

Written by: **Titus Kakembo**

Titus interacted with deaf youth during collaboration between DLU & KiBO

An encounter with Deaf Link Uganda, a Community Based Organisation working with deaf people, was an eye opener to a whole new world - it was like seeing the other side of midnight! After numerous interactions with members of Deaf Link Uganda through KiBO Foundation, I am now well versed with deaf people's life experiences: their potentials, dreams and barriers they face in traditional societies that have, since time immemorial, discriminated against them. It dawned on me that there is nothing under the sun a deaf person cannot do!

We also fall in love, one deaf youth told an attentive audience while debating during a Community Education Programme session at Deaf Link Uganda headquarters on "Sexual Health Education" symposium conducted by Straight Talk Foundation. Another girl eloquently contributed her views about life and relationships. But another discussant swore she could never stand a polygamous marriage because of the Biblical teachings which emphasis one-spouse matrimonial unions. She observed that because of the grinding realities of poverty in our societies and the alarming prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, polygamy was not a viable option. In a heated debate, a deaf peers challenged her views commenting that being deaf, she wouldn't mind her husband having another wife. Not ready to bow down, in Sign Language, she summed men up as sexually insatiable humans. These entire discussion and interactions were fluently and eloquently communicated through Sign Language – with an interpreter on spot – interpreting from signed into spoken language. If it were not for the interpreter I would have been completely lost and left out in this Community. It was amazingly impressive and inspiring to be in the presence of deaf youth. I felt like I had been given a chance to share their views on personal issues, which are commonly considered taboo in our conservative African societies.

During an interview with Deaf Link Uganda's Executive Director: Nassozi Kiyaga, she lamented about the appalling state of affairs regarding the deaf and how they are rampantly excluded from participating equally and benefiting from nationwide HIV & Aids services. Nassozi said: *The Ministry of Health messages specific to reproductive & sexual health, diseases, HIV & Aids/STDs that are put out by the media, should be delivered on television in Ugandan Sign Language.* True to her complaint about the deaf being neglected and marginalised, a survey at **The Population Secretariat** was a shocking revelation that they lacked figures of the number of disabled people in the entire country! There is no data to provide specific information about the number of deaf people in Uganda. Worse still hearing aids, which greatly benefit hard of hearing children, are not available; if found they are exorbitantly priced and unaffordable for poor parents, even if

subsidised. Furthermore, deaf children lucky to have a chance to education are subjected by The Ministry of Education to take the same examinations, without special consideration for their special needs, assistance or appropriate resources - as their hearing counterparts. This explains why educational failure among deaf children in schools is very high. There are also very few schools for the deaf in Uganda. To add insult to injury, there are hardly any higher institutes of education for the deaf - and if one is lucky enough to get as far as Senior Four or Six, she or he has nowhere else to go in pursuit of a desired career: with employment opportunities being extremely narrow for the deaf. The very few who come from economically well off backgrounds have no choice but to go to neighbouring Kenya or other countries for further studies.

It is absurd and unfortunate that deaf people in our society are referred to by a derogatory term: *kasiru* (idiot). Deaf Link Uganda is engaged in a difficult battle to brave a tall huddle to change negative attitudes towards the deaf nationally. It is disheartening that in some tribes bearing a deaf child is considered an abomination; while the use of gruesome and inhumane methods by some parents is shown when they tie their deaf child with a heavy metal chain and confine them to the backyard. Having a deaf child can be a cause for divorce; while the suffering of many deaf women is evident in their exposure to sexual violence, physical, mental and emotional torture many experience. These experiences and personal agonies remains untold by the media and are continually hidden due to social discrimination, prejudice and stigmatisation, a situation that is compounded by communication barriers.

Uganda needs to wake up and urgently respond to the abuses faced by deaf people: we need to protect our deaf citizens and enable them lead meaningful lives. Deaf Link Uganda is doing a great and commendable job - all its endeavours to advance the welfare of the deaf must be supported.

Titus Kakembo *is a freelance journalist attached to The Sunday Vision and features department of The New Vision newspaper – Ugandan’s leading newspaper. He has taken particular interest in issues concerning the deaf and here he candidly shares his experiences. Titus strongly feels it is time for the media to take an active role in raising awareness about People with Disabilities by advocating their rights.*

