

Psychosocial support uplifts a young refugee mother.

From humble background in Kojo Keji, South Sudan, Poni Esther is a 19-year-old kuku girl whose life unveils a sad past. Raising a family as a young mother with no job and two (2) children -1 female and 1male including the husband was one of the most challenging occurrences in her life. The family requires financial support daily. These ranged from health care, school fees, feeding and other emerging demands.

At age 13 – the South Sudan civil war broke up between the ruling government and the opposition in 2016. She lost many relatives among which include her father. With her mother, they fled with to Uganda to seek refuge in 2016 where they settled in Zone 3 of Palorinya Refugee settlement in Obongi District, over 180 km away from home. Poni got married to a South Sudanese man with a boy child at an early stage of 16 years old which did not go well with the mother - she brought her back home and again got married to a Ugandan. The later marriage is characterized by a lot of threats both physical and emotional that caused the psychological torture in her thus calling upon the counselors for psychosocial support. The children feared their father and were the most affected since they witnessed all the unfortunate events of violence.

Mrs. Poni Esther a client from Believe Bonga Center in Zone 3 East Palorinya Refugee Settlement.

Photo (Not taken – Confidentiality)

In January, 2021 Rural Initiative Community Empowerment West Nile launched two programs titled ‘Program for Adolescents and Children’s Education and Social empowerment (PACES)’ and ‘Program for Education Advocacy Counselling and Economic Empowerment (PEACE)’ that aims at ensuring ‘*Children in primary school and out of school adolescents in Uganda have access to formal and non-formal education*’. This Program has 5 thematic areas namely; Bonga, Early Childhood and Education, Technical Vocational Education Training, Community Managed Savings Group and Psychosocial support.

The programs are implemented in Zone 3 of Palorinya refugee settlement in Obongi district targeting the children, mothers, fathers, adolescent boys and girls, youth. Mrs. Poni participated in the community awareness creation on the programs in April, 2022 during which she got to know about the opportunity that the project was offering to the adolescents in her walk of life. She got interested and further consulted through the Refugee Welfare Council One of his villages on how to get access to the project team.

The same year and month, she was considered for support under one of the thematic areas i.e., Bonga where she joined Believe Bonga center zone 3 East in Longa village, Legu Parish. The project of psychosocial support works through trained Counsellors who frequently visit the Bonga centers to assess the mental wellbeing of the participants looking at the history of the lives. Mrs. Poni was suffering silently. After she learnt about the Psychosocial support services, she then reported the threatened violence she was facing from the husband. This drew the attention of the Psychosocial support team to her rescue. She got the support from RICE West Nile in software component (counselling and advises), later a referral was made by PSS Coordinator to LWF for protection. The counselling by RICE West Nile Counsellors continued and the support from the Block leaders made her to build resilience. Her and husband was counselled and upon realizing his wrongs changed his life of threatening the wife and he apologized that he was doing all those under the influence of alcohol. He promised to stop drinking alcohol moving forward. She no longer leaves in fear of her husband and the family is harmoniously sharing resources and ideas. The children no longer live in fear of their father.

“The Counsellor was very kind, understood me clearly and encouraged me to look at the positive side of everything including taking of challenges as part of our life ... I am happy for the support” – Says Mrs. Poni when interacting with PSS Officer.

Poni’s story is inspirational to many young mothers who are psychologically tortured in the host and refugee communities. Poni hopes that the program can reach out and support more young girls who are suffering silently to open up with their various Psychosocial problems to the right persons. To her there are many people in the settlement who still don’t understand the importance of psychosocial support and may want to improve their lives emotionally, psychologically and physically. She however remains grateful for the opportunity to enhance his skills and knowledge on managing problems.