

'I am not Nobody now' (by Amai Toriro and Juliet Waterkeyn)

I am Amai (Mother) Toriro. This is the story of how my life changed when I became a health club member. In 1995, I was dumped by my husband. He left me with 7 children and went to the city. He had another wife but after six years she died of AIDS and he came back to his rural home for me to look after him. When he came back six years later our home had changed. He told me to take down the rooms I had built as he did not approve of my design. But the members from the health club came and helped to defend me and in the end he agreed to keeping my house the way I had made it. Two years later he died and I kept on by myself supporting my family. My husband left me with nothing;

At first I was in difficult times as we had no money, until I joined the Community Health Club started by Zimbabwe AHEAD Organisation and we were taught how to self realise. We called our club 'Rujeko' meaning Light! I attended the health sessions every week for six months and learnt about so many things. It gave me light to understand how to prevent diarrhoea, bilharzia, malaria, skin diseases, worms, even HIV/AIDS but most of all how to care for our family with good hygiene. I completed all 20 health lessons and graduated with my certificate in 1996. The next year my children and I dug a pit latrine and our own deep well. Later I put in a handpump on the well from the money I earned. I became the Chairperson for our club in 1998.

In our meetings we learned how to improve our way of living and we applied this knowledge. We were given homework every week to improve our lifestyle. I built a pot rack for drying the plates off the ground. I dug a rubbish pit, and kept my yard clean. My kitchen is so beautiful, with homemade clay shelves and everything laid out well. My water is covered properly and we take drinking water carefully with a ladle. We know unsafe water, dirty food, and dirty hands cause diarrhoea. Our children are no longer sick due to poor hygiene.

In 1999, every club member was trained with a skill to enable us to make money for ourselves. We learnt how to sew mosquito nets, and others learnt how to press oil to make soap. In our areas over 100 people joined a paper-making project. My two children were also trained and got a full time job making paper. During difficult times in Zimbabwe this helped us to survive as they went to Harare and made paper there.

In our club some were trained how to keep bees. We must plant wood lots if we keep bees, because bees need trees, so this makes our area very green. I started with just a mud hut, but with my income from selling vegetables and herbs, I built a four-bedroom house, making my own bricks and roofed with iron sheets. All have nutrition and herb gardens and I now have drip irrigation. I am earning as much as an office worker from selling vegetables, herbs and honey

Something very important to me as a woman, is caring for the home and the children. I myself paid for their school fees up to 'O' level. I even told them if you want something like a better life you must have skills. So all my children joined the clubs, even all my friends were in the club and we were together every week meeting and planning our projects. I am happy and I just feel free, and pleased with every activity. I am self-reliant now because I have knowledge and skill to live well.

Our health club always assists those who have problems in the village. We also know how to cure small infections suffered by people living with AIDS. I am now a District Nutrition Trainer for ZimAHEAD. I train the carers how to handle the clients and care for the sick. I have over 70 varieties of herbs in my garden, and I know all the names, and how to use them. I help families to organise their lives when

someone dies. We help each other with funerals through a revolving loan. When there are funerals in the village, those in the health clubs always cook as we know how to be hygienic and prevent cholera and diarrhoea. As health club members we often support those orphans without parents and the widows lacking food with our own produce, and with clothes.

Our health training stopped five years ago but we continue to meet every week to plan our projects. We play netball, we remind ourselves of good practice and have competitions for the best home. In our ward there are 20 health clubs just like Rujeko with over 100 members in each. In Makoni District there are over 200 health clubs with about 20,000 members. There are many women like me with smart, clean homes and healthy children who will survive and be strong. I was happy with what I have done with my time on earth, even though I too have the terrible disease called AIDS and must die soon.

Epilogue:

Mrs Toriro died in 2010 from AIDS but she set a fine example by her energy and dedication to the community, and many came to her funeral. Though her own hard work she raised herself and her family up and although she died prematurely she was happy with her life and is remembered throughout Makoni District. As she once said to me, ***'I am not nobody now'***. We send you her story which she dictated for us, so that her example can act as an inspiration far beyond her own area. One woman on her own is often powerless, but there is nothing stronger than a group of motivated ladies.

Picture 1: Strong women: Community Health Club Women celebrate getting a certificate for completing 6 months health sessions, with Project Co-ordinator Josephine Mutandiro (left) and trainers: Mrs Toriro (Center) and Mrs Rezen (right).

Picture 2: An immaculate kitchen inside a mud hut.



Below: Mrs Toriro shows her upgraded family well With windlass and cover. Behind is her garden with over 100 herb varieties and vegetables grown organically, no fertilizer and with intercropping. (I cant find the .jpeg of this)