



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**HEALTH POLICY  
INITIATIVE**



KENYANS AND AMERICANS  
IN PARTNERSHIP TO FIGHT HIV/AIDS

# Bringing Hope from Bitterness

## **Dorothy Awino's disinheritance led her to fight for women's property rights in Nyanza, Kenya.**



PHOTO CREDIT: SALIM KASSIM, HPI/KENYA

*Dorothy T. Awino, consultant for the project's Women's Property Ownership and Inheritance Rights Initiative.*

NYANZA, KENYA | Women and children are often deprived of home, land, and property in Kenya. While the formal legal framework contains protections for women and children, many tribes in Kenya traditionally deny women's right to inherit land. In cases of property inheritance and land use, tribal authority overrides formal authority at women's and children's expense. As a result, many widows and orphans are disinherited.

The HIV epidemic exacerbates the situation, as large numbers of women are widowed due to AIDS, losing access to the resources they need to support their families. Also, women are often blamed for bringing HIV into the household, increasing the likelihood of disinheritance and adding stigma and shame to their burdens.

Dorothy Awino experienced the bitterness of losing her home through disinheritance. When her marriage ended in 1992, Dorothy and her two-year-old son were forced to leave their home in Oyugis, Southern Nyanza. With nowhere to turn for help, Dorothy did not protest their disinheritance. For the next nine years, she struggled to make ends meet as a single mother. She kept a journal of her experiences to give her strength, not knowing that she would one day become a champion, fighting to help other women hold onto what she had lost.

In 2003, Dorothy joined with other women who had suffered disinheritance to found a community-based organization (CBO), the Road Marks International, to address gender discrimination and women's inheritance rights. The Road Marks operates in Nyanza Province, where cultural practices and traditions among the Luo tribe have made disinheritance of women and orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) more prevalent than in any other area of Kenya. The situation is compounded by Nyanza's rate of HIV prevalence, which is one of the highest in the country.

These factors led the USAID-funded POLICY Project to launch the Women's Property Ownership and Inheritance Rights (WPOIR) initiative in Nyanza to mobilize local leaders to uphold women's and children's inheritance rights. In 2006, following the end of the POLICY Project, USAID continued to provide support for the WPOIR initiative through Task Order I of the USAID | Health Policy Initiative.



PHOTO CREDIT: SALIM KASSIM, HPI/KENYA

*Monica Nyangun, a disinherited widow, shares her story flanked by Dorothy Awino during the women empowerment meetings.*

In 2004, inspired by what she had learned at a workshop on inheritance rights hosted by the POLICY Project, Dorothy soon became deeply involved in the WPOIR initiative. Following capacity building and training, she was designated as Coordinator and Community Mobilizer for the project.

The WPOIR initiative has focused on building the capacity of the Luo Council of Elders—a small body of respected elders who traditionally arbitrate disputes within the community—(LCE) to address the infringement of women’s and children’s property rights. Before the WPOIR initiative began, the LCE did not recognize the disenfranchisement of women and OVC as a problem in the Luo community. However, as more and more women and children came forward to share their stories, the elders saw an urgent need to act and have embraced an active role in protecting the rights of women and OVC.

Dorothy Awino has been instrumental in achieving many of the WPOIR initiative’s successes in Nyanza. She works closely with the LCE, the Kenya National Human Rights Commission, the Provincial Administration, and the Lands Tribunal, serving as a liaison between the council and the government. The LCE reports cases to her and she connects them with the District Administration, the Provincial Administration, the Lands office, and the National Human Rights Commission.

Her knowledge and understanding of Luo culture has helped Dorothy gain the Elders’ acceptance. “Initially the Luo Council of Elders did not have much confidence in me especially being young and a woman, but they have since recognized me and we have worked very cordially to achieve a lot for the women and children,” she said.

Dorothy has mentored widows and orphans, especially those affected by HIV and AIDS, helping them to speak openly about their experiences and to challenge stigma and discrimination. She has worked with community groups to sensitize the community on HIV and AIDS issues, and has struggled to help people living with HIV (PLHIV) get treatment. She has advocated for OVC rights, working with the local police force to achieve the creation of children’s desks in police stations in the Kisumu District.

Dorothy’s involvement has made a measurable difference for women and children in her community. She has helped nearly 50 women to



PHOTO CREDIT: SALIM KASSIM, HPI/KENYA

*Dorothy Awino and a caregiver discuss issues of disinheritance with widows in Nyanza.*

return to their family lands, and, through her efforts, many widows have received official acknowledgment of their right to land. She has been recognized by the community and the Provincial Administration as a champion for the rights of women and OVC, and has gained the confidence of other organizations, which turn to her for her wealth of knowledge and experience.

According to Dorothy, one of the WPOIR initiative's key achievements has been to identify and cultivate champions from within the community. Watching women and children she has mentored gain new confidence and skills has been immensely rewarding. With support from Dorothy and the project, those who once depended on her have now become role models and mentors in their own right. In their newfound strength, Dorothy sees a mirror of her own journey, and hope for lasting change.

Dorothy sees the challenges that remain in her community. Poverty and deeply rooted cultural practices are still barriers to protecting the rights of women and children. Yet Dorothy believes that her work with the project has begun to change attitudes among community members and leaders in the region. She has observed a significant reduction in violations of children's and women's rights since the project's inception, and women and children are now empowered to discuss their rights, HIV status and related issues openly. Unlike her younger self, women in her community now know their rights and have the power to claim them.