

# Scaling Up Efforts to Curb Teenage Pregnancies in Eastern Uganda: A Collaborative Initiative in Bugiri and Namutumba Districts



## Interview with Dolly Ajok, Project Manager for the EU-funded Action to Scale-up Reduction of Teenage Pregnancies among Vulnerable Girls in Eastern Uganda



Some of the beneficiaries of the Action to Scale up initiatives against Teenage pregnancies in Busoga region-

**Interviewer:** Can you tell us about yourself and your work?

**Dolly Ajok:** My name is Dolly Ajok, and a public health enthusiast. I work with Amref Health Africa as a Project Manager for a teenage pregnancy reduction project in East-Central Uganda. I've always loved working with young people, and it's rewarding for me to see them get empowered, know they have a voice, and embrace the reality that they can change their lives and communities.

I price creating platforms that convene young people to deliberate and strategically plan around adolescent and young people's issues in the recent past strongly favoring youth health financing needs in Uganda. I have witnessed young people collaborate with stakeholders to build sustainable solutions prioritizing the well-being of Uganda's young population and allocating resources for their diverse needs. For me, it is fulfilling to see young people informing policymakers and decision-makers of not only their issues but how they can collaborate in addressing them.

**Interviewer:** Can you provide an insight into the project and its objectives?

**Dolly Ajok:** The Action to Scale up Reduction of Teenage Pregnancies among vulnerable girls is a 2-year project implemented in a consortium led by Amref Health Africa with its partners Amref Health Africa-Uganda, UWONET and NSHAWA a local CBO. Interventions are employed in 08 select sub-counties in Bugiri and Namutumba districts with the aim of building capacity of key stakeholders to effectively tackle Sexual & Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH), prevention and response to teenage pregnancies. Besides girls, the project also targets boys at risk themselves, as potential agents of change and role models against SGBV.

A baseline conducted by the project concluded that majority (62.7%) of the respondents felt young people did not have choice or right to choose pregnancy even when communities seemed to have favorable attitudes on SRH rights for young people. Further interrogation in the region shows that 58% of teenage girls have sex in exchange for goods, 66% conceive before they enter teenage marriage and 34% have children following teenage marriage. Clearly illustrating the different entry points to teenage pregnancy thus need for the project.

**Interviewer:** What unique approaches does the project use to combat teenage pregnancies and sexual gender-based violence?

**Dolly Ajok:** Working with boys and men as allies in advancing SRHR for young people and challenging negative and harmful social-cultural practices, perceptions and behaviors that promote teenage pregnancies have been impactful in communities where we work. These change agents are influential community members or exemplary youths who volunteer to actively speak up against teenage pregnancies and sexual gender-based violence. Their ground engagement has resulted to referrals, sensitizations at both community and household levels increasing opportunities for provision of on-spot advice and referrals to community members for services and collaboration in identification of adolescents/families in need of support. Additionally, with focus on empowering young girls economically. The project has supported to skill, form and functionalize Youth Savings and Loans Associations, registered them at district level, and linked to government programs and business opportunities within their communities.



Economic empowerment is crucial in youth programming because many young people's needs especially around access to services is tied to financial independence. If this is not factored into the project design it can

present hindrance to sustainable impact in teenage pregnancy reduction.

And lastly, responsive and adaptive programs motivate youths to embrace and sustain the project interventions. Young people should be involved and participate at all levels of the project design and implementation. Before we commenced vocational skills trainings for example, teenage mothers led the process of identifying their skills gaps, ranking their skilling needs and designing the



Girls take to share some of the exciting things they have been able to do that improve their incomes and quality of life through the VLSA.

skilling method. Although this led to slight modifications in planned project delivery approaches, solid commitment and ownership of the intervention was earned.

**Can you share with our readers some of the key achievements of the EU Teenage Pregnancy Reduction Initiative Project?**

**Project Manager: Dolly Ajok**

The project in the last year has reached over 13,000 young people on record with comprehensive SRHR education, menstrual hygiene and management, safe relationships, preventing and managing STDs/STIs. This is seen a slight improvement in uptake of FP services by youths in reproductive age. We aim to impact



Some of the girls together with a health worker and peer to peer educators pose for a photo following various activities held at the health center with support from Amref Health Africa and EU

the lives of 40,000 girls and boys with SRHR/SGBV knowledge and services.

The ripple effect of the 80 teenage mothers trained in vocational skills and financial literacy has in turn extended to over 300 pregnant, parent and out of school teens. These efforts have directed the formation of Youth Savings and Loans Associations fully run by youth under 18 in all the 08 sub counties where we work. These groups address youth economic issues, education and health financing, with the young girls saving and borrowing for healthcare for themselves and their children. Notably, six girls have returned to further their education with support from these associations.

Maintaining strong partnerships with district authorities and key stakeholders has grounded Amref Health Africa and its partners in the benefits of collaborative, sustainable, government led project delivery. This has led to sub-counties like Kagulu adopting vocational skills training for youths (hairdressing) fully financed by the sub-county and community based on our learnings. Our achievements highlight the need for adaptive, responsive, holistic and multispectral approach with emphasis on combining economic empowerment with health initiatives to ensure sustainable impact for

communities entrenched in negative cultural beliefs. In areas where teenage pregnancies are rampant, it is almost normalized and this calls for sustained interventions targeting social behavior and mindset change. Many teens experience repeat pregnancies, trapping them in a cycle of disempowerment. This too needs to be unsympathetically interrogated closely monitoring the trends. For instance, one of our beneficiaries was already expecting her third child when she joined the project at 19 years. Repeat teen pregnancies are becoming a major reason why regions like Busoga remain heavily impacted trapping young girls in a cycle of poverty and dependency. This underscores the importance of economic empowerment initiatives.



Tereza takes time to breast feed her baby .

Tereza embodies the struggles these young mothers face. She would walk to the health facility for antenatal care whilst attending vocation skills training sessions, which ran from morning to evening for three months. Balancing her responsibilities as a young mother, she often brought her children to the training sessions. After birth recently, she ensured to request a family planning method before leaving the health centre. Although her in-laws were not in full support, her mind was made up. Tereza has since started a small business making and selling baby clothes, tomatoes, and silverfish. Another challenge is the lack of adequate facilities in schools. Despite government directive for all schools to have girls' changing rooms, many still lack them. Coupled with the high cost of sanitary pads remain fertile ground for teenage pregnancies. Although the project trained 20 schools on reusable pad making which has seen schools like Buyange Primary School in Namutumba district take proactive steps by training all pupils but parent's initiative in taking full responsibility in providing for their children's needs is still low.



Teenage girls and boys learning how to make Re- Usable sanitary pads.

**Sustainability Plans**  
**Interviewer:** Can you elaborate on the sustainability plans for the EU Teenage Pregnancy Initiative Project?  
**Project Manager: Dolly Ajok**

We have built a robust partnership

with districts, community structures, beneficiaries, resulting in actioned commitments to sustain project initiatives. Bulange Sub County in Namutumba district allocated 5% of their annual budget to continue community sensitization and linkages to SRHR/SGBV services.

For the teenage mothers trained, the Youth Savings and Loans Associations have been formed and functionalized at all project supported sub counties. The groups have been registered at the district level and linked to the Parish Development Model (PDM) and other business opportunities, allowing them to expand their businesses.



We work with and strengthen already existing government and community structures we co-create project activities with them to ensure ownership and continuity

Additionally, during selection of community change agents, priority was given to those already volunteering in some capacity. This anchors the skills they have attained, building their capacity to mainstream the project objectives in their day to day volunteer efforts. By embedding our initiatives within existing community structures and securing district-level commitments and actions, we aim to ensure the long-term sustainability of our efforts to combat teenage pregnancy and support young people in the region.

Girls take to share some of the exciting things they have been able to do that improve their incomes and quality of life through the VLSA.

**Message of Appreciation**  
**Interviewer:** What message would you like to convey to the donors who have supported this project?

**Project Manager: Dolly Ajok**

To the European Union delegation in Uganda, we extend our deepest gratitude for the financing. Although it is a short-term initiative with a modest budget, the impact we have achieved is weighty. We have witnessed remarkable changes; young girls returning to school, smiles on faces of survivors of SGBV that have achieved justice and budding entrepreneurs. These are solid impacts that underscore the



value of your support. However, our work is far from complete. By scaling up best practices from the project, we can ensure that more young people have the opportunity to transform their lives and their communities. Thank you for your support.

young people.

**Project Challenges**



Maureen in blue was trained by the project, she is now passing on her skills to other girls in the community. She has big dreams of owning a tailoring school and a stall to sale her already made clothes and food stuff.

**Interviewer:** Can you share some of the challenges you have witnessed during the implementation of the EU Teenage Pregnancy Reduction Initiative Project?

**Project Manager: Dolly Ajok**

One of the significant challenges we faced was the prevalent acceptance of teenage pregnancies in some

# Transforming Lives: New Initiative Reduces Teenage Pregnancy and Empowers Girls in Busoga

By Tonny Abet



## Recall

**Maurine Ndibogesa, a resident of Kagulu in Namutumba district, recalls her life taking a drastic turn when she got pregnant at 14 while in primary six. Abandoned by both the boy who impregnated her and her own parents, Maurine faced a grim reality. "I produced the child and my parents also abandoned me. It was a hard situation," she shares. "I started digging for my survival and to care for my child. When I get Ushs1000, I buy smearing jelly for my baby and other basic needs."**



**M**aurine, now a teenage mother of three, reveals that the boy who had deserted her reappeared after she gave birth to her first child, convincing her of his undying love and getting her pregnant again. This time, his family took her in, adhering to local social norms, and providing her with some relief. Despite these challenges, Maurine was pregnant with her third child when she learned about a new initiative aimed at reducing teenage pregnancies.

The project, "Action to Scale-up Reduction of Teenage Pregnancies among Vulnerable Girls in Eastern Uganda," funded by the European Union, is being implemented in a consortium where Amref Health Africa lead. The project targets the Busoga sub-region districts of Bugiri and Namutumba, which had some of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the country, the project has significantly impacted Maurine's life through its skilling and financial literacy programs. Maurine is among the 13,000 young people reached by the project, surpassing the initial target of 800 teenagers and young people below the age of 19. Amref trained Maurine in tailoring and financial literacy and gave her a complete startup kit including a sewing machine and African fabric to start her own business. "I can pay school fees for my child. I can also buy for myself whatever I want – smearing oil and soap. I am no longer begging," she says.

During her third pregnancy, the project provided a modest transport refund during her training. "I saved the money well. When I was due for delivery, I collected the money I had saved and bought clothes for the baby. I produced well in the hospital," she explains. Maurine is now using contraceptives and plans to focus on her business and her children's education, thanks to the support from the project. Shamina Namugabwe, another beneficiary from Namutumba district, shares a similar

story of transformation. After dropping out of secondary school due to financial difficulties, Shamina faced an unplanned pregnancy. However, the Teenage Pregnancy reduction project offered her a lifeline. "We started the tailoring training, and after three months, our life styles had completely changed. We were not putting on shoes, so we started buying them. I decided to start family planning" she narrates.

Shamina and other trainees formed a savings group of 32 members, meeting every Thursday to save between Ush1000 and Ush5000 each. They have achieved significant progress through this initiative, with their savings amounting to Ush1,140,000 and welfare contributions of Ush184,000 in less than 4 months. "I got a

stagnated at 24 percent, a slight decline from 25 percent in 2016.

Ajok stresses the need to revisit approaches to fighting teenage pregnancy and removing barriers to contraceptive access for young people. Economic empowerment is crucial for the success of interventions like access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) information and services. "If you want to go to the health centre to get a family planning method, you may need some transport money especially if the facility is distant. Without it, you might decide not to go or defer your trip to another time increasing your risk," she explains.

The project provided skilling and financial literacy training for 80 girls, who then



**Project Manager Dolly Ajok engaging with the teenage girls during one of the activities.**

loan of Ush50,000 from our youth savings association, used Ush30,000 to buy fabrics, and Ush20,000 for threads and other materials. Now, I supply African fabric to different communities, making a profit," she adds.

Project manager Dolly Ajok acknowledges the positive outcomes of the two-year project but emphasizes that more needs to be done to address teenage pregnancies in the region and the country. "Bugiri and Namutumba were some of the hot spot districts for teenage pregnancies, with cases between 2,000 and 5,000 post-COVID. This drove us to implement the project here," she explains.

Despite the presence of other organizations, the statistics for Bugiri remain high, with sub-counties like Budhaya and Bulidha still experiencing rampant teenage pregnancies. "In Budhaya, abuses are often targeted towards girls living with disabilities," Ajok adds. The recent Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) data for 2022 indicates that teenage pregnancy rates have



**After 3 months of hard work some of the girls who successfully completed their tailoring and financial literacy training received their certificates, a tailoring package and seed funds to start them off.**

trained over 300 others in tailoring and financial literacy. These girls formed the Youth Savings and Loans Associations, saving for healthcare for themselves and their children. "So far, about six girls have gone back for further education, with one advancing her vocational skills at Iganga Vocational Institute," Ajok reveals.

Local leaders, including Kagulu sub-county Chairman Kepha Waiswa, have observed positive changes due to the project, such as improved livelihoods for teenage mothers and a decline in teenage pregnancies. "Those girls were very stubborn, but following the training, they have improved and are now working," Waiswa notes. He also highlights the lack of secondary schools in the sub-county as a contributing factor to teenage pregnancies.

Owakitbwa Sam Nathan Nkenga, NSHAWA's Executive Director, underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of teenage pregnancies. "Parents had left their parenting role, some people are very poor, and there is also ignorance about the right time for children to get married or pregnant. We had to fight and work with religious and cultural leaders to reverse harmful practices," he explains.

The project has brought hope and empowerment to many teenage mothers in Busoga, transforming their lives and the community. Integrating such responses in the parish development model will help reduce teenage pregnancy.



**Shamina on the left joins the Project Manager Dolly Ajok for a sharing moment after the health talk at the health facility**