

# Teenage pregnancy does not mean the end for a 17-year-old refugee girl.

Uganda's National Adolescent Health Policy defines adolescents as people between the ages of 10 and 19 years. Twenty-five percent of Uganda's population is comprised of adolescents. A 25 percent pregnancy rate among adolescents in a population of 40 million people is therefore a worrying issue for the government of Uganda. More than three thousand girls got pregnant in the greater West Nile region during the Covid-19 lockdown according to statistics department from Lugbara cultural institution

Seventeen years old Mrs. Poni Blessing has mastered her baby's sounds and gestures and the two share very special bond. She sings for him cradles songs in *Kuku*. Although the two enjoy each other's company now, Blessing says she got pregnant unexpectedly and the course of her life took a sudden twist.

From humble back ground in Kojo Keji, South Sudan, Blessing the kuku girl's life unveils sadness and regrets. Facing a difficult moment after being defiled by a fellow tribe mate that resulted in to the pregnancy as a young girl with no job was one of the most challenging occurrences in her life. She personally requires financial support daily but there is no fallback position. The financial needs ranged from health care, clothing, feeding and other emerging demands for herself and the baby.



Mrs. Poni Blessing (standing) receiving material support from RICE West Nile project team.

Photo credit: Afekuru July

At age 13, the South Sudan civil war broke up between the ruling government and the opposition in 2013. She lost a number relatives and her mother separated with her father. While looking for safety, the mother went to Kiryadongo and the father took refuge in Palorinya. Poni Blessing first settled with the mother in Kiryadongo Refugee settlement in Masindi District, over 380 km away from home. She was later called by the father to join her in Palorinya. The father was already married to another woman, Poni lacked proper parental care as the mother would have offered her. She needed a life, she looked for life, and she messed in the life by engaging in anti-social behaviors.

Poni was defiled by a South Sudanese man stage of 16 years old which did not go well and when the father got to learnt about it, he was not happy but let her stay with the step mother while he moved on to Kiryadongo refugee settlement. When the father abandoned the home, the step mother started denying her food, stopped her from using her utensils. The young helpless girl was 2 months to delivering and yet still

she was living a life full of challenges. Viewing from the motherly perspective, she envisioned more danger when she gives birth hence seeking for psychosocial support.

In Jan, 2021 Rural Initiative Community Empowerment West Nile launched a project titled 'Program for Adolescents and Children's Education and Social empowerment (PACES)' 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 project is 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 an enrollment and awareness of Beneficiaries campaign on the project in April, 2022 during which she got to know about the opportunity that the project was offering to the community members in his 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, 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 start was stigmatizing considering the fact that she was pregnant, the fellow adolescents mocked her. This made her feel uncomfortable and almost giving up on attending the Bonga sessions. Upon creation of awareness in her center, she understood the need for her to open up. The project of psychosocial support works through Counsellors who frequently visited up to home, offered her material support inform of mattress, smearing oil, bed sheets, basin. This motivated her and made her to build resilience. The counsellors organized family counselling where her father and step mother acknowledged their wrongs and forgave each other. The reunited the family started supporting then adolescent girl, encouraging her not to give up on life. Her step mother confessed to doing everything out of ignorance.

Poni's case story is inspirational to young girls who are psychologically tortured. Poni hopes that the program can reach and support more people to open up with their various Psychosocial problems. 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.

***"My step mother stopped giving me food yet I was pregnant and needed the food much ... it took me courage to attend the Bonga classes in my state but today I can smile, I can think of the future – says Poni Blessing***