

VOICE IN UGANDA NEWSLETTER

December 2023

OUR COLLECTIVE EFFORTS IN ADDRESSING GENDER BASED
VIOLENCE IN UGANDA

UNiTE! Invest to Prevent Violence against Women & Girls.



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STORIES OF COLLECTIVE INVESTMENT IN ENDING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN UGANDA

Under the overarching theme of **“Invest to Prevent Violence against Women & Girls,”** we, at Voice Linking and Learning Uganda, proudly continue our UNITE Campaign. This year, we aspire to light up the remarkable efforts of our grantees and rights holders who stand as beacons in the fight against gender-based violence (GBV). Their stories of resilience, advocacy, and determination form the heart of our newsletter, titled **“Our Collective Efforts in Addressing Gender Based Violence in Uganda.”**

Within the pages of this newsletter, we aim to spotlight the unsung heroes shaping the narrative against GBV in Uganda. From the individuals boldly taking the lead to the male champions challenging societal norms, from the dedicated service providers offering a lifeline to survivors to the policymakers working towards legal frameworks, and finally, to the local leaders, encompassing political, religious, and cultural figures, contributing to the collective effort against GBV.

Through these narratives, we hope to weave a tapestry of inspiration, resilience, and progress. Each story is a testament to the power of collective action and the positive change that can emerge when diverse stakeholders unite with a shared goal, the elimination of gender-based violence.

Join us as we celebrate the triumphs, acknowledge the challenges, and collectively reinforce our commitment to creating a Uganda where every individual, regardless of gender, lives free from the shackles of violence.

Together, let us amplify the voices that refuse to be silenced and continue the journey towards a more just and equitable society.

Yours,
Uganda Linking and Learning facilitators



EMPOWERING LIVES, BREAKING CHAINS: SMILE AGAIN FAMILY PROJECT'S TRIUMPH AGAINST GBV

Amidst the myriad of challenges facing survivors of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), there is a ray of hope. At the tender age of 16, Rashida found herself trapped in the clutches of GBV after the untimely death of her parents led her into the care of an aunt. Unfortunately, instead of finding solace and support, Rashida faced neglect and abuse by her aunt who withheld basic necessities from her.

In a desperate bid to secure her needs, Rashida just like many other young girls, entered into a toxic relationship where she became a victim of both sexual and verbal abuse, resulting in an unplanned pregnancy and her subsequent expulsion from home. Rashida found love and acceptance at SMILE Again Family Project. In a world where apathy often reigns, Smile Again Family stands tall as an instrument of change in devising solutions to GBV under their Voice funded project titled **“Empowered Teenage Mothers, Living their full Potential”**.

We firmly believe that the battle against GBV cannot wait for survivors rather, it requires proactive measures to empower individuals before they become victims.” **project coordinator**

The Smile Again Family Project, refuses to wait until people become victims to show up as saviors. They strive to create awareness against GBV, going beyond statistics to the real stories of those affected. Smile Again Family Project emphasizes the importance of personal narratives and by uncovering the stories behind the numbers, the organization not only deepens awareness but also identifies the root causes of GBV in their communities.

Through this storytelling approach, Smile Again Family Project identified economic dependence and low self-esteem as predominant factors contributing to GBV. In response, the organization empowers young mothers through hope based communication and economic support; training on establishing, managing, and sustaining business enterprises in which girls like Rashida benefit. This initiative has significantly reduced instances of young girls enduring torment due to dependency.

Rashida's story embodies the transformative impact of Smile Again Family Project's efforts. After joining the program, she found herself under the wing of her grandmother and embarked on a journey towards self-sufficiency. Smile Again Family Project supported Rashida to initiate a fish-selling business, now saving up to 30,000 Uganda shillings(equivalent to 8USD) per day as profit. This newfound financial stability has empowered her to care for her child and meet her basic needs.

“Through the trainings in Smile Again Family Project, I have developed a changed mindset, from waiting to be given and end up being abused to creating a future full of hope for myself and my child”, says Rashida.

Smile Again Family Project stands as a testament to the power of collective efforts in addressing GBV. Through awareness, empowerment, and a commitment to change at the grassroots level, they pave the way for a future where individuals are not merely survivors but architects of their own destinies.



In the Picture is Rashida on the Left selling food items. on the Right are other beneficiaries, now rights holders who have leveraged their economic strength to launch their own businesses”

FROM DESPAIR TO EMPOWERMENT: PULONYA GRACE'S JOURNEY OF RESILIENCE UNDER THE YOK OF GBV



Pulonya Grace in the middle in her Vegetable Garden

Meet Pulonya Grace, a 49-year-old widow and mother of six who, in addition to challenges caused by disability, faced societal rejection and discrimination. In the face of tragedy, losing her husband in an accident, she found herself denied access to family land by her in-laws, adding to the turmoil in her life.

“My life became worse and more challenging after the tragic and unfortunate loss of my husband in an accident. This loss was devastating for my family and left me feeling hopeless and extremely sad.”- Grace Pulonya

Amidst the chaos, Pulonya joined the Partners for Community Health and Development Organization (PACHEDO). Through their Voice-funded project known as **Women's Resilience for Gender Equality and Rights Promotion (WOREP)**, many women and girls undergo transformative training on their rights, life skills, leadership, and socioeconomic empowerment using a community platforms called **Women Rights Advocacy Group (WRAGs)**.

Empowered by newfound knowledge, Pulonya gained

the confidence to speak up about the denial of her land rights. The project not only equipped her with the tools to assert her rights but also facilitated a meeting with community leaders, elders, and her in-laws to address the injustice against her.

In the meeting, stakeholders agreed that Pulonya should be allowed access to her marital land for the well-being of her children. The elders warned of legal consequences if this resolution was not honored, and her in-laws, recognizing the gravity of the situation, eventually respected the proposed solution. Pulonya joyfully reclaimed her land a few weeks later.

Empowered by this victory, Pulonya joined the VSLA PACHEDO group, where she learned the art of saving and generating income for her household. Engaging in vegetable growing on her newly acquired land, has turned her adversity into opportunity. The economic empowerment training motivated her to work hard, and she now generates individual income and also contributes to the savings of her VSLA group.

“I have found a great comfort in being part of my group. In addition to economic empowerment, I have a new family. I no longer feel isolated as a single mother and I greatly appreciate my new friends. There are some days I don't have money to contribute to the VSLA, but I find the presence of the group so comforting I go to enjoy their company. I feel more confident and accepted by my community” - Grace

Pulonya expresses her gratitude to PACHEDO, acknowledging them for restoring hope, raising awareness of her rights, and providing economic empowerment which have all helped her to recover from the pain she suffered.

Pulonya Grace's story is a confirmation of the transformative power of collective efforts in addressing GBV.

JOY'S COMMITMENT TO SELF IMPROVEMENT IN THE BATTLE AGAINST GBV

Meet “Joy,” a 26-year-old refugee from the Bahema tribe in Congo who since 2016 has been residing in the Kyaka II refugee settlement. Joy is now a GBV champion/change agent on a Voice funded project called **Refugee Women Empowerment Project**



Joy facilitating a mock advocacy activity during one of the Training under the RWE Project

Her early years were not easy and in the face of cultural norms that dictated early marriages for Bahema girls, Joy took a different turn that helped her to emerge victorious.

Orphaned at the tender age of three, Joy's aunt took care of her and paid her education up to Primary five. Joy's life took an unforeseen twist when, at around 12-13 years old, her aunt arranged for her marriage. Returning home from school, she discovered that marriage had been arranged without her knowledge, and the bride price had been paid. Rumors from her peers in the village mocked her, claiming she would never attend school again. Uncomfortable with this destiny thrust upon her, Joy gathered courage to confront her aunt who assured her that according to their culture, Bahema girls are expected to marry early for the sole purpose of bearing children.

Determined to curve her own path, the night before

her arranged marriage, Joy fled to town and found work in a hotel, eluding the predetermined fate that awaited her. When conflict erupted in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Joy became a refugee in Kampala, where life was arduous until she was granted refugee status.

At 17, compelled by survival, Joy entered into marriage not of her own will. She married a man with two children, eventually becoming a mother of three with an extended family of seven.

Despite the challenges in her marriage, including financial struggles and occasional abuse from her husband, Joy remains a source of inspiration.

Passionate about empowering women, Joy advocates for self-sufficiency, encouraging women to work and contribute to their households. Her message is clear: financial independence can be a shield against abuse. By working and supporting their children, women can foster autonomy and resilience.

Although her formal education in Congo halted at Primary five, Joy's commitment to self-improvement led her to adult education in Uganda. This education not only broadened her horizons but also empowered her to actively participate in projects, allowing her to express herself confidently.

“In adult education I learnt English and translation skills. This bridged my language barrier. I can now ably express myself and explain issues to my colleagues because I can now translate in Kiswahili and my native language.”

Joy's story is more than a narrative, it's evidence of courage, resilience, and the transformative power of individuals taking control of their destinies. Her journey serves as a rallying cry for girls and women, inspiring them to confront and overcome gender-based violence through self-improvement.

OVERCOMING EMOTIONAL ADVERSITY AMONG WOMEN AND GIRLS WITH SPINAL INJURIES



Mark Kalibbala Giggs

My name is Mark Kalibbala Giggs, and twelve years ago, a car jerk changed my life forever. As I repaired a vehicle, I became the victim of a tragic accident that

damaged my spine, transforming me from an upright walker to a wheelchair user.

Amidst this challenging journey, I met Angela Balaba, a counselor and Executive Director of Center for Disability Rights, Research & Governance who employed various strategies in an attempt to uplift me. It wasn't until she adopted a 'crisis counseling style' during a one-on-one session that a profound change occurred. Angela posed an emotional question, asking whether I perceived myself as illiterate or elite. Despite holding an A-level advanced certificate at the time, bitterness and anger consumed me, disrupting my sleep. Determined to redefine my life, I made the pivotal decision to enroll in university.

Today, I proudly hold a Bachelor's degree in Community-Based Rehabilitation and am a Master's degree student pursuing studies in Disability and Development. I contribute to Nakasongola Local Government as a Community-Based Officer, juggling my responsibilities with part-time lecturing at Kyambogo University in the Department of Community-Based Rehabilitation. Additionally, I provide supervision to intern students and proudly represent Uganda in the National Wheelchair Basketball Team, which competed in Ghana in August 2023.

*In Mark's words, **"I am empowered, embracing every endeavor that fills my heart with enlightenment. My journey is proof of that one can overcome emotional violence"***



Rose Abenakyo during one of the Peer Training Session

Through the efforts of the Center for Disability Rights, Research & Governance (CEDIG), on the **Voice funded Make Every Voice Heard in Health Services project**, I actively engage in peer group training sessions. These sessions aim to empower women and girls with spinal injuries, fostering resilience against emotional violence. Tailored for individuals, spouses, and peers, these trainings provide essential tools for coping and building resilience.

Meet Rose Abenakyo, a young lady with a spinal injury. Initially shy, timid, and struggling with low self-esteem, Rose underwent a transformative journey through peer group trainings. She learned basic wheelchair transfers and gained the confidence to navigate the streets independently. Discovering an interest in hair management, Rose's newfound resilience empowered her to represent persons with disabilities in Iganga district.

*Reflecting on her journey, **Rose states, "I wonder where I could be if I had not overcome the emotional violence."***

BREAKING BARRIERS, BUILDING CHAMPIONS: A YEAR OF TRANSFORMATION IN OCE LYANTONDE'S FIGHT AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



The Principal Lyantonde Technical Institute sensitizes duty bearers including RDC Lyantonde (second Right) and rights holders on diversity and inclusion of the youth, women and girls in non-formal skills empowerment to end gender-based violence.

In the heart of Lyantonde District located in South-Western Uganda, is a transformative story of a group of passionate and committed male champions fighting against gender-based violence. **The Organization for Community Empowerment Lyantonde (OCE)**, in collaboration with Voice, embarked on a year-long journey to empower and uplift the community, under the **Key and Vulnerable Populations Empowerment Project** particularly focusing on key and vulnerable populations in Lyantonde Rural Sub-county.

At the core of the project's objectives is the enhancement of socio-economic capacities, providing alternative sources of income, and fostering participation in Community. Under the Socio-economic Empowerment interventions, the project has realized significant success with the formation of the Kawule/Nseese Beans Growers PDM Enterprise Group. The group of fifteen rights holders located in Kalagala Parish is duly registered under the Lyantonde District Community Social Services Department and is on a list to benefit from the Parish Development Model Disbursements next quarter (January-March 2024).

Several youth have also been enrolled on the skills acquisition program providing non-formal training. Trainees are supported to select from a range of options ranging from construction, metal fabrication, plumbing, tailoring, and hairdressing.

Despite these interventions, there was a need to positively influence the community to fight Gender

Based Violence which is prevalent in the area. The project has trained 15 Gender Based violence Champions to defy gender and social norms and to combat gender-based violence against women and girls.



Female rights holders embracing diversification and inclusion of women and girls to acquire non-formal skills for six months under the empowerment project.

Wilson Nkangi, a Youth representative to the Lyantonde rural sub-county council from Kalagala Parish, expressed the transformative effect of the training on leadership, gender equity, and gender-based violence prevention. He stated, "This meeting has built my confidence to lead and mobilize fellow youths to participate in development interventions and end gender-based violence against girls and women."

Since their training, the male champions have leveraged their voices through Radio talk shows at 103.8 Kaaro FM Limited, advocating for the inclusion of youth, women, and girls in income-generating activities. Their message that calls for a call for an end to gender-based violence and income inequality has sparked a wave of change within the community. In addition to awareness raising, the male champions have been engaged in mobilizing rights holders for a six-month non-formal skills acquisition training at Lyantonde Technical Institute with support from Voice.

In Lyantonde, the work of the male champions continues to yield results in the community particularly among men.

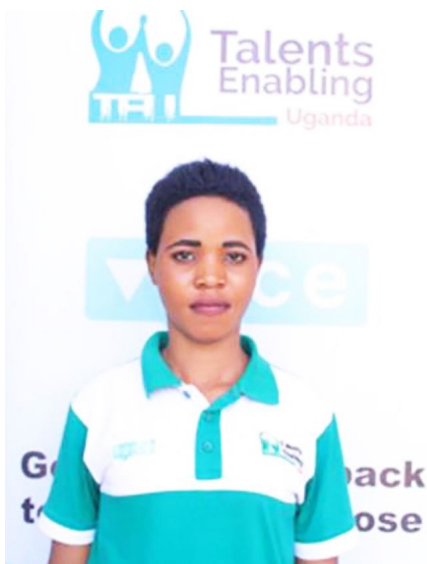


A group of thirteen rights holders undergoing a six months non-formal skills acquisition training at Lyantonde technical Institute with support from VOICE.



Wilson Nkangi (R) a youth representative together with the project officer-OCE (C) and a male champion (L) participated in a radio talk show on ending gender-based violence.

ARISING FROM ADVERSITY TO ADVOCACY: AKANKWASA JUSTINE'S JOURNEY FROM FISTULA TO EMPOWERMENT



Justine is now confident in herself

Akankwasa Justine, originally from Kagadi District in mid-western Uganda, faced numerous challenges on her journey from being a victim of obstetric fistula to emerging as a glimmer of hope through the support of **Talents Enabling Uganda (TEU)** under the Voice funded **Getting my life back,**

to fulfil my full potential project.

At the age of 17, Justine, a senior-two student at Kagadi Senior Secondary School, had to drop out due to the economic difficulties exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic. In a desperate attempt to escape her awful circumstances, she married a market vendor with the consent of her economically unstable parents.

Her ordeal took a drastic turn during childbirth when her husband refused to accompany her to the hospital, leading her to walk a kilometer to a nearby medical clinic. The difficult labor resulted in a tear that developed into obstetric fistula, causing uncontrollable leakage of urine. Despite the challenges and subsequent pregnancies, Justine endured the physical and emotional pain, unaware of her condition.

Facing abuse, abandonment, and economic struggles, Justine found a spark of hope when she learned about free fistula treatment in Kasese District in western Uganda through a radio announcement. She sought and received medical intervention, marking the beginning of her physical healing.

However, the journey didn't end there. Alone and responsible for her children, Justine decided to relocate to Kampala in search of opportunities and escape the psychological torture and stigma she faced. It was in Namasuba, a suburb of Kampala, that she crossed paths with the TEU team.

Talents Enabling Uganda enrolled her in a comprehensive training program covering psychosocial support, leadership development, and business skills.



Justine sharing her story with sister friends during a Self-esteem and confidence building training by TEU

Through TEU's support, Justine underwent a transformation in self-esteem. She participated in psychosocial support, leadership development, and business skills training that enabled her to discover her potential and to gain the confidence to share her story with others.

"Since I joined, Talents Enabling Uganda, they welcomed, loved, taught and made me believe in

my-self. I have built my self-esteem and now I can stand freely in front of people" -Justine

Justine is now an active member of the Rights Holders Sensitization team, traveling to community schools to encourage young girls to stay in school and avoid early marriages. She emphasizes the importance of informed choices, urging girls to delay marriage decisions to prevent the cycle of suffering she endured.

"There are many girls like me, who are lured into premarital sex and end up pregnant, this affects the whole trajectory of the girls who get into dire GBV. "I feel it's now my duty to stop this by sensitizing other girls". Said Justine

Justine's success story highlights how TEU through support from Voice is empowering women and girls to overcome adversity, rebuild their lives, and become advocates for preventing gender-based violence in their community.

EMPOWERING COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN CANCER CARE

In the battle against cancer, its impact on mental health cannot be understated. The harsh reality of cancer often involves abandonment, eviction from rented houses, isolation, and even forced sexual intercourse. The Uganda Women's Cancer Support Organisation (UWOCASO), in collaboration with VOICE have in response launched the **Mentally Cancer Free and Thriving project** in Mende Subcounty, Wakiso District in Central Uganda.



Community Champions Sharing Experiences during a Skilling session

Under this initiative, 10 empowered rights holders transformed into community champions—men supportive of their wives, male and female cancer survivors, and Village Health Teams—were equipped to raise their voices against exploitation, sexual abuse, and violence. The goal was to forge partnerships with legal and human rights organizations, amplifying efforts to secure justice for women and girls facing these atrocities.

Simultaneously, 6 health workers from Bulondo HCIII, Mende HCIII, and Bbanda HCII were oriented in integrating mental and psychosocial support into health assessment and management services. Positioned as focal persons, they support mental health assessments among suspected cancer patients referred by the community champions.

The project has served as an eye-opener for rights holders and the Mende community. The revelation that many women experience GBV after a cancer diagnosis, with men chasing their wives away

and remarrying, highlighted the urgent need for intervention. Muwonge Robert, a male cancer survivor, expressed the impact of the training on his confidence to speak out against exploitation.

"This training has been impactful to me; I have gained confidence to speak out against women exploitation to other fellow men to support their wives instead of being violent to them" - Muwonge Robert, a male cancer survivor.



Rights holders during a Debeaking Session

Beyond advocacy, the community champions have embraced community sensitization, identifying more rights holders, and providing psychosocial support. They also extend skill-building interventions in agriculture such as cultivating vegetable gardens and poultry to improve nutritional, daily food needs, and mental and physical well-being.

Esther, a rights holder, shared her transformative journey: *"I was stuck and didn't know the next step after being diagnosed with cancer. But I have been relieved after joining this skilling group. I have gained poultry farming skills and now rear some poultry. I am now able to pay my child's school fees"*

In the heart of this collaborative effort, voices that were once silenced are now speaking out, breaking the chains of gender-based violence and fostering positive transformation in the lives of those affected by cancer.

HOW MALE CHAMPIONS ARE LEADING THE BATTLE AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN RURAL JINJA

In the heart of rural communities like Namagera in Jinja District, Eastern Uganda, a remarkable transformation is ongoing as male champions take bold strides to eradicate gender-based violence. Hope Mutesi brings to light the inspiring efforts of the **Teenage Mothers and Child Support Foundation (TMCSF)** under the **Solidarity with Teenagers-Uganda (SWT-U)** project funded by voice.

This initiative involves engaging young men, both in and out of school, to champion the cause of ending violence against women and girls. TMCSF, through the SWT-U project, targets diverse groups of male individuals, including youth leaders, market vendors, boda boda riders, schoolboys, and other community leaders. The aim is clear – to create a secure environment free from gender-based violence, particularly for teenage mothers residing in the Butagaya and Budondo areas.



Male champions undergoing training in fighting GBV

At the forefront of this noble mission is Mr. Munaabi Sharif, a 27-year-old youth chairperson hailing from Namagera town council. Since the inception of the project in August 2023, Munaabi has actively participated in the Solidarity with Teenagers-Uganda-supported training sessions. These sessions aim not only to empower teenage mothers socially, economically, and mentally but also to safeguard and promote their rights. These young girls and women are exposed to increased violence in their homes, face physical and emotional abuse from partners, guardians, and caretakers.



Munaabi Sharif (in white) standing with some of the teenage mothers he has supported

Munaabi Sharif emerges as an inspiration of change, rallying teenage mothers from Namagera to join the transformative training program. Munaabi, as a male champion, steps up to address this issue head-on by engaging the guardians and community leaders. His proactive approach aims to mitigate the violence these girls endure due to their participation in the training sessions.



“As a male champion, I am dedicated to fostering gender equity and inclusiveness in my community,” declares Munaabi Sharif. He takes on the role of an advocate, reporting instances of abuse to community leaders and serving as a catalyst for change and inspiration among men in Namagera. Munaabi actively advocates for the rights of women and girls on various platforms, increasing their visibility in a society where rural communities often

grapple with high incidences of sexual harassment and domestic violence.

During the SWT-U project training sessions, Sharif and fellow male champions continually deepen their understanding of women's rights and their pivotal role in mitigating gender-based violence. Equipped with the skills to be role models and change agents, these champions strive to create lasting impact in their communities of operation, spanning Butagaya and Budondo Sub-counties in Jinja district. Through their concerted efforts, a brighter, violence-free future emerges for women and girls in these rural areas.

“Having male allies or champions in fighting gender-based violence is important in breaking the chain of the vice. We as men can freely engage the perpetrators without any fear which is not the case with women.” said Kakande Kasiimu, a male champion in lumuli village, Butagaya.

“In our local communities, it is important for our fellow men to understand that women equally have a right to make their own living, so when these young teenage mothers are abused because of attending trainings, it violates their rights as women. Therefore as a male champion in Budondo, I work towards ensuring that these young women's rights are respected and protected from their perpetrators by directly engaging them (both perpetrators and victims) and also reporting such cases to local authorities like LC 1 chairpersons” said Tamale Sula, a male champion from Budondo sub-county.

APPRECIATION

The Linking and Learning Facilitators (SL Consult and LASPNET) appreciate the following grantees and rightsholders for sharing their stories and experiences in ending GBV in Uganda.

 Smile Again Family Project	Smile Again Family Project
 Talents Enabling Uganda	Talents Enabling Uganda
 TMCSF TEENAGE MOTHERS & CHILD SUPPORT Foundation	Teenage Mothers & Child Support Foundation
 PACHEDO FACILITATING INNOVATIVE COMMUNITY HEALTH SUPPORT & DEVELOPMENT	PACHEDO
 UGANDA WOMEN'S CANCER SUPPORT ORGANISATION UWOCASO	Uganda Women's Cancer Support Organization
 ORGANIZATION FOR COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT (OCE) ...together we can	Organization for Community Empowerment
 CEDIG CENTER FOR DISABILITY RIGHTS RESEARCH & GOVERNANCE	Center for Disability Research & Governance
 MBELENI FOUNDATION ACTION FOR REFUGEES	Mbeleni Foundation

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