Sara

THE EMPTY COMPOUND

The Empty Compound

This is the seventh of a series of comic books produced by UNICEF in Eastern and Southern Africa on the adventures of Sara, an adolescent girl. Sara is a symbol of children's rights, and is gradually becoming a heroine and a dynamic role model for girls' as well as boys' empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa. The story addresses the issues of 'breaking the conspiracy of silence' by talking openly about HIV/AIDS to prevent the spread of this deadly disease, living positively with HIV/AIDS and caring for children orphaned by AIDS. In this story Sofia, a young woman, is being stigmatized because her husband died of AIDS. Her in-laws throw her out of the house with her little girl, blaming her for the husband's death. Sara's parents offer her a home, ignoring much resistance from the uncle. But as the story progresses, we see how Sofia is constantly blamed by the community and harassed by her brother-in-law who proclaims to be in love with her. With support from Sara and her parents, she is finally reconciled with her in-laws and returns to her home.

The Empty Compound is a blend of action, suspense and educational elements. The story, in an entertaining manner, portrays how people's lives are affected by HIV/AIDS, and the importance of adopting safe and appropriate behaviour by young people to prevent the spread of this disease.

The comic book is a part of a package of communication materials including a users' guide (see back) and a poster. An animated video of the story may be produced in the future.

The Empty Compound is the product of a large team of African writers, researchers and UNICEF personnel who have worked together since 1994, evolving characters, settings and stories of the Sara series through in-depth discussions with hundreds of villagers and peri-urban dwellers in 12 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa, as well as in some countries in West Africa. This story was researched in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia and Mozambique. Through this extensive research process, the communities became partners in the creation of the stories.

The Empty Compound has been produced by the Communication Section, UNICEF-ESARO, with financial support from the Government of Norway and UNICEF Committees in the Netherlands, United Kingdom and United States, and in collaboration with UNICEF country offices in Eastern and Southern Africa, as well as Western and Central Africa.

Six other packages are currently available on the themes of:
- Keeping Girls in school;
- HIV/AIDS and avoiding sexual abuse;
- Female genital mutilation;
- Sugar daddies, or sexual exploitation of young girls by older men and HIV/AIDS;
- Teenage pregnancy;
- Child domestic labour.

Other communication packages on different themes are under development. These are:
- Children in armed conflict situations
- Malaria

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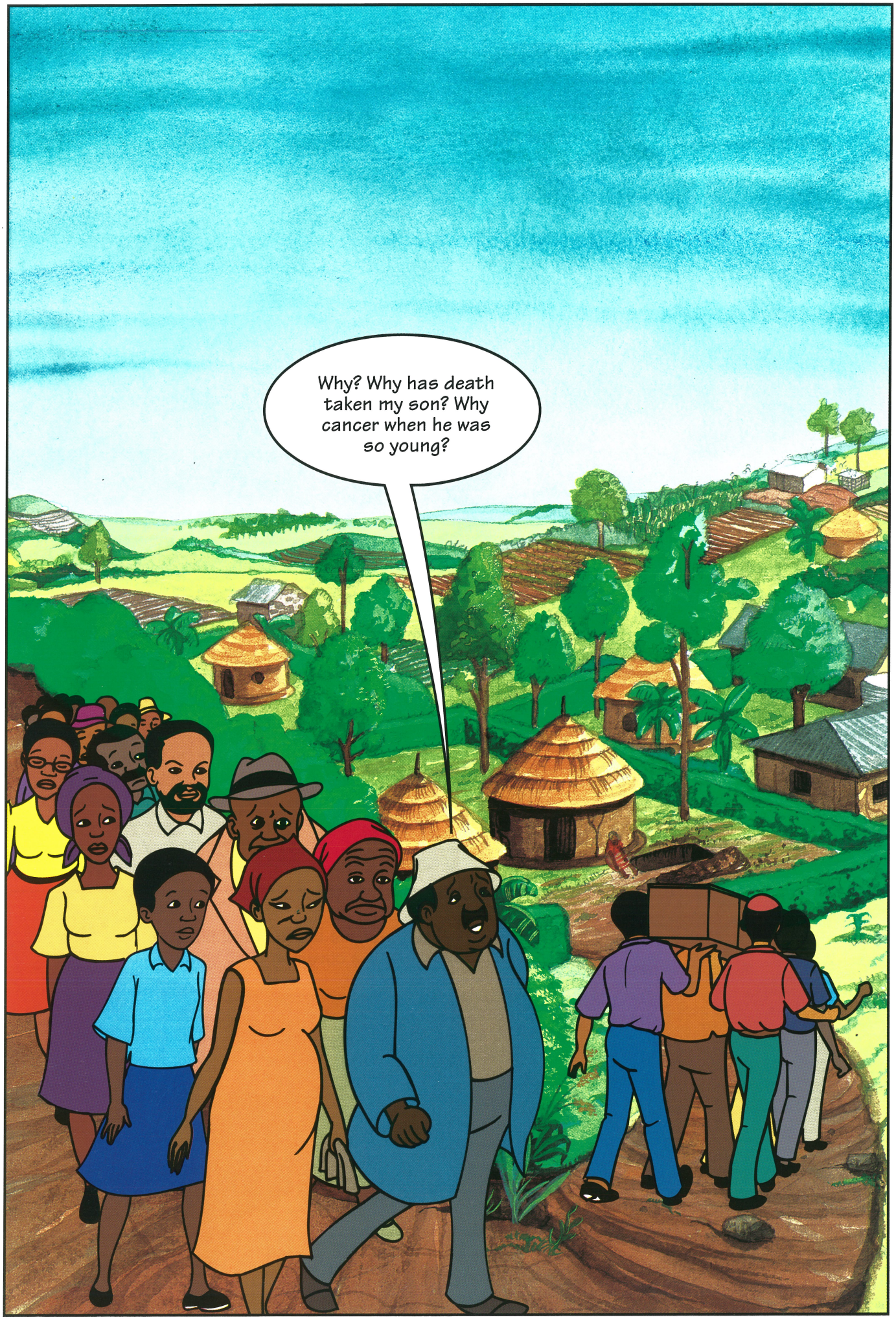
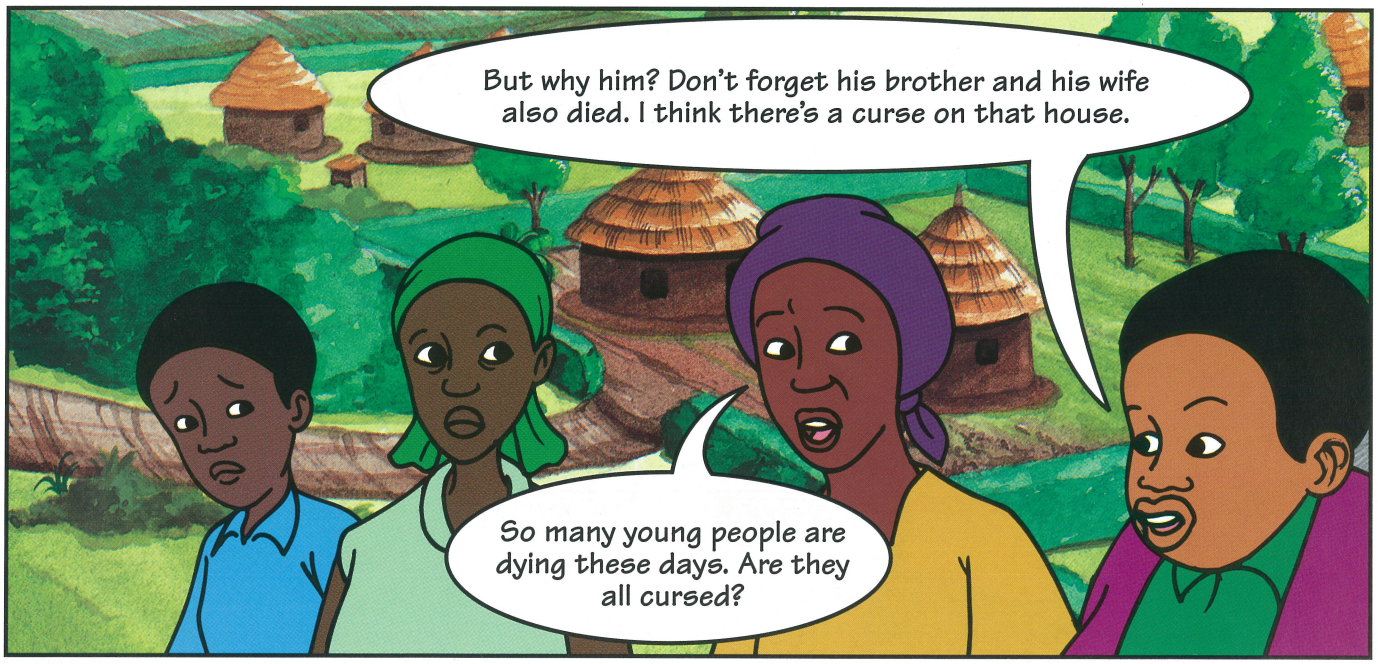

Why? Why has death taken my son? Why cancer when he was so young?

People are hurrying home.
Why don't they tell the truth about people's death these days?
What do you mean?

Everyone knows he died of AIDS.
We're not sure, though.

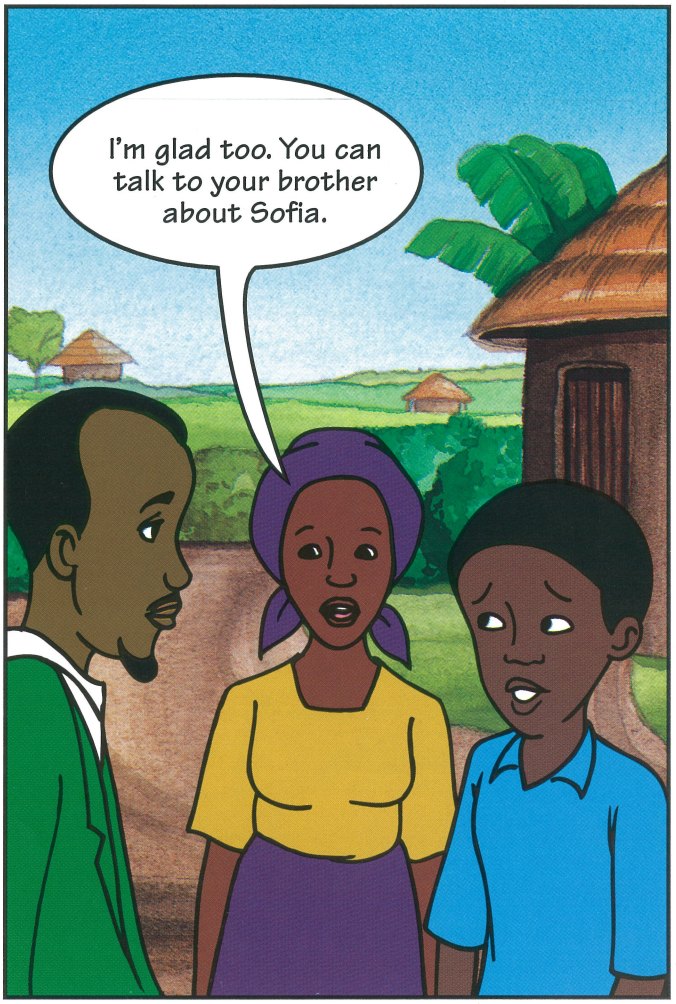
Hmm! Do they have to write AIDS on a person's face before you believe?


But why him? Don't forget his brother and his wife also died. I think there's a curse on that house.
So many young people are dying these days. Are they all cursed?

Sara's mother turns towards the women.
You might be right about AIDS. The problem is who wants to admit it? They know what will happen...
... and their relatives know what will happen. People will whisper and condemn. They want to blame someone.
Exactly. Just watch the father of the dead man. I bet he'll blame his daughter-in-law.
She's our cousin, you know.

Father, father!

I'm so glad you've come.
I'll be staying a month this time.


I'm glad too. You can talk to your brother about Sofia.

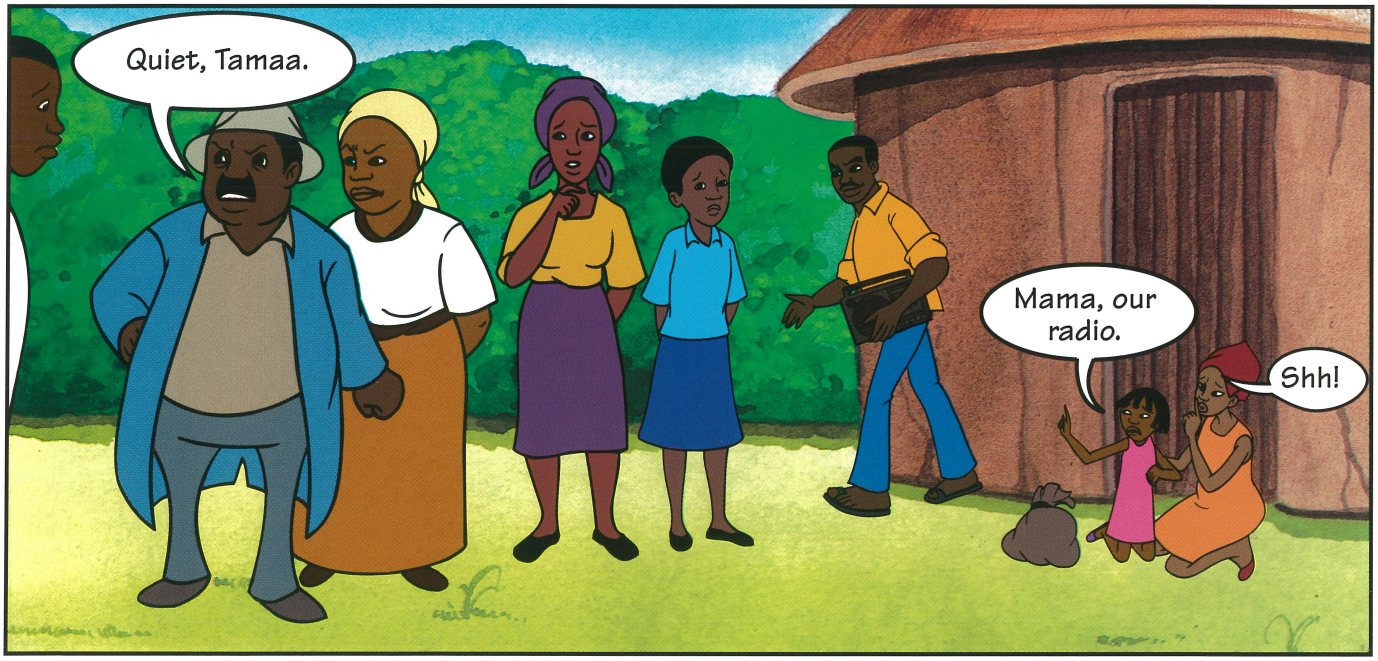
It's evening...
Well, I say we shouldn't take her. She has a child. She's pregnant and who knows what disease she might have as well.
But we can't leave her on her own. Her parents are dead.

When her own father-in-law kicks her out why should we take her in? Our tradition says...
... you should not abandon someone in trouble, especially when they have little children.

Well it's my household!
And it's my house, too. She needs help. She can stay with us until her father-in-law sees sense.
Uncle storms off.
Sara, tomorrow Sofia will come and stay with us.
I'm so glad.
But listen, Sara. It's not going to be easy. People are already whispering she has AIDS.
And you know how people are. They will start whispering about us too, behind our backs.
I don't care.

We don't mind either. We're just warning you. You're going to have to be extra strong.
Poor Sofia...

Meanwhile, in Sofia's house...
Father...
Good riddance, you witch.
You killed my son, you...


Quiet, Tamaa.
Mama, our radio.
Shh!

Come with us, Sofia.

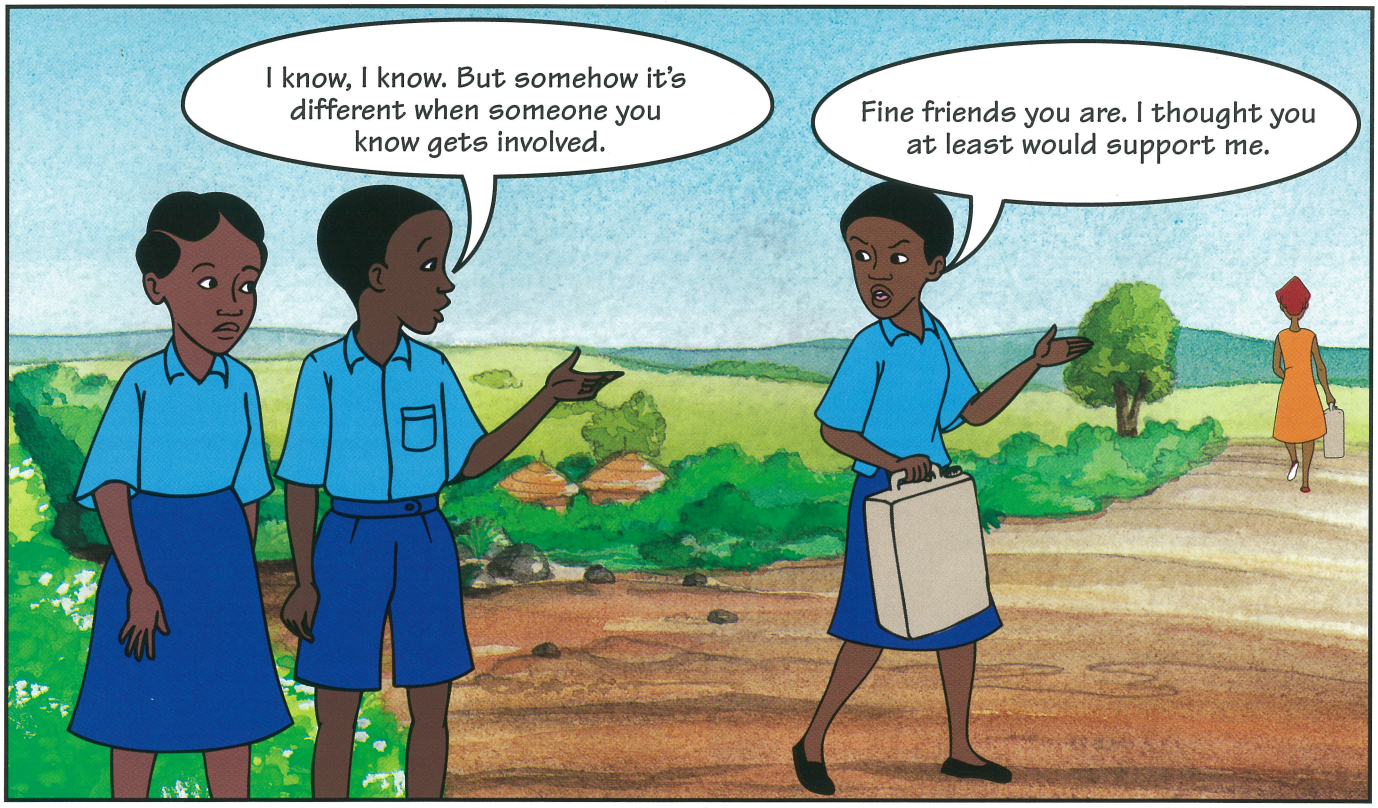
Next day, Sofia and Sara go to the well.
Hello!
Hi.
er... hi.

What's the problem?
Sara, we're just talking about Sofia. We're worried. If she has AIDS...

Oh come on, Juma, how do you know she has AIDS?

Because her husband died of AIDS.
How do you know?

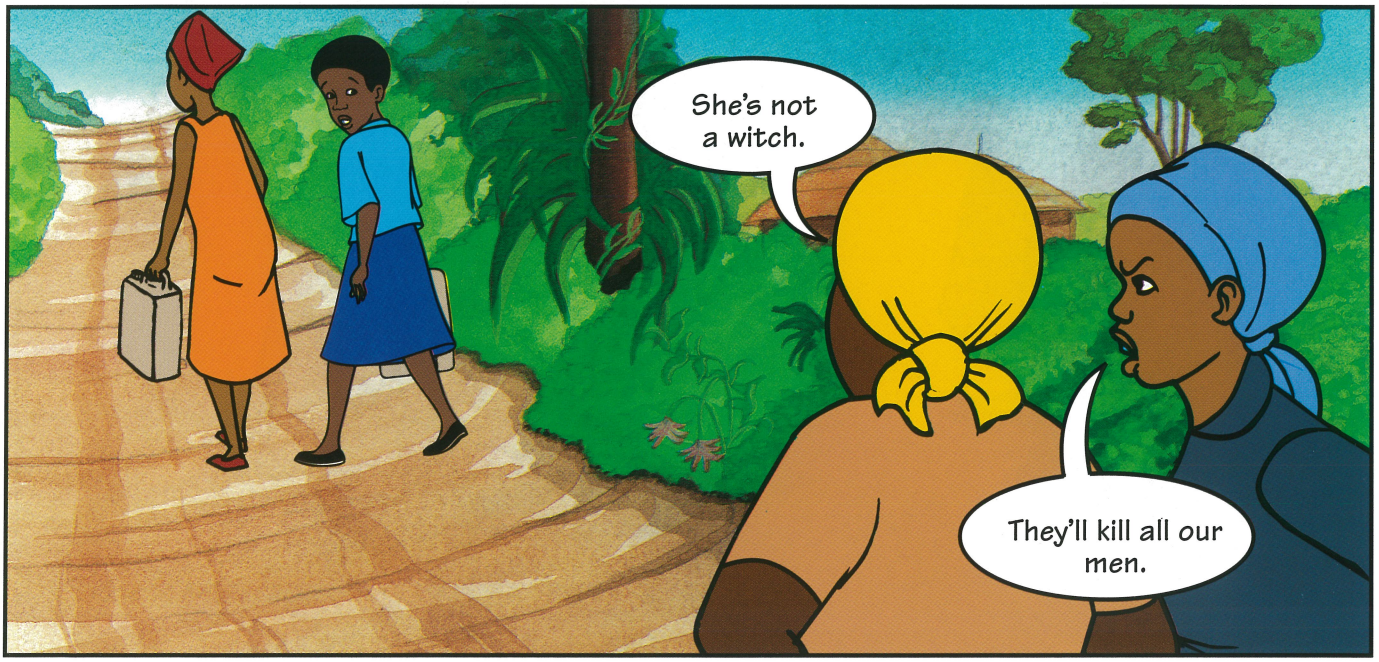
And even if Sofia has AIDS too, so what? How many times has Ms Matata told us you don't get AIDS from staying in the same house, or eating the same food, or...



As Sara and Sofia approach the well, there is a sudden silence and people move away...

Let's go.

Little witch!


She's not a witch.
They'll kill all our men.

Back at home.
What's wrong with everyone? They're so mean and unfair.
Why? What happened?

They all looked at us and started shouting...
Remember what we told you yesterday?
People are still afraid of this disease they don't want to face up to it.
Why, mama?
They are scared and they don't want to realise that silence is dangerous...

Next day...
How come you got married so early?
I was tricked into having sex. He forced me.

Did you get pregnant?
Yes, he wouldn't use a condom. Then my family forced him to marry me.

People who have AIDS should be careful not to give it to others.
Sara, it's not so easy. I know he had many girlfriends, but I had other boyfriends before my husband.

But it must have been him.
People always accuse the wife, no matter what.
And they'd be right.

I loved my in-laws and they loved me. And now I'm kicked out as if I am a murderer. What's the point of living?

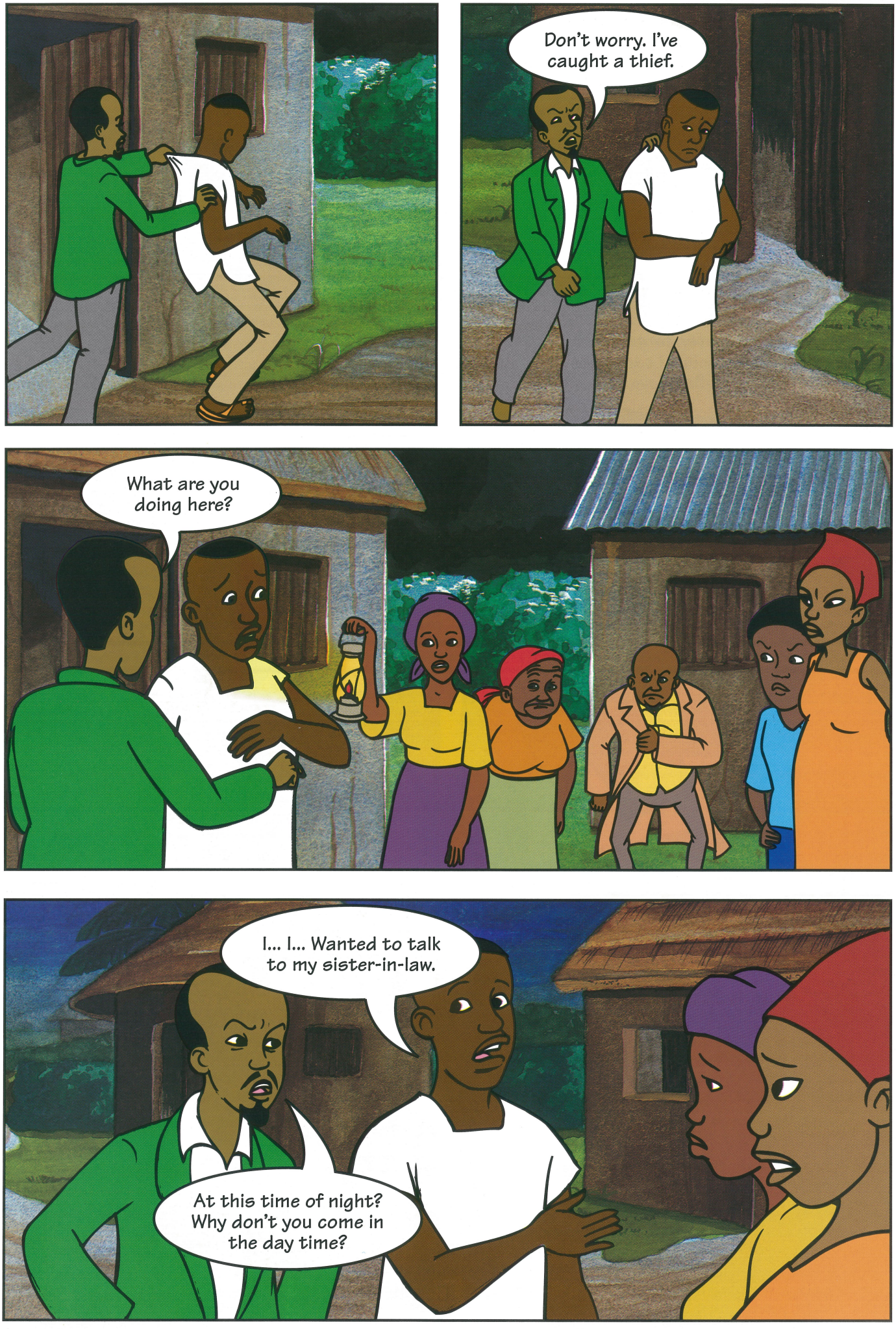
Please don't say that. We want to help and your daughter needs you.

What if I get sick and leave her and the new baby as orphans?
Sofia, your children are part of our family, too. And you don't even know you have AIDS, anyway. My teacher says people can take a test at the health centre.

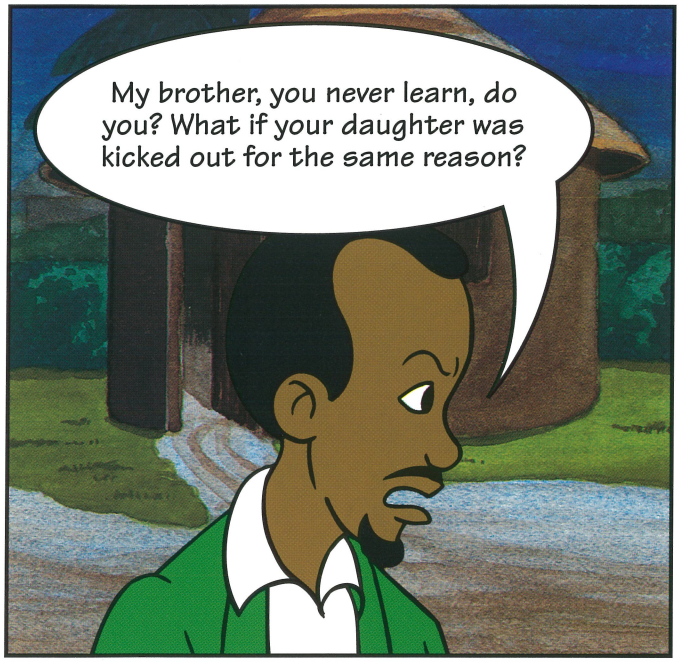
That night...

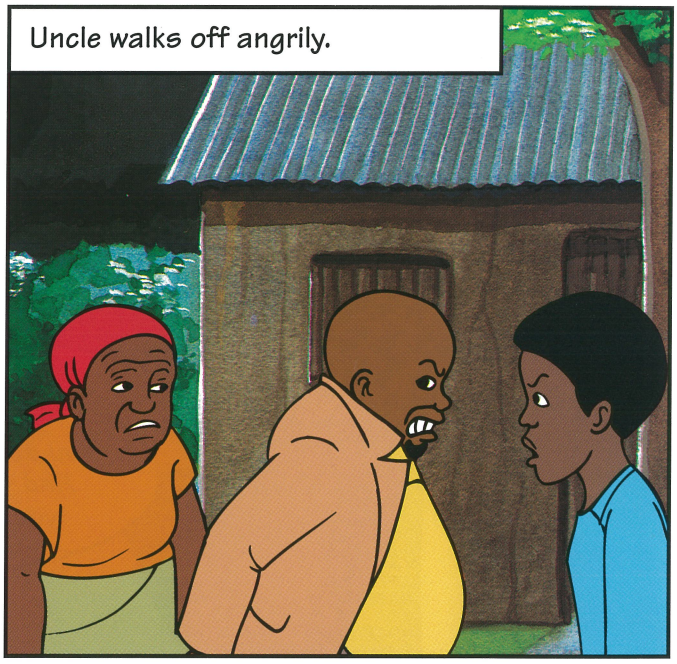
There is a scratching sound at the window...
... and the sound continues...
What's that?
Tamaa, my brother-in-law, what are you doing here?
Sofia, come outside. I want to talk to you.
At night?

Oh, come on sister, forget that bad brother of mine. I can make you happy. Sofia, I love you.
But everyone thinks I have AIDS. Your father never wants to see me again. Leave me alone.
Someone as beautiful as you can't have AIDS. Come on, you must be lonely now.
Why can't they all leave me alone!
Help! Help!


Don't worry. I've caught a thief.
What are you doing here?
I... I... Wanted to talk to my sister-in-law.
At this time of night? Why don't you come in the day time?

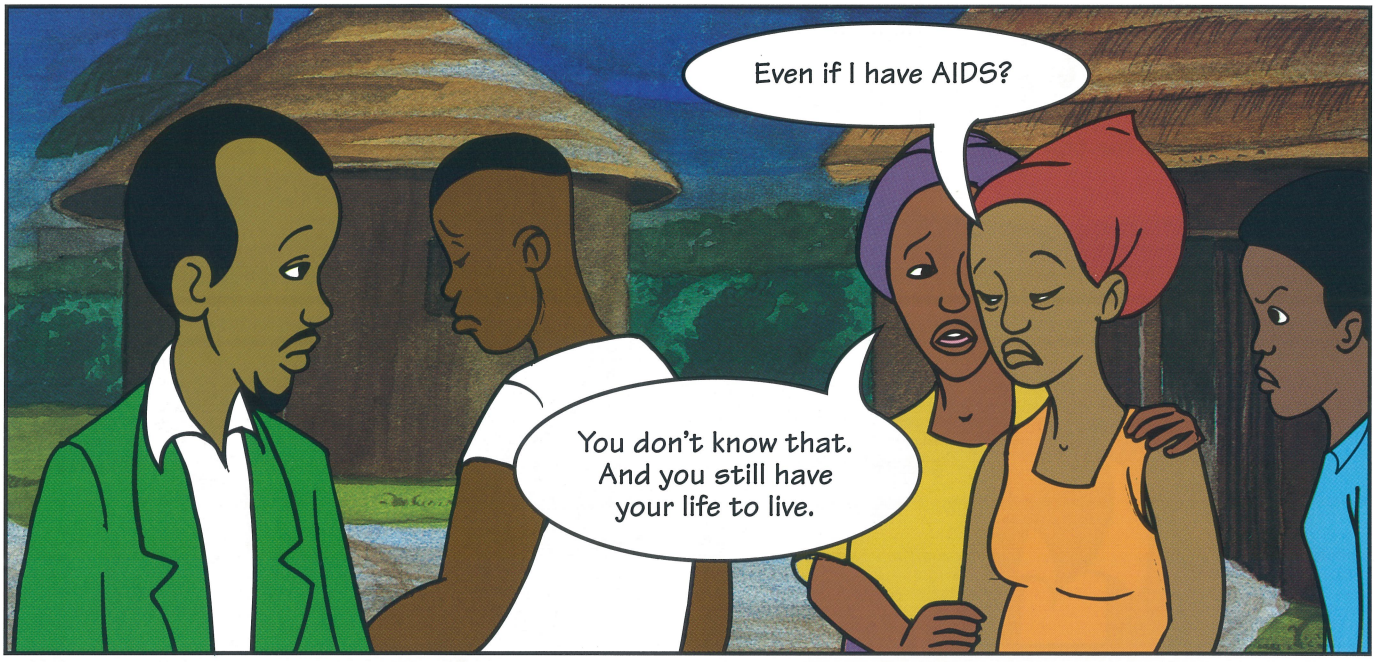
It's... It's... It's my father. He'd kill me if he knew I were here.
I told you, we should never have taken this girl. Look at the trouble she is causing us.


My brother, you never learn, do you? What if your daughter was kicked out for the same reason?

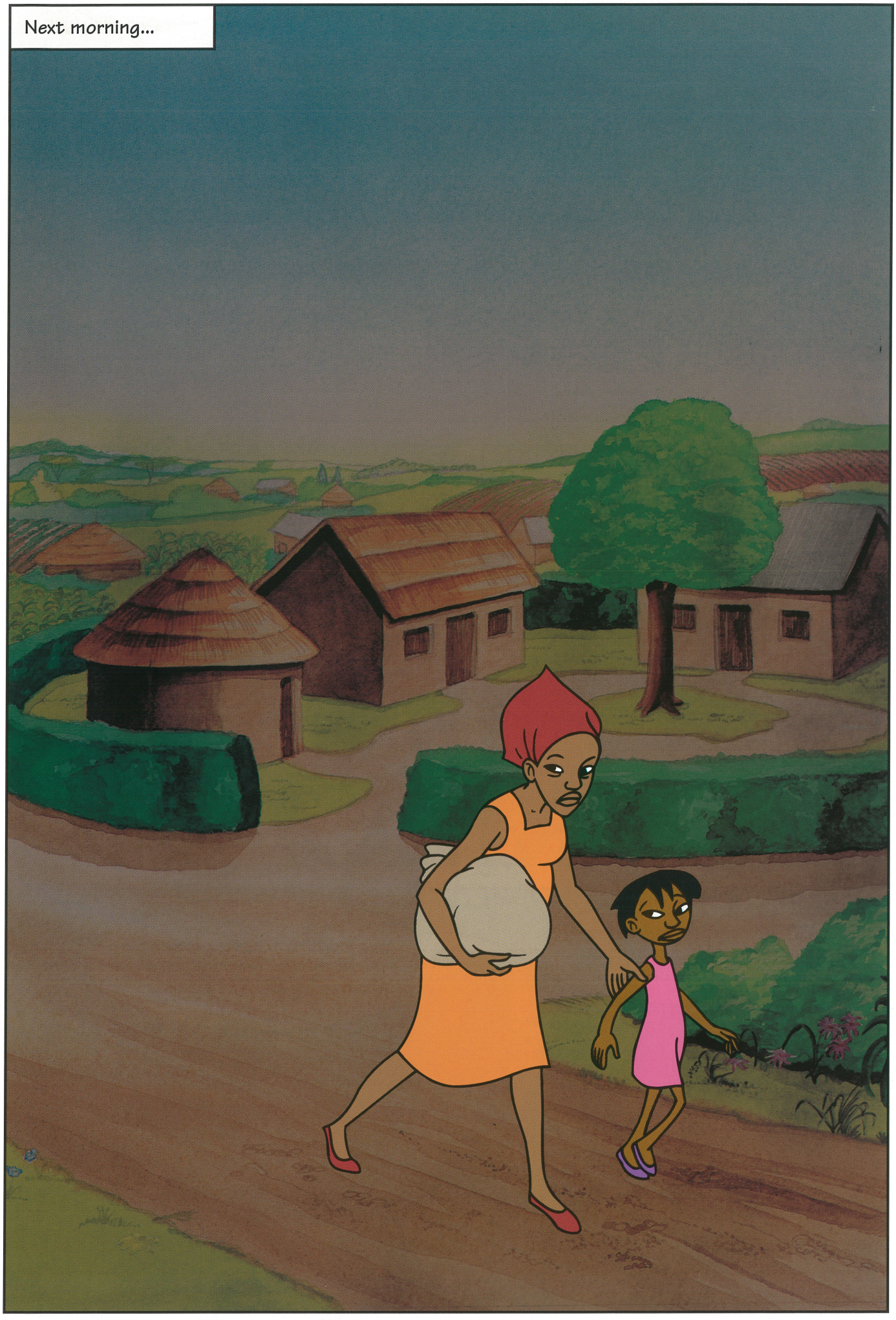

Uncle walks off angrily.

And next time you want to pay a visit, come during the day. I could have hurt you badly.

I'm sorry. I never asked him to come here. You know he wanted...
I know exactly what he wanted. And I'm sure he won't be the last one.


Even if I have AIDS?
You don't know that. And you still have your life to live.

But not through midnight visits.


Next morning...

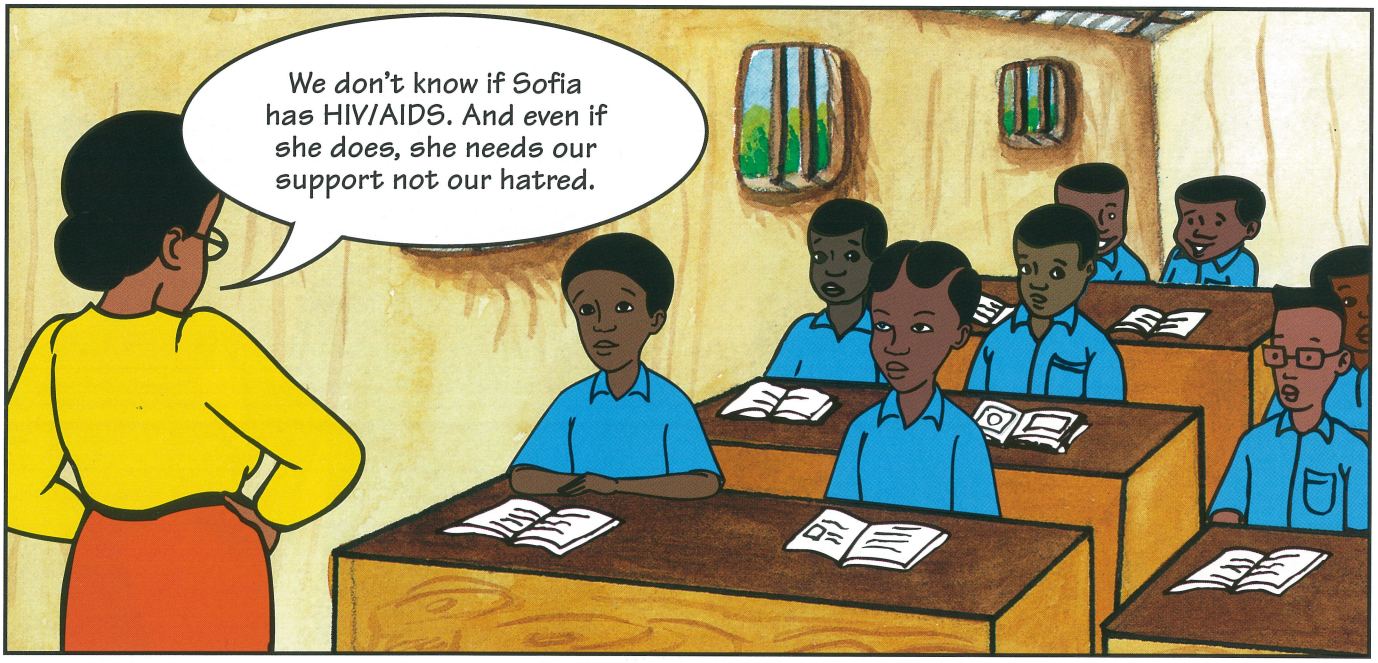
Papa, mama, Sofia's not here!
She's probably gone to the well.
But yesterday she talked about killing herself...
She'll be back. You don't take your child with you when you want to kill yourself.
She must have some problems she wants to sort out. Now don't worry and go to school.

AIDS... AIDS... AIDS.
Witch... witch... witch...

I hate you all. Look at you, whispering and pointing like idiots.
If Sofia kills herself because of you...

What's going on?
They are all mocking Sara because of Sofia.

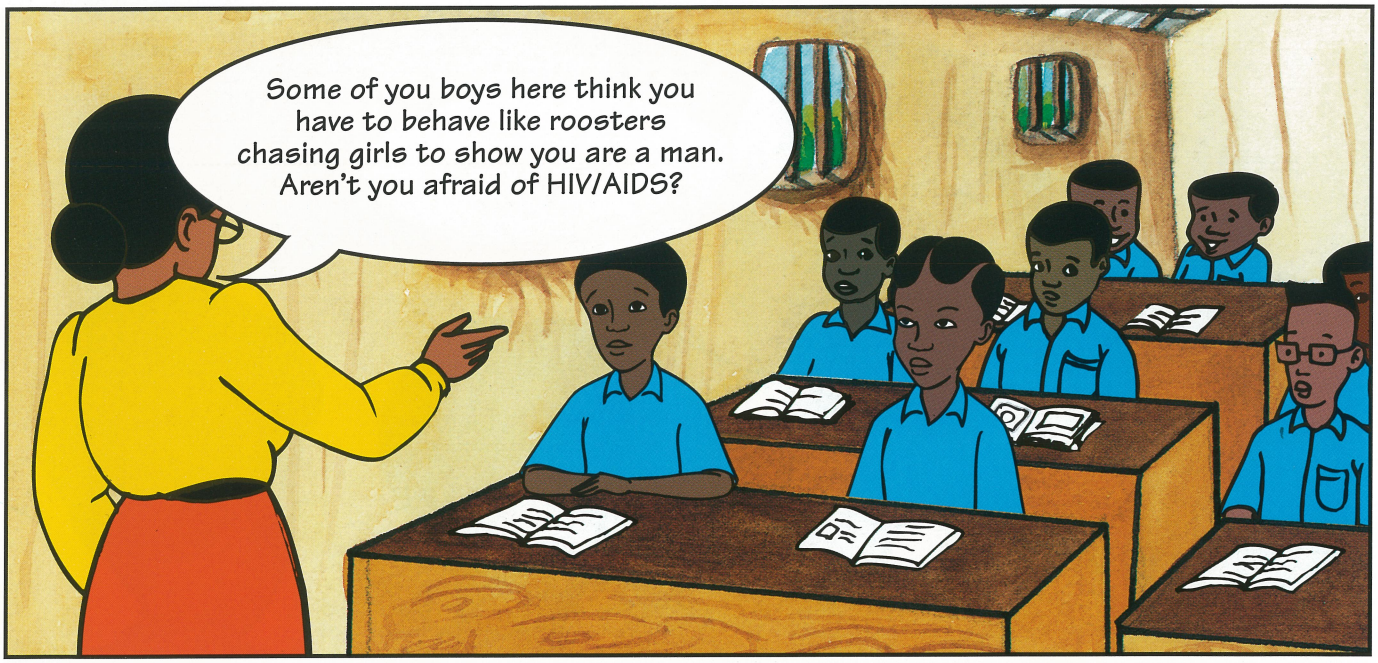
Is that so? Then let me say a few things which no one wants to hear around here.


We don't know if Sofia has HIV/AIDS. And even if she does, she needs our support not our hatred.

She can live for many years very safely and bring up her children very happily, but not when everyone is against her.

Even if she is HIV positive, do you think she is the only one in the village?

And what about you all? Are you safe?


Some of you boys here think you have to behave like roosters chasing girls to show you are a man. Aren't you afraid of HIV/AIDS?

And for girls it's even more risky. Very young girls or girls who are forced to have sex are at a very high risk of getting infected.

And you can tell your friends the same thing. Unless we face up to this disease and tell the truth, it will finish us all off.

Now, can anyone tell me how we can avoid AIDS?

By using condoms.
By staying faithful to one partner.
By putting off having sex.

The bell rings...
Okay for today, class. We'll discuss this again.

Sara comes home from school.
If we don't find her we'll have to tell the chief.
It's too early yet. She might have gone anywhere.

Sara goes to her room.
Please, Sofia, come back and we'll show everyone how to be strong.

Come on, Sara, let's go to the well.

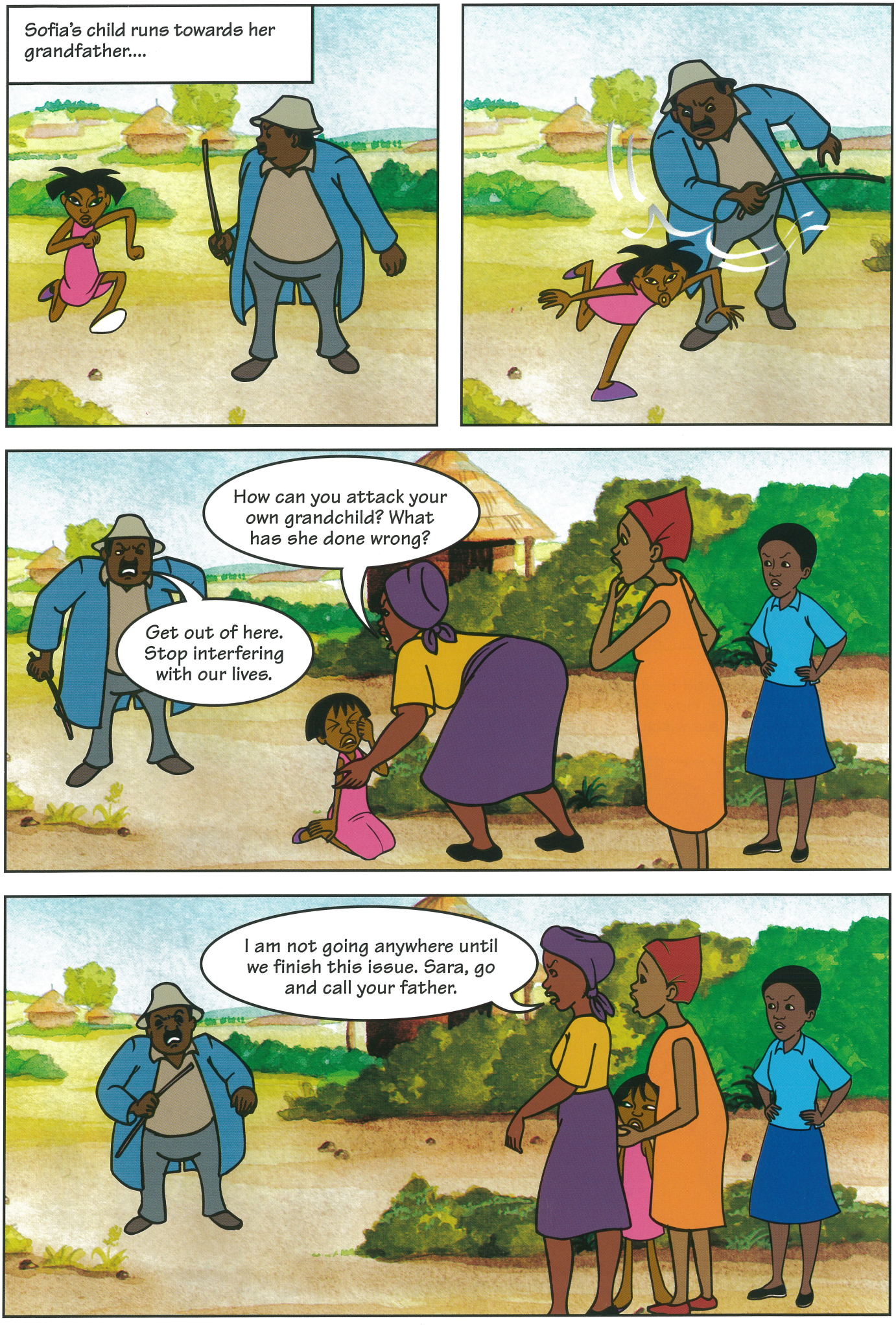
The path to the well takes them near Sofia's compound...

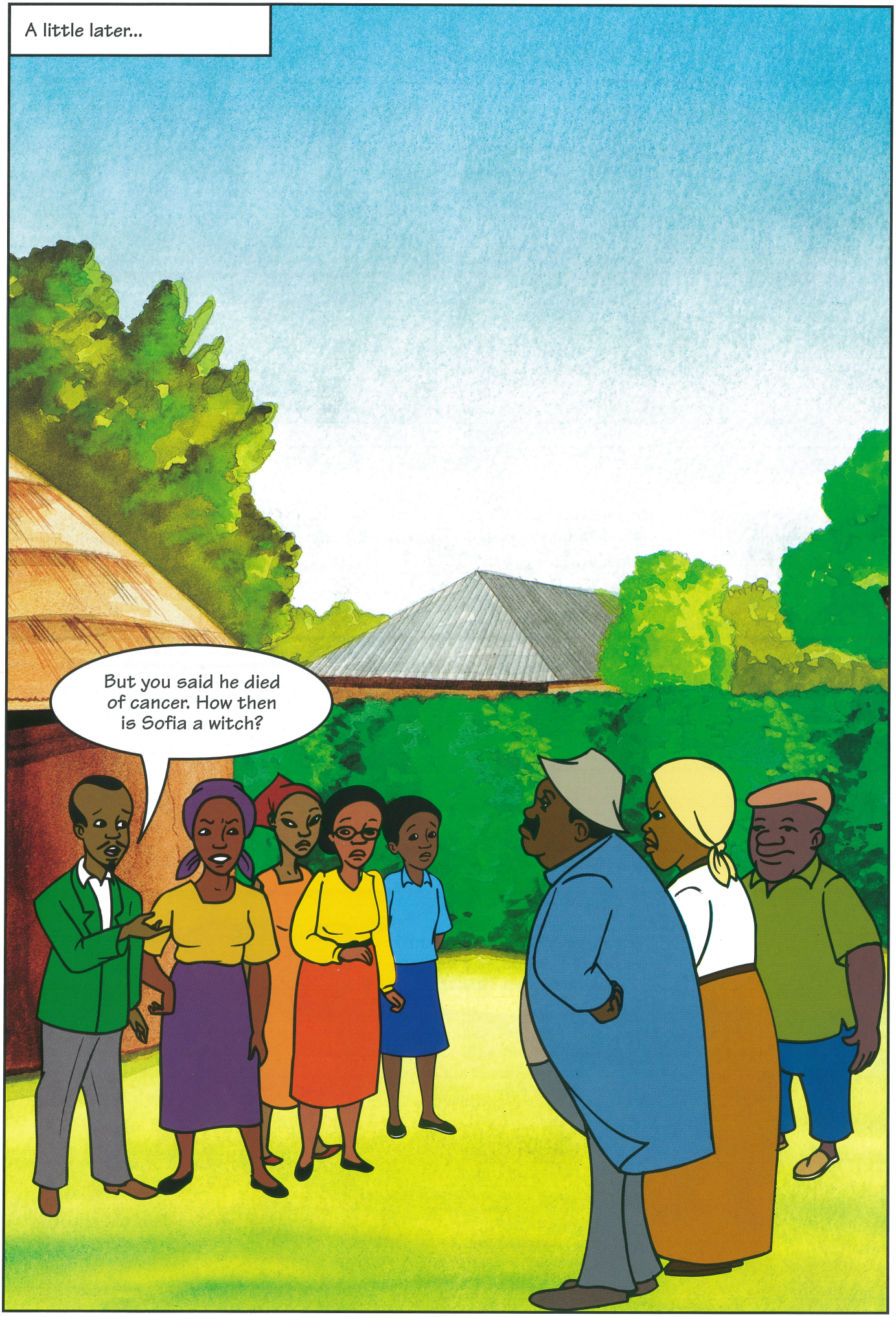
Sofia, Sofia, you're safe. We were so worried.

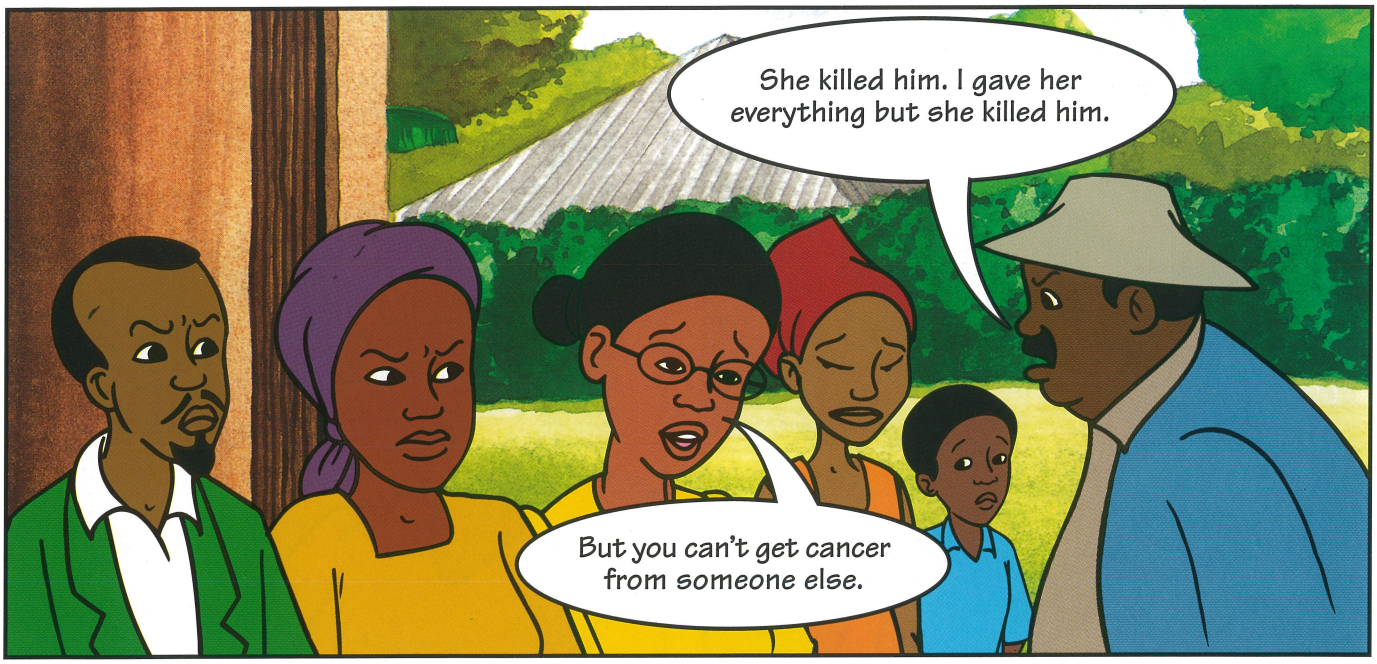
Look. Look at it. It's dying and no one cares. We're all dying and no one cares.

Sofia my dear, where have you been? We've been so worried.

I went to town to take the HIV test. I've got to know the truth.
But why didn't you tell us?
I had to decide by myself.
Oh, Sofia...
Just then, Sofia's father-in-law comes out of his house...
Take your evil away from here!


Sofia's child runs towards her grandfather....
How can you attack your own grandchild? What has she done wrong?
Get out of here. Stop interfering with our lives.
I am not going anywhere until we finish this issue. Sara, go and call your father.


A little later...
But you said he died of cancer. How then is Sofia a witch?


She killed him. I gave her everything but she killed him.
But you can't get cancer from someone else.

Yes, what are you hiding?
It's...

It was AIDS, wasn't it?
Never. Not my sons...

AIDS can strike anyone. Especially our young people...
... no one is being open with them. And when they learn, it's already too late.
There are clinics and centres in town where young people can get help...
My sons don't need help. I brought them up well. No one taught them to be hooligans. It's those women...

Were your sons virgins the day they got married?
Are you sure?

Don't listen to him, father... They just don't want to keep Sofia...!

And who came visting Sofia in the middle of the night?

No wonder she ran away when everyone is pestering her like this.

I'll kill you, you little hooligan. You want to follow in the footsteps of...

You see, it's no good denying the truth. Our young people need to know. They need guidance, but who is guiding them?

I'm so confused. I only wanted the best for my sons.

Now two of them are dead. And my compound is falling to pieces.

That's why Sofia wants to come back and look after it. Give her a chance.

And talk with Tamaa too. He needs your help.

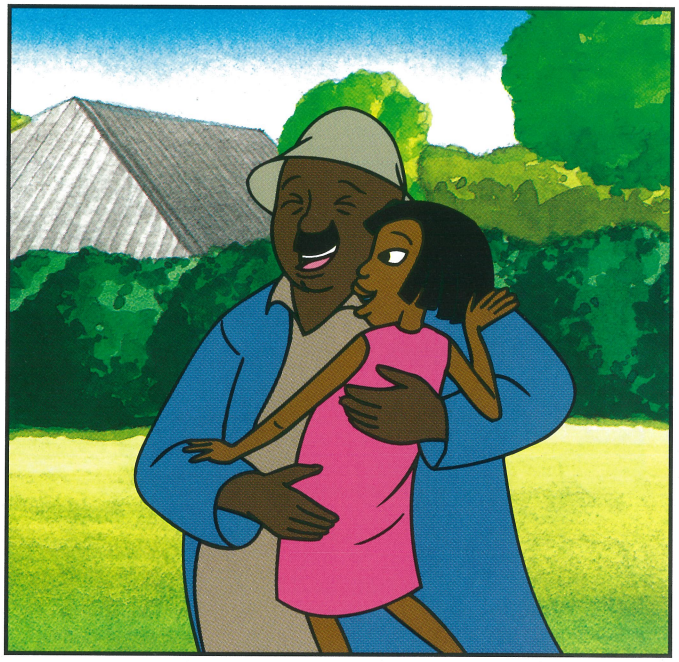
He's right. We must talk openly about this. So many young people are dying.

Look at Sofia. She wants to know the truth.

And even if she finds she is infected, she can guard her health and live longer.

This is where we can all help.
What will happen if she dies?

There are so many orphans already. Once we are open about the disease, we can get rid of our fear. Then we can make plans to look after the orphans.



Sara
Communication Initiative

USERS' GUIDE TO "THE EMPTY COMPOUND"

HIV/AIDS continues to affect the lives of millions around the world. According to estimates by the joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), 24.5 million adults and children were living with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa as of end of 1999. Globally, the figure is 34.3 million people, and they are joined each year by millions of newly infected. 2.8 million people died due to HIV/AIDS in 1999. This is a human tragedy, which is a growing threat to stability, both in social and economic spheres of life. Gender gaps and inequity, non-fulfillment of the rights of children and women, misconceptions and ignorance, certain socio-cultural norms, unemployment and limited opportunities, as well as a lack of societal responsibility and lack of appropriate life skills, are all contributing to the spread of the disease.

Those dying from the disease are people in the prime of life, who are often parents, leaving behind children who are still too young to fend for themselves - poor, powerless and often stigmatized. By the end of 1999, 12.1 million children had been orphaned by AIDS, 95% of them living in sub-Saharan Africa.

Young people between the ages of 10-24 account for over 50% of all HIV infection occurring after infancy, worldwide. The reasons are involvement in early sexual behaviour, early marriage, rape and defilement, and ignorance regarding safe sex. Due to high death rates through HIV/AIDS and armed conflict, the number of child-headed households is on the increase in sub-Saharan Africa. These children are economically and socially vulnerable. They seek employment in the informal labour market where they are underpaid, exploited and frequently sexually and physically abused, causing a further increase in the spread of the disease. In addition, the rise in teenage pregnancy, which results from the above conditions, negatively affects the education and development of adolescent girls. The growing numbers of young, HIV-positive mothers also increases the rates of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. In the case of boys, feelings of hopelessness and limited work opportunities lead them to seek other, often risky ways, including sex, to establish their sense of male identity.

Stigmatization, moral condemnation and fear inhibit people from talking openly about the disease and its implications and impact on their lives. In many communities, women are blamed for male promiscuity and hence are held responsible for the spread of the disease. HIV/AIDS is still looked upon as a moral issue and considered as the outcome of promiscuous behaviour. Superficial or inaccurate knowledge about transmission of the disease aggravates the situation further, resulting in discrimination and fear of the people living with HIV and AIDS.

Keeping girls in school and educating them about the risks of HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy is an excellent long term strategy. However, experience so far has proven that mere creation of awareness is not enough to stop the spread of this deadly disease. The only way forward is to equip young people, especially adolescents, with psycho-social life skills to empower them to choose appropriate and safe behaviour, and to exercise their right to participation in decisions regarding their own futures.

Strong programmes are required to give adolescents their rights to correct information and life skills; access to adolescent friendly health services; opportunities to participate in health promotion and community development; as well as a safe and supportive environment. Many countries are taking steps to set up Adolescent Friendly Health Services (AFHS) which are accessible and affordable to young people, providing testing for HIV, pre- and post-test voluntary and confidential counseling and condom distribution services. The services are offered by trained health workers, sometimes with the support of peer educators. Related programming involves realization of the rights of children orphaned, affected and infected by AIDS through community-based programmes, which entail holistic and sustainable approaches.

"The Empty Compound," produced by UNICEF-ESARO's Communication Section, is designed to support and accelerate the existing programmes on prevention of HIV/AIDS and community-based approaches to living positively with HIV/AIDS. It is a well-researched package that can be used as an educational tool by organizations, programmers and service providers who are working for the realization of the rights of children and women - for their survival, protection, development and empowerment.

OBJECTIVES

The story has a strong personal appeal and value as an education-entertainment tool. It can be used with different communities to stimulate discussion on the issues of HIV/AIDS prevention and stigmatization, responsible behaviour and safe sexual practices, living positively with AIDS and caring for children orphaned by AIDS. Research has shown that it can be effectively used to:

- Create awareness in communities to break the "conspiracy of silence" and to promote constructive discussions on dealing with the impact of HIV/AIDS on families and communities.

- Stimulate in-depth and productive discussions in communities on the issue of stigmatization, including moral condemnation of individuals; on the role of various members of the community in prevention of the spread of the disease; and on living positively with HIV/AIDS.

- Build a supportive environment for people living with HIV and AIDS and for the care of orphans within the family as well in community structures.

- Initiate discussions among adolescents on the value of positive girl-boy relationships; the need for developing psycho-social life skills and safe behaviour which protects them against HIV/AIDS; the consequences of unprotected sex and the importance of delaying sexual activity, sticking to one trusted partner, or practicing safe sex, including the use of condoms.

- Initiate discussions among parents and teachers regarding their role in supporting and guiding young people in making healthy decisions.

- Encourage young people to participate in problem solving, health promotion and community development.

BEFORE YOU START

Tell the group that you will hold a discussion on the story. During the session, you can either divide participants into teams of two for reading the story together or distribute the comic books to all to read, one day prior to the discussion session. This will depend on the availability of the books.

BEGIN WITH QUESTIONS ON THE STORY: FOR ALL GROUPS

- Did you like the story?
- Can someone tell us what the story is about?
- Who are the characters in the story?
- Who do you think is the main character of the story? Why?
- Which characters did you like best in the story? Why?
- Which ones didn't you like? Why?

You may ask specific questions on the comprehension of the story:

- How did the story begin?
- Why were the women whispering about the dead man? How did he die?
- Did his family say openly how he died? Why not?
- Who is Sofia?
- Why was the uncle unwilling to let Sofia stay in his compound?
- What was grandma's reaction to uncle? What was Sara's parents' reaction?
- Why did Sofia's in-laws throw her out of the house? Of what did they accuse her?
- How did Sara's friends react to Sofia? How did the neighbours behave with Sofia at the well? Why? What was Sara's reaction?
- Do you remember Sofia's life–story? Could you narrate it?
- What were Sofia's concerns about her children?
- Who was Taama? Why did he come to see Sofia in the middle of the night? What happened?
- Why did Sofia run away?
- Why did the children in school tease Sara? What was Ms Matata's reaction? What did she say about HIV/AIDS?
- How can one avoid getting HIV/AIDS?
- How did Sara and her mother find Sofia? What was Sofia's in-laws' reaction when they saw her back in their house?
- How did Sara's parents resolve the problem and reconcile Sofia with her in-laws?
- What do you think will be the future for Sofia? Do you think she has HIV/AIDS?
- If Sofia has HIV/AIDS, how can she still lead a happy and fruitful life for many years to come? What support does she need?
- What lessons can be learnt from this story?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR SPECIFIC GROUPS:

QUESTIONS FOR GIRLS

- Do you know of similar incidents as described in this story?
- Do you like Sara? Why/Why not?
- Are there girls like Sara?
- What do you think of Sofia? Are there girls/women like her in real life?
- What do you understand by the word "boy friend?"
- Who are these boyfriends? Age-mates or older men? Is "sex" a part of having a "boy friend?"
- If you accept a gift from a "boy friend" does that mean he has the right to demand sex?
- What can be the consequences of such relationships? Probe: Are young people aware of the risk of diseases passed on through sex? What kinds of diseases?
- Have you heard of sexually transmitted infections (STIs)? Can you name any? Have you heard of HIV/AIDS?
- Can people get HIV/AIDS from sexual relationships? What happens if a person gets infected by HIV?
- Do girls willingly engage in sexual relationships? Why/Why not? Are they sometimes forced to have sex? What does a girl do in such a case?
- What do you think of Taama? Are there men like him? Why do you think he behaved the way he did in the story?
- Do people talk openly about HIV/AIDS? Why not?
- Should people talk more openly about HIV/AIDS? Why/Why not?
- Where do young people access correct information on sexual health?
- Do adolescents discuss about sex-related issues or other problems with older people or their peer group? Who do they talk to?
- Do parents/teachers support and guide young people in making healthy decisions and life choices? Can you give details?
- How do people find out if they have HIV/AIDS? Are there any facilities in the community where people can take tests? Are people counseled before and after testing? Is the service confidential (private)?
- Is it important for people to know their HIV status? Why?
- How can one avoid getting HIV/AIDS?
- Do young people use condoms? Why/Why not?
- Should they use condoms? Why/Why not?
- Where can young people get condoms from? Is it easy/difficult to get condoms?
- Do young people themselves buy condoms from dispensaries/clinics? Is it okay for them to do so? Probe: Do they feel uneasy/uncertain about condom use? Why do they feel that way?
- Do young people stop using condoms later in a relationship? Why/Why not? Is this decision safe?
- How does your community treat girls/people who get infected with HIV/AIDS and other STIs?
- Do girls get pregnant from sexual relationships? What happens?
- When young people have sexual relationships, do they think about the risks? Which risk do they think about more, pregnancy or HIV? Why?
- Can a pregnant girl or teenage mother attend school? How do her peers react to her?
- Can a girl say "no" to sexual advances? What does she need to make the correct choices for herself? Who can help her?
- Can school education help girls and boys to make healthy choices?
- Are there children in your community whose parents have died of AIDS? Who takes care of such children?
- How does the extended family and community treat such children? What do you think about this behaviour?
- Do these children go to school? How do their peers treat them?
- What can young people do to give more support to these children?

QUESTIONS FOR BOYS

- Do you know of similar incidents as described in the story?
- Do you like Sara? Why? Why not? Are there girls like Sara?
- What would you have done if you were in Sara's situation in this story?
- What do you think of Sofia? Are there women like Sofia?
- What do you understand by the words "boy friend" and girl friend?"
- Do women/girls have many boy friends? What about men/boys? Do they have many girl friends? Why?
- What kind of relationships do girls and boys have? Do they engage in sex?
- What can be the consequences of such sexual relationships? Probe: Can they get any kind of sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?
- Do you know what HIV/AIDS is? What happens when a person gets infected by HIV?
- Do boys feel pressure from their peers to engage in sex? Why? How can they take healthy and responsible decisions for themselves?
- What do you think of Taama? Are there young men like him? Why do you think he behaved the way he did in the story?
- Do young people talk openly about HIV/AIDS? Why?/Why not?
- Where do young people access correct information regarding sexual issues?
- Do adolescents discuss sex related issues or other problems with older people or their peers? Who do they talk to?
- Do parents/teachers support and guide young people in making healthy decisions or life choices? In what ways?

- How do people find out if they have HIV/AIDS? Are there any facilities in the community where people can take tests? Are people counseled before and after testing? Is the service confidential (private)?
- Is it important for people to know their HIV status? Why?
- How can people avoid getting HIV/AIDS?
- Do young people use condoms? Why? Why not?
- Should they use condoms? Why/Why not?
- How would a boy/man react if his girl friend insists on condom use? Can girls do that? Should they?
- Where can young people get condoms from? Is it easy/difficult to get condoms? Do they have enough money to buy condoms?
- Do young people themselves buy condoms from dispensaries/clinics? Is it okay for them to do so?
- How does your community treat people who get infected with HIV/AIDS and other STIs?
- Can school education help girls and boys to make healthy choices?
- Do you think girls and boys can have a friendly relationship without having sex? Is this a good idea?
- Are there children in your community whose parents have died of AIDS? Who takes care of such children?
- How does the extended families/community treat such children? How do their peers treat them? What do you think about this behaviour?
- What can young people do to give more support to these children?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS AND OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- Are people aware of HIV/AIDS? How can one avoid getting HIV/AIDS?
- Do people talk openly about HIV/AIDS? Why not?
- Do you think the issue should be discussed more openly? Why?
- Where do young people access correct information regarding sexual issues?
- Do parents/teachers talk to young people about sexuality and other adolescent issues or problems? Why? Why not?
- Who are the best adults to talk to adolescents about these issues? What knowledge and skills do they need?
- Do parents/teachers support and guide young people in making healthy decisions or life choices? How?
- How do people find out if they have HIV/AIDS? Are there any facilities in the community where people can take tests? Are people counseled before and after testing? Is the service confidential (private)?
- Is it important for people to know their HIV status? Why?
- What do people do when they find out they have HIV? Do they discuss it with anyone? Who can they talk to?
- How does the community react to people who have HIV/AIDS?
- What happens to children if their parents die of AIDS? Who takes care of them? Do they go to school?
- How do other children treat these orphans? Why? How can the situation be improved?
- Are there child-headed households here? Does the community provide any support to such children?
- What could be the role of the community in supporting AIDS orphans who themselves are suffering from HIV/AIDS?
- Do you know of similar incidents as described in this story?
- Does the community play any role in giving protection and support to women like Sofia?
- How can the community help in the prevention of HIV/AIDS? What can they do? Who should take the lead?

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES

The following are suggestions for activities which will improve understanding of this story and how it relates to the existing situation of adolescents in their own communities. The activities will help to motivate the group:

- to find ways to build peer support to help prevent HIV/AIDS;
- to challenge stigmatisation and promote greater openness and stronger community support for adults and children infected or affected by HIV/AIDS;
- to develop life skills (like assertiveness, communication, decision making, etc.) to make healthy choices, including to stay in school;
- to strengthen the role of the community supporting such empowerment of young people.

Encourage the group members to participate fully in planning and carrying out these activities. Here are some possible ideas.

A. Group Discussion

Let the group discuss the story amongst themselves. One member can facilitate the discussion, allowing others to join in with their opinions. This can be done in groups of six to ten.

B. Drawings

The group members could draw pictures of the section of the story which they find most interesting. They could then discuss why they found that part interesting, what lessons could be learnt from it, etc. Select this activity depending on the age of the participants.

C. Drama

Create a drama or role play on some of the themes from this story: how girls can be assertive to resist sexual advances; how young people/adolescents can make healthy, positive choices; how parents/teachers can establish supportive communication with adolescents; how people living with HIV/AIDS can live positively and look after their health; how the community can provide caring support to people living with HIV/AIDS and to children whose parents have died of AIDS. Show how young people in particular can contribute to health promotion and community development.

The drama could also explore Sofia's future life beyond the end of this story. Ask group members to act out different roles.

Ask questions: How did you feel when you acted in different roles? How did you feel about the situation in which you found yourself in the play? Did it feel real? Ask other members to react to the play.

D. Survey

Ask the group to conduct an informal survey in their community to find out if people are aware of STIs and HIV/AIDS; whether they know how these infections are spread; what are people's attitudes to those living with HIV/AIDS; if people are willing to break the conspiracy of silence and discuss these issues openly; how many child-headed households there are in their community; what care is being provided to such children and what more could be done for them; how many of these children are attending school and how many are engaged in labour?

E. Brainstorming

Based on the results of the survey, brainstorm on a list of actions to be undertaken:

- **for adults, young people and the community** to promote greater openness in talking about HIV/AIDS, to create a caring and supportive environment for people living with HIV/AIDS and for children whose parents have died of AIDS, and to develop a community mechanism to support these orphaned children in accessing education and managing their lives.

- **for parents and teachers** to mobilize the community regarding the prevention of HIV/AIDS, and to support adolescents to gain information and to develop appropriate psycho-social life skills, and empower them to make correct decisions on issues like sexual relationships, education and other life choices.

- **for young people** to encourage and support each other to practice healthy life styles and avoid risky behaviour, including sexual activity that risks transmitting HIV.

- **for adults and young people** to share correct information and create awareness on HIV/AIDS and other STIs and to prevent the spread of these infections.

F. Community involvement

The group could share the ideas of Sara's story with their community through some of the following activities. They can perform these in public, with friends, women's groups, churches and other religious and community venues. Since these are sensitive issues, it would be important to have an experienced facilitator to assist the group in leading the discussion with the community.

- A brief drama or skit with alternative endings and discussion.
- Story telling with alternative endings and discussion.
- Debates on the issues in the story.
- Puppet shows with Sara characters.
- Songs, dances, poems and games on the themes of the story.

Some of the activities can be undertaken on an open stage so that more people can watch and participate in discussions. You can think of other activities to popularize the themes of the story and to create awareness among people.

In parents-teachers' meetings (PTA), mothers' group meetings or community meetings you could discuss how to create awareness on the importance of keeping children in school, how to establish communication with children/adolescents about issues related to sex and other concerns that affect their development, how to ensure effective intervention in the case of sexual abuse, how to help prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STIs.

You may want to form a club, committee or forum for girls and boys where they can discuss various issues that affect their development. Such fora can serve as a sort of resource center and a support system where young people can share experiences and gain correct information. In groups, the girls and boys should be able to discuss how they can acquire self-esteem and confidence to adopt positive behaviour, and resist unwanted sexual pressures. Children orphaned by AIDS should be included in these committees to support others like them. School teachers and NGO workers who are involved in human rights and women's issues can also be active members. They can discuss with the community how to build a supportive environment for young people's development, especially for out-of-school children and children orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

G. Discussing results

After a few weeks, the group can meet to discuss:

- What actions were taken at home and in the community?
- What were people's reactions?
- What activities were successful? What problems arose?
- What further role can the community play in preventing HIV/AIDS and evolving a caring and supportive environment for people living with HIV/AIDS, orphans and children heading households.

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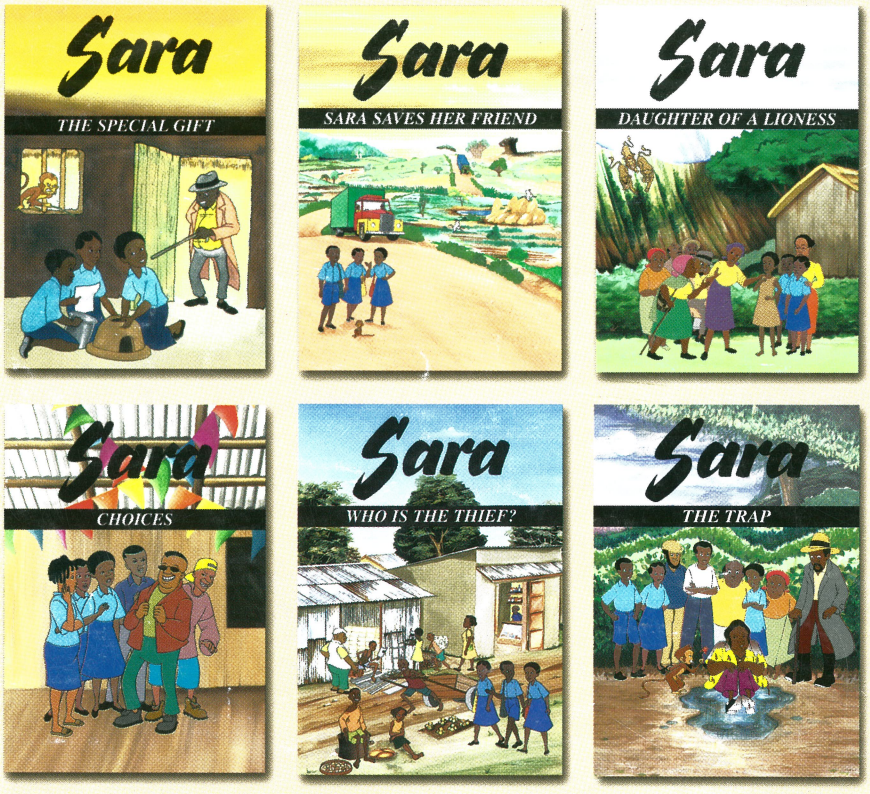
Sara's cousin has died, leaving his wife Sofia and their baby son. Although Uncle says his son died of cancer, everyone knows he died of AIDS. Then Uncle starts blaming Sofia for his son's death and banishes her from his compound. Sara is delighted when Sofia comes to stay, but whenever Sara and Sofia go out people whisper and point. Some even call Sofia a witch! Why is everybody so prejudiced?

The Empty Compound is part of a series of seven exciting comic books about the adventures of Sara and the issues that affect her and other girls in Africa. Read them all and look out for the posters and videos.



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