

Vet against all odds

On International Women's Day we look back at the touching story of Nannozi Beatrice Kasirye, a Ugandan vet and one of the many strong women who specialised at ITM.

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Dit is de omschrijving

Few children choose to set off for boarding school at the tender age of ten: Ugandan student *Nannozi Beatrice Kasirye* was such a child. Realising that a good education will help her avoid farm work, she was determined to excel in school so that eventually she can get a job in a "nice city with lights". Currently, she is completing a master-after-master programme in tropical animal health at ITM; a degree that will enable her to work in a laboratory and carry out research. The path to Antwerp has proved to be a long and winding road.

Beatrice grew up in a small village in central Uganda called Kayini. Her parents were both teachers but her father was forced to give up his profession, as farming provided a better income. Being a person who appreciated the value of education, he did everything he possibly could to make sure his seven children attended good schools, despite the societal pressure to limit the money he spent on the five girls. "We live in a society where men are obliged to financially support their family and immediate relatives," explains Beatrice. "They monitor their wives' incomes and have the final say in how the money is spent. As a result, people think a girl is either supposed to be groomed for marriage or should go for low-paying jobs like sewing or working in a beauty salon, or at best obtain a certificate. After all, they will get married, all of their money will be controlled by a man, and little will be taken back home to her relatives."

Beatrice completed her secondary school and started a bachelor programme in veterinary medicine at Makerere University in 2005, where only a quarter of her class were female. Stigmas surrounding the course were abundant, such as "female vets never find husbands because most of the men fear them"; or "girls are too weak to handle the workload of the course and often do not finish it within the compulsory five-year period". In Uganda people tend to associate veterinary medicine with the treatment of cattle and they believe girls are unable to handle bulls, so they will easily be outcompeted by boys."

But Beatrice Kasirye stood her ground. After graduation she started working for an NGO called BRAC (Building Resources across Communities), on the Livestock and Poultry Project. She was carrying out clinical work and advisory services for farm management practices, like feeding and deworming. This job presented its own challenges and growing a thick skin became a must. Poultry farmers were mostly women and the majority had never worked with a female vet before; each time felt like she was undergoing an exam and Beatrice had to win their trust over and over again. "Musawo aliwa?" ("Where is the vet?") was a phrase that Beatrice heard all too often, from the mouths of male cattle farmers who almost expected her to fail when handling their animals as the farms were not equipped with a crush (a strongly built stall or cage for holding livestock safely while they are examined). "If this job taught me anything, it was that whatever I do as a vet, I had to give it my utmost best," reflects Beatrice.

Three years ago Beatrice left the non-profit world and became a state employee: she is currently a vet inspector at Entebbe international airport, the principal airport of Uganda, where a rush job is common daily practice due to strict flight schedules. After having worked in positions that required practicing for some time, she became interested in epidemiology and realised she wanted to delve into research and laboratory work. This, however, required getting a second degree; one that would provide real lab work experience. She allowed herself a year to find a suitable

*"Girls know that education is their only path to self-sufficiency. It is their only chance to shape their own fate rather than having the limits of their lives dictated to them by others."
(Michelle Obama)*

programme that was flexible so that she could keep on working and look after her newborn son; and to find a scholarship that could cover her costs.

So she began gathering her papers and saving money. One day, a colleague forwarded her some information on the Master in Tropical Animal Health programme, a collaborative degree between ITM and the University of Pretoria. The course was everything she needed; it combines online and face-to-face training, the latter including hands-on laboratory work. She applied, and in November 2015 she received the good news: her application was successful!

Since early September, Dr Kasirye has been living in Antwerp, a city she calls mind-blowingly beautiful. Despite the challenges, she has full support of her immediate family. To make the most of her time, she fully immersed herself in coursework. The programme follows an integrated One Health approach, an aspect that, Dr Kasirye feels, has been ignored in disease control for decades. One Health stresses the importance of collaboration among scientists from multiple disciplines and Beatrice herself gained a better appreciation of this concept through the course. "Though it may seem obvious that various professionals would work together, unfortunately it does not happen often," she says. "If it did, we could all be much more efficient in our jobs."

So what is Beatrice looking forward to the most? Getting her degree and being reunited with her two-year-old son in January.