

## A World Away

BY ALLYSON A. MCKINNEY

**T**he other day I awoke from the kind of disorienting dream that leaves a cloud of confusion well into mid-morning. I dreamt I was driving through downtown San Francisco with my law firm colleagues, past the symmetrical high-rise buildings that keep that part of the city draped with cold shadows, discussing my role as a mid-level associate. But then I noticed the

mosquito net above my bed. I heard goats bleating and caught the faint scent of trash burning.

“Ah, yes,” I remembered, “I live in Africa.” In my current home of Uganda, the majority of my clients are poor widows and orphans, victims of a crime broadly termed “property grabbing.” Gloria (whose name has been changed) is one client who has overcome this injustice with amazing perseverance and strength of spirit.

One day last year, Gloria’s young son led her to the field behind their home where her husband had hanged himself—perhaps because he was sick with AIDS or because he had been caught embezzling funds from his government job. As Gloria scrambled to find a way to care for her children, her father-in-law rallied his relatives in a campaign of harassment. Her in-laws claimed that Gloria had no right to remain in her home after her husband’s death. The local council leader advised Gloria to flee.

Despite Uganda’s 1995 constitution guaranteeing women’s “right to equal treatment with men,” and a succession act that protects a widow’s right to remain in her marital home, widows are often cast out by more powerful family members after their husbands die. A woman

may lose husband, home, babies, and livelihood—all in one punishing blow.

Gloria and her three children ended up taking refuge with her pastor, who cares for 26 orphans in his small home. In early 2006 the pastor put her in contact with International Justice Mission, the human rights agency where I work.

Prior to my work in Uganda, when I heard the word *widow* I thought of someone who had lived out a long, full life. With Gloria, as with a number of widowed clients, I noticed something familiar in her face and eyes. Like me, Gloria is not too far past 30.

As in most property-grabbing cases, Gloria’s husband had died without a will. After investigating her case, my colleagues and I were able to help Gloria assert her rights to her marital home.

Gloria’s rights under the law were quite clear. But for her case to be more than a nominal victory, the wrongdoers—Gloria’s in-laws and neighbors—had to actually respect her right to return to her compound and let her live there in peace.

Our staff worked with the local council leader to arrange a mediation, where dozens of curious adults and children gathered. My colleagues carefully explained the law. The local council leader now took a different view on the matter and ensured that Gloria could return home.

Gloria simply exploded with happiness, throwing her head back, letting out a loud, high-pitched victory cry—“*ayayayayayayayyyyyee*”—and then bursting into song and dance. I could not understand the words of her native Lusoga, but I danced with her.

I remembered vividly how, as a law firm associate, the last high-stakes litigation I worked on had us all breaking records for billable hours. After the court ruled in our client’s favor, there were celebration parties and impressive gifts from the grateful client.

Gloria cannot even afford the bus fare to meet me in the nearest town, so to see her I make the long, hot, dusty drive deep into the countryside. Recalling the soul-wrenching loneliness she experienced after being rejected by her community, Gloria told me, “I never thought I could have a friend like you.”

It seems her in-laws hadn’t, either. Typically, it’s not that those who perpetuate the injustice of property grabbing are so powerful, but rather that their victims are extremely vulnerable. Most offenders bank on the fact that no one will stand up to defend the widow and the orphans.

“You do,” I assured Gloria. “You do have friends.” I am humbled.

As Gloria’s in-laws trickle over to her compound, they all greet me with smiles and handshakes. They now claim that they never really wanted her to leave. I smile back, and thank them generously for welcoming “my sister” Gloria back to her home. I assure them that I’ll see them again soon. Meanwhile, Gloria begins the hard work of cultivating her overgrown gardens. **CL**



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