

Faces of the ACDA Rwot Omiyo Women's Group

By Christine Harris

Each of the 28 women in the ACDA Rwot Omiyo Women's Group has been through unimaginable hardship. Three of these courageous women volunteered to share their stories with me:

MARY:

A cheerful and happy woman of 33, Mary was married in her early teen years and she had her first child when she was 18. She now has 7 children. Her husband used to dig in the garden/field and she would make the local brew (beer) to sell and support their family. However, over the years her husband has turned into an alcoholic and no longer helps support or feed the children. In addition to her 7 children she has been entrusted with 9 orphans. The orphans come from 3 different families. The parents of 2 of the families were killed by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) Rebels the other set of parents died of HIV/AIDS. Mary's husband cheats on her and sleeps with many other women. Recently, a woman came to Mary's house and gave her 2 children and told her they were her husband's children and since he stopped giving them money she can't keep the children. So now Mary cares for her own 7 children, the 9 orphaned children, and 2 children fathered by her husband with another woman.

To support her children Mary sews table clothes in addition to making the local brew. She cannot afford clothes, school fees, or hospital costs for the children she is caring for. Sometimes she even can't buy food. Mary says she would use the money for the beads for these costs.

BETTY:

Born with a club foot, Betty was married at the young age of twelve. Betty and her husband Peter lived in the Agoro Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in constant fear of attack and violence from the LRA. After a long sickness, Betty's husband died in 2002 of a heart attack. Since then she has been trying to care for her 6 children on her own. She tried to make money by cutting grass in the field and bringing it to town to sell for thatching huts. Once she was attacked by the LRA rebels while collecting grass in the field. She has also worked cutting firewood and hoeing in other people's fields. In



addition to her 6 children, she is trying to care for 2 orphans from her dead husband's relatives. Her children have gone to primary school (the equivalent of a grade 7 education in Canada), but she does not have money to send them to secondary school. She routinely lacks money for food, clothes and rent. Betty makes beads every week with the women's group. She hopes in the future the money will be invested in income generating projects so she can afford food and school fees.

HELEN:



Helen has a quiet and gentle personality. She is 55 years old. She got married when she was 18 to a young soldier and had 2 children with him. During the take over of Amin in January 1971, her husband was taken to a prison and killed. Helen was inherited as a third wife by a man from in her husband's family. With her new husband she had 5 more children. After giving birth to her 7th child, she developed cancer in her uterus and the doctor said she could not have any more children. Based on this information her husband abandoned her. She took her children back to

the home of her parents. However, after this her father died leaving no one to look after them. Now Helen is taking care of her children, her sister's children and her mother, making a total of 14 dependents.

When she was younger she would cut firewood and bring it to town to sell in order to support all of her dependants. However, now that she is older, she has trouble carrying the firewood and has no source of income. Sometimes she is able to make a little money by buying large bags of charcoal from strong young people and dividing it into smaller bags to resell. Sometimes she goes without eating so that her children can eat.

Helen says that the most important problem she is facing now is paying school fees. She says education is the only way her children will be able to get out of the poverty they are in. She desperately wants the children in her care to get an opportunity to go to school. Helen says the children try to help get money for school. For example, they carry water for other families to earn a small amount of money (they get about \$0.12 Canadian for carrying 20 Liters of water). But it is not enough. Helen says if she gets money from the beads she will spend it on the school fees for her children and the other children she cares for.

These are just a few of the stories of the women in the ACDA Women's Group. Others have overcome similar adversity including the death of husbands, becoming infected with HIV/AIDS and attacks from the rebels.

Money from the beads sold through Working To Empower goes directly to these women, both to help with costs directly, such as school fees and food, and to invest in other agriculture and income generating projects.