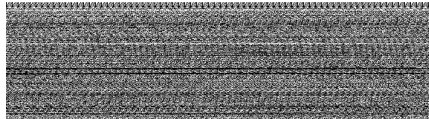


**"EYES WIDE OPEN"**  
**Script of the documentary**  
**By Elisa Mereghetti**

Developed with the support of the MEDIA PROGRAMME  
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**Text:** Catherine Phiri discovered she was HIV-positive after the death of her husband. In Malawi, her country, AIDS is still a strong taboo. Catherine decided to break the silence surrounding AIDS, to speak about her condition in public, and to found an organization, SASO. The Salima HIV-AIDS Support Organization helps thousands of AIDS orphans and terminally ill patients. It also spreads information on HIV-AIDS in the district of Salima.

**Song**

*Ladies and gentlemen, friends, everybody. Listen here. A terrible illness has come. The world is now dangerous. This disease is called AIDS.*

**Titlle:** Eyes Wide Open

**Catherine Phiri:** I was diagnosed in 1990, after my husband died in 1989. I am a nurse by profession, I could not continue with my job because at that time there was a lot of stigmatization. I have 2 children: a girl and a boy, the girl is now 17 the boy is 15. But when my husband was dying the boy was about 3 years and the girl was about 5 years. My husband's relatives came and did property grabbing they took everything that we had, and they chased us out of the house where I was staying with my husband. And I walked out with my children like beggars. We were eating food from trash, that means we were eating food from dust bins, people who threw out banana leaves we picked them up and we ate them, it was 1990.

**Song**

*There is no other person like you, God  
My father left me and now I am an orphan*

**Kirsten Madsen:** If I should see a picture of Catherine it's sitting in the middle of a lot of children, and she is yelling you do this, you do that and then she sees a kid who needs shoes and she would try to get shoes for that kid, she would be here there and everywhere, she would never sit in an office behind a desk, she was not that kind of a director, she would always be there in the middle of everything.

**Catherine Phiri:** So in 1992 I moved over, walking from Lilongwe to Salima with my children. Salima is not my home base but that is where I first rested when I left Lilongwe, that was my first destination. So I thought maybe these people will not know that I was positive, so I could get settled here. After a year when I got settled here people started talking about it, and that's when I decided to open up myself, it had been a long time hiding. But the worse part was that when I was here in Salima I was staying with an uncle with the children and he chased me away with my children. We started the same thing, but I decided to be on my own, have my own house, stay with my children, teach them what was HIV and who I was. So it has been very difficult for my life, to bring up the children with the stigmatization of HIV-AIDS. That's how I managed to decide to have an organization, so that people should not be stigmatized on the HIV virus if they have it, that's how I started it.

**George Kanyemba:** She was simply saying: I am sure where we are going we'll take this organization where people will know. At that time we were known to 2 or 3 villages. So that was one of the visions which at that time she was saying: I am sure that at one time we'll have an office and people will be coming to the office. So following the mission statement, the objectives of the organization we ended up having this office. It was at the time we were meeting under this tree. About 3 kilometers from here, an acacia tree. We were meeting at the time, under the tree. So this is the beginning of the organization.

**George Kampango:** Catherine was one of the first people living with HIV-AIDS in this country to come out in the open, and it was very early in the nineties when stigma and discrimination were very very rampant. And that is something that inspired a lot of people in this country, and I am one of those that were inspired by Catherine Phiri's courage to come out amidst this threatening stigma and discrimination.

**Paul Duncan:** Catherine did something one has to appreciate. People in Salima are now talking about HIV-AIDS all over. If you ask in a village you'll be given information... Stigma and discrimination is decreasing.

**Nedson Timbenau:** She taught me that if you are teaching about HIV-AIDS, start right away in your family. If you start right away in your family to educate your children and wife and some

other surrounding, you are able to take that message now to outside. But tell them the truth about HIV-AIDS.

**Text:** Various means of communication are used during information events in rural villages. Traditional masked dance (Gule Wamkulu), music and drama serve the purpose of involving the audience and explaining about prevention of the HIV-AIDS epidemics.

### **Scene Orphan**

- I have no place to stay, no place to go
- My parents are not here anymore, and noone is here to listen
- Not even God can help me
- Many other children like myself are suffering in this village
- If I could walk to meet my parents I would
- But since that's not possible I will kill myself
- So I'll be able to reach them in Heaven
- I should stop crying, I am a man after all
- Should I do it here?
- Ok, I will

**Paul Duncan:** This is one of the songs that Catherine Phiri liked very much just because it talks about those people who are poor, that they have not worry much or commit suicide, just because they are poor, but just work hard in different fields so that they can achieve whatever they can achieve to sustain their lives and to support their families... It was her favorite song, wherever she was, even at a party, she used to wait for that song to be played. It made her feel happy and relieved and she was even dancing to that song.

**Catherine Phiri:** This is common in every African country, when there is poverty there is also HIV. Why? People tend to get out from the villages, from the community, they go into town, they seek for jobs. And the worst part of poverty involves women, because women they leave the community, they come into town, and then they sell their body, and at the end of the day they go back home, they start to get sick.

### **Text:**

- In Malawi today AIDS is the first cause of death for people between 14 and 49
- Life expectancy is now reduced to 40 years of age
- 15 years less of what it was before the appearance of AIDS
- The number of orphans, on a total population of 11 million people, has reached 400.000
- It is expected that 25 percent of the entire urban work force will die by the year 2010.

**Lucius Banda:** I think there are so many women who are going through that, that are turning to what they didn't want to be, maybe they are becoming prostitutes because they have a responsibility because some father somewhere just left them with children. That would be another reason we are having AIDS. It's bad. But another thing it's just carelessness, that feeling that it will not happen to me. In the years I have been performing I have been on stage for over 16 years now, I have seen people come, people lose weight, people fall sick, people die, while I am on stage. What I am saying is: I see people who come to my shows, like you asked me I am coming to Lilongwe a lot, the people that were coming to my shows 4 or 5 years ago, they don't come anymore and I know they didn't leave for London or the States, they left for the grave.

***Song Lucius Banda***

*Death is everywhere now  
People are going to the grave  
As if they were migrating  
There are almost no more people around  
It seems they have all moved out  
You cannot get used to death  
But we are getting used to it  
Because death is all around us*

***Lament***

*You have departed, but this is not the right way to go  
We will suffer greatly for your absence  
Our hope was on you, but you have gone so early  
I don't have any more words, my heart aches  
It looks like you are sleeping, but you are gone forever*

***Priest at funeral:***

AIDS is taking a lot of people, but there is salvation in the word of God  
If you believe in God and behave faithfully you can be saved from this calamity.

**Paul Duncan:** At first people did not accept death and they were saying that maybe somebody has bewitched that one. But as of now if you go to visit a client if you ask the biography of that client maybe you'll be amazed being told that my husband was a man who is good at marrying other wives, then to myself I believe that I have the virus and I know that I'll die. Now people are coping and they know that if somebody is having the virus he suffers from AIDS and that one automatically is going to die. These people are accepting it. And some of the people are getting prepared.

**Catherine Phiri:** We don't have regular medicines, we rely on donors. And when the donor gives us, that's when we give to the community, that's pain killers, and those are what we have.

Sometimes we don't have any medicine to give. The only thing that we care for ourselves is to care for the chronically ill and then the people in the community who are guardians are able to know what is happening.

**George Kampango:** Access to medicines is a problem in Malawi. To begin with, people living with Hiv-aids are poor people..... lowly educated and therefore not employed. And that does not fetch enough money for them to afford anything as expensive as the ARVs. In Malawi you have to pay 2500 Kwacha, we would say the equivalent of one dollar a day, now the average Malawian, let alone the person living with HIV-AIDS, cannot afford.

**Dr. Biswick Mwale:** I think the HIV-AIDS epidemics has very profound effects on this society. I think we know already productivity is low. I think is low because of various reasons: the highest skilled people the productive age group is dying, and skilled people are dying. And those that are remaining are either busy attending funerals or they are sick themselves. And the remaining team is already demoralized with the poor working environment as well as the overload because those that are dying are going to leave the work on the others. So in terms of productivity is indeed going down. The hospitals are overstretched. Doctors are dying, nurses are dying, people are dying, so you have very few people to be able to manage the patients in the hospitals because the health workers are dying. The same with the education sector: the teachers are dying, so you have classrooms that are full of students, but then there are no teachers to teach because teachers are dying at a pace more that government is able to replace these teachers through training programs.

**Catherine Phiri:** If you are very poor, and you get sick with HIV, that is the bigger problem that we are fighting. We need the people to have food, at least food, because they cannot go to the gardens, they cannot harvest next year, so they need the continuity of having food supplied to them.

**Zahra M. Nuru:** We had a small committee when our headquarters UNDP wrote to us to request, they wanted some names of prominent people that are leading in the fight against poverty.... So we found a number of individuals who were trying in their own way to fight poverty and to fight HIV-AIDS as well, it was difficult to make a choice, but because of the energy that Catherine had in getting her work done and how she mobilized and the history that she had what she had to overcome, stigma and discrimination, as a single woman and a mother, bringing up children and other people's children, we thought that really she is a model.... We sent her profile to New York, we got the good news that in Africa Catherine qualified, among all the countries that were represented, the profiles that were sent to New York. That was a very happy moment when we broke the news to her. She was really

humbled by that and she said I will receive this on behalf of all these people that are fighting, are fighting HIV-AIDS, are fighting poverty. So then she made the trip and she came back and from then she became an international figure. She won the International Poverty Award 2000.

**Song Joseph Nkasa**

*My sister you have done bad things  
And now your health is gone  
This is not witchcraft my sister  
That's AIDS, which has taken the whole place  
I warned you against immoral behaviour  
But you were not listening to my advice*

**Catherine Phiri:** When I was having only the HIV, I thought I will fight with the HIV and see what I can do. But I managed to survive with HIV for 10 years. And then came in the TB. Now I said right, HIV struck TB, I got 2 things to fight, I will.

**Subtitles:**

- *Everybody, get out of the office*
- *Call the Orphan Coordinator, tell him to come here*
- *If we had money we would have loved to go to her birthday in Denmark*
- *It would be fantastic, but I'll wait, you carry them with you*
- *That was so great... You'll be here?*
- *I'm not going to bed, this is my bed here...*

**Kirsten Madsen:** She is a founder, she is a typical founder, she is a very strong personality, and she wants to be very democratic but it was very hard for her because it was her baby so if people were democratic in a way she didn't like so much, she would definitely cut through and I think the reason why people accepted that is because she was the one with the vision, she was one with the big picture, she was the one who could lift SASO from the ground, and she was also the one with the ethical standards, she knew we can't do that, this has to be whether we have funding or not, she was also a good leader as far as not being too impressed by white people, I mean donors and things, she would certainly respect some of them but she would also disregard some if she felt they were not treating the community right. And this is very rare, when you stand with your beggars bowl, somehow then it's rare to see somebody who also dares to speak up. And she certainly did.

**Robert Ladislaus:** Catherine she is a very good woman, and she is a courageous woman. Since '94 there was no other organization here in Salima addressing this issue. But though her initiative people have benefited a lot. And there is also an indicator of behaviour change in this district. One example is the counseling: at first people were just getting married without

being tested, but through HIV-AIDS education and awareness in the community, and through her initiative, people are coming for a test before getting married.

**Wedding song**

*It's a pity that the father knows this is poison  
It's a pity that the mother also knows this is poison  
But you don't taste poison  
No, you better not taste poison*

**Chief:**

Gwengwe village was born with my family  
I am the elder chief, and I thank you all for being here  
And I am very pleased today, because this couple  
Is giving a good example to many people  
They became engaged last year and now they are married  
They are healthy, they are not infected  
They should be of example to everybody!

**Catherine Phiri:** We had to make contact with the people in the community so that they know what is happening. And because we are dealing with the adults, we discovered in the long process the children were also infected and affected, and that's when the children's corner came into place. We had to have a children's corner, so that the children should also learn, because those are the windows of our future.

**Nedson Timbenau:** The number of orphans who are registered here at SASO is 1725. But every Saturday they come maybe 900 or 1000. The children they are coming here maybe to have food. Definitely the rest of the week most of the orphans they don't eat enough. They just eat nsima maybe with vegetables or maybe with beans but it's very difficult for them to have diet food because in Malawi to say the fact it's one of the country which is the poorest, so we cannot say we can manage to eat 3 meals a day, it's impossible.

**Kirsten Madsen:** She was definitely very good at wanting them to have good standards, sometimes you can have organizations who think: oh they are so poor so we just give them basics, because that costs less. I remember some kids who had to go to school, it was very important for her that they got nice shoes, nice clothes, so they didn't seem less than the rest of the children. And I liked her very much for that, keeping standards, they should not be second grade kids. And she was also very much into not calling children orphans, they were children, so I think she had a very big respect for little people.

**Catherine Phiri:** We call them memory books. We are trying to teach the children what went through with their parents. So they are able to understand, if their parents are sick now they are able to understand that their parents are suffering from HIV-

AIDS. So actually is the preparation of the children for the dying of their parents.

**Nedson Timbenau:** Most of the parents they don't know much how to write down their memories what they have being doing before. So that memory book, if this kid is able to write and read is able to ask the parents what they know so that they have to tell the kid and the kid has to write it down in the memory book. In such a way the parents are involved because they are transferring the experience to the children so that when they die the children are able to keep that history in those memory books.

**Catherine Phiri:** So that's how the memory book came into place, the memory corner came into place, because I don't want the children to have the same problem that my children had, yes.

**Girl:** My name is Ellen Msaya. I am a girl age fifteen. I learn at Karonga Primary School, I am in standard eight. I live at Kamuzu road. My father was dead when I was young, and I stayed with my stepfather, in our family we were 5 children, now we are 4 because my one brother was dead. My dreams: I want to be a soldier fighting against HIV-AIDS, or a nurse.

**Kirsten Madsen:** She had lots of humour but she would also get angry quick, so if you were not a strong person you could get a bit scared of Catherine, she was a personality that spoke up immediately. But she was also a personality that later that day, even though you were crossing swords earlier in the day, then it was all right in the afternoon, and you could still have fun with her later on; she did not respect people who would not stand for what they meant.

**Robert Ladislaus:** She didn't give up. She was still coming to work even when she was sick. She could have slept in her office. She was not scared of being sick.

**Linly Kamanga:** Catherine was a woman that I believe if she had no patience there would be no SASO there. Can you imagine she started that organization in 1994. And the funds SASO started receiveing funds in around 2000 or 1999. All these years she was going without any funds. Imagine. But since she had a hope, she had a vision, she remained there, that's why I am saying that even though she is dead, she is still there. So I have learned a lot, to be patient in doing things, you need not to run, no, do little by little, little by little, until you reach your goal.

**Second girl:** Another topic: the death of Catherine Phiri. Aunt Catherine Phiri was a director of SASO, she died on Sunday th 11 of May 2003. Her death took place at Mtengo wa mtenga hospital in Doha district and she was buried on 13 May 2003 in the village of Yacine in Chiradzu district. To my side the death of aunt sorrowed me very much because she was our mother at SASO, I

indeed we have lost a lovely parent. She did many things to us which we cannot account. May God bless her and her soul rest in peace.

**Thomas...:** At 8 o'clock that was Sunday on 11th May that's when we heard the phone from Nedson Timbenau. At 8 o'clock Nedson phoned us saying Catherine has left us.

**Nedson Timbenau:** It's a strange thing that the time that she was taken to the hospital I was one of the people to go and nurse her to the hospital. And when I remember that day I feel real pity. Because Catherine has died in my hands. Then it will be very difficult for me to forget her totally, because she had died in my hands.....

**George Kanyeamba:** I remember last year she said I have extra more ten years, she was saying that, before she started sick, and she was trying to emphasize this the moment we were fully funded by some of the donors who had to uplift SASO from where it was she was saying yes now, I have started working, people now have to see me working, so I have extra ten years, so that gives us hope, that if somebody is positive and is trying to have a vision like that, she was giving us courage....

**Thomas:** when I see the image of Catherine as of now it comes as if maybe she is still alive. Wherever I can go, even if I go in my small office there, still I think about her. Oh Catherine told me about this, I have to do this. If I relax, then I spoil the organization, the organization must go up. Even the people in the field they must feel that since Catherine she is out, we have to maintain what Catherine was doing.

**Linly Kamanga:** When always I think about Catherine I always think of courage. She was a courageous woman, she never feared anything. What she did was like she wanted all her visions, all her plans to be done, and that's exactly what she did. And even if when she was dying, a few days before her death, she said hey my people, my fellow volunteers, I have done what I wanted, and the part which is left is for you.... meaning that whatever she wanted at least she has done and she has completed but the left part is for us...

**Catherine Phiri:** It happens to me because I was in a very terrible situation, and I didn't want other people to face the same problem I had, because it was a big problem, so trying to solve the problem for my friends who are positive I thought it was far much better for me to come up with that thing, put up an organization so that people should learn and people who are affected should learn that we can still live and do something... You have to have a strong will, that I will live.

**END**