News
Q&As



Sr. Florence Muia distributes chicks to her clients in Upendo Village, located in Naivasha, a town northwest of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. (Courtesy of Upendo Village)



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For years, Sr. Florence Muia witnessed the harsh realities faced by people living with HIV in the impoverished regions of Kenya. She told Global Sisters Report that many endured social ostracism, stigma and a lack of access to essential treatment, trapped in a cycle of despair that often feels like a death sentence.

Driven by compassion and a fervent desire for change, Muia of the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi set out on a transformative mission to instill hope and provide healing to those who have been unjustly marginalized for far too long.

Kenya, an East African nation with a population of over 58 million, is home to approximately 1.6 million people living with HIV/AIDS. Additionally, there are around 1.1 million children who have become orphans due to AIDS.

Research published in 2000 indicated that, due to the high levels of poverty in Kenya, many affected individuals could not afford the cost of HIV/AIDS treatment. Consequently, nearly all of these individuals would die prematurely before the age of 40.

In 2003, Muia established Upendo Village, which is now a modern facility designed to support people living with HIV in low-income communities. Upendo, which means "love" in Swahili, is situated about 60 miles northwest of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya.



An Assumption sister assists Sr. Florence Muia in supervising food distribution to clients in Upendo Village, northwest of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. (Courtesy of Upendo Village)

The facility offers essential services, including free HIV testing, counseling and antiretroviral therapy, or ART, delivering lifesaving treatment to thousands in need. With state-of-the-art medical technologies and a compassionate team of trained professionals, Muia said the facility is committed to providing exceptional care and unwavering support to individuals living with HIV.

Although the Kenyan-born Catholic nun's mission began in Kenya, it did not end there. While studying in the United States, she continued advocating for global support for HIV/AIDS treatment. Muia was the first nun in Kenya to serve as a probation officer, a position she held from 1990 to 1998.

While in the U.S., the 68-year-old nun worked diligently behind the scenes to advocate for legislation that would guarantee affordable treatment for individuals in

developing countries. Her efforts aligned with a crucial moment in global health diplomacy when Rep. Henry Hyde, a Republican from Illinois, introduced a bill to fund HIV treatment in low-income countries.

Muia was instrumental in building strong support for the bill by actively participating in meetings, raising public awareness and energizing discussions among lawmakers.

Her persistent lobbying efforts were successful, she said. The bill received overwhelming support and was passed in 2003, with reauthorization in 2008, paving the way for a historic initiative by the United Nations to distribute HIV drugs for free to people in developing countries, including Kenya. This program has since provided lifesaving antiretroviral medications to millions, offering individuals the hope of a longer and healthier life.

GSR: Could you please share more about yourself?

Muia: I was born on Jan. 6, 1957, in Machakos County, Kenya, East Africa. I joined the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi in January 1976, took my first vows in December 1978, and my perpetual vows in August 1986. I am the foundress and executive director of Upendo Village, a project of the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi in partnership with Wheaton Franciscan Sisters, established in 2003.

I hold a doctorate in peace and conflict studies from Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology in Kenya, a master’s degree in pastoral counseling from Loyola University Chicago, and a bachelor's degree in social sciences from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi, Kenya, and a diploma in social work from Government Training Institute, Maseno, Kenya. I am an international mediator, certified and accredited by the Kenya Judiciary, and a member of the Counselling and Psychological Society of Kenya, among other associations.

I have served in various institutions in various capacities, including school boards and hospitals. I have been in leadership in the congregation as assistant superior general for six years.



Sr. Florence Muia of the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi launches a water project meant to assist those living with HIV/AIDS at Upendo Village, northwest of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. (Courtesy of Upendo Village)

Could you please share your insights about Upendo Village and what inspired you to establish it?

The story of Upendo Village dates back to 2001 when I was a student at Loyola University in Chicago. While studying there, I had an opportunity to attend several conferences every summer on the AIDS pandemic. At the time, ART therapy was free and available for HIV-positive patients, and as such, they were living positively and healthy.

On the contrary, in Kenya, we were losing around 700 lives daily due to AIDS complications. This hit me hard, and I began to contemplate how I could save lives back home. I shared my dream with one of the Wheaton Franciscan Sisters, who, in return, shared the story with the leadership. It was as if God intended this to happen

so that it could give birth to our partnership of care and service to the Kenyan people who were suffering, infected and affected by the AIDS pandemic.

After graduating from Loyola University in May 2001, I started contemplating on how to make the dream of starting a project to respond to the AIDS pandemic in Kenya be realized. The Wheaton Franciscans were already having a project in Wheaton which was dealing with people who were HIV positive, helping them to rebuild their lives once again, giving them the support they needed to move on with life. I was offered an opportunity to work with the people to gain firsthand experience in the ministry.

Our partnership with the project, I believe, was God-designed because the sisters also wanted to reach out to Africa and support the response to the AIDS pandemic, and this project became ideal for meeting their desire. The Assumption Sisters have their hands on the ground serving and supporting the people through various programs, while the Wheaton Franciscans help to support us financially to continue with the ministry. In 2003, the Wheaton Franciscan Sisters donated seed money to renovate two old existing classrooms and washrooms, which would be the initial starting point for Upendo Village services. The Catholic Diocese of Nakuru donated three acres of land for the future development of the project.



The residents of Upendo Village in northwest Kenya are actively working to educate their community on effective strategies to prevent HIV/AIDS. By raising awareness of the disease and its impact, they empower individuals to take charge of their health and well-being. (Courtesy of Upendo Village)

What achievements have you made so far, and what activities does the facility currently undertake to assist those living with HIV/AIDS?

Since the inception of the project in 2003 to date, we have reached out to 2,625 women, 820 men, 398 HIV-positive children, 7,600 orphans and vulnerable children and 3,236 other household members, making a total of 14,679 those served to date. We run four support groups for those men and women who are HIV-positive on a weekly basis at different locations and two support groups for the grandmothers/caregivers who are taking care of orphaned children. During the school holidays, we have a support group for children/teenagers who are HIV

positive. The support groups provide psychosocial support, counseling and education on different topics meant to empower the clients on issues of self-care, nutrition and how to improve economically.

Upendo Village is a home-based care outreach project that supports people within their home environment. It differs from other projects in that, from the start, I believed that it was not enough to provide medications to those infected with HIV or even those who had full-blown AIDS, but nutritional supplements and proper diet are key to their bouncing back to life and also empowering them economically to move on.

So far, 703 have benefited from dairy goats, 1,079 from Indigenous chickens, 271 from interest-free loans, 472 solar lamps, 50 water tanks of 5,000 liters each, 217 school uniforms to needy students in the community, 328 children have benefited from education sponsorship program since 2006, and 11,863 tree seedlings have been issued to clients. Through these empowering programs, our clients have continued to live positively, with less stigma and with raised self-esteem.



Sr. Florence Muia distributes trees to her clients in Upendo Village, located in Naivasha, a town northwest of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, as a means of conserving the environment. (Courtesy of Upendo Village)

What awards and recognitions have you received for your work?

In 2007, I was the recipient of the Damen Award from Loyola University Chicago. In 2005, I was nominated as one of the 1,000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize in Switzerland. In 2004, I was the recipient of the Paul Harris Fellow Award from The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International, and in 2001, I received the Phi Beta Delta International Scholars Award from Loyola University Chicago.

How do you ensure the facility remains sustainable in light of the increasing number of individuals living with HIV/AIDS who come seeking vital support?

Despite having some small income-generating projects such as processing and bottling water, a dispensary, and a multipurpose hall for support of the project, we depend on donor funding through project proposals for grants and also donations from our partners.

Our Children of Upendo Sponsorship Program depends on both international and local sponsors who support their education. We connect a sponsor with the needy child and keep them updated on the child's performance. Once we give a family a dairy goat, the first kid if it's a female, once weaned, is brought back to be given to another family on the waiting list. This way, they learn to give, too, as another way of supporting others. Once we have donations for more goats, we buy from our clients unless they don't have them, and then we buy outside. The goat milk is very nutritious and helps to boost their immune system.

All the programs supporting our clients are aimed at helping them to achieve self-reliance, reduce poverty and live with dignity. By supporting an orphaned child to access formal education and grow, we empower them to have a voice and change their destiny. Where a child is a total orphan, we identify a reliable member in the extended family to take the child or children to their home, and we support the children from there. This provides the child/children with a home, security, attachment and identity. In return, the family will, by extension, benefit from the

support being given to the child, e.g., food. This partnership ensures the child stays with relatives of the deceased parents, giving the child a sense of belonging.



Sr. Florence Muia distributes goats to her clients as a means of empowerment in Upendo Village, which is located in Naivasha, a town northwest of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. (Courtesy of Upendo Village)

What are the main challenges that you and the people you serve face?

Over the years, we have experienced challenges with funding due to the challenges of the global economy. During the early years, we were able to sponsor over 100 students per year, but currently, we have only 74 due to donor fatigue and global economic constraints. The demand is high, but we can only do so much with limited resources. Let us empower the people and reduce dependency syndromes such that even when the project faces financial challenges, the people can still move on. Even a pair of chickens can make a difference in a family because it will hatch many

more. I have seen those whom we have empowered give back. No one is too poor to give!

What additional insights or important information would you like to share with others?

I attribute the more than 20 years of success of this project to the encouragement I get from our partners and my religious community, the teamwork of the staff, the perseverance and resilience of our clients, and the commitment of the grandmothers/fathers caring for the orphans.

My joy is seeing our clients thrive and move on, especially some of those who were bedridden and bounced back to life and have seen their children grow into adults. The prayers and smiles from these clients and grandmothers make me rise every day with renewed energy to continue to serve them. When I celebrate our children's graduations from college or university, I get lots of gratification.

This story appears in the **HIV/AIDS Ministry** and **Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing** feature series.