

MOTHERHOOD, LABOR, FAMILY, STRUGGLE AND SURVIVAL:



The untold stories of
women breathing life
into flower farms
in Uganda





INTRODUCTION

Women make up 60 to 75% of the labourforce in the floriculture sector, taking up tasks like weeding, harvesting, packing and labelling flowers. These are the stories of four such women working on two flower farms in Uganda. Beyond their occupations, these stories are of their full, complex existences: their backgrounds, childhoods, strengths and limitations. These are profiles of their life journeys from being children themselves, to growing into adults who have children, keep their families together, contribute to theirs and their families' economic survivals; as well as navigate the capitalist-patriarchy.

HOW WE PUT THIS TOGETHER

These stories were primarily collected by sound recordings and written notes from oral interviews conducted in the local, Luganda language and later transcribed into English. Some sentences have been shortened for purposes of accurate translation.

The interviews were conducted at the farm premises where these women work; in offices, compounds and even while walking through the green houses. Additional interviews were recorded inside the homes of three of the subjects.

WHAT WE OBSERVED

In these stories, the overriding themes remain: motherhood, labor, family, struggle and survival. The subjects speak of the responsibility of child care that has been largely left to them, whether by absentee fathers, present but dormant ones, or partners who have passed on. For three of them, their first encounter with child birth and motherhood came unplanned, during school. The fathers of only two of these remained in their lives and those of their children. Work in the green houses is characterized by little pay, long hours and just half of or no protective gear. Both these farms have daycare centers on site which allow for the women laborers with children up to 2 years old to come to work with their kids and leave them in safe care as they go into the green houses to work.

It is mostly women who work in the farms as casual laborers; picking, weeding and harvesting. The few men working there are either in irrigation, welfare, or scouting, which is the more scientific task of checking flowers for pests and diseases.

Salaries range between UGX 90,000 (USD 24) for workers on probation, to UGX 300,000 (USD 81) per month. These are inclusive of lunch and before statutory cuts (Pay As You Earn-PAYE, National Social Security Fund, etc.) While the workers at one of the farms are transported to and from work, workers at the other one have to walk there. Women at both farms have representatives on the workers' trade union committees, and have begun savings cooperatives to supplement their salaries.





Efforts to request for salary increments are futile, and medical welfare is limited. At one of the farms, the women confided that when taken for treatment, some workers' medical results are altered by medical practitioners in connivance with management, so that the farm authorities will avoid responsibility. Some of the medical issues that came up were: infected feet due to damaged gumboots, hand cuts from thorns, and back pain which is the most prominent considering the posture taken to do this work.

Temperatures inside the green houses are high, something they say they got used to. There was a covered bucket of drinking water in each green house while the other farm had none.

The subjects appeared to be in higher spirits, seemingly glad when they were being listened to and humanized. They were happiest and most comfortable in their homes. Those whose children have outgrown the farm day cares often leave their kids with women neighbors to whom they pay a small fee, or buy foodstuffs for as compensation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This curating of women's experiences would not have been possible without the support of Hivos, who have been in the vanguard of advocating for decent work for women under the auspices of the Women@Work Campaign. The Women@Work Campaign is an initiative by Hivos that seeks to propel decent working conditions for women who earn their living in global production chains most notably flowers, fruits and vegetables grown for export. Special thanks also go to Edna Ninsiima whose strength in weaving words humanised the subjects of these stories and allowed us into their lives; and to Mudo Evaline whose artistic eye allowed us a peek behind the curtain to see how the women work and live. Together they were able to bring to life, the experiences of these women, and solidify their contributions for posterity.

We now invite you into the lives of Felista, Rita, Specioza and Namatovu.





FELISTA

FIGHTING FOR WOMEN'S LABOUR RIGHTS TO THE WORKERS' COMMITTEE

Felista has a delightful personality. She smiles, greets and is eager to explain and to give whatever information needed about her work. It is clear in her clarity and swiftness to answer, that she has mastered the ins and outs of her job's task, and that of the others. Felista has worked at the farm for nine years now – which explains why she is very well versed with the work.

Felista grew up with her mother and father, peasant farmers in Mubende District. She went to school until only Primary Seven when decided to drop out. A decision she attributes to the tiresome long journey to a Universal Primary Education school. "We would walk six miles from home to school. Sometimes I would be sent back home as a school fees defaulter. I got tired of it all and left in search of work and a better living." She would later find work as a domestic house help in Buloba town, Wakiso District. This is where the farm she works at is located. It is where her home is too.

Felista worked for a couple who she says was anything but kind. "They treated me poorly and paid me peanuts. Sometimes the meagre pay came way past its due date, other times it didn't come at all." The couple had set up a Pentecostal church and asked that she start singing and drumming there, once they discovered her skill set in the activities. A request she immediately declined. "I am Catholic, so I didn't want to be a part of their worship." That is when she left and moved in with her sister and brother-in-law.

THE JOURNEY TO THE FLOWER FARM.

In 2011, Felista who at the time was staying with her elder sister decided that this dependence was not for her anymore. "I didn't have a job, yet I had my own necessities. I had heard that there was a flower farm in the area. So, one morning in August of 2011, I began to walk towards here, asking anyone I met for further directions because I was not certain where exactly the farm was." When young men on a passing pickup truck which she would later discover had been headed to her destination offered her a ride, she took it, but almost immediately asked to alight. She says there was no road by then, only paths and a lot of forest, most of which is still surrounds the farm establishment. "There were also frequent murders being committed. Dead bodies would be found in the forest and shrubs on several mornings, so I rethought my decision to get on the truck."

Felista got to the farm at a time when it was in dire need of workers. She was led to the office and handed a bucket and a contract on arrival. "There was no application system like it is today, we simply started and were assigned supervisors." The supervisors then were unsparing and did not stand for any errors from even the workers like Felista who were new on the job. But one week into her start of work, the farm management organized a three-weeks training at the headquarters in Mukono District. During that time, they would be transported to and fro and provided lunch too. "The workers with whom I began have all left. Only one remains. Many left during the training." On why she stayed in spite of implacable supervisors and the work that her fellow trainees found too hectic: "I had no other way. I did not have a job, yet I wanted my life situation to change."



THE JOB

9 years later, Felista not only picks flowers at the farm, she is also on the workers union committee which they began to protect their interests. This position requires her to speak to the management committee members on behalf of her fellow workers. Some of the issues that arise include; medical, operational and remuneration complaints. From Monday to Saturday, the company transportation van picks her up from a stage near her home which is in the same Buloba town of Wakiso district. Once at her work premises, she and the others change into their overall coats, whose colors each represents the stage of flower farming to which the workers are allocated. They wear gumboots too, with socks that they purchase themselves. They then have breakfast and should

be at their work stations by 8:00 am. Within 8 hours of a day, they are required to pick 6,000 small flower shoots in bunches 120 groups of 50 flowers each. This is the number of flower shoots per package that is exported to Holland. Each harvest is put on a weighing scale to determine the accurateness of each individual's harvest – the target number here is 40 – 45 grams. The workers don't always meet the target. "Sometimes flowers are not as many in the green houses, and they (supervisors) can see that. So they accept an allowance of some flowers less, say 3000 to 4000 flowers. But if one is consistently not meeting their targets even during the inaugural 3 months training, they are issued a warning, sometimes laid off."



CHALLENGES

Felista is most challenged by a constant lack of money and inconsiderate managers. "It (the money) never adds up. I am constantly broke and sometimes the salaries come late, without explanation. Yet we need it, we have to eat, we have kids to take care of. The statutory cuts (NSSF and PAYE) also bring the final pay even lower." Recently when salaries delayed, Felista and other committee members presented their fellow workers' dissatisfaction to management. "Now committee members are being accused of instigating the rest. There is a notice on the board that those who were striking might be penalized with a salary cut."

Despite these monetary challenges, Felista has some job benefits and has made some moves. She rents a house together with her husband with a UGX 20,000 (USD 5) rent allowance that the job affords her. Her benefits include a daily UGX 2,000 (USD 0.54) pay for a meal at lunch. And in 9 years, with her UGX 8,500 (USD 2.2) per day pay, Felista Nakavuma has bought a piece of land on which she hopes to build her own home.

FAMILY

The house in which Felista lives is one-roomed, central to a line of other similar house units. Inside, a large curtain separates what looks like the bedroom from the living room area. Left to a couch in which she sits holding her son, is a LED TV and a free-to-air decoder. These, she says she has bought recently, after attending the Akina Mama wa Afrika training and being encouraged to save. "Every day I walked by the shop from work and saw this TV. I knew I wanted it, but I didn't have enough money. The training was the push I needed. I saved up and last month I bought everything at UGX 330,000 (USD 89). Now I am able to catch up in the news and the shows I like."

Her 2 year old son, Andrew has recently left the daycare at the farm. Now she leaves him with the old women neighbor. "I buy some sugar, rice and milk which can be prepared to him to feed on during the day." Her husband, a casual laborer, doesn't always have jobs, which she finds frustrating. "Sometime he goes weeks without getting work, which means that every expense falls on me. Yet it would be easier if we shared the costs."

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RITA



A PREGNANCY WHILE STILL IN SCHOOL FORGED FOR HER A DIFFERENT PATH

23 year old Rita is a mother of two, a 7 year old and 2 year old. She doesn't often see the older one who she says she had, unprepared. "I did not even breastfeed her. As soon as she was born, my mother took her, while I began to look for work. She still lives with my mother." While in Primary School in her home district Mbale, she became pregnant; that was the end of her education. "My father was furious and could not stand the sight of me. He said that I had disappointed him by getting pregnant and that I had now become a spoilt child." Rita wishes that her father had accorded her a second chance. "Who knows, if he had allowed me to continue with school, I might have made something better of myself and my life."

A friend brought her to Kampala to work in a bar. She worked there for nine months. "My boss treated me well, gave us food and even accommodation. But the bar revelers were mostly annoying and unbearable." It is at this bar that she met her now, husband and father of her second child in 2015. "He used to be one of the bar patrons. One day he propositioned me, asking to take me away and give me a better life. At first I was hesitant because I had been warned about men in Kampala. My friends said they were always looking to exploit women and nothing more." She eventually gave this man the benefit of a doubt. Rita now lives with this man, a builder by occupation, together with their second child. The father of her first child often sends money as part of child support, and sometimes, takes his daughter for the school holidays.

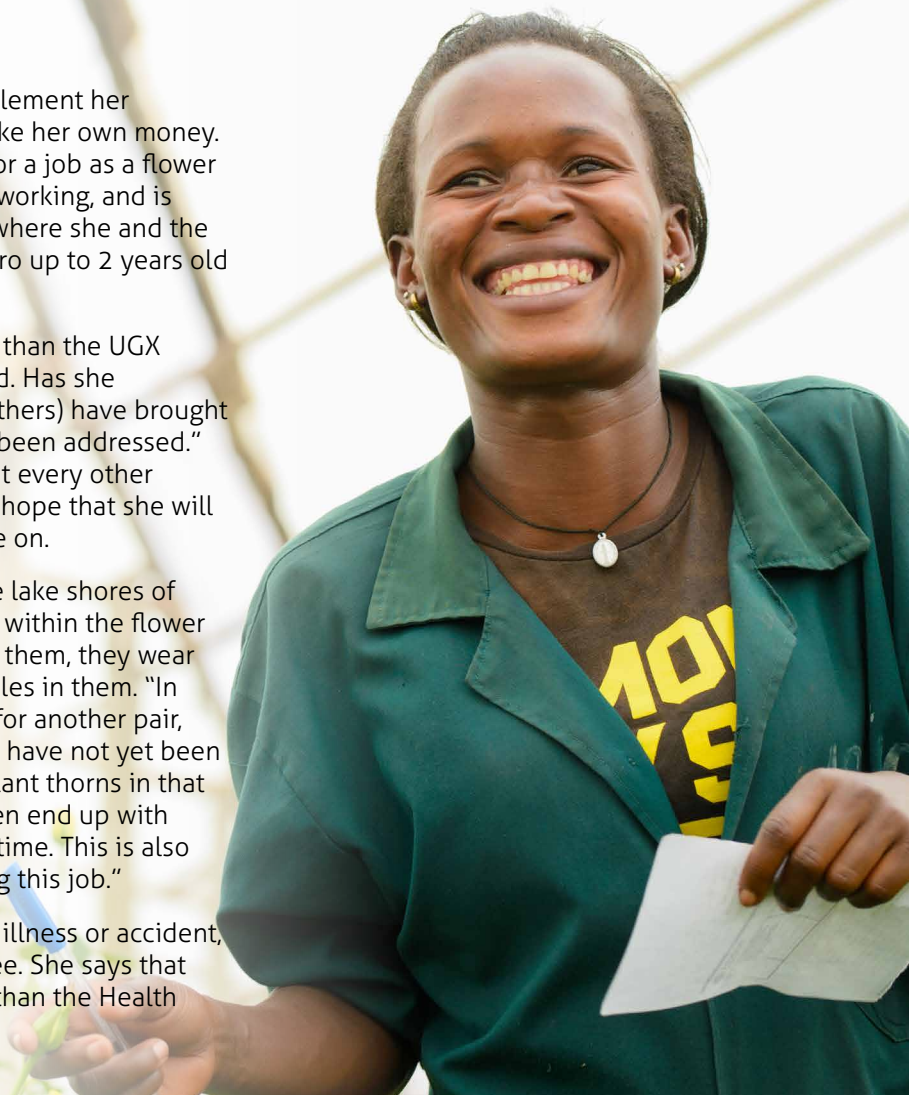
THE JOB

Last year, Rita decided she wanted to supplement her husband's salary, but most importantly make her own money. She came to the flower farm and applied for a job as a flower picker – she was hired. She is happy to be working, and is most grateful for the daycare on the farm where she and the other mothers' babies of, right from day zero up to 2 years old are taken care of while they work.

She however wishes that she earned more than the UGX 90,000 (USD 24) per month that she is paid. Has she communicated this issue? "We, (with the others) have brought it to management before, yet it has barely been addressed." The most they do is make a 10% increment every other year." She nevertheless keeps going in the hope that she will eventually find something better and move on.

The farm at which Rita works is right by the lake shores of the Lake Nalubaale, which causes flooding within the flower beds. And while gumboots are provided to them, they wear away overtime and many old ones have holes in them. "In such cases, we're supposed to requisition for another pair, but sometimes they will say that new ones have not yet been purchased. With the flooding and flower plant thorns in that water (we do not have gloves), many women end up with infected feet and thorn pricks most of the time. This is also why many of our colleagues end up leaving this job."

The workers here are treated, in case of an illness or accident, at the farm's dispensary for a subsidized fee. She says that whereas it can be costly, it still is cheaper than the Health Center IV clinics in the town outside.



LESSONS FROM AKINA MAMA WA AFRIKA'S FEMINIST TRANSFORMATION LEADERSHIP TRAINING



Rita was able to change the ways in which she responded to authority before. "When I had just come here, I didn't want to be told to do anything other than what I wanted to do. Taking orders was very difficult for me. In the training, we had a session on conduct which I think helped me a lot." Rita has now taken it upon herself to help orient new workers who might have challenges adjusting in the beginning. "Some even say to me: you used to be that way too," she laughs.

She has also taken to body exercising, a practice she also took away from the training, even when she says it was difficult to adjust to. "When they asked us to get up early on the first day I was irritated. I thought that we should be left to rest for the period of the training." By the third day, she said she felt more alive than ever and wanted the exercises to become a daily routine. "I don't always have time because even before I get to work I have to get the child ready for school. But over the weekends especially, I go to the nearby football field and jog. My husband has started joining me too."

THE WOMAN AT HOME

When she is at home, she likes to sit on a particular couch and relax, watching TV or listening to the radio. Other times, she is cooking a meal for her family, or playing with her younger child. Rita wants to be listened to more when she raises her concerns. Something she says does not happen enough in communication with her partner.

IN THE FUTURE

Rita is not certain yet what she would do after here. "I have been saving about UGX 30,000 (USD 8) per month, mostly. When it accumulates, I can think of a plan then. For now, I hope to get a better job, or maybe have a piece of land to grow my own food."

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SPECIOZA

FEELING THE PINCH OF THE GENDERED BURDEN OF PARENTING

"My name is Aude Specioza, and I am 50 years old. I work as a supervisor in Green House 12 and I have worked here for 14 years." This is not the first time Specioza is working at a flower farm. Before her job here, she worked at another farm, still as a supervisor, where she left as soon as management imposed salary cuts on staff. A mother of five, Specioza says she would have had six children, if her first child had not passed on.

"I have four boys and a girl now. I had a girl before all of them, but she died when she was a baby." With the first one now 31 years old, and the last one 22, she is ready to retire. "All of them have been put through school. I only have the last born left to go." The 22 year old was admitted to higher institution of learning but couldn't go this year because the money for tuition was not enough. Her mother however hopes to have him enrolled next year.

In 2013, Specioza built a small bungalow house which stands alone in a neighborhood close to the shores of Lake Nalubaale. On the unplastered walls hang framed pictures of her children and grandchildren, one of her in her hey-days. Specioza lives with her two grandchildren and her last child who currently is away looking for work. Today, one of the daughter's is visiting too. One grandchild is taking an afternoon nap; the one who is awake snuggles up to her throughout our conversation.

SPECIOZA WISHES THAT MEN WERE BETTER PARTNERS TO WOMEN, ESPECIALLY IN PARENTING. "MEN HAVE NEGLECTED THEIR PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES, LEAVING THE BURDEN TO WOMEN. NOW IT IS US WHO HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF THE KIDS AND ALSO WORK TO SUSTAIN THEIR LIVES, WITH NO HELP AT ALL."



GROWING UP

Specioza grew up with both her parents in Mukono District. They sent her to school. When she was in Primary Six, she got pregnant and dropped out to start a family with the father of her unborn child. He already had a grocery shop with which he ensured she was taken care of. Together, they had more children and he remained the breadwinner, with her taking care of kids, selling fried Tilapia fish to local residents and doing some subsistence farming. Then he died. "I only started a full-time job when my husband passed on. Before he would take care of us, but now with the responsibilities glaring at me, I had no choice but to look for employment. That is also why I have held on for so long – the responsibilities."

THE JOB

"I have always liked the job for the most part. I have taken care of my kids; most of them are out of the house and have started their own families. I have not had many difficulties working until recently." She attributes this to the piling responsibilities which make her month salary insufficient. "My parents too can no longer afford to fend for themselves, and I have to fend for them. I am exhausted; and I am certain the most I can continue doing this work is five years."

Specioza has attended a couple of Feminist Transformation Leadership trainings conducted by Akina Mama wa Afrika. Her biggest lesson from them has been to adjust the hard-handed conduct towards fellow workers in her supervisory role. "I used to be very tough on these women. Many times I didn't listen to them; and I felt that I was better than them. I have since worked on changing that. I am better."

She has also learned to exercise self-care and saving skills. "I liked the morning exercises they taught us to do and I try to jog when I have time. I like Club Beer, so I also drink one or two bottles once in a while." Aude has also since made it a habit to religiously take a percentage of her salary for saving as soon as it comes, before she starts to spend everything else.

Friendships with fellow workers here for Specioza have been a little rocky. She had friends at the farm she worked at before, but hasn't had so much luck here. "It is difficult to confide in people here. You might let someone in on the secret, next thing you know is it is out there."

ON WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Specioza wishes that men were better partners to women, especially in parenting. "Men have neglected their parental responsibilities, leaving the burden to women. Now it is us who have to take care of the kids and also work to sustain their lives, with no help at all." She also believes that if the hours at work were revised to allow women work solely on deliverables' basis, they might be doing financially better. "We are very enterprising – a lot of women here can bake confectionaries, weave mats and do crocheting. Yet we barely have time for anything other than this job. Even when one has completed their day's tasks, the managers require that they remain in the green houses doing something else until the day ends." When they get home at the end of the day, they barely have any energy for anything else after cooking meals for dinner and taking care of their children.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

In retirement, Specioza had thought before that she would resume farming. Not anymore. "I thought I would go back to farming, but I don't think I will be able to do that now as I have no land to till, or even strength for the activity." The hope now is that she will set up a charcoal store, as well as a grocery shop.

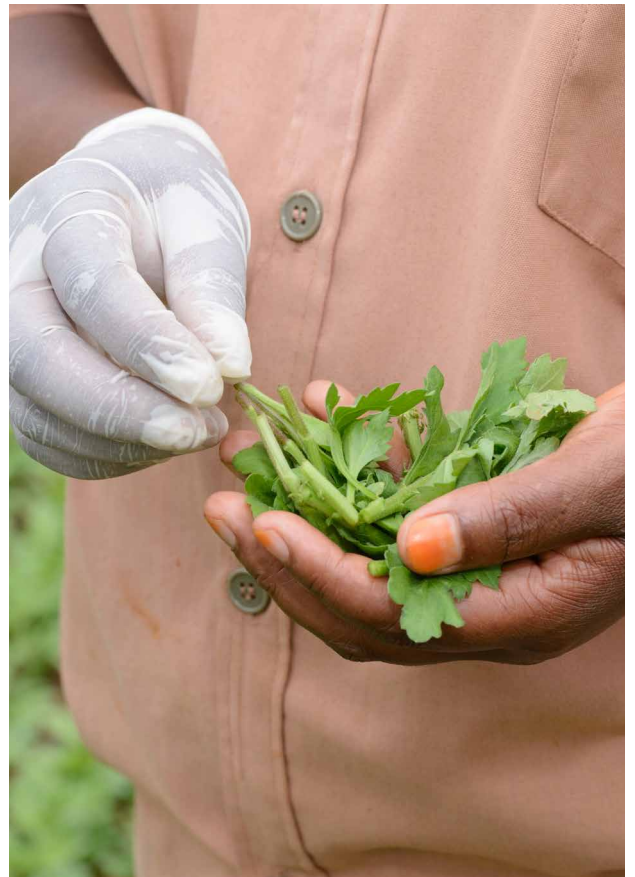




NAMATOVU

STAYING BUSINESS SAVVY TO SURVIVE

Namatovu is the popular socks vendor among her colleagues. At the end of her work day, outside the changing rooms, she turns into a trader – showcasing her product, conducting negotiations, and recommending what pair and color of socks one should buy. Each pair goes for 2,000 Uganda Shillings (USD 0.54), earning her a 1,000 shillings (USD 0.27) profit. On market days in the Nsangi town where she resides, Grace buys second hand knee-length socks which she then resells to the woman at the farm. "I had this idea when we last attended a training workshop with Akina Mama. They told us that we could come up with ideas to supplement our salaries. I had realized that many woman here struggle to find socks to wear inside their gumboots, since we are not provided those. So I started this small enterprise." One fellow worker says that it is helpful that she doesn't have to go looking in markets when her socks are worn out; another one wishes the price for a pair went lower.



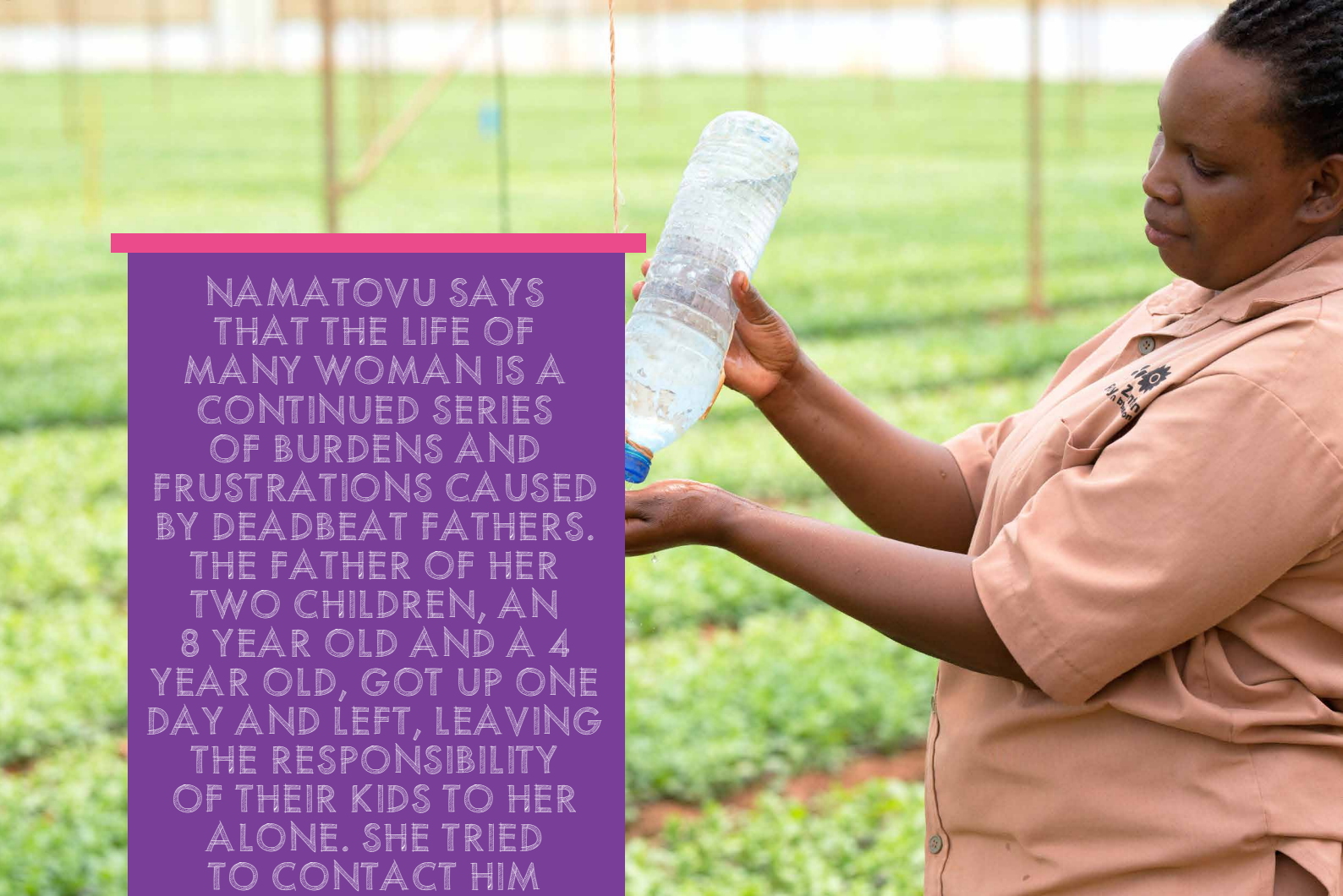
COMING TO THE FARM

"I was working as a food vendor, earning 3,000 shillings (USD 0.8) per day. I delivered breakfast and lunch to casual laborers and private sector workers, most of who would verbally harass me and sometimes refuse to pay for the food they ate. For every time a customer didn't pay, my boss would deduct that amount off my salary. I was always tired and frustrated."

From the town in which Grace lives, she always saw this farm's green houses in a distance. She had heard only bad things. "When I asked around, people always dissuaded me. Many said that I would contract HIV/AIDS. I was skeptical too but I was tired of my job where even a plate breaking meant that I would be penalized." On 20th July, 2014, Grace asked her friend, a boda-boda rider to bring her to the farm. At the farm, she asked the guards whether the farm needed workers. "They told me to return on the 26th, when they would be registering a new group. I did not have any money for transportation on the return date. So I reached out to my friend again. Grace's friend rode her to the farm again. When she and the rest who had also come in search for employment had gathered, they were led inside for interviews. She had been the last one in the queue, and to be interviewed, yet her name was read first in the selections. Grace attributes these events to her relationship with God. "In those times I read the Bible often, and the word encouraged and affirmed me."

"THEY DO NOT LISTEN TO US SOME TIMES. OUR BACKS HURT ON THE JOB, SO WHEN I STAND UP FOR A FEW MINUTES TO STRETCH AND REST, WHY SHOULD THAT GET ME A LETTER OR CAUTION?"





NAMATOVU SAYS THAT THE LIFE OF MANY WOMAN IS A CONTINUED SERIES OF BURDENS AND FRUSTRATIONS CAUSED BY DEADBEAT FATHERS. THE FATHER OF HER TWO CHILDREN, AN 8 YEAR OLD AND A 4 YEAR OLD, GOT UP ONE DAY AND LEFT, LEAVING THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THEIR KIDS TO HER ALONE. SHE TRIED TO CONTACT HIM THROUGH HIS BROTHER, BUT IT BECAME EXHAUSTING SO SHE MADE PEACE WITH HIS DEPARTURE.

ON THE JOB

Grace works from 7 am to 4.30 pm in flower growing, pinching (an activity similar to pruning), as well as weeding. She is grateful for work, although getting up so early, she admits, doesn't afford her enough rest. "I have to make dinner for the kids when I get home after a long day. Then be up by 5 am

to prepare them for school and get ready because the van that picks us to transport us to the farm arrives at 6 a.m." Supervisors are often uncompromising. "They do not listen to us some times. Our backs hurt on the job, so when I stand up for a few minutes to stretch and rest, why should that get me a letter or caution?"

On back pain, she says that many woman leave after they have developed back complications. Complaints about back pain here might either get you taken to a clinic for treatment, or if you're unfortunate, accused of having brought with you this "problem." "Especially for the new workers, if they complain of back pain, often times they will be told: you must have already had it. How come others who have been here longer than you aren't complaining?" There is a pregnant woman working in one of the green houses. Grace says that pregnant workers are entitled to a three months unpaid leave from early in the 3rd trimester – but many choose to stay up until the 8th month.

In green house number 7 where she often works, she shares a light moment with two male workers, who she later reveals work in irrigation. They seem to have a good working relationship, and she confirms that she has no complaints working alongside either of them.

What drives Namatovu is that she at least has a job from which she has managed to not only single-handedly feed and school her children, but also buy a piece of land. "Compared to what is out there, even if the money is little, I am grateful." She and some of the womxn here have started a Savings and Credit Cooperative (SACCO) under which they deposit money on a monthly basis and lend it out to their members in their time of dire need.

Namatovu says that the life of many woman is a continued series of burden and frustrations caused by deadbeat fathers. The father of her two children, an 8 year old and a 4 year old, got up one day and left, leaving the responsibility of their kids to her alone. She tried to contact him through his brother, but it became exhausting so she made peace with his departure.

"And it is not only me. Many women here are also struggling alone. Men have thrown all of the responsibility to us; from finding the kids' schools, to buying all the necessities. Most of us withstand certain conditions because we have no help raising our kids, it's all on us." She has since found another partner with whom she lives, close to her sister who works in a salon in the same town. "Sometimes he (the partner) helps me with paying school fees. My sister also helps me a lot too. She drops and picks my children from school."

THE FUTURE

"When I leave here, I do not want to be employed anymore." Namatovu hopes to set up a makeshift trailer container which she will turn into a grocery shop. "I have always also wanted to build my own house and stay in with my kids."





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