afford.

"Research tells us that while the majority of the older women may be very poor, they still have to play several different roles," says Dr Martin Kamwengo, a lecturer in Gerontology at the University of Zambia.

They provide care to the sick in the household and the community. They

mind the children and act as surrogate mothers to orphans. They settle conflicts and disputes. They are reservoirs of knowledge about family and community history, childbearing and childcare, herbal medicine.

Hunger is one of the challenges facing older women in the southern African region, says Dr Kamwengo. According to the latest statistics, over half of the districts in Zambia are reported to be facing starvation. The worst hit households are those headed by older women.

Another serious problem for them is HIV/AIDS.

"As more and more adult children fall sick or die from AIDS, aged parents take on new roles, responsibilities, and relationships," Dr Kamwengo points out. "They become income earners, guardians, and

caregivers especially of their adult children who are ill. AIDS-related deaths are increasing rapidly: there were 25,000 in 1990, and are expected to reach 211,000 in the year 2010."

The disease is affecting the elderly women as mothers, grandmothers, care-givers and as sexually active individuals. They provide care to the sick adult children, spouses and other relatives in the house and in the community. They look after the orphans whose parents have died. During the time they care for the sick, no economic activities take place in the household and as a result families become poorer. "Furthermore, most of the household resources are spent on medical bills and, later, funerals," explains Dr. Kamwengo.

While looking after the sick they get exposed to opportunistic infections and

body fluids of the infected people. In this way they risk contracting HIV. As they see their children and those around them die, they become lonely and isolated.

Explanations can be many for the current scheme of things in many Third World countries, but the more plausible reason for single-parent households, disease, and unemployment is that governments have not invested in people. Many leaders in these countries have amassed tremendous wealth at the expense of their people.

For instance, it has been difficult to contain HIV/AIDS because of mass poverty. Young girls are forced into prostitution because their parents cannot feed and dress them well enough. On the other hand, many men have taken advantage of the situation by leaving their homes to cohabit with single women who are either unemployed or are underpaid.

Proposed solutions include enacting legislation that would ban streetism and meting out harsh jail sentences to people who infect their lovers with HIV/AIDS. The solutions have been put forward but the people's leaders are half the time corrupt and unwilling to act on the situation.

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