

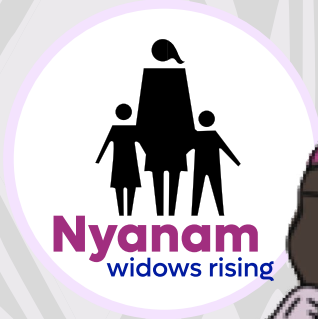


Nyanam
widows rising



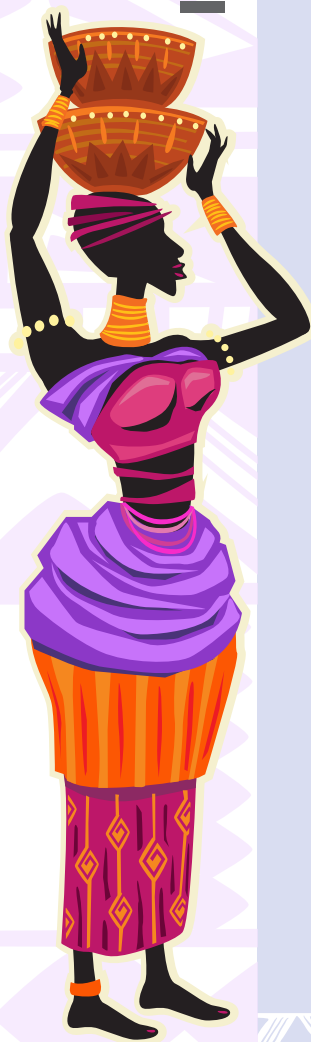
Redefining resilience in widowhood

Supporting widows' resilience



**Preparing widow leaders
for positive community
transformation**

Introduction



Supporting widows' resilience

Jackie Odhiambo,
Founder and Executive Director, Nyanam

1 in 3 widows in Kenya experience stigma linked to their widowhood status. Stigma is the root cause for health, economic and social inequalities widows experience and addressing the widowhood stigma is the reason for existence of Nyanam.

Nyanam is a restorative justice organization preparing widows to lead positive community transformation through integrated programs in leadership, health, livelihoods, justice and youth education. Our work alleviates widowhood poverty, mitigates the impact of HIV/AIDS, and gives widows the tools to tackle oppressive cultural, economic, and social practices that undermine widows' dignity and limit their agency.

Our journey began in 2012, when we helped Konyango Village in Osiri Community in Kisumu Kenya to establish their first primary school, Mboti Sunrise Primary School, that is now a public school serving about 300 children. We also partnered with Kenya Water for Health Organization to drill a community well, an experience that opened our eyes to the social stigmatization of widows. When widows spoke, no one listened and whenever something went wrong with the project, they were scapegoated. Just at this time, one widow began approaching me asking for support.

I was raised by a team of widowed women, my mother Rebecca, aunt Peninah, and grandmother Wilikister. In my childhood, I experienced the love and care of these women, noticed their loneliness, and felt their financial hardships. There was never enough food for all, and we were often sent home for school fees. When I got a scholarship through mentorship from Zawadi Africa Education Fund to study at Williams College in the USA, I resolved that my education would make my mother proud. After completing my master's in Public Health at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, I decided to return home and focus on establishing Nyanam. My joy now is that through Nyanam, not only my mother, but hundreds of widows like her are proud, and hopefully thousands will be in the future.

Introduction

In the past four years, Nyanam has grown from supporting 80 to 800 widows. This ten-fold increase in our reach has primarily been led by the widows we serve. We help widows rise above feeling lonely to connected, and helpless, hopeless and voiceless to the change leaders they are.

This anthology, redefining resilience in widowhood, brings you the stories of the widows we serve through their own voices. It displays the dilemma that female widowhood is in the African context. widows show us that in widowhood, women lose their social status but also embark on a journey of self-discovery that involves strengthening their abilities and spirituality. They face multiple oppression such as rejection and disinheritance and but also find new freedoms and enhanced agency. This push and pull journey need our collective support, which Nyanam provides. You can learn more about our work at www.nyanam.org. I hope these stories inspire you and your community to be loving, encouraging, and supporting the widowed women around you.



Preface

Supporting widows' resilience

Evelyn Odhiambo,
Youth & Communications Lead

I joined Nyanam in December 2021 as a Youth and Communications Lead, after volunteering with the organization for two years in their Youth program. While I too had been raised by a widow, my father died before I knew him, I had no clue about the depth of the stigma and struggles widows face until joining Nyanam. All I had seen growing up was my mother as a strong woman raising her kids in the best way she could. My mother ensured we ate, we were clothed, and we went to school. She was and remains to be my super woman. Never did I ever experience a gap in fatherhood because somehow my mother filled it.

Deep listening is one of our core values at Nyanam. As soon as I began encountering varied stories of widows in the organization, I started learning about the struggles of widowhood in my own Luo Community. Listening to the widows' stories pierced deep into my heart. Their traumatic experiences traumatized me too. Most of the time, I couldn't hold my tears and the anger within at the injustices they endured. However, amidst these challenges, something brought light. The widows' resilience. In every challenge, the widows found an inner strength that pushed them to put their best foot forward for their children.

The courage these women showed in the face of stigma and the fight to be seen, heard and respected was my cue for this anthology. Listening to their stories of hope and resilience was something I felt needed to be heard widely. I also wanted a communication product that raised awareness of widows' plight through their voices. Through this anthology, the world will read about widows navigating cultural and economic biases to lead positive lives and protect their families. The widows also share the impact they experience from Nyanam, work that I am proud to be part of and that I invite others to support. I am also thrilled that Nyanam has not left widows' children behind, supporting access to education through school fees, and hosting youth mentorship workshops in environmental stewardship, comprehensive health, and technology.





Dedication

To you who chooses to hold on when the future seems bleak and blurry, we dedicated this to you.

Credits:

We thank 10 Nyanam widows for graciously sharing their stories to make this anthology possible.

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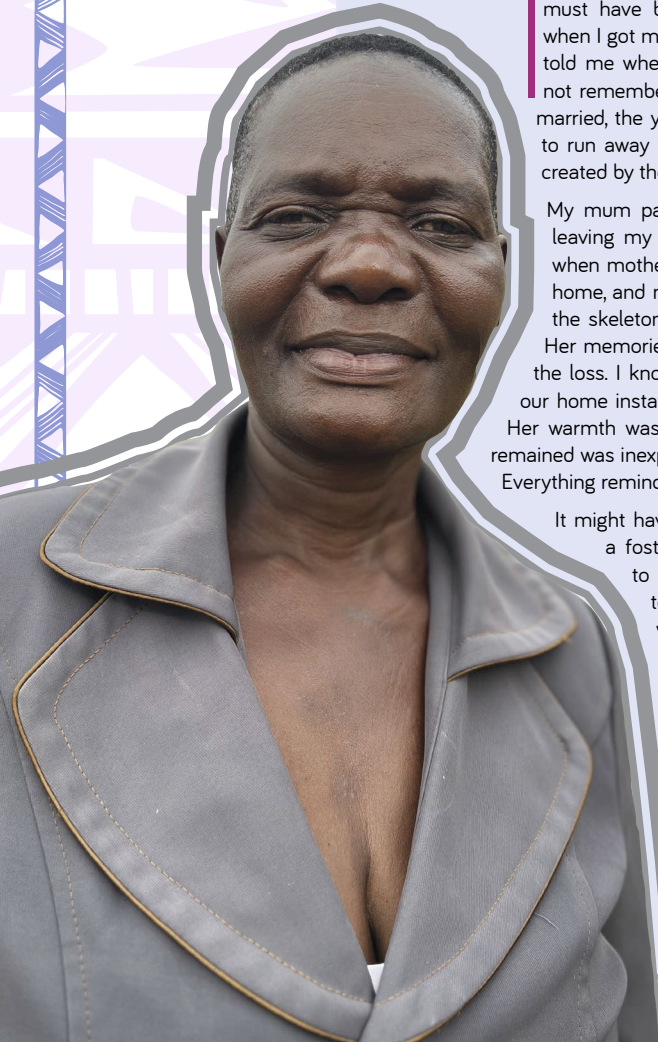


The Widows' Stories

Parenting as an orphan, then as a widow: the tough decisions

Rose, 53Years

Widowed for 25 years



I must have been 20 years old or even younger when I got married. My mother had died before she told me when exactly I was born. And, while I do not remember with exactness the date when I got married, the year was 1989. I chose to get married to run away from a fierce father and to fill a hole created by the lack of parental love.

My mum passed on when I was in class seven, leaving my siblings and I with my dad. You see, when mothers die, they leave with the idea of the home, and no one ever gets to fill their void. Only the skeleton and structure of the house remains. Her memories remain too, punctuating the pain of the loss. I know so because when my mother died, our home instantly ceased to be the home we knew. Her warmth was gone. Her love was gone too. What remained was inexplicable pain, coldness, and emptiness. Everything reminded me of her.

It might have been better, I suppose, if we found a foster family –at least until we matured to face the world. But no one wanted to take us in, and it was difficult living with a fierce dad. As the eldest, it often occurred to me the shoes I had to fill were too big. I became not only the big sister but also a loving mother, growing shoulders strong enough for my siblings to lean on.

Two years after my mother's demise, my father died too. Our relatives mistreated us, and we chose to depend on ourselves. The

relatives always told me that when I was old enough to be married, – which in my culture is from 16 years and above - I should take my siblings with me. But my mum's dying wish had been that I stay with my siblings wherever I went. That is exactly what happened. I went into marriage with my siblings. My husband was gracious enough to understand. Unfortunately, he also passed on, leaving me with my three siblings and our four children to raise. I was only 29 years at the time.

During the time that I got married, marriages were pre-arranged, and wives were scouted for by relatives of the husband to be. Love and chemistry between the spouses were mostly overlooked. And yes, I did not love my husband, but I was afraid of quitting the arranged marriage for fear of being judged harshly by the society. Since many people never understood my story or the scars that I had gotten from the cruel hand that life had dealt me before I decided to get married, they assumed that I came into my marriage with children born out of wedlock. They did not know they were my siblings. The criticism and the blame were overwhelming.

Having taken up the roles of my parents, I was an orphan who was parenting my orphaned siblings. This experience was difficult in many ways, but it also prepared me for the future experience of nurturing my children after the demise of their father. If I were to compare the two experiences, I would say my life as an orphan was tougher as compared to my children's life after their father's death. They were lucky to have me working hard to provide for them. Also, I think that losing a mother is tougher than losing a father.

It's now 25 years since my husband died. At the time of his death, my relationship with my in-laws was already greatly severed. I felt misunderstood in their presence, yet I still had to deal with them. Part of the reason my in-laws despised us was because they thought we were desperate and knew we had no other refuge. They also thought of my siblings as another man's children. I had no other home, and my siblings knew no other place as home, other than whatever my husband had for us. I considered mending my relationships with my in-laws - something I never achieved when my husband was alive. Overwhelmed by their criticism, I moved from the rural village to an urban slum of Obunga in Kisumu. My husband left no will behind for the simple fact that he did not have an inheritance or anything he could bequeath his offspring. I stayed in Obunga for two decades, doing micro-business to survive and sustain my family.

Kisumu city, where I moved to, is a concrete jungle. But it is also a city of possibilities. I thought I would eke out a living by simply being street-smart. How wrong I was! My life in town bore no fruits and was tempting for indecent indulgence, which my conscience kept me away from. I also had orphaned children to take care of. As a widow, I experienced days of desperation where I had no limits. I would sell



anything and everything to provide for my family, whether immoral or illegal. Anything my hands could do, I did. I started with selling roasted maize, then opened a makeshift restaurant. I later started selling illicit brew which I did for a long time. In between, I sold fish.

My motivation was to get money and I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted. But this freedom came with its challenges. People seeing that I was alone started stealing and some even soliciting sexual favours from me. Selling alcohol, saw me slowly slide into alcoholism, one sip at a time. It was a hard and lonely existence. Having no one else to share ideas with, my mind, body and soul wandered off a lot.

Eventually, I clutched at the hands of God, and after salvation, I worked as a house help. When I gave my life to Christ, the first teachings I received reminded me that when one's husband dies and they leave the husband's home, when they get born again, they should return. That was life changing. It opened my heart to forgiveness and my soul found a refreshing comfort and warmth. I decided to go back to my matrimonial home that I had ditched several years before. I returned home with nothing good other than the reassurance that Christ was in control and that everything would pan out as God wished.

Back in the village, hatred and mockery increased tenfold. I had sojourned and returned home empty handed, they said. My children's schooling was adversely affected, especially for my firstborn. I had little-to no financial means and with no help in sight. Knowing God as my saviour gave me the courage to stay in that home despite all the hatred that was directed at me and my children. Somehow, by God's help, I put up another house since the previous one had been demolished and all my belongings sold off. I had been bitter about not having a proper house, a situation that lowered my self-esteem, especially as my ugly house was an eyesore to all.

My return marked a fresh start, albeit challenging, and it was during this time that I learnt about Nyanam. When we were called upon to join in the activities of the organisation, I, like my peers, thought the benefits would be instant. Many with this mentality dropped off, but I stayed on. Life had taught me endurance and patience. The teachings I have received from Nyanam have made a significant and tangible difference in my life.

Nyanam offered us a platform, through which widows like me can come together to talk, share, and bask in the warmth of togetherness. This unity of widows lessens the burden of loneliness and gives us the courage to walk together through the curve balls that life throws at us. Nyanam has taught me to be more confident and the importance of compassion when correcting others. Through their guidance, I courageously undertook to search for the pieces of land my father-in-law had left. I keep the details of these parcels of land



Nyanam
widows rising

safe. Nyanam has imparted in me the wisdom and the courage to resolve cases and disagreements among my family members and even village mates. I have learnt how to deal with all sorts of people and conflict. I have grown from the woman once ridiculed to a clan elder whom the village is dependent upon.

As a part of Nyanam, I have been deeply rooted in the teachings of God, making me a more effective teacher of the word. Nyanam has taught me a lot of life skills that I wouldn't have found elsewhere, which I also pass on to other women who are yet to join communities of widows like ours. I also tell new widows that it is determination, faith and patience that leads to the reward we seek.

The leadership of Nyanam has been patient with us despite our shortcomings. They have been coming to our homes and villages to teach us. Nyanam has also helped with the schooling of one of my four children as well as sorting my housing problem. I am one of the 10 women in my community having new houses built with modern technology through a partnership of Nyanam and Onsite ICF. I believe that the best is yet to come. God bless you Nyanam. I'm now transformed. I'm now a leader at home and in the village. I am eternally grateful to Nyanam.



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I'm glad my widowhood contributed to the formation of Nyanam, which is now helping many widows

Rebecca, 59 Years

Widowed for 23 years



Nothing really prepared me for widowhood quite like the experience itself. From dealing with grief to handling the enormous financial challenges, it has been a journey characterized by intense lows. I was widowed in 2000. Until his death, my husband and I resided in Nairobi. He meant the world to me, and after his death a lot changed. A part of me went with him, and what remained was never to be the same. I immediately assumed the role of sole breadwinner for the family, finding ways to provide food, pay my children's school fees, rent and many other needs. It seemed like I had to work ten times as hard to provide for our children in his absence. As a young widow living in Nairobi, went through a lot. I knew I had to uphold my morals, remain a virtuous woman to be a good role model to my children. My children were my priority. Remarrying wasn't on my cards.

At the time of my husband's death, his two brothers, my brothers-in-law, had already died. As a result, there were many fatherless children to take care of. We were three widows in the family including my sister-in-law and my mother-in-law, left to take care of everyone else. Life became quite difficult, and the trauma threatened to break me.

Among the many hurdles that I faced after my husband's death, the greatest was the land issue. My mother-in-

law, either by design or default, never allocated land to my husband wasn't given any land. I have never understood why he was bypassed and yet he had rights too. That aside, my husband and I put our resources together and purchased a piece of land. Unfortunately, he passed on before the land was formally transferred into our ownership. In an inexplicable turn of events, the family that had sold us the parcel of land, changed tune when the tragedy of death befell me. They demanded their; land back. This would have resulted to many difficulties for me and my children. I therefore decided to quit my job in Nairobi and went home to occupy the land so that if they were to take it back, they would do so right in my face.

I later sought justice through the courts, which was not easy because at first, I had followed the wrong process and I had to start over. I didn't lose hope. I learnt that the process of land succession (inheritance of the property in the name of the deceased) happens through the courts and not through the land registry. After a long and protracted process, justice was served in my favour. I could not hide my joy when the courts awarded me the right to live on the land as my property.

I also struggled through thick and thin to educate the orphans that were left under my care until they completed their studies. In 2017, my third born daughter, Jackie Odhiambo, convened a widows' meeting. Jackie was blessed to study in Williams College in the United States through the support of Zawadi Africa. She began giving back to our village while still a student. Driven by the experiences she had seen us go through after her father's demise, she felt the need to start Nyanam, an organization exclusively for widows.

At Nyanam, sharing our experiences as widows has made us stronger and realize that we have much in common. Nyanam also gave us a platform to learn about our rights as widows in protecting ourselves and the properties left under our care. Nyanam is also place where widows have been able to raise, empower and educate their children through different programs such as mentorship, self-awareness, and environment campaigns such as trees planting. I am also proud that my last born daughter, Evelyn Odhiambo, joined Nyanam to create a program for widows' children too.

As members of Nyanam, we carry out table banking to support each other on personal projects such as building houses, buying chairs, tents, kitchen ware, solar panels, and goats for the members. We have also managed to start a welfare initiative where we help each other with funeral expenses and other social needs, which has afforded us a level of financial independence.

My life as a married woman was great because I had my husband's support. As a widow, I envisioned, wanted, and hoped to accomplish many things that never came to be. The fear of doing things alone and second-guessing my decisions sometimes weighed me down.



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With Nyanam, I have been inspired, motivated, and empowered to get out there and meet my dreams without fear. I am now a cage-fish farmer in Lake Victoria.

I urge fellow widows to find warmth and strength in togetherness and unity. When we come together, we can accomplish great things, more than if we remain as individuals. But above all, I urge fellow widows not to never give up on the power of prayer and on God because God makes great things happen for the less fortunate. In a special way I want to thank Nyanam for their programs and the dreams that they have for widows and I pray that they get to accomplish the dreams.



When a co-wife emerges: young widowhood, self-control, and sowing seeds of peace

Eunice, 30 Years

Widowed for four years



I had only been married for two years when my husband died in 2019. I knew he had divorced his first wife when I married him in 2017. But, his death opened feuds I never knew existed. At the time, I was 26 and I was his second wife. His first wife who doubled as his ex-wife showed up for his burial. As soon as my husband was six feet under, she took all household items, leaving me with nothing but a bed. I had never met nor interacted with my husband's ex-wife prior to his death. It was the villagers that introduced her to me as my co-wife, during my husband's funeral. But she came and violently took away my furniture, utensils, and every other thing she could put her hand on. I had to use the only money I had to start my life over again.

It is not easy to watch helplessly as your property is being carted away. Such a desperate and delicate situation could easily turn ugly. But I let God be in control. I found courage in knowing that it is God who provides and takes at will. I prayed for the courage to remain silent. But that was not all. My co-wife later stormed my house, asking me to vacate, claiming the compound that had both of our houses, as hers. It was a difficult moment characterized by physical assault, humiliation, and despair. It was a test of my patience and self-restraint. Somehow, I found the grace to remain steadfast from the Lord. I stayed on knowing that God was with me.

Shortly afterwards, my husband's ex-wife left for Nairobi. For the brief period she was away, there was relative calm. When she came back, she was even more hostile.

And she didn't want to see me in the vicinity nor see me use any of the resources in the compound such as trees. She was petty and often quarrelled. I chose to keep quiet until I couldn't anymore since I was boiling with anger. Chaos ensued at some point, and the matter was reported to the local administration. The administrators recommended arbitration by the in-laws. But an amicable solution was never reached. As a result, my co-wife continues to engage in a war of words which I choose to ignore.

When my husband died, we lived in a small makeshift structure. He died before he constructed for me a better house. The house he left behind may fall anytime. It is a ticking time bomb. One day I may wake up without a roof over my head. The roof leaks and the door is not lockable from inside, compromising our security.

But my greatest challenge is a land matter. My co-wife doesn't feel that I qualify to inherit any of the parcels of land our husband left us. She keeps invading my personal space and has intrusively planted trees behind my house. I feel my rights have been violated and this has become my greatest nightmare.

To fend for my children, I resorted to selling bhajia (fried potatoes). But this didn't work out as well as all the proceeds from the business got depleted in medical bills when my child and I fell sick. I resorted to doing menial jobs. As a young widow, it is assumed that if you speak with your brothers-in-laws, you are asking for sexual favours. This is part of the stigma that widows carry. For sure being widowed while young comes with so many challenges that call for a lot of work on self control.

I joined Nyanam in June 2021. Since then, I've received counselling and life skills, which I find very useful and relatable to my situation. Nyanam's program is tailored to meet the needs of widows like me. We're organized into groups at Nyanam and I'm part of the Daughters of Naomi. This group has given me a sense of togetherness and identity. Nyanam's counsellors are always available, whenever I feel overwhelmed and need someone to help process difficult decisions. Nyanam has drawn me closer to God with the teachings of Christ that we receive and has offered us a free space to vent without being judged. Nyanam has instilled in us the importance of a peaceful coexistence. I'm now a peacemaker. I strive to sow seeds of peace wherever I am.



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How I fought claims that I plotted to kill my husband and finding solace in God

Mary, 62 Years
Widowed for 17 years

It has been 17 years since he died. The two most daunting parts of life without him are being accused of having a hand in his death and dealing with the in laws. My in-laws don't appreciate that talking about my deceased husband opens painful memories of him. Sadly, that is part of the lonely journey of being widowed.

My husband was murdered on his way home from a drinking den. At the time of his death, he was set to get a bank loan. But, I was accused of orchestrating his death, when really his death caught me, like everyone else, by surprise. I reported him missing and a frantic search begun. When I was called to where his body was discovered, he was lying there calmly and innocently. He was breathless and lifeless. His warm smile had faded and his body was pale.

The assailants committed the heinous act trying to get money from him. They then fixed everything to appear as though I was part of the execution plan. I was threatened by his family and friends. It took a post-mortem to prove my innocence. He died leaving me with four children and a co-wife, who also later passed away leaving me with a huge responsibility.

Now, I stay with my co-wife's children. One is in form two and the other is a final year student at Eldoret Youth Polytechnic. Hopefully, he will be graduating later in the year. Whenever they are sent home for school fees, I'm never at peace. Raising fees is hard especially during these tough economic times.

Our property was registered in my husband's name. When he died, my brothers-in-law took everything, and



I wasn't expected to say anything. Their actions plunged me into an ocean of despair, and I needed help to survive. I was a church goer but never owned a Bible. I preferred listening to the scripture directly from the preacher. After being widowed, I got my own Bible, which I read every day before I sleep. It gives me reassurance and guidance. I have survived through a difficult and harrowing experiences as a widow, through the teachings in the Bible that reassure me that God is in control. The ways of the Lord have taught me to refrain from making bad decisions. God's hand and grace upon my life have helped me go through the vicissitudes of life. The Bible has become my solace.

Before he died, my husband was acquiring a loan to renovate our house which was in a state of disrepair. Unfortunately, he died before he could fix the house. And so, to honour him, I decided to use the money I got as a compassionate package to renovate the house. However, our customs do not allow for a second wife to construct a house before the first wife does so.

Nyanam helped me achieve my commitment to my husband. Having found me in an unlivable house during their first home visit, Nyanam donated construction materials and sent builders to help me construct a new house. I am an intrinsically stubborn and very emotional person. Joining Nyanam has been a journey towards being able to manage myself better. I would advise any widow going through hardships to put their trust in God that it shall be well. Nyanam has changed my life tremendously. I'm grateful that God's grace located me through you.



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From a desolate houseless widow to an exemplary farmer

Verine, 48 Years

Widowed for 21 years

My plan was to get married to a loving husband, have children, and raise them together. But God had other plans which always prevail.

I was 22 years old and had two lovely children – a boy and a girl – with my husband when he died in 2002. And just like that, my world turned topsy-turvy. At the time, I was a homemaker with no paid job. I depended on my husband to provide everything. His death left me exposed, with a financial and emotional burden to bear. I did not know how to face life without a partner. Neither was I prepared to raise our children alone. As he was being lowered six feet under, the cruel reality that I was on my own hit me.

In the days after his burial, I constantly wept by his grave side and worried about how life would pan out without him. The path ahead was blurry. He was a partial orphan and I wondered how I would take care of my already aging mother-in-law. These were truly dark days when I wallowed in loneliness and sorrow.

My first-born was in nursery school and the last born was still breast-feeding. They did not know that death had taken away their dad. However, the older child would occasionally ask about the whereabouts of his father. But because he was too young to understand, I lied that he would return soon. All this while, I encouraged myself to be strong if not for anything else but the children. I never wanted them to see me break down. But it hurt me every time I had to lie to conceal the truth from them.

There is no formula to mourn a loved one. Sometimes what would start out as a wonderful day would end up ruined by the endless reminders of your departed loved one. It is said that time is a great healer. But it was taking too long. The transition from denial to acceptance phase is especially draining. By God's grace, I found fortitude to accept that death, like life, happens to all. I slowly began to accept the reality that I was a



widow with a family to take care of.

Upon realising that whining and worrying would not change my reality, I ventured into subsistence farming, to be able to meet my family's needs and keep me busy to numb my sorrows. Were it not for my faith in God, I would have remarried. When opportunities to remarry presented themselves, I encouraged myself to stay. My mother-in-law always told me "That God knows and listens." "Nyochieng," she would tell me, "God is omnipresent." She was aged and we survived on my small-scale farming.

Having walked this path of widowhood, I use my life's story to encourage other widows. Sharing my experience was my way of healing. In return, I became a voice and beacon of hope in my community. People always referred widows to me for advice. My teachings were anchored on the Bible, especially the story of Ruth and Naomi. I'm glad that my mother-in-law took me in as one of her own when my husband died. I felt comfortable around her because she was a God-fearing woman.

At the time of my husband's death, we did not have a proper house. We were staying in a grass-thatched house which began to leak whenever it rained. My parents-in-law, also passed on, leaving me alone with my children. The house got worse and eventually collapsed. With no shelter for my children and I, and no one to turn to, I faced a double tragedy. This was a truly trying phase and the reality of death felt fresh again –this time, having lost three people whose presence signified strength and so much more. I was lucky to have well-wishers build me a house. I have now been a widow for the last 21 years. My eldest son is now of age and working in Nairobi. My daughter has just completed her studies.

In 2019, I joined Nyanam on recommendation by Nicodemus, a Nyanam team member, who explained to me the benefits of being a member. I am presently an active member as well as the incumbent secretary of Tieng'o Widows' Group. During the coronavirus pandemic, Nyanam donated foodstuffs to cushion us from hunger the families faced then. This is just one of the many instances when Nyanam has touched our lives so intimately.

I'm a born again Christian and I like sharing the word of God whenever I can. Nyanam sponsored me to pursue a training in Inductive Narrative Bible Study. This training, for which I'm eternally grateful for, gave me an opportunity to better understand the Bible. I'm now a better Bible teacher. Nyanam further enlightened me on good agricultural practices. As such, I currently practice smart agriculture. My tomatoes attract many customers. Nyanam has immensely changed my life and even villagers see the difference Nyanam has brought to my life. I'm a true testament to Nyanam's profound impact on widows' lives.



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Self-discovery during widowhood and making impact in the community

Jasinter, 30 Years

Widowed for 8 years



When my husband died in 2015, I was a 24-year-old mother of two boys. The first born was four years old while the younger was only five months old. Since he was the family breadwinner, life instantly became difficult. I had neither business nor source of income and my five-months old baby was too young to be left behind for me to go job hunting. My husband preferred that I stayed indoors to avoid gossiping. He was peace loving and believed that staying low-key was the best way to avoid quarrels. But also, he was raised as an orphan and his circle of friends was small.

Save for the flock of cattle he left behind which I now had to shepherd; I did not know exactly where to start. All I knew was that I had to go out of my way to fend for my young family. Widowhood comes with immense loneliness and poverty. The villagers would sometimes mock me that hunger would kill me. But their words inspired me not to be idle. And giving up, I promised myself, was not an option. Fees and other bills were staring at me. In retrospect, I cannot explain how I survived that phase until the time my baby was old enough to be left behind. In the first year after his death, I survived by the grace of God since I had no other source of income. We survived on subsistence farming and proceeds from the sale of sisal and ropes. This was all before I got employment with a community-based organization in 2018.

On the upside, my husband's death reminded me that I had to work extra hard knowing that I was on my own. While I strained, I challenged my limits, learning, unlearning, and relearning towards being the best I could be. I signed up for seminars to learn new things. I also worked hard to provide for my children. I became a good listener and quick learner. I also learnt to be malleable and teachable. As the days passed, I made new friends and

learnt new knowledge and skills that I never imagined I would ever have. With time, the narrative changed. My thirst for learning, improving myself and sharing my knowledge has elevated me to the status of being fondly referred to as “the community resource person.” People from my community consult me a lot. And now the only time I stay home is whenever I'm cleaning the house.

My four-year old never knew that his father had died. He believed that he was out working. Whenever he went out to play with other children, they would ask him about his father's whereabouts. He wondered why his father would not return home. When he reached grade six and could understand, I told him that his father had died.

Sometimes I long to have company, someone to share my life with. But I'm also used to staying alone now and adjusting to the change of having a companion once more would be difficult. I also do not want to remarry not only to protect my children from being ridiculed that their mother has remarried but also, to shield them from the trauma of adjusting to having a stranger as their father.

I joined Nyanam in 2019 and the first meeting was a turning point in my life. At this time, following constant squabbles with my in-laws, I had run away from my home and lived in a market centre. My in-laws interpreted my going to seminars and taking up jobs to care for my children as sexual immorality, and they never gave me peace. The teachings I got on the first day of meeting Nyanam urged me to go back to the home that I had abandoned the year before. I did so and had a meeting with the family I was reluctant to return to.

After listening to the story of Ruth and Naomi, I decided to be the modern day Ruth. The teachings opened my eyes to different perspectives of life, finances, family and so much more. Nyanam offers guidance and counselling but leaves you to make the necessary decisions by yourself. Thanks to their teachings, I now make informed and better decisions. I have changed a lot. I would say the married version of myself was lazy while the widowed version is an enterprising person.

The Bible is my compass. I have learnt how to be assertive, make critical decisions, and relate well with the people around me. Nyanam's teachings entirely rely on the Bible and its leaders are caring and compassionate, and this distinguishes Nyanam from all other NGO's I've been part of previously. At Nyanam, I have been currently tasked with the responsibility of leading a curriculum called Voice of Change, which centers learning from the stories of widows in the Bible.

I would challenge other widows to come out of their comfort zones and not be depressed over their husbands' deaths. To the older widows with daughters-in-law, be loving and guide the bereaved daughters with love and compassion. And for Nyanam, I'd ask you to continue helping the widows.



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widows rising

Rejection is the most painful experience in widowhood

Betty, 50 Years

Widowed for 25 years

I had only lived with my husband for three years before he died some 25 years ago. We were blessed with three boys. The eldest at the time was yet to start schooling.

We lived in Nyeri, where my late husband owned a garage. When he fell sick, we moved back to our ancestral land in Kisumu, leaving behind our children in Nyeri. When I went back to Nyeri to pick my babies, my husband passed on. And my world changed from that moment. I helplessly watched it crumble. All I had was taken by my in-laws, even before my husband was buried.

A fortnight after his burial, my father-in-law summoned me for a meeting and ordered that the garage that my husband owned would be taken over by one of my brothers-in-law. He ordered that I leave his homestead but leave his grandchildren behind. He explained that this decision was informed by the fact that I was still young and wouldn't stay without remarrying. I defiantly decided that I would remain behind and take care of my children. I decided to fight on. I moved to Nyeri and vowed to fight till I regained possession of my husband's garage among other properties.

When I took my husband's garage back, I knew this action would alter and redefine my relationship with my in-laws from that point onwards. My father-in-law kept my children, and I only visited them during the December holidays. One time, after missing my children so much, I devised a plan to take them back. I visited my in-law's home as usual during school holidays, thanked them for taking care of my children, and asked if they could visit with me for only a few days before schools reopened. I took the children, leaving everything that belonged to them behind, including clothes and books. And that was how I managed to get my children back with me. I stayed in Nyeri with my children for 13 years



working on my late husband's garage before visiting my in-laws again.

As a single parent who had only lived with my late husband for three years, my social life took an unprecedented twist. I was the only one from my family who had lost a spouse. Both my parents were still alive and my three sisters had spouses. I couldn't help but envy them. It pained me that my children never had a chance to experience fatherly love. I resolved to nurture my children to be the best they could be, despite the challenges.

I faced a lot of stigma as a widow. No woman wanted to see me walk with their husbands for fear that I would snatch their husbands from them. This resulted in a lot of bitterness and mental instability. I cried a lot and longed for compassion. In as much as I always envied the married who had spouses, I also decided not to remarry. I had an underlying fear of facing loss again, but my immediate concerns were finding someone who would not mistreat my children. In my culture children belong to their father's family and I did not want to interfere with lineage and identity of my children. Before I knew it, I was already 50 years old and felt I was technically past my prime age to remarry.

After 13 years, the business my late husband left couldn't support us, and so my kids and I went back to my in-law's home. We got to discover that my brothers-in-law had taken my husband's property. They had even sold some of his parcels of land and changed ownership to their possession without my knowledge. Given that I had left in a huff, my return was greeted with scepticism and rejection by my in-laws. They didn't want to hear anything to do with me and my children. Regaining possession of the property has been my greatest challenge, but I pray and hope that it will be sorted soon.

I joined Nyanam in 2022 as part of Mak Bada Widows Group. It has been a very positive experience for me. Because I am a believer, Nyanam has impacted my life positively and changed my view on so many aspects of life. Secondly, Nyanam has taught me to be strong amidst the bitterness, rejection and loneliness. Thanks to Nyanam, I have developed a confidence I never had before to be able to stand up for others widows.

Nyanam has also given me the emblem of leadership, and offered me various trainings on agriculture, business, counselling, and land rights. And now, I am happy to say I work as a community health volunteer courtesy of Nyanam.

At Nyanam, we carry out table banking activities to support ourselves. We have also formed a widows welfare in case of the loss of one of us. Looking back at all the negative things I have face since I became a widow, I can confidently say that Nyanam has given my life a new meaning. I know that God has great plans for me.



From all I went through, I can't spare any effort to help another widow

Ann, 66 Years

Widowed for 21 years

My husband was an only child. In a culture where bloodlines and legacies are fundamental to who a man is, when he died some 18 years ago, it felt as though an entire lineage was wiped out and the family ties cut from us. We had been married for 16 years and had three children together. Going by the Luo culture, a wife is to be inherited by her in-laws after the husband passes on. But after his demise, I considered myself old, and unsuitable for remarriage. Deep down I knew I wouldn't oblige to the societal expectations of widows providing for and taking care of widow inheritors. Widow inheritors often have greater demands than real husbands. They demand good food and special treatment all at the widow's cost.

After my husband's death, I was always treated as an outcast by his family, so I migrated to another community. Besides the economic burden that the death of my husband brought me, the grief was very overwhelming. I felt a lot of emotional anguish. It took a long time for me to accept that my husband was no more. My children and I had to make a lot of adjustments, which was only natural as we tried to fit into our new life without him.

Before he died, I was exclusively a homemaker and depended on my husband for all our family needs. I was quite unbothered about fending for the family. He provided everything – school fees, food, and love too. When he died, he went with all these. In his absence, I had to work twice as hard to make ends meet and be strong enough to face the uncertainties that come with being



widowed. Nothing stays the same. It feels like even the 25 years of living with my husband could have never prepared me for the twist and turns that life took upon his demise. As soon as he breathed his last, I knew I had to chin up. It is now 18 years since his died. Two of our children were already in secondary school when he passed on. And a year later, another daughter joined form one.

Given the financial burden that comes with widowhood, I sometimes got support from my birth parents. They did it wholeheartedly because they were supporting their offspring and their grandchildren. But that was hardly ever adequate. I joined several women groups in the hope of drawing warmth and support from them. But that never happened and the little warmth and energy that was left in me was drained. These groups came with financial obligations like membership fees which I could not afford nor keep up with.

I turned to religion and became a highly active member of the church. I was doing this to gain the church's help. The church should be a refuge for the destitute, like myself, so the holy book teaches. Sadly, the church also shunned me in my most desperate moments. I even organized a harambee to raise school fees for my children, but the church did not give me any support. Only a handful of friends came through, and they too could only help with school fees for only one of my children. My children always applied for bursaries through the chief's office, but they were disqualified in the process, as we were seen as outsiders, as migrants who did not fully belong.

After my children completed high school, I had no money to send them to college, so they stayed home. It was an incredibly challenging and defining time for me. My daughters got married while my son went looking for menial jobs to fend for himself since he did not have his secondary school certificate, owing to uncleared school fees debts. I did hairdressing and sold vegetables for a living. But right now, because of my advanced age, I can no longer plait hair, so I only sell vegetables. I was also a member of a women's collective where I could get loans through which I managed to put my children through school. This same group also gave me food donations every now and then.

Nyanam was a stitch in time. I first heard of Nyanam in 2019 when their team visited our village and asked the widows to form a group with a view to coming together to offer help and solutions to each other. Nyanam's founder, Jackie, was brought up by a single mother and Jackie understood what widows go through. We were told Nyanam would offer emotional, psychological, and financial support. More than three years later, I am testament to the great help I have received from Nyanam.

Besides mentoring widows, Nyanam donated foodstuffs during the International Widows' Day in 2020, when the country was at the peak of the COVID-19 crisis. Nyanam has trained us on how to



Nyanam
widows rising

be food secure . I am now able to feed my family, and to sell the surplus vegetables to my community. Nyanam has also trained us on microbusiness and taught us how to peacefully coexist in our groups, families, and community, which are lessons we wouldn't find elsewhere for free.

Nyanam has sharpened my leadership skills and I now consider myself a great leader. I'm the chairperson of my sub-group, Karwamati, which I effectively manage using the insights I have gained from Nyanam on leadership and management. It was at Nyanam where I learnt to grieve and accept the cruel reality of the death of my husband. Nyanam has taught me how to be a forgiving person, setting a good example to others in the community and being a cheerful giver. I now understand how I can bring together my fellow widows and build a community where we can share our struggles and triumphs. My greatest takeaway from Nyanam is to strive to be exceptional in everything we do professionally or socially. Nyanam also has a training program on land and property rights. Nyanam offers pro bono lawyers to help in this process. Thanks to Nyanam, I now am a custodian and guardian to my household and other widows whom I help navigate life after the death of their husbands.



Becoming the voice of change in my community

Grace, 43Years
Widowed for 15 years

I have been a widow for 15 years. My husband was polygamous, and I was his third wife. His demise changed a lot of dynamics in my life. His absence from my life brought a lot of challenges. I miss him, especially his support. For example, I was not allowed to till the land that I used to till before he died. My co-wives did not accept me, and they felt I was not worthy to be part of their family. They made life unbearable for me.

Before my husband died, I was doing business and I was thriving. My co-wives did not like my progress and were jealous about my success. They felt my husband favoured me over them, not knowing that my successful businesses enabled me to provide him with a comfortable life. My husband was a businessman and we made financial decisions together. The jealousy heightened after his death. Fortunately, my children were not involved in this. If I had been the first wife, I would never have mistreated my co-wives. I saw nothing to be bothered about since the man we shared was already dead.

My husband passed on when my children were young. The first born was in nursery school and the last born was still breast feeding. I was so stressed that I would go for days without eating. The children from the first wife looked down on me and would even graze their cattle in my farm where my crops were. That hurt. Out of frustration, I decided to leave my marital home and set up a new home. The whole experience was very humiliating. The new home was simple but not strong enough to resist the weather elements.

I remember one night as it was raining, the house began to



fall apart. My children and I were thoroughly rained on. This was one of the lowest times of my life. I was emotionally hurt but I had to be strong for my children. I encouraged them to be strong. I told them that no situation lasts forever. I was optimistic that one day, all would be well.

I applied for loan to build another house. Unfortunately, I was unable to repay the loan resulting in the auctioning of all my livestock. My brother-in-law helped me set up another home. It was not easy because my brother-in-law's wife felt threatened that I was snatching her husband from her. However, I kept my cool since I knew what I wanted. I also ensured that my children did not get to learn that I was being humiliated.

In 2021, we formed a self-help group - Yaw Pachi Olando Self Group - together with other widows in my area. It is through this group that we joined the umbrella of Nyanam. Joining Nyanam has been both a blessing and an eye-opener. Through the training dubbed "Duond Lokruok" which can be translated as the 'Voice of Change,' Nyanam's trainings have shaped my perception of life in a big way.

Other than the biblical related trainings on life experiences, Nyanam introduced the concept of kitchen gardening to us. I currently have my own kitchen garden where I grow vegetables which I use for myself and even sell to others at times. Nyanam also offers counselling that has helped in my healing journey. I'm now a respected leader at family and community level thanks to Nyanam. I urge widows to be good listeners and always share ideas with others, because through sharing ideas you grow. I am a farmer, businesswoman. I bless Nyanam for blessing me.



My battles to get control of my husband's property and how God turned my enemies into friends

Risper, 74Years

Widowed for 22 years

I married my husband in 1965. He died in 2001, leaving me with six children to take care for. For 22 years now, I've had no one to take my burdens to, so I turn to God for help. At the time of his death, my children had all completed their secondary education. I hustled my way through to ensure they got tertiary education.

I gave birth to ten children but four died. My daughters are now married. My only remaining son also passed on. His wife died five years before him, leaving him with a two-year-old child to nurture. The child he left behind is now done with secondary education.

I hail from Nyahera, Kisumu and I am married in Kano. Upon my husband's death, the first challenge I went through were people snatching land from me.

My in-laws claimed all the parcels – even my husband's portion. They thought I would die soon after him. My neighbours also started despising me and some of them even laid claim to the land. But God helped me to get most of my land back through the Land Commission. For some parcels, the cases are still in court. This was a challenging time for



me because I cannot read but I was helped by kind people that I met. As miraculous as it sounds, over time, the people who were grabbing our land became good neighbours and some even work for me now. Overall, I am grateful to God.

When he was alive, my husband elaborately explained to me about the parcels of land he had bought. Except, he did not tell me about the ancestral land. Partly because, in our society, women would not be informed about ancestral land issues, and because my father-in-law was not happy with me for having given birth to more girls, yet he wanted male grandchildren.

To be sincere, after my husband's death, we had a tough time. As part of my upbringing, I underwent hardships that prepared me to tackle life's challenges. Despite the challenges I have faced with threats of property grabbing, I considered my widowed life easier than my married life. My husband was a violent man and restricted my movement and interactions. His death brought me both personal freedom and economic burdens as I struggled to fend for my children single handedly.

As an older widow, Nyanam found me when I was already a born again and committed Christian. I love the ways of the Lord. I let myself bask in God's glory, grace, and goodness. I am passionate about widows and orphans, and whenever I can, I conduct gift drives for them. Because of my concern for widows and orphans, when I got the land, I was fighting for, I gave part of it to my nephews and nieces whose parents had passed on.

When I joined Nyanam, I thought I was too knowledgeable to learn new things. They proved me wrong. Together with a group of widows, we continue to learn lessons on many things and share experiences on how to cope and thrive as widows. I have become passionate about farming from the new farming methods that I have learnt from Nyanam. The teachings at Nyanam are eye-opening and have given me a sense of independence. I am happy and proud to be associated with Nyanam. Furthermore, as Psalms 23 states, "The Lord is my shepherd. He leads me through the valley of the shadow of death." I am willing to continue being a part of Nyanam and being part of the support system for the widows.

To my fellow women, I would advise you to stop being dependent on your spouses so that even in their absence, your life will still move on. If they are present, you can as well partner with them. That is the only way you'll be independent when they die. I now pray that God grants me more years to live so I could help more widows. I've had a wholesome transformation since I joined Nyanam,



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Epilogue

Amplifying the voices of those still unheard in our society

Grace Kinda,
Board Secretary, Nyanam

I first met Jackie at a conference in 2010, both attending as fellows of Zawadi Africa - an international scholarship program for young women. I was drawn to her humble, brilliant, and resolute spirit. Each year we met, our conversations deepened, realizing that we are both children of Luo widows and share a strong desire to support our mothers. Over the years, I celebrated as she rallied support to build a primary school and water resources for her community.

A few years later, Jackie reached out for help with developing a widows' curriculum for her organization, Nyanam International. Within a short time of operation, Nyanam's work and impact had spread fast among the widows in her community. More widows, including those outside her community, wanted to be part of its programs. This request awoke a conversation I once had with my mother as a child. She had said - "I wish there would be a place where widows can go, a center of sorts - a place where their voices are heard. That would mean so much." I resolved that I would do whatever it took to support Nyanam. Today, I serve on the board of Nyanam. The work is healing, meaningful, and powerful.

This anthology provided a glimpse into the lived experience of widowhood, through the eyes of ten women. Their stories amplify the voice of those still unheard in our society. These are stories of profound loss, but also of incredible resilience - the ability to adapt and recover in the most difficult situations. I hope that by reading you can use your voice to amplify theirs, too.



Epilogue

Showcasing the indomitable strength that widows have

Angie Okhupe,
Board member, Nyanam

As a board member of Nyanam, I write to you today with deep gratitude and a profound sense of purpose. It is both an honor and a privilege to be part of an organization that strives to uplift and empower widows, acknowledging the immense strength they possess.

My journey to this role has been shaped by personal experiences close to my heart. I was raised by a single mother. Witnessing her resilience, determination, and unwavering love left an indelible mark on my life. Her unwavering spirit instilled in me a deep appreciation for the challenges faced by widows and single moms alike, and the importance of supporting them on their path to healing and empowerment. Now, I use my personal experiences and professional expertise to make a lasting impact. I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of a supportive community, and it is my utmost passion to create a similar environment for widows who may feel lost or overwhelmed. Through Nyanam's programs and initiatives, we strive to provide widows with the resources, education, and opportunities they need to rebuild their lives with dignity and purpose.

I am inspired by the incredible stories of resilience and strength that emerge from the widows we work with. Their determination to rise above adversity, their commitment to their families, and their unwavering spirit are a testament to the human capacity for triumph. Through this anthology, you have found a tapestry of diverse narratives, showcasing the indomitable strength that widows possess in navigating life's obstacles and creating new beginnings. Through these stories, we honor their struggles, celebrate their victories, and raise awareness about the challenges they face. By sharing these narratives, we hope to inspire compassion, understanding, and support for widows worldwide, fostering a more inclusive and empowering future for all.



Epilogue, Daniel Ogetta, Journalist

They loved them. Then married them. But death snatched their spouses away from them. In this anthology, ten widows walked us through their grieving stages. Between denial and acceptance, they say, a lot is bound to happen. Sometimes it is rejection by the in-laws; other times it is just picking up the pieces that takes excruciatingly long. But does the grief ever fade completely?

It occurred to me as I wrote these pieces that I have lived bits of the struggles the widows have shared. While that is strange to say as man, it's hardly strange for boychild raised by widow. I had so many episodes of *deja vu*, paused severally midway when engulfed with bouts of empathy and sympathy. It was intensely consuming to relive these moments. While each widow's experience is unique, many moments reminded me of the experiences of my widowed mother. I knew the struggle because my mother always mumbled them in prayers when she thought we were deep asleep.

Having been raised by a single mother, these struggles sounded familiar. Mothers have a way of telling when something is wrong with us. My mum seemed to have mastered the art of reading our emotions. And, whenever she felt we were low, she always encouraged us with verses from the Bible. She would wake up to pray for her household in the darkest of the nights. She taught me that the combination of the Bible, God and hard work always yields good fruits.

She taught me that every sunrise and sunset were prayer times. In the morning, God would be picking and queuing prayers —and the early you prayed the better, she would tell us. In the evening, God would be planning and recapping. She taught us to always meet with God at these hours.

I choose to reflect on this part of my life because it is held here in the stories of the ten widows. I feel like a part of my life —and soul — is in between these beautiful covers. If not for anything else, I took part in the writing of this anthology as an honour to my mum. May these stories of resilience awaken the verve in you, to fervently pursue whatever you put your heart to. While at it, may heavens harken to the desires of your heart.



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