



**Sylvin Nakaio**

27 years old

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**M**y twin sister, Topista, and I were born in Mulago hospital, which is the biggest government hospital in Uganda. We have five other sisters so we are very much a family of girls! We never really had a father as he left us to live with his other wife when I was ten.

I went to school up until the age of sixteen when I had to leave because we didn't have enough money to pay the school fees. After this I found it very hard to find a job and I was unemployed for a long time. One day a friend suggested that I worked with her as a prostitute. I thought about it and a few days later I started working on the streets.

I was eighteen years old by this time, but working as a prostitute wasn't the first time I had sex in exchange for something. The first time I had sex was when I was thirteen years old. Between the ages of thirteen and fifteen I had a boyfriend at school who paid for my food and clothes in exchange for being his girlfriend and having sex with him. I didn't like him, but at least I had something to eat and clothes to wear to school. When he stopped paying me I left him.

On the streets a group of women and I worked for our 'aunt' who was the one who found us clients. Life was fine as long as the man paid. I've been beaten many times by men who wouldn't pay me after sex. However, still I earned good money; on a good evening I would get 20,000 shillings (about €) for sleeping with two or three clients.

When the men had condoms with them I would use them, but if they didn't I wouldn't use anything. So, as you can imagine, I had STDs almost all the time. Luckily, I'm still HIV negative.

Twice the police have arrested me. The first time was when I was twenty years old. A group of policemen came up to us and demanded free sex. When we didn't agree to it they beat us and took us to the police station. We were charged with prostitution, but we told them that we were only walking down the street when they found us. They beat us again and at a fee of 50,000 shillings (about €4) each they let us go free the next day.

The second time I was arrested was when I stole a wallet from a rich client. He pressed charges against me and I was arrested. At first I told them I was falsely accused, but they beat me so much that I had to give in. I had to give the wallet back and had to pay 100,000 shillings to be free again. I'm glad my friends could help me to pay the fine.

When I was twenty-two years old I became pregnant from one of my regular clients. As soon as he found out he left and never came back. I was really scared about having the baby, but I had no choice because abortion was not an option for me. Neither was stopping my job; until the day I gave birth I continued to work on the streets. Clients were fine with my pregnant body and so was I.

When I was twenty-five years old a friend told me I should stop working as a sex worker. She told me about a vocational skills programme. I started to work fewer and fewer hours on the street and eventually I gave it up altogether and, instead, spent all my time learning how to braid hair.

The 'aunt' was not pleased and she didn't understand why I stopped working for her seeing as prostitution is well paid compared to braiding. But I wanted to make changes for both my child and myself, and I didn't want my child to ever know about this job.

My life today is not as bad because I've started a hairdressing salon with some girlfriends. I'm living with my child in a small apartment and my sisters also live close by. Life is simple but it's good. I sometimes think about going back to prostitution because hairdressing doesn't make much money, but I will try to prevent going back as long as I can. It will be my last resort.

When I look back at my past I'm not proud of what I have done, but I understand why I did what I did. For now I hope my business will grow so that I can give my child a better chance of a good future. I am very hopeful ■