



Spirititan

VICS

Empowering the vulnerable in Uganda
A chance for a healthy life in Nicaragua
Defying Tough Odds in Cameroon

Empowering the Vulnerable and Stigmatized

This year VICS was thrilled to start a new partnership in Uganda with The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of The Good Shepherd. Spiritan priests at Mulango Parish, Kampala, had asked the Sisters to find and work with vulnerable people living on the margins. Sister Bibian and Sister Jennifer went to the most obvious place in their parish – the Katanga slum. There, they found many women whose only hope for income was prostitution. Slowly, a

relationship was built, and the women started sharing their struggles and dreams. The Mirembe Women’s Project was born.

Through funding from a private source in the US, Sisters Bibian and Jennifer began a micro loan program – giving 37 women \$US16 per month to start a small business. The types of businesses would not be new to VICS volunteers: selling candy on a tray, roasting corn, selling vegetables such

as onions and tomatoes, making and selling soup or samosas to people living in the slum, and making charcoal from green banana peels. For safekeeping, the Sisters keep any small profit and have it accessible for the women when needed. But that’s not all. Once a certain amount has been saved, the Sisters match their savings and the women re-invest in their business.

Seeing how they really live

I had the privilege of meeting these women who the Sisters call “recovering prostitutes”. The Sisters park about a kilometre away, then walk to the slum. Arriving unannounced, the Sisters see how the women really live. (How many of us would apologize for the condition of our home if people arrived without prior notice?)

Walking through the “two people wide” pathways, we saw washing on lines strung between houses, open polluted water runs, a murky creek that rises and floods homes during the rainy season, and one-room windowless homes made of mud and plaster or cement. People jostle to get past each other, walk along narrow ledges next to the open water runs; and children being children run, play, cry, and vie for attention. Women not only repeatedly smile and welcome the Sisters, but also welcome us visitors who “come to see us and care about us even when you don’t know who we are.”

Houses are made from different materials. Houses made from brick, mud, wood, or cement depend on one’s ability to pay for repairs. Landlords collect rent, but do no upgrades or repairs.



Sister Bibian visits the women in their homes.



The Mirembe Women's Project helps women start a small business.

In their homes

Not all men are comfortable with the women's personal growth and increased independence. Visiting the women was easy – being in their homes was not always possible. Openly invited, the Sisters felt it best we enter homes only when women were alone.

Nasazi's home was an exception. Removing our shoes, we entered Nasazi's small, dark, one-room house. Inside was a small shelf with a few pots for cooking, two chairs and a bench, and a very smooth cement floor. Why a cement floor? At 4:00 every morning Nasazi wakes to start making samosas. Rolling out the dough on her impeccably clean floor, she makes 200 samosas then sells them for 200 Ugandan shillings, or 7¢ each.

Katusgabe's house is as long as a single bed and about twice the width. Selling a few tomatoes and making charcoal in her small space from green banana peels, she has saved enough money to build a platform the size of a single bed. What a difference this has made to her and her three children! Now, she's protected from sleeping on a wet floor when the river floods her home. The Sisters are concerned with possible side effects to living in the same small room where the charcoal is made.

Successes and challenges

Women from the Mirembe Women's Project meet every Thursday. They pray, share their joys, successes, challenges and dreams. Most women have raised

enough money that their children can start attending school. Their challenge is having enough money to pay school fees for an entire year.

Some men in their lives have offered to join the group and help, but because many of the women are in power and/or abusive situations, the Sisters are very clear that men can not be part of this group.

Again, it was humbling to hear them speak – and to speak so openly to people they do not know. They spoke of slum landlords who, without notice, raise their rent then threaten to kick the women out of their homes if they don't pay. To suddenly find extra money is nearly impossible. They dream of having funds to keep their children in school full time.

One of the most moving things I heard was from the children who said things are better now because they have clothes, can go to school, and "we don't see so many uncles around."

Moving the project forward

How does VICS fit into this? Sisters Bibian and Jennifer have dreams as well. They know what they need to move this project forward. They dream of an accountant to manage the women's money, keep it safe, and recommend savings and investments. They also dream of hiring a social worker, councillor, and someone to sell their products.

VICS's partnership is two-fold. We are providing the micro loan funds for one year. We also now have another in-country volunteer. Joan, a highly qualified accountant, is now doing the books and looking after the women's money for a small stipend. Because of the women's experiences with men, hiring a female accountant was an important decision. If the Sisters find a funder for the micro loans, VICS may be able to assist with the desperately needed social worker.

So, here we are. Partnering with more people in a new country ... watching them grow and develop and set the pace at which they move forward. Walking hand in hand. ■