

# HOW PALABEK'S REFUGEE GIRLS ARE RECLAIMING THEIR FUTURES

At just 13, Isabella became a mother long before she understood what motherhood meant. Fleeing conflict in South Sudan, she arrived in Palabek, Lamwo district, carrying trauma, silence and a childhood abruptly cut short, **Johnisani Ocakacon** writes.



Some of the beneficiaries of TOGETHER project making reusable pads

**A**t just 17 and a mother of two, Isabella (another name withheld because she is still a minor) stands before other girls not as a victim, but as a mentor teaching them the sexual and reproductive health knowledge she never received. Her transformation is part of a quiet but profound shift taking place in Palabek Refugee Settlement in Lamwo district, where hundreds of young refugees once trapped by teenage pregnancy, early marriage and limited health information are discovering confidence, purpose and hope through a comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) initiative.

When Isabella speaks about her past, her voice softens, as if replaying memories she wishes she could rewrite.

"When we fled South Sudan and settled in Palabek, I dropped out of school. I got pregnant and I delivered my first child at 13 because I did not know anything about sexual rights," she says.

Isabella is no longer the scared girl she once was. As a peer educator with the Bed Ki Gen teen mothers group, she uses her story to empower other young girls navigating similar hardships.

"I have learnt that before dating, you should go for a blood test and get proper information about pregnancy. This knowledge is helping me avoid more unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases," she says.

The 17-year-old believes teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections have reduced because of SRHR

sensitisation in the settlement.

Much of this shift is linked to the sh13b, seven-year Uniting Towards Gender Equality for the Enjoyment of Women and Girls' Total Health and Rights (TOGETHER) project, implemented by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA-Uganda) across Agago, Lamwo, Pader, and Kitgum districts.

Funded by Global Affairs Canada through ADRA Canada, the project focuses on improving SRHR, preventing gender-based violence, enhancing nutrition for children under five, and creating safe spaces for adolescents, young women, refugees, and host communities. Isabella's story is echoed by many other young women in Palabek.

Lilly Abalo, 20, says she used to struggle with low self-esteem.

"I used to be weak in decision-making and filled with anger. But through the youth club and psychosocial counselling, my life has changed. I now believe that my life is not over."

**Muwanga (right) addressing Dr Maurice Okao of Ambrosoli Memorial Hospital (fourth-left); Flavia Adiao, a health officer from TOGETHER project (third-left); Ndahilo (second-left) and Florence Namuwaya from the Ministry of Health (left) during a joint monitoring exercise recently**

## INTERVENTIONS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

At Atanga Health Centre III in Pader district, in-charge David Nokrach says teenage pregnancies and early marriages have reduced significantly.

"We now have a youth-friendly corner, and youth come for health talks twice a week," he says.

Nursing officer Petra Elupe says outreach programmes, which are facilitated by Uniting Towards Gender Equality for the Enjoyment of Women and Girls' Total Health and Rights project, are helping parents understand the pressures young people face.

"Poverty pushes many girls into early pregnancies. But now more youth are seeking health services," she says.

In Pader, Ambrose Ongwech, the assistant district health officer for maternal and child health, says some adolescents are driven by the desire for a luxurious lifestyle.

"Health services for adolescents are helping them cope with challenges," he says.

I want to start an income-generating activity to support my children," she says.

Abalo urges development partners to add vocational training: "If youth get skills, they can earn income and become self-reliant."

During a recent three-day joint monitoring visit with the Ministry of Health officials, Pio

Ndahilo, the project manager, said the project prioritises adolescent health and SRHR for young people aged 10-24.

"The project is targeting 30,000 beneficiaries across four districts. We have trained 69 health workers, 90 nutritionists, and 101 village health teams in SRHR," he said.

Ndahilo said the project is

already transforming lives.

"Teenage pregnancies have reduced from 33% at baseline to 16% in the fourth year of the project," he said.

Women's decision-making power has also risen from 22% to 55%.

Nineteen-year-old Sunday Atimango, who became pregnant at 14 and dropped out because her parents could not afford fees, said the project brought clarity about family planning.

"When we came to the settlement, there was no SRHR programme. This project has helped us improve menstrual hygiene and avoid unwanted pregnancies," she said.

Lilly Oyella, 21, said the project helped her reshape her life.

"I did not know much about life at first. But after learning about SRHR, I improved my hygiene and started a business. I fry cassava chips and make cakes and chapati for learners. The money helps me care for my children," she said.

Beatrice Aryemo, 24, oversees a group of 30 teenage mothers who hope to rebuild their lives.

"We are trained in SRHR, problem-solving and life skills. I believe this support will transform our lives," she said.

## KEEPING STUDENTS IN SCHOOL

At Palabek Ogili Secondary School, SRHR education and skills training are helping students stay in school.

Senior Three student Neema Akwero said learning to make reusable sanitary pads and liquid soap has changed girls' lives.

"Girls no longer have to ask parents for pads. We make them at school and sell some to

the community," she said.

For Henry Olara, who is in Senior Three, making detergent has become a business opportunity.

"I no longer disturb my parents for pocket money," he said.

The head girl, Gloria Adoch, said stigma around menstruation is fading.

"Even boys are now involved in menstrual talks. The stigma has reduced," she said.

Emma Komakech, a Straight Talk club member, said the project improved his self-esteem.

"I help other youth avoid drug abuse and focus on income-generating activities like making liquid soap," he said.

Senior woman teacher Filder Lakot said the project has shaped both academics and character.

"Learners are attached to teachers who guide them morally," she said.

Her colleague, senior male teacher Simon Emede, said teachers now help fill the parenting gaps.

"Students share a lot with teachers, and this improves discipline," he said.

Anthony Oceng, a parent, believes the project is helping youth avoid early pregnancies and become self-reliant.

Dr Moses Muwanga, the assistant commissioner community health in the Ministry of Health, reinforces the value of SRHR.

"Skills like making reusable pads and liquid soap empower young people to stand on their own. When youth are empowered, they become better leaders of tomorrow," he said.

