



DREAMS Innovation Challenge

Silence Speaks – Youth Stories



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JSI RESEARCH & TRAINING INSTITUTE, INC.



Funds Manager for DREAMS Innovation Challenge

Silence Speaks – Youth Stories

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Prepared by:


JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI)
44 Farnsworth Street
Boston, MA 02210-1209


Cover photo:

Sophia showcases her ICT skills to the United States Ambassador to Kenya at an event hosted by ACWICT. Photo: Sophia Muchere

DISCLAIMER:

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Silence Speaks is an initiative created by [StoryCenter](#), which helps individuals and organizations use storytelling and participatory media for reflection, education, and social change. Silence Speaks helps convey first-person narratives of struggle, courage, and transformation and works to ensure that these stories promote gender equality, health, and human rights around the world.

JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. partnered with StoryCenter in November 2017 to help DREAMS-IC grantee staff tell stories (as written pieces, photo essays, and short videos) about their work in local communities and then implement storytelling and photography projects with the youth they serve.

The initiative included a series of three webinars:

- Orientation to the use of personal storytelling and participatory media approaches to address girls' vulnerability to HIV and AIDS.
- Two-part training on mechanics and ethics of developing spoken, written, and photographed personal stories.
- Story-sharing, including the process of developing community stories through the Story Circle format and guiding the process of facilitator/participant feedback.

46 grantee staff members who participated in the webinar series developed personal stories and were invited to apply for a five-day, intensive digital storytelling production and facilitator training session in Kenya. Twelve were selected to participate in the workshop, during which they developed short, personal digital stories about their work and prepared to lead storytelling and photography projects with their DREAMS-IC beneficiaries.

With follow-up technical assistance to conduct community-based storytelling and photography projects with young people, each participant returned to their community and ran a Story Circle workshop. This compilation includes personal stories from the young people who participated in the Story Circles run by the 12 workshop participants, and gave consent to publish their stories.




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Youth Story

A Brief Story About Me

By Florence Nduta. Florence is a participant in Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which gives adolescent girls and young women in Kenya greater control over their HIV prevention approaches, including pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), through public awareness campaigns, peer education, and HIV testing and counseling.



I was born in Nairobi into a family of six children. Because we are a Christian family, my siblings and I walked through the right path. This was due to our serious parents, who have always been at our backs.

Respectful, obedient, trustworthy, God-fearing, intelligent, loving, compassionate, hardworking, and supportive are words that describe the person I am. I choose to do what I feel is right, most of the time. Truth be told, man is born to err, and no man or woman is perfect.

Very unique, I have a set of things I love doing: watching movies, dancing, swimming, traveling, and reading novels. I got the chance to pass through the 8-4-4 system of education. I was able to score good grades throughout school. I therefore succeeded in my K.C.P.E and K.C.S.E exams. Though it was a bit tricky, I survived the challenges.

Then I got the chance to join a training institute after school, where I specialized in hospitality tourism. I thank God for the opportunities I've been given so far; I can't complain much. I did get myself involved in a number of hustles before I got employed, but those times are over. Now, I'm okay. This is a brief story about me.

Photos courtesy of Florence Nduta. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Youth Story

My Journey

By Mercy. Mercy is a participant in Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which gives adolescent girls and young women in Kenya greater control over their HIV prevention approaches, including PrEP, through public awareness campaigns, peer education, and HIV testing and counseling.



Mercy, ready to find a new job and start a new life.

Being the first born in a family of six children meant I had to take care of all the responsibilities. When I was only 15 years old, I travelled from Western Kenya to Nairobi, in order to secure a job. Back then, we all believed that Nairobi was full of money and opportunities. I had to go, since in our village it is believed that once you reach adolescent, you are ready to get married.

I arrived in Nairobi at around 4:00 p.m., and a friend of mine fetched me. I had secured a job as a housemaid. My friend escorted me there the following morning, my clothes packed in a plastic bag, to start work.

I had to stay strong to earn some money, because the house chores were very heavy and tiresome. I always woke up at around 3:00 a.m. and did not sleep again until 12:00 a.m., after working tirelessly. I was given only one meal a day, but I still appreciated it. I worked for six months without any pay. Every time I asked for my money, I was told, "Just wait, we are saving it for you."

I became tired of always working like a poor donkey. One day, I gathered my courage and decided to ask again for my money. Little did I know that I would be chased out. I was given only two thousand shillings and told to leave. I went to my friend's place, but she was not happy to see me. I didn't know anyone else in the city, I was stranded, with nowhere to go. I cried bitterly, and I slept outside for some days without food and water.

On the third day I met a lady who offered to host me. She introduced me to DREAMS. She explained how it empowers young girls and women. I was very eager to be part of it, and so she offered to enroll me there. They helped me find a new job and a place to stay. They introduced me to other young women facing struggles. Now, instead of isolating myself, I feel that I can face anything.

Photo courtesy of Mercy. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Life's Burdens

By Norah Hemali. Norah is a participant in Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which gives adolescent girls and young women in Kenya greater control over their HIV prevention approaches, including PrEP, through public awareness campaigns, peer education, and HIV testing and counseling.



From a young age Norah would do odd jobs, like washing neighbor's clothes, for money to support her family.

I am the firstborn in a family of five girls. Life was one hell of a burden, and nothing good ever seemed to come my way. We lived in a weak, slanting house that leaked so badly every time it rained.

Things became harder when my mum was diagnosed with a serious type of arthritis that made her unable to get out of bed. Our dad was jobless. We would all squeeze onto a single bed, with empty stomachs, hoping tomorrow would be better. I was only 13 years old, and I had to fend for my siblings. So when I finished primary education, I could not make it to high school due to lack of money.

Poverty became a routine, and hustling was my daily profession. I had no time to make friends, as I woke up every day to go wash people's clothes or clean their houses and dishes, in exchange for food or money. Sometimes the people I worked for told me that mum had borrowed money she had not returned. I would cry bitterly, because I expected to be paid, so that I could buy food for my siblings. I hated life at that moment, as I would go home feeling weak and tired and still have to go to the kitchen to cook. My mum couldn't do it, and my siblings were too young.

One day, I went to the farm where I was working, as usual. After I was through with the job, the owner told me he would connect me with a friend in Nairobi, for a job with a better salary. Out of desperation I agreed, even though my parents weren't happy because I was so young.

Life in Nairobi was really tough. All odds were against me. The man I had been recommended to tried to introduce me to other men, but I refused, so I was thrown out of the house. I suffered so much, but after some time I met someone who taught me how to make flowers to sell during graduations. Doing that work, I met a DREAMS girl. Talking to her really helped me. I joined the program too, and the support we get in training and health education has made such a difference.

Photo courtesy of Norah Hemali. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Looking for Light

By Roser Ever. Roser is a participant in Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which gives adolescent girls and young women in Kenya greater control over their HIV prevention approaches, including PrEP, through public awareness campaigns, peer education, and HIV testing and counseling.



Roser Ever pregnant and alone in her rented room.

People always say that at the end of every darkness, there is always light, but I never saw it after all the things I went through. It started when I met this man, very handsome. He used to spoil me in all manner of ways. All that I saw was love; love that nobody else had shown me. When my mom tried to tell me the other side of this man, I paid no attention. I was very young, and I thought I knew everything.

One day, my mother got so tired of my behavior that she chased me out of her house. I took my bag and went to my "sweetheart," who showed pure shock on seeing me. After I told him what had happened, he clearly seemed not to want me to stay there, even after all the promises he had made of providing a place for me to stay if I needed one. He took me in due to sympathy, but after two months of living together, he started beating me up. This is when I found out I was pregnant. When I told him, he suggested that I should get an abortion, as he wasn't ready to start a family. I refused, because a classmate of mine had recently died due to an abortion. He threw me out.

First I went to live with my aunt, who after realizing that I was pregnant sent me away. So I ended up living with another man. When I told him my story, he said that if I wanted to stay with him, I had to offer him sex every night. I planned to teach him a lesson. One day while he was out, I packed my clothes, his laptop, and some money, and left his house. I sold his laptop for twenty thousand shillings, which I used to rent a single room. I had no one to visit or talk to me, as I was a wanted person by the police ... so I lived in fear.

Finally, I gave birth to a healthy baby boy. I have regretted that I ignored my mother's wise counsel, and now I work on talking to young girls so they do not make the same mistakes I did. I am also working on making sure that my son will study and live a beautiful life.

Photo courtesy of Roser Ever. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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An Early Pregnancy

By Shiro. Shiro is a participant in Bar Hostess Empowerment and Support Programme's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which gives adolescent girls and young women in Kenya greater control over their HIV prevention approaches, including PrEP, through public awareness campaigns, peer education, and HIV testing and counseling.



When she realized she was pregnant, Shiro had to leave her parents' home.

When I was 19 years old, I got pregnant. The world turned against me. Even worse, there was no money. Everything was so bad. At home, mum was on my side a little bit, but my dad was so angry. The man responsible was not in a position to help me. Life was so hard due to poverty that I decided I had to get married early. I thought I was doing myself a favor ... little did I know I was putting myself into more problems.

At first, things looked up, but after some time my husband started mistreating me because reality hit him that I was there to stay. Because I had a complicated pregnancy, walking was a problem for me. The thought of providing for me during pregnancy was too much for him. He turned violent towards me. Whenever I asked him for anything, he would hit me so badly.

And he started seeing other women. One day, when I asked him why he was cheating on me, my husband beat me so badly that I couldn't stay with him anymore. So I went back home, even though the situation there was still bad.

After I gave birth, I started doing odd jobs to make ends meet. It wasn't easy, but I was willing to make life better for my child and me. Then a friend introduced me to DREAMS, and through talking and encouragement as part of the group, I am better than I was before. I am a confident and strong young woman.

Photo courtesy of Shiro. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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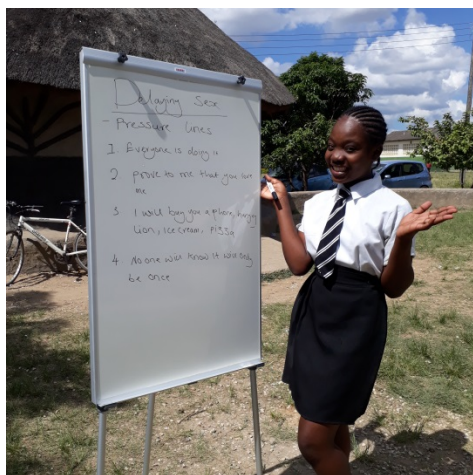
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Open and Brave

By Angel Phiri. Angel is a participant in Lubuto Library Partners' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which uses public libraries in Zambia as a gateway for scholarships, referrals, mentorship, reproductive health programming, and community engagement.



Angel is so proud of who she has become, and she hopes to teach other girls about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

asked me, "What do you learn in those classes?" Once I told him, he became freer to discuss such issues with me. He also told me to tell my young sister about the mentoring program, and that is how she joined it. Through the mentoring lessons and field trip tours, we explore and come to know more things, and then we teach others what we have been taught.

The project has indeed supported me. I am what I am today, so brave and intelligent, because of DREAMS. I can tell my friends, my relatives, and my parents all about what I learn and do, at our DREAMS lessons. I thank our mentors and all who are helping us at DREAMS.

In my culture, it is very hard to talk about sex, relationships, or HIV/AIDS, with elders. It is considered disrespectful. So it was very hard for me to talk about sex and HIV with my parents or even my friends, because I thought that they would think badly about my life, or assume that maybe I was having sex.

Then the time came for my desire to have freedom in speaking out to be fulfilled. It was when I turned 15 and joined the DREAMS mentoring program. During the DREAMS sessions, we learned the importance of avoiding sexual relationships and staying safe from HIV, because by doing so, our goals for the future can be reached.

Part of mentoring involves inviting our parents to come for parent mentoring lessons. When my mother attended family mentoring, it made it easier to talk to her. Even my father, too. One day, my father



Angel began to talk with her parents about SRHR topics, and they encouraged her to get her younger sister involved in the program too.

Photos courtesy of Angel Phiri. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Remember my Tears

By Annastasia Ngwenya. Annastasia is a participant in Lubuto Library Partners' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which uses public libraries in Zambia as a gateway for scholarships, referrals, mentorship, reproductive health programming, and community engagement.



Annastasia's boyfriend deserted her, and she had no way to take care of her baby on her own.

When I was a year old, my father passed away. My mother had to go door to door looking for petty jobs, so that she could buy food and send me and my sister to school. Because we were so poor, I attended when we could afford the fees but had to stay out when we could not.

In 2014, when I was in grade eight, I had a baby girl. A year and a half later, the father of the child left us. He said he was going to look for a job, which was a lie. Life became hard; I was not concerned about school, I was just thinking about my baby. I started farming and selling vegetables at the market. I tried my best, but I failed.

Then my mother advised me to go to Lusaka, our capital city, to look for a job so that we could survive. I left my two-year-old in the village with her. In Lusaka, I finally got employed as a maid. I

earned only K250 (\$25) a month, which was not enough for me to support myself and my daughter back in the village. So after six months, I looked for another job in the food processing industries. But they told me they needed grade nine results, which I didn't have.

I found another job as a maid, instead. Then one of my friends told me about the DREAMS program at Ngwerere Lubuto Library. They were looking for young mothers who could learn how to read and write in three months. After graduating from this course, I joined the mentoring program and was selected for a DREAMS scholarship. The program bought us school shoes, bags, and books, and it also pays our school fees. I am now back in school, and my dream is to become a nurse upon completing my studies.



Finally back in school, Annastasia has joined the DREAMS program at the Lubuto Library and has support to pay for school fees, books, shoes and her school uniform.

Photos courtesy of Annastasia Ngwenya. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Destined to Succeed

By Diana Chilala. Diana is a participant in Lubuto Library Partners' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which uses public libraries in Zambia as a gateway for scholarships, referrals, mentorship, reproductive health programming, and community engagement.



Diana discovered she was pregnant when she was in Grade 9, and all her classmates ridiculed her.

There was a time when I was loved by my parents, but when I was 14, I made the mistake of falling pregnant. My parents were so disappointed in me. At that time, I was in grade nine. With exams steadily approaching I continued to attend school. My friends used to laugh at me and point fingers at me. I cried and prayed to God, my only true friend at the time.

But I never gave up. I kept going to school, even though it was difficult to concentrate because the other girls used to gossip about me. When I was writing my exams, I was almost nine months pregnant. I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.

In December, our results came out. I qualified to go on to grade 10. My parents were so proud of me, again. They wanted to send me back to school,

but they do not work, so they have no money. So I stayed at home, waiting for God to help me. At least my daughter's father supports her, and he says he will marry me, once I complete my studies.

Now, instead of being home all day doing nothing, I attend the DREAMS Mentoring and Family Literacy programs offered at Lubuto Library Partners. I always advise the girls in our mentoring program to wait and not rush into having sex. I tell them, "I miss school ... you need to understand the possible consequences of having sex at an early age."



Diana gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. She is getting support from the father and has joined the DREAMS program so she can tell other girls to avoid sex until they have finished school.

Photos courtesy of Diana Chilala. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Struggle for Freedom

By Mervis Lungu. Mervis is a participant in Lubuto Library Partners' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which uses public libraries in Zambia as a gateway for scholarships, referrals, mentorship, reproductive health programming, and community engagement.



Mervis had to look up and down for work, to support her and her son when no one else could help.

I was born in 1997. My parents died when I was just six months old. I grew up and started school in eastern province. In grade nine, I got pregnant and dropped out. The man who got me pregnant denied he had been responsible.

After I had stayed out of school for three years, my family members refused to support me in completing my education. I had no option other than to look for a job, in order to sustain my life and that of my son. Even though it was not an easy journey, I managed to survive.

I moved from one place to another, looking for jobs. As I was searching, I came across some people who told me about the DREAMS project. I got interested, and in July 2017, I joined the program. I started with Family Literacy, with a group of other young mothers. Over three months, I learned how to read and write. Then I moved to the mentoring program.

Last November, I applied for the scholarship program. The competition was stiff, but fortunately I was among the 25 girls who were selected to go back to school. As I am speaking now, I am in school and doing very well in my academic activities. I want to complete my studies and pursue a career in nursing.



Thanks to her hard work studying and learning how to read and write in English, Mervis won a competitive scholarship to go back to school.

Photos courtesy of Mervis Lungu. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Girls Need to be in School, Period!

By Stella Banda. Stella is a participant in Lubuto Library Partners' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which uses public libraries in Zambia as a gateway for scholarships, referrals, mentorship, reproductive health programming, and community engagement.



Stella completed the DREAMS mentorship program and was selected for a scholarship of a monthly supply of pads - she has no reason to miss school anymore.

One Sunday morning, while my mother was attending church service, I was sent to sell maize by the roadside. I didn't feel comfortable, and I knew there was something wrong, so I went home. I rushed to the bathroom to check myself, and I discovered I was bleeding. I didn't know what to do. I was scared of what was happening to me; it was my first time to bleed.

I rushed out and told my neighbor, and she told my older sister. When my mother came home, my sister told her what was happening. My mother bought me a packet of pads but did not tell me how to use them, so I just packed them away. I avoided school, for fear of messing up my uniform and having people laugh at me.

But all this changed when I joined the mentoring program under DREAMS. In our group, we talk openly about periods and how to use pads. I learned that if I wear a pad, I don't have to miss school anymore. We learned everything about menstrual hygiene, and I am now even confident to share what I know and my experience, with others.

Upon graduating from the mentoring program, I was selected for the DREAMS scholarship program to receive a supply of pads each month. I have no excuse for missing school. No girl should miss school just because of her period.

Photo courtesy of Stella Banda. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Our Mother, Our Heroine

By Tionenji and Linda Ngalande. Tionenji and Linda are participants in Lubuto Library Partners' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which uses public libraries in Zambia as a gateway for scholarships, referrals, mentorship, reproductive health programming, and community engagement.



Tionenji pushed her younger sister Linda to join her at the DREAMS program in the Lubuto Library, where they both applied for school scholarships. Tionenji ended up receiving a partial scholarship from another source, while Linda received a full scholarship from DREAMS.

the DREAMS mentoring program at the library and enrolled for the program. I told my sister Linda about it, but she was hesitant. So I said, "Follow me and stand a chance of being sponsored to go to school, or remain home doing nothing."

Linda: I followed my sister's advice and went to sign up for the DREAMS mentoring program. We both applied for the DREAMS scholarship, but I was the one who was selected. My sister was happy for me, because she believes I have a long way to go in terms of school. I am currently in grade 10, and she is in her final year of high school. The DREAMS project has taken a huge burden off our mother. Now, she only has to worry about some of the expenses for Tionenji, who is being partially assisted by another scholarship provider. I go to school under the DREAMS scholarship, which is an all-expenses paid scholarship.

Our father is a medical doctor. When he married our mother, she became a housewife. In 2006, our parents got divorced for reasons they were not willing to share with us. Our mother and our other siblings were forced to relocate to Lusaka, the capital city in Zambia.

This is where hell on earth began, for us. Our mother was not working, but she was supposed to take care of us. Our father remarried only months after we left. We moved in with our uncle at first, and then we started living with our mum. Life became harder than before, because mum was not able to take us to school. When we tried to reach out to our father, he told us, "There is no place for you with me, now." When we did start going to school, we had to go on an empty stomach.

Tionenji: In 2012, I sat for my grade seven exams and passed to grade eight, but I stayed home for a year because mum could not manage to sponsor all of us children. The next year, God was gracious, and I was back in school. In 2015, I sat for my grade nine exams and passed. 2016 came, and I was supposed to go to Lusaka Secondary school, but due to a lack of finances, I stayed home for one term. Each and every day that came, life got worse. I heard of

Photos courtesy of Tionenji and Linda Ngalande. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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DREAMS Innovation Challenge

Silence Speaks Youth Story

My Life

Anonymous author. The author is a participant in SAYWHAT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which provides structured mentorship to empower girls and young women in Zimbabwe to stay in secondary school, receive sexual and reproductive health education and support, and seek health-related services.

When I was nine months old, my mother took me from Zimbabwe to live with a man I was told was my father, in France. His wife, who I was told was my stepmother, took good care of me, despite having her own children. Everything was rosy until the year 2006, when my mother brought me back to Zimbabwe. Leaving France was hard for me—it meant leaving the only family that I knew.

My mother struggled to make ends meet. I was introduced to a new family, and I met my stepbrother, who I always fought with. I also met my real biological father, who apparently had emerged from the dust, and I got too confused. A part of me was angry at him and felt like I didn't need him, and a part of me was thrilled to have met him. To ease this stress, confusion, and tension in my mind, I took a razor blade and made 20 small cuts on my hand and thigh. The cutting gave me a numb feeling; I felt relieved and at ease.

Cutting became a part of me, it became my go-to, in times of trouble and need. After cutting for the first time and enjoying it, it developed into a habit. I started to download quotes about death, self-harm, and depression. I was not really suicidal, but the thought of killing myself crossed my mind constantly. Self-harm was the easiest way to ease my pain. I have friends who come to me for advice, but they do not know that I have my problems as well. My father studied a bit of psychology and tried helping me out, but I resisted.

Sometime in 2017, I was asked to join a club led by a student teacher. The sessions helped me find a temporary solution. I learned to turn to writing poems and short stories whenever I felt a frenzy coming up. People usually say I am a good writer who thinks “out of the box,” not knowing that I am actually going through what I write about. I write to let it all out.

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My Bitter Truth

By Gugulethu Buhle Moyo. Gugulethu is a participant in SAYWHAT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which provides structured mentorship to empower girls and young women in Zimbabwe to stay in secondary school, receive sexual and reproductive health education and support, and seek health-related services.



Gugulethu joined SAYWHAT's Big Sister Little Sister program and met a female mentor who helped her gain confidence and new friends.

I began dating when I was 14 years old. I never intended to start at a young age, but I was pressured into it by my friends. I am not shifting blame, because I know it was my decision to make, but they did play a role. "That's what all the big girls do," they said.

I got into a relationship with a 17 year old student who started asking me for uncomfortable favors. He emotionally blackmailed me into having sex with him, and I lost my virginity. When I told my friends about what happened, they were not happy, and they started to keep their distance from me. "We cannot be friends with someone who sleeps around," they told me. I became the talk of the school, and my boyfriend dumped me, saying, "I cannot be associated with a girl who is not discreet."

I was shattered and in pain, and I wanted the universe to swallow me alive. I began to live in isolation. My behavior change started affecting my performance in school, and my teachers picked up on it.

One of my teachers then introduced me to the Big Sister Young Sister program. At first, I felt like I didn't belong, until I realized that I can trust my big sister. I opened up to her, and she referred me for counseling at school. She listened to me without judging or condemning me. This was a great surprise, as most people had shut me out. My relationship with my mentor grew stronger as she constantly checked on me.

The counseling sessions then helped me to accept what had happened to me. I also got information on contraceptives and was tested for HIV. Knowing my status also enlightened me and helped me to make better choices for my future. As I attended more of the sessions, I learned how to speak out and also make good decisions. The DREAMS program really came and changed my life when I least expected it and needed it the most.

Photo courtesy of Gugulethu Buhle Moyo. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Rays of Hope

By Nomsa Dube. Nomsa is a participant in SAYWHAT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which provides structured mentorship to empower girls and young women in Zimbabwe to stay in secondary school, receive sexual and reproductive health education and support, and seek health-related services.



Nomsa and her beautiful little girl. Nomsa is now a DREAMS Big Sister mentor to other girls who got pregnant early on, and feels inspired by them every day.

I had just finished high school when I found out I was pregnant. The father of my baby was still in school. We had mixed emotions about the pregnancy; we were happy but in fear of the responsibility.

Culture demands that the girl's aunty report a pregnancy to the boy's family. I was forced into wearing a long dress and looked like a rural wife. As I entered the room full of people, I could feel the tension. I saw disgust in their eyes. Before we could get comfortable, questions started pouring out. "How certain are you that the baby belongs to the family?" they asked. His mother spoke with great rage and disgust, saying, "My son is not going to be the father's child as he is too young." I felt so uncomfortable. My aunty stood up in anger from the insults, and we left.

I was in tears from these words that I could not even swallow. They had been poured out with no effort to protect me or consider how I felt. His mother had protected her son with no thought of the pain she had caused to me and my unborn child. Her insults crashed my world and erased all the dreams that I ever had.

It is unfair to us girls who get pregnant, when the boys who fathered our children are allowed to continue with life as if nothing has happened.

Months passed, and I gave birth to my daughter. I walked around smiling, yet I carried a burden that weighed heavily on me. I then trained as a mentor under the Big Sister Young Sister program. I mentor many young girls and teenage moms who have been through much harder circumstances than I have, and still they have hope in their eyes. I also now have a healthy relationship with the father; I forgave him, and now we focus on raising our child.

What happened opened me up and made me view life differently. I accepted the moment that weighed heavily on me. I felt lighter and smiled from the inside, as my happiness returned.



Nomsa has a healthy relationship with her daughter's father again, and he is now sharing responsibility in raising their daughter together.

Photos courtesy of Nomsa Dube. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Mistakes are Great Lessons

By Valentine Mpofo. Valentine is a participant in SAYWHAT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which provides structured mentorship to empower girls and young women in Zimbabwe to stay in secondary school, receive sexual and reproductive health education and support, and seek health-related services.



Joining the SAYWHAT DREAMS program as a club mentor has helped her to heal, and to share her knowledge about SRHR with other girls.

the mind that he would marry me. I broke my virginity and have lived with regrets. What hurts most is that he did not wait for me to heal—the next week, he moved on.

My schooling raised my hopes up. I was trained to be a mentor in the DREAMS project. Although I was a big sister, I also learned so much in being part of the club. Mentoring younger sisters made me regain my confidence, and I knew that talking about sexual health was the right thing to do. I realize now that loving someone is not a crime or of any danger, if you have knowledge about being safe. Now I am happily in love with a man who will never force me into doing something I do not want to do.

“Without sex, I will not be able to love you,” my boyfriend told me. I fell in love, but I was just so confused, I didn’t know what was right or wrong. My life was full of boredom—I hardly had time to laugh or socialize, and I spent most of my time doing schoolwork. I was afraid to go out with my friends, because I was afraid of peer pressure and doing things I wasn’t comfortable with.

One Tuesday afternoon, I managed to escape from my circle of friends. I felt there was no space for me. I went to see my boyfriend, and I slept

with him. He was my first love, and I did it for him, not for me. I was young and made the mistake of getting into a sexual relationship with him, with



Valentine now has a new boyfriend who loves her for who she is, and doesn't force her to do anything she doesn't want to do.

Photos courtesy of Valentine Mpofo. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks Youth Story

Journey of a Thousand Miles

By Yolanda Tambula. Yolanda is a participant in SAYWHAT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which provides structured mentorship to empower girls and young women in Zimbabwe to stay in secondary school, receive sexual and reproductive health education and support, and seek health-related services.



Yolanda with her Grassroots coach.

It all started when I was young, selfish, and ignorant. I did not even want to hear the words “HIV and AIDS,” since the virus was regarded as taboo in my community. My innocence was violated when I was sexually abused at the age of 15. My family took the side of my abuser, thinking he was innocent and would not hurt a fly. I was suffering. At that moment, I realized that my position as a girl child in the family was at play.

So I went against them and whispered into an ear that was willing to help. My grassroots coach Sandile Ncube never gave up on me. She had a heart of gold, and slowly but surely I started opening up to her. My coach stood by me and also supported me throughout the whole process. She believed me, even when everyone else thought I was fabricating the story. At the end of it all, I got the justice that I deserved because of my coach. I also received counseling.

I was first introduced to DREAMS through the grassroots project. I got involved in the mentorship program that was organized by SAYWHAT. This mentorship program gave me a sister that I had never had. She taught me a lot of things about being a teenage girl. I did not keep the information that I got to myself but shared it with others who showed an interest and then became part of the program. I also got to know my HIV status and learned how to stay negative and take care of myself. Thanks to the DREAMS program, I am now a better person.

Photo courtesy of Yolanda Tambula. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Youth Story

Against All Odds

By Faith Akaro. Faith Akaro is a participant in Brick by Brick Uganda's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which teaches girls to construct reusable menstrual pads for personal use and income generation, and enables in-school reproductive health education.



Today, Faith is happily continuing her studies and feels grateful to her friends and family every day.

One time, while I was growing up, my father ran into some financial challenges and took out a loan that he was unable to pay. Because of this, he decided to stop paying my school fees. Instead, he paid only for my brother's fees, since he didn't have enough money. My mother earned just a little money, which she used to sustain the basic needs of our family.

I stayed at home for over a month until my dad suggested that I should get married. I was so sad during that time, because all my friends were in school. When I talked to one of them, she urged me to keep on reading my books and show my interest. After a while, my dad got some money to send me back to school, because he saw how much I valued it. I am so grateful to be getting my education. I don't take it for granted.

Photo courtesy of Faith Akaro. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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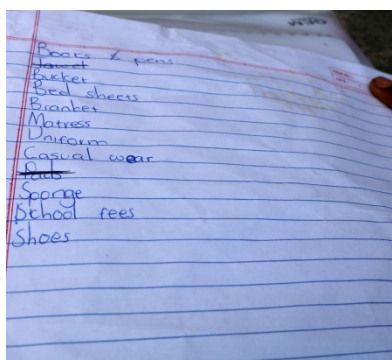
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Youth Story

The Pains of Being a Girl

By Fatiah Namayanja. Fatiah is a participant in Brick by Brick Uganda's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which teaches girls to construct reusable menstrual pads for personal use and income generation, and enables in-school reproductive health education.



When Fatiah first got her period, she added pads and a towel to her list of necessary school supplies but her father did not understand.

Towards the beginning of every term, my father always told my siblings and I to write down what we needed, for school. This time round, while reviewing the lists, he called out angrily for us to come to him. When we rushed there, he asked us to explain why we needed some of the things we had written down. For me, he asked why I needed sanitary pads and a towel, and I explained to him that I had started my period. He wasn't satisfied with my explanations and crossed these items out, leaving only the scholastic materials like pens and books.

Then he went on to tell us that he didn't have money for us girls, because, according to him, we are untrustworthy. He said that no matter what he did for us or how much he put into us, we would never appreciate it, and he would never get any reward from us, while boys were an investment. Because my parents had separated, I was staying with my father and his new wife. My stepmother and I felt that we couldn't say anything.

School started, and when I got my period, because I had no pads, I chose to stay at home for that time. I had menstrual cramps that really hurt me, so I also decided to stay in bed. When my stepmother got wind of this, she shouted at me for being lazy and left all the house chores for me to finish, even though I told her I was not feeling well. My elder sister returned from school, and I told her what had happened. She gave me a cloth to use but didn't have anything for the pain.

Later in the term, my mother came to visit us. We explained what had happened, and she promised to take us from there so that we could be closer to her. I was transferred to a different secondary school, where I even found the DREAMS project running. I have learned how to make reusable menstrual pads to save my mother from needing to buy me pads. I was also able to gain confidence, because we were treated equally with the boys. Now I know that I have so much ahead of me.



Fatiah learned how to use reusable sanitary pads so that she could save money and still attend school.

Photos courtesy of Fatiah Namayanja. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Mentorship is an Asset

By Latifah Namugumya. Latifah is a participant in Brick by Brick Uganda's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which teaches girls to construct reusable menstrual pads for personal use and income generation, and enables in-school reproductive health education.



Latifah's classmates made fun of her for having a stain on her school uniform.

When I was 13, I started to notice changes in my body. One day, I got abdominal pains that were strong, and I couldn't understand why. After a while, I saw blood on my underwear as I went to bathe. I was horrified, afraid to even tell my mother. I simply refused to go to school and said I would return after the next week.

After a month, while I was at school, I noticed the abdominal cramps again. But this time, I was in class. The teacher had asked me to come up and illustrate something on the board. Because I had stayed seated for a long time, I wasn't sure if blood was on my skirt or if it was just my imagination. I refused to stand up, and this angered the teacher, who walked up to me and insisted I go up to the front of the class. At this point, all attention was on me, and I had to stand. When I did, the teacher noticed the stain on my skirt and proceeded to escort me out of

the classroom. The rest of the students started whispering and giggling, but the teacher warned them to stop.

When we got outside, she asked why I hadn't talked to her earlier or tried to find help. I told her I was scared. She offered to help me and support me, even to make reusable menstrual pads, because she had been trained to do so. She kept urging me to be confident and determined so that I can achieve my dreams. I am so glad to have had her support, and I am now no longer afraid of my period, because I know it is a normal part of being a woman.



Latifah shows her reusable pads to other girls.

Photos courtesy of Latifah Namugumya. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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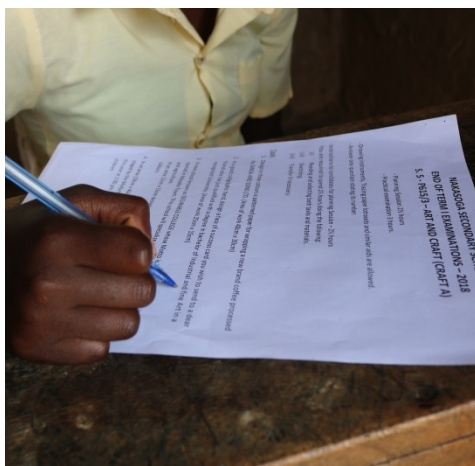
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The Shame of Menstruation

By Noeline Bakyazi Oliver. Noeline is a participant in Brick by Brick Uganda's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which teaches girls to construct reusable menstrual pads for personal use and income generation, and enables in-school reproductive health education.



Noeline sat for her exams, worried that she had her period and no sanitary pads.

I was in boarding school, and I was going without sanitary pads because my dad could not afford to buy them when the term was starting. He had promised to send me money, but unfortunately for me, my period came before he had sent it.

It was examination week, and I was torn between staying in the dormitory to miss the exams and going for the exams so that I wouldn't lose marks. I decided to go to the exam room and do the papers first. While there, I felt something pouring on to my skirt, and as soon as I felt it, I asked for permission to go and use the toilet. As I stood up, I didn't realize that my skirt had been stained, but the boys in class started laughing, and one of them shouted, "You will never touch anything of mine because you will always smell of blood." I was so embarrassed and swore never to enter that class again.

I went to the dormitory and cut up my towel to use to absorb the blood from my period. It was hard and rough and ended up irritating my privates, but I had no option.

Many months passed, and the DREAMS program came to our school while we were at assembly, to tell us about their work. I joined them and learned about how to make reusable menstrual pads. After this, I never had to worry about students laughing at me, because they have also been trained about the changes we girls go through during puberty and are now more sensitive to issues like menstruation.



Finally the DREAMS program came to her school and taught her and other girls how to make reusable sanitary pads. DREAMS also sensitized the other students, so that they don't make fun of girls anymore.

Photos courtesy of Noeline Bakyazi Oliver. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Opportunity

By Linnet. Linnet is a participant in Culture Fund of Zimbabwe Trust's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which addresses cultural norms that hinder adolescent girls and young women in Zimbabwe from accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services and from making autonomous decisions that affect their health.



Linnet doing chores alone at home, after she was not able to retake her school exams.

I am a last born in a family of eight, and we live in Mudewaire village in Makoni.

I finished secondary school in 2012, but I did not pass all subjects. I wanted to retake the exams; however, due to financial challenges, I could not. I am the last born in a family of eight. My brothers got the chance to proceed with their education, while I was told that there were no resources for me to continue.

I became a home bound girl, only responsible for house chores and working in the fields. I could not find other employment, as I was still very young to work and I had no qualifications for any job posting.

A call came in when I was at home, for a DREAMS club in my area. I decided to join and started attending sessions. I learned a lot about my sexuality and how I can prevent myself from contracting HIV.

In January 2018, our club was invited to participate in a beading and found objects training. I had not known that there are possibilities of making money from just about anything that is lying around in the house. I learned that I can make sling bags from empty cooking oil or juice containers, which we usually throw away, thinking they have no use. I can now make beaded accessories like earrings, necklaces, and bracelets from the skills training I attended.

On the side in my spare time, I try to recycle plastic lids and tins and make wares that are useful in the house. So far, I have made more than six accessories that we use in our house, and some of my friends who are not part of the club are requesting that I make some for their homes. This is an opportunity for me to make money, and I have already started making more products for sale.

My mother is very proud of my new skills. I now help buy food for our family, and I help other girls in my village to appreciate that even if they fail in school and have no resources to rewrite exams, they can learn other valuable skills. Not everyone has academic abilities. I am now coaching other girls to make beaded items to sell, so they can make some money for themselves.

Photo courtesy of Linnet. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Talking About Sexuality

By Pelagia Nyamana. Pelagia is a participant in Culture Fund of Zimbabwe Trust's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which addresses cultural norms that hinder adolescent girls and young women in Zimbabwe from accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services and from making autonomous decisions that affect their health.



When Pelagia was a teenage girl, her boyfriend pressured her into sex before she was ready.

When I was 16, I fell in love with a guy who was a bit older than me. Slightly down the lane of the relationship, he started asking me for sex. Because I was younger than him, I felt I could not say no. I also did not have any information about what the sex act would be like, or whether I was obliged to do it with him. No one had taken the time to talk to me about sex, about relationships, or other information necessary for a growing girl. So I gave in to the request out of ignorance. I did not tell anyone about it, for fear of being teased by my friends. I became stressed that I could be infected with HIV or worse still, pregnant out of wedlock.

My studies were affected by this, and my teacher noticed that I was not performing as well as I used to. She called me to her office and asked what was going on. At first, I said I was fine. Then the thought of being pregnant or HIV positive came to my mind again, and I decided to go and talk to her. She took me to the clinic for tests. When both came out negative, I was happy and relieved. I got married four years ago, and I live with my husband.

Last year, I joined the DREAMS club in our area, where we learned a lot about HIV, sexuality, and empowerment. In the group, there are also some girls who are the age I was when I first faced the dilemma about having sex with my boyfriend. I saw an opportunity to talk to these girls after club meetings, about sex and everything they need to know before engaging in sex. I became more confident to talk to them about their sexual health and encouraging them to get tested. At my local church, I am now able to talk to young girls about sex, offering them information that I had to learn by myself. I am hopeful that I will help someone avoid the same mistakes I made.

Photo courtesy of Pelagia Nyamana. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Gaining Confidence

By Personal Gakazuru. Personal is a participant in Culture Fund of Zimbabwe Trust's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which addresses cultural norms that hinder adolescent girls and young women in Zimbabwe from accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services and from making autonomous decisions that affect their health.



Personal grew up in a big family, and had to help her mother with the siblings from a young age.

I was born and raised by my mother, after my father passed on when I was nine months old. She struggled to raise us, as our family was big and no formal income was available. I managed to go to school until I was 16 but did not come out with meaningful skills to get a good job. I did some menial work to help my siblings further their education.

I got married at 21, to a 34 year old man. Since I was younger, I had less power to negotiate or talk about sex. I could not ask him for HIV testing since I was a virgin. I was afraid he would ask me why I wanted to get tested, though of course I was worried about him being infected, not me. I also knew that it would be a taboo for me to talk about sex and HIV with the rest of my in-laws. We lived in that limited communication, and I had started to get used to it.

The DREAMS project came to our village in 2017, and we girls were invited to attend a meeting. During the empowerment session, we talked about how to start sexuality conversations with our partners. We learned about HIV prevention and how

knowing your status was the first step in preventing HIV infection.

I went back home, and that night I decided to nicely engage my husband in talking about sex and getting tested for HIV. At first, he was not open to discussing this with me, but later on, he warmed up to the discussion. We got tested together and have been able to talk about sex freely, thanks to the lessons we were taught during the DREAMS meetings. I continued attending the DREAMS club sessions, and now I have the confidence to discuss sex and sexuality matters not only with my husband, but with my family.

Photo courtesy of Personal Gakazuru. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Youth Story

Cultural Norms Can Be Wrong

By Scholastic Dambe. Scholastic is a participant in Culture Fund of Zimbabwe Trust's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which addresses cultural norms that hinder adolescent girls and young women in Zimbabwe from accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services and from making autonomous decisions that affect their health.



Scholastic thought that her dreams for education and a better future were over before they even began, when her father refused to support her studies and she was forced to work in the home instead.

I am the only girl in a family of eight. I was born in an area which I am not ashamed to call 'backward.' My father wasn't employed, so we relied on farming. As a girl, I did most of the domestic chores, while my brothers did nothing. My father believed that only boys should go to school and that educating a girl child is a waste of time and resources, since I would be married off to another family.

So because of his strong cultural beliefs, I was not given an opportunity for education compared to my brothers. I passed my grade seven with results everyone admired, but my father could not be bothered. I stayed at home doing house and field work. That same year, there was a severe drought, and my family was really affected.

One day, a rich, elderly man from the neighboring village arrived. He was talking to my father, and as they chatted, they would take a glance at me while I did my daily chores. The matter was discussed in the evening— I found out the old man had agreed to pay bride price in the form of cattle, groceries, and maize. Honestly my heart missed a beat when I heard this. I thought to myself, "How can my father think so little of me to sell me off to a man his own age?"

After resisting, I was chased away from home and found myself a refugee at my aunt's place. At first I became hopeless about my future, though I was relieved to not be married to an old man. Then I joined the FACT Culture Fund DREAMS club, which was a break from my life of working and suffering with all the house work. One day, they asked about my education, and I produced my results slip. When I was asked, "Scholastic, do you want to continue with your education?" I knew that DREAMS had finally broken the biggest barrier in my life.

I was referred to a project offering education subsidies, and today I am back in school. Instead of selling vegetables, I am solving mathematical equations. DREAMS had given me another chance. I tell other girls not to let outdated ideas about culture take away their future and dreams, and I will not stop fighting for what is right for girls.

Photo courtesy of Scholastic Dambe. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Youth Story

Becoming Confident

By Yolanda Nherera. Yolanda is a participant in Culture Fund of Zimbabwe Trust's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which addresses cultural norms that hinder adolescent girls and young women in Zimbabwe from accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services and from making autonomous decisions that affect their health.



Yolanda first got tested for HIV in the DREAMS program, and then gained the courage to talk with her husband about the importance of HIV testing. They have now gotten tested for HIV together.

I am a young woman aged 21. I was born in a poor family and married into a better one. When I finished secondary school, I went to town to look for a job and started working. I then met my husband during the holidays, when I came back home.

I am a very reserved person. I did not discuss my relationship with anyone, or engage in any discussions about HIV testing, whether with my family, my husband, or even with girlfriends. I considered the matter too stressful, as I thought that if someone is HIV positive, they are as good as dead.

I joined the FACT DREAMS club in June 2017, after a friend invited me. The first time I was at a meeting, I was shocked by the way girls were talking about sex and their relationships. I was just quiet during the first session, as I thought that as a Christian girl, I could not talk about sexuality. During that session we girls were encouraged to get tested and know our HIV status, but I was too scared to imagine myself doing this, although I was having unprotected sex with my husband.

As I attended more club sessions, I started opening up to the idea of getting tested, but I had no guts to do it. One day in October 2017, during a club meeting, some organizations were testing for HIV and providing family planning services. I went in thinking, "I hope I am negative, how will I tell my husband I got tested without telling him? He will suspect that I cheated." It was my first time getting tested, after living with my husband for four years. Luckily, it came up negative.

The best thing I learned during the testing experience was that being positive is not a death sentence. I understand now that many people are living positively and accomplishing their goals. I then decided to talk to my husband about getting tested together, and he agreed. I am now able to talk about my sexual health because of the confidence I now have about my health and my body.

Photo courtesy of Yolanda Nherera. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Youth Story

A Measure of Relief

By Cynthia. Cynthia is a participant in Catholic Medical Mission Board's (CMMB) DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which makes school environments in Kenya more girl-friendly by addressing gender-based violence, improving sanitation, and enabling scholarships and fee-waiver opportunities.



Cynthia's father didn't understand her menstrual difficulties and thought it was a curse. She begged to attend mosque and school during her period, but did not have enough sanitary towels to cater to her needs.

My teachers used to give me packs of sanitary towels, each containing eight pieces. For me, that was not enough. After two or three days, I would run out of the pads. My mother would then get me two more packs, which also never lasted.

After running short of the sanitary towels, my parents would give up on buying more for me. The only option I had left was to sit in my room, alone.

My help came when DREAMS came to our school and introduced re-useable sanitary towels. The joy I felt was beyond expression. The re-usable towels made my life much easier. I have now been

attending school regularly, even with the heavy flow of blood, and my grades are looking good. Even though I still cannot go to the mosque, at least I can now feel a measure of relief.

I am happy because I can stay in school and achieve my dreams. I want to help many other girls to stay in school for a brighter future!

Photo courtesy of Cynthia. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Speak Out, Girls!

By Rose. Rose is a participant in Catholic Medical Mission Board's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which makes school environments in Kenya more girl-friendly by addressing gender-based violence, improving sanitation, and enabling scholarships and fee-waiver opportunities.



After helping her friend, Rose empowers other girls in her school and community to speak out about their challenges and continue studying.

My name is Rose. I am 17 years old and live in the Kangemi slums in Nairobi, where girls face challenges of every kind. One of my friends had a challenge that was so painful. She was the only child in the family, living with a single parent—her father. When he got home from work, he would harass her sexually by raping her. Whenever she tried to refuse, he beat her up and forced sex on her.

She only came to school when her father was in a good mood. When she was there, I noticed the injuries on her neck, which she hid with a scarf. She shared her challenges with me, and I talked to her about opening up and telling the guidance and counseling teacher. After I made many attempts to convince her, she finally agreed to do so.

The teacher gave her a listening ear and talked to her about how to rise above the sexual abuse experience. Her father was approached, talked to, and counseled as well. Her father agreed to stop abusing her, and she moved out to stay with her aunt.

carried out by the DREAMS project. I have been empowered and know that, when facing challenges, I should communicate with someone who can help me. I want to empower other girls to speak out and support them in achieving their dreams and goals.

I want to also help other young girls facing challenges in school and at home, with the knowledge I have learned in the mentorship sessions

Photo courtesy of Rose. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Suffering is a Passing Cloud

By Specioza. Specioza is a participant in Catholic Medical Mission Board's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which makes school environments in Kenya more girl-friendly by addressing gender-based violence, improving sanitation, and enabling scholarships and fee-waiver opportunities.



After getting a job as a housegirl, Specioza was finally able to continue her studies and is doing well in school.

My name is Specioza, and I am 17 years old. I have lost both my parents— my mother died in the year 2014, and my father in 2016. I was in form two, but I dropped out of school since there was no one to pay the fees.

My aunt took me in as a favor, but I never got love from her. I was mistreated every day. My aunt introduced me to prostitution, and I joined, not knowing the risks it had. I did this for a few weeks, but I could not stand the harsh challenges and finally ran away.

Since I had nowhere to go, I started sleeping on the streets at night. During the day, I would look for something to eat by either begging or stealing. Sometimes I would sleep hungry, and other times I would be beaten for stealing food. When I had my period, I would go to a tailor and borrow some leftover materials to use as pads.

I had lost hope of getting help, but one day, a friend visited me on the streets where I was living, and we had a long talk about my life and how I could turn it around. Since I did not have

anywhere to go, I decided to look for a job as a housemaid. A lady took me in and offered me a job in her house.

This lady later took me back to school. Now, I am performing very well academically. I want to have a better life than what my parents had. I have come to realize that suffering does not mean the end of one's life.

Today, I talk to my girl-friends about overcoming challenges and focusing on making a better tomorrow for themselves. I tell them that to make it in life, your desire to succeed should be greater than your fear of failing.

Photo courtesy of Specioza. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Second Chance

By Tabitha. Tabitha is a participant in Catholic Medical Mission Board's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which makes school environments in Kenya more girl-friendly by addressing gender-based violence, improving sanitation, and enabling scholarships and fee-waiver opportunities.



Tabitha's friend confided in her when she realized she was one-month pregnant at the young age of 17. She decided to keep the baby, even though she knew her mother would be upset.

My friend at age 17 years got to a dead point. We were in the same class, and she realized that she was about one month pregnant. Unlike other girls of our age, she decided to do the unexpected and keep the pregnancy. Never did she put the thought of abortion in her mind. She wanted to stand up for what she believed was right.

After the fourth month of pregnancy, it became evident. Her mother noticed and wanted her to get an abortion. "Why take out an innocent life?" she used to ask me every day. Peer pressure from her friends was also knocking her door. All her friends advised her to have an abortion. This became even worse when her mother gave her options. She told my friend, "You drop out of school and take care of your burden, or you get an abortion and get back to school and continue with your education." My friend was passionate about education, so this was a hard choice for her to make. Her mother rejected her in public, and she became both emotionally and mentally disturbed.

I took a step and talked to her, reminding her of our mentors from the DREAMS health club, who taught us to face any challenge that came

our way. She slowly turned a deaf ear to the negative things said about her and delivered a baby boy.

Her mother, seeing the determination in her and the support her friends from the health club gave her, decided to take her back to school after one term. We, the DREAMS health club members, welcomed her back and encouraged her to focus on her education.

It is up to us to fight the injustices of our society and ensure that girls are educated. Pregnancy does not have to mean a girl must drop out. It is the right of a young girl who made a mistake to get a second chance in education. Let us unite and keep girls in school.

Photo courtesy of Tabitha. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Caring for My Own Needs

By Harriet. Harriet is a participant in Aidsfonds' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which, in collaboration with Sawa World, provides young women with tools and training to become small business owners in Uganda.



Harriet and her son play in the garden.

I am a single mother of one child, living with my partner. I got married when I was 18 years old, and I live in Mukono, Uganda. For some time, I did not have a job. I depended on my partner to cater for my basic needs and health care, and any other financial needs.

I dropped out of school in my senior year because my parents did not have enough money to further my education. Sometimes men would try to convince me to go out with them, promising to take care of my most urgent needs, since my parents could not afford them. I was later forced to marry one as a way out.

Then I attended the DREAMS-IC (Sparked Women) training, where I learned among many other skills how to prepare fruit juice. I started to make fruit juice after one month of attending the training, with home utensils, and I have been making juice for sale, for the past year. The team from the Sparked Women training gave me additional equipment

to grow my business, which has been helpful.

I also attended a marketing refresher training, where I got more knowledge on how to improve my business. As a result, I joined my savings with a fellow youth making liquid soap, and we have set up a joint business and include salon services.

I earn 25,000 Ugandan shillings per day and save 5,000 as profits from my sales. The money helps me to pay for my needs at home and buy clothes for my child; I no longer depend entirely on my husband for support.

The DREAMS Sparked Women Project has also greatly increased my knowledge of HIV, through the counseling sessions I have had with a Community Health Entrepreneur who moves around our community. Engaging in other DREAMS programs has encouraged me to test for HIV every three months, to stay healthy.



After joining the DREAMS-IC Sparked Women program in her area, Harriet learned how to make and sell fresh juice.

Photos courtesy of Harriet. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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From Fear to Hope

By Jane. Jane is a participant in Aidsfonds' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which, in collaboration with Sawa World, provides young women with tools and training to become small business owners in Uganda.



Jane now sells liquid soap regularly, to customers around Mityana. She is saving up for a sewing machine, so that she can open her own shop and expand her business.

I learned how to make liquid soap. I started with 20,000 Ugandan shillings (\$5 U.S.), which I got as a loan from my friends. The first time I made liquid soap, it did not come out well, and I was not paid by my first customers. I felt discouraged at the start, but coordinators of the program give me more materials as start-up capital, which helped me to resume my business. With the extra materials, I made a 20-litre jerry can of liquid soap and earned 18,000 shillings (about \$4 U.S.) in profits, from the sales. This allowed me to purchase more materials and continue making soap, to grow my business.

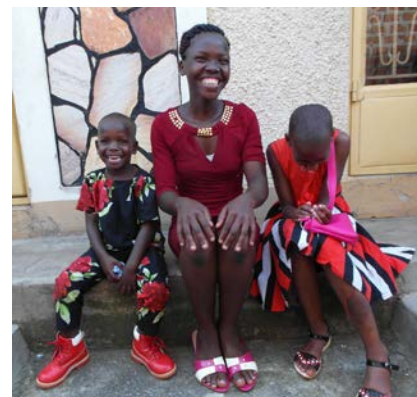
I have always wanted to have a savings account to raise enough money to buy a sewing machine. Now, I have saved 150,000 shillings (\$42 U.S.), and I hope that through persistence and hard work that I will be able to raise enough to buy the sewing machine, so that I can make and sell clothes.

I feel really proud of the impact the DREAMS-IC Sparked Women project has had on my life. I am now a courageous, determined, empowered young woman who can make better health choices. In a year, I see myself owning a shop, where I will have a sewing machine and will also continue to sell liquid soap.

I dropped out of school when I was 19 years old, because my parents could not afford to pay for my school fees. I moved to Mityana in search of a job and was employed by a lady as a housemaid. On one of my visits back home, my parents had arranged for me to get married in the village. I did not want to get married at such an early age, and so I ran away from home. I went back to my employer, who took me in as her child.

I have had friends who have been deceived by men who say they have money, but do not. Some have ended up getting pregnant, and some have contracted HIV. I feared this happening to me, so I joined the DREAMS-IC program when my employer informed me of the opportunity.

I learned how to make liquid soap. I started with 20,000 Ugandan shillings (\$5 U.S.), which I got as a loan from my friends. The first time I made liquid soap, it did not come out well, and I was not paid by my first customers. I felt discouraged at the start, but coordinators of the program give me more materials as start-up capital, which helped me to resume my business. With the extra materials, I made a 20-litre jerry can of liquid soap and earned 18,000 shillings (about \$4 U.S.) in profits, from the sales. This allowed me to purchase more materials and continue making soap, to grow my business.



Jane is satisfied with her prospects, and looks forward to the future where she can be independent and wait to get married until she is ready.

Photos courtesy of Jane. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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The Change in Me

By Mitina. Mitina is a participant in Aidsfonds' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which provides young women with tools and training to become small business owners in Uganda.



The DREAMS program has raised Mitina's self-confidence and independence, as well as her community's opinion of her. She also learned about sexual and reproductive health and rights, and how to negotiate condom use in relationships.

My name is Mitina. I am 19 years old. One day, I tried to talk to my partner so that we could go for an HIV test, but he objected, saying he was sure he was negative and saw no need to go. I had just met him and was afraid of losing him. I ended up having sex with him, and that is how I conceived my first child. The second child was also a story I do not want to remember; my partner had refused to go for an HIV test, even with the counseling from my sisters. When I told him I was pregnant, he asked that we abort, which I was not okay with. So he left me.

Now, I am a single mother with two children, and I'm living with my mother and stepfather. One of my biggest challenges has been taking care of my children. Because I do not have a job, it has been hard to buy things like clothes or pay the medical bills when they fall sick.

I used to do cultivation as a way of earning an income to get money, but this does not come so often, because we have only two seasons in a year. The hardest part was when a farmer left me to dig two acres of land for 15,000 Ugandan shillings (about \$3 U.S.) and then did not pay me at the end of the day. He just

said, "I do have money, but I will pay you once the harvest has been sold." This can take up to three months, and yet my child's health care will not wait three months.

I learned about the DREAMS program from my friends. They had attended a training where they learned how to make liquid soap and trained those of us who had missed the opportunity. This changed my life. I now make and sell liquid soap as a way to take care of my health care needs and other basic needs. I make 20 liters of liquid soap in a week, and I make profits of 50,000 shillings (about \$14 U.S.) on average, per jerry can.

The DREAMS-IC program also sensitizes youth about ways to prevent HIV. They talk about the use of condoms and testing for HIV every three months, which has helped me to stay healthy while protecting myself. I am now confident, and I can negotiate condom use with a man without fear that he will leave me. This is all because I can also make my own money from selling liquid soap, and the community has pride in my work.

Photo courtesy of Mitina. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Mcup is Part of Life

By N. Lushaba. N. is a participant in University of the Witwatersrand, MatCH Research Unit's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which educates and provides girls with menstrual cups (MCups) to remove barriers to full school participation in South Africa, including lack of access to feminine hygiene products, bathroom privacy concerns, and inadequate sanitary systems in schools.



Christmas is a happy time, but when Nontuthuzelo got her period she thought she had something to be ashamed about.

Christmas day is a joyful time in my family, when we wear our new clothes and eat nice food, and we even eat dessert. That year, 2008, was almost the same, except for the fact that I didn't eat dessert. All of a sudden, I felt funny, and I got up and left the table.

My older sister followed me, and I told her that I thought I was having my period. She said, "Wipe with tissue paper, and let me see what is going on." During that time, I was not staying with my mother. When I finally moved in with her, I kept it a secret that I had started my period, until one day she saw my underwear, and she asked me. I was very shy to let her know, because I thought it was my fault that I got periods – I thought there was something wrong with it. She shouted that I had kept it from her, and I was ashamed.

When time went by and I was introduced to the Menstrual Cup, I was not afraid at all to tell my mother that I was no longer using disposable pads. She wanted to see the cup, and I showed it to her and explained how it works, just like how the MCup team trained me on how to use it. She was very amused and confused at the same time. I thought she

wouldn't get it, but she did. To my surprise, my mum was very relaxed and encouraged me to use the Menstrual Cup and clean it properly, as instructed. My mum is actually a cool person – it's really nice to know that she is now recommending the Mcup to her friends' daughters.

I don't see a reason why I would ever stop using a Menstrual Cup. Periods are a part of life, so Mcup is a part of life!

Photo courtesy of N. Lushaba. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Thank You

By N.W. Diamini. N.W. is a participant in University of the Witwatersrand, MatCH Research Unit's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which educates and provides girls with menstrual cups (MCups) to remove barriers to full school participation in South Africa, including lack of access to feminine hygiene products, bathroom privacy concerns, and inadequate sanitary systems in schools.



Finding out she was pregnant in university was difficult news for her to digest, but she decided to make it work.

Life in the village was very tough, I can say, but I won't forget these words my granny told me all the time: "Perseverance is the mother of success."

When I finished high school, I moved to the city. I tried to make a living by plaiting people's hair, but it wasn't how I thought things would turn out. Living with my mother's sister was tough, and she didn't support the idea of me continuing with studying. I wanted to go to college. My grandmother allowed me, but my aunt said I was wasting my time. I was forced to go to college without my aunt's approval. I went ahead and registered at Coastal College, and things were not easy. I had no provision for my basic needs.

When I had thought things couldn't get any harder, I found out I was pregnant. My baby daddy passed away that very same month. How was I going to survive, and how would I be able to provide for this baby? Eventually I had the courage to tell the family of the baby's father that I was pregnant, and now my daughter is living with her family.

Now I was faced with the problem of how I was going to buy myself toiletries. I had to stay away from college during my periods.

In 2018 I met the MatCH Research Unit people, and they introduced the Menstrual Cup. To me, that meant all my worries would go away and I wouldn't have to miss school when I'm on my periods. MCup is the best thing I have come across. The program changed my life in a huge way, and for that I want to say thank you.

Photo courtesy of N.W. Diamini. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Gaining Confidence to Share

By P. Kwela. P. is a participant in University of the Witwatersrand, MatCH Research Unit's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which educates and provides girls with menstrual cups (MCups) to remove barriers to full school participation in South Africa, including lack of access to feminine hygiene products, bathroom privacy concerns, and inadequate sanitary systems in schools.

When I was 14 years old, I had a space in my life where I needed parents, to share the changes happening to me, especially when I grew breasts and got my period. I needed my mom in my life. But I felt like my parents were absent, even though we lived together.

For the first time ever, I participated in a focus group discussion, and it made it easy for me to share how I feel. As a pastor kid, in my religion, every time I am on my period I am not allowed to cook, because our tradition teaches that during menstruation, females are impure. My father as a priest must remain holy all the time; therefore, he cannot eat my food. I feel alone, like I'm not part of the family, during these times.

MatCH Research Unit really helped me a lot to gain confidence in sharing my feelings. As I listened to other girls, I realized that I was not the only one who faces challenges like running out of pads during periods and having problems with how to dispose of my pads. I get my periods for seven days, and every time, I had to keep all the used pads in a plastic packet so I can throw it all out at once, when the garbage truck comes the following Monday. It was very hard, because the used pads would smell awful inside, and if I took the packet outside, the dogs would open it. Luckily, I got a Menstrual Cup that is reusable. Now, I don't have any pads to worry about throwing away.

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The Struggle is Real

By X.. X. is a participant in University of the Witwatersrand, MatCH Research Unit's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which educates and provides girls with menstrual cups (MCups) to remove barriers to full school participation in South Africa, including lack of access to feminine hygiene products, bathroom privacy concerns, and inadequate sanitary systems in schools.



X. plaited girls' hair to save money for her sanitary pads, but still didn't find that it was enough to pay for what she needed.

I was lucky: my mom told me about periods, what to do when the day arrived ... and she gave me pantyliners in my bag, when I went to school. But when I was on my period, I was so ashamed, because I bled too much and used too many disposable pads. My mom had to buy two packets for me and another one for my elder sister. She wasted a lot of money on pads, and in our family, every cent counts.

My school was a public school. Our toilet had boreholes. It was so annoying when you entered a toilet and saw blood on the toilet seat. Most of us came from poor families, and we couldn't afford to buy pads. Others were using socks and toilet paper.

When I was doing grade seven, a project came to and taught us about menstruation and gave us pads. At high school, I was plaiting people's hair, and I thought I could buy pads for myself, but they cost too much for me.

So now my mom won't give me any money because I made my own. I struggled, because I knew my mom is a single mother and the head of the house. After I finished school, I came to Durban. I struggled to buy disposable pads, but at last here in 2018 I found the Mcup project. It provided me with the Menstrual Cup, which is reusable and guaranteed for five years.

They didn't just give me a MCup, they also set up a discussion group where I learned more things than I can count. We've been talking about STI's, contraception, sexuality. Now I save some of the money I earn. Every girl must have a Menstrual Cup. This will decrease the number of students that are absent from schools because they don't have money to buy disposable pads.

Photo courtesy of X. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Journey to my Period

By X. Mazibuko. X. is a participant in University of the Witwatersrand, MatCH Research Unit's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which educates and provides girls with menstrual cups (MCups) to remove barriers to full school participation in South Africa, including lack of access to feminine hygiene products, bathroom privacy concerns, and inadequate sanitary systems in schools.

When my peers started getting their periods, mine was nowhere to be seen. Years went by ... still no period. Was I less of a woman? I wondered to myself.

My friends started their periods when we were in grade 7, and now I am in grade 11, so I was beginning to think there was something wrong with my womb, that my womb will never bare children. Even my friends were laughing at me.

Finally, I turned 17, and to my surprise, here is the period I have been waiting for but had given up on. What does this mean for me? I quickly told my mother and she said, "Wow, you've got your period ... the main thing is to stay away from boys."

Luckily for me since I wanted to further my studies, I was admitted in college to study agriculture, where I met the DREAMS Menstrual Cup (Mcup) team and got a Menstrual Cup. Then I realized that everything happens for a reason and that blessings come in disguise. Starting my periods late saved me money, and as I was fortunate enough to be introduced to the Mcup, I have saved lots of money compared to my friends. If they had known about the Menstrual Cup, they wouldn't have missed school during their periods. They have been using disposal sanitary pads for the past seven years.

Through the DREAMS team, I finally learned and understood the female reproductive organs and how my body functions, and what happens in my body in order for me to get my periods. I really wish I had known this information earlier, but today, I can pass it all on to my younger sister and help her understand the menstrual cycle.

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Informed Decisions

By Y.W. Sibisi. Y.W. is a participant in University of the Witwatersrand, MatCH Research Unit's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which educates and provides girls with menstrual cups (MCups) to remove barriers to full school participation in South Africa, including lack of access to feminine hygiene products, bathroom privacy concerns, and inadequate sanitary systems in schools.



When Yolanda got into university, she attended a health outreach event talking about the Mina Menstrual Cup and it changed her outlook on taking care of herself.

Growing up, I was very keen on going to high school, but when I got there, I realized it wasn't for me. All I thought about was how to please my friends, just so that I could fit in. I started to drink, and before I knew it, I was dating one of my teachers. I didn't even think that was wrong, I had become a loose cannon. My mum would hear these rumors, but I was in denial.

Fortunately, before it was too late, I came back to my senses and realized that these people who I called my friends won't give me anything in return. This was wrong. Who would have known that I would even make it to college?

One day at college, I was attracted to this big gazebo with bright orange containers on the tables underneath it. I was curious to find out what was there – I love freebies. Little did I know that there was a type of menstrual protection out in the world, so beautiful and lasting for so long! "This is called a Menstrual Cup," the lady behind the table said. She started to train me and the

other girls there on how to use it. I saw that it will help me save money.

The lady continued and asked, "Does anyone know what double up means?" She smiled and said that to double up means using a condom even though you are on a contraceptive method, to protect yourself from pregnancy and STIs.

I then received my Menstrual Cup and a small book that gave me more information on my sexual rights and options on different types of contraceptive methods, so that when I go to the clinic and choose a contraceptive method, I will make an informed decision.

Photo courtesy of Y.W. Sibisi. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Yes I Can

By Judy Muthoni Komu. Judy is a participant in ACWICT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which empowers girls and young women in Kenya with skills and opportunities to become financially independent.



Judy at the DREAMS graduation. She feels that the program has given her another chance in life, and the ability to support her mother and family.

Life before the DREAMS program was unbearable. I grew up in a family of 12 children, in a rural area. I came to Nairobi to look for a job, and I got employed as a house girl. Life was so difficult, because carrying a bucket full of water was a problem. Even worse, I was not getting enough to eat. I considered going back home but when I thought of drinking porridge the whole day (that's all there is to eat, in our area), I opted to struggle.

When the challenges I faced became overwhelming for me, I decided to go and stay with my sister. She agreed to have me on the condition that I get a job. I found work in a hotel, where I earned 200 Kenyan shillings a day. After a while, I fell sick for two weeks with pneumonia, and my employers had to replace me with another person. As if that was not enough, I was thrown out by my sister's husband and had to seek refuge at a friend's house.

My friends mocked and ridiculed me for washing clothes to make money. They encouraged me to try prostitution to pay rent and buy food. Afterwards, I got married at an early age to a man who was not stable. I continued struggling to help my husband in paying rent and buying food, and it was in this situation that I heard about DREAMS.

I was lucky to be enrolled into a program where I learned hairdressing, life skills, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship. After I finished, I was fortunate to get a job. Now I can help my husband with rent and food, and pay school fees for my child. Every month, I also send money to my mother, who needs to take medicine for high blood pressure. DREAMS has helped me a lot, and in the future, I wish to open my own salon and cosmetics shop.



She is now working in a hair salon, where she is able to contribute to the household income, care for her child and be more independent.

Photos courtesy of Judy Muthoni Komu. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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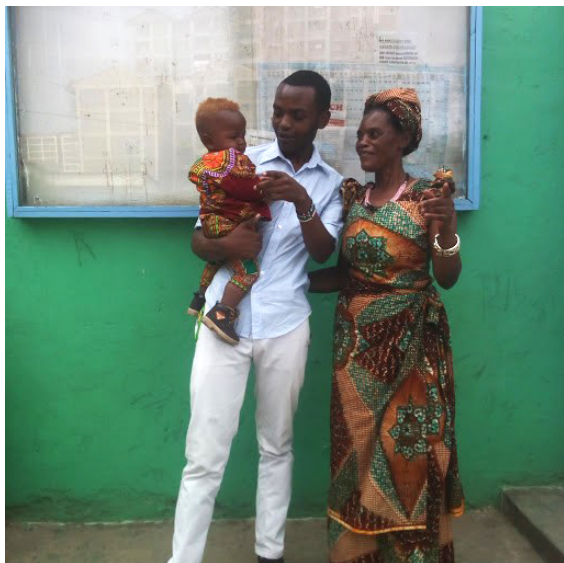
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Youth Story

#NIMECHILL

By Leah Nakami. Leah is a participant in ACWICT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which empowers girls and young women in Kenya with skills and opportunities to become financially independent.



Leah had graduated from secondary school and was volunteering for a small stipend at a local school when she found out she was pregnant. Luckily, her mother and brother are very supportive.

of becoming a lawyer was shattered. I started asking myself, “How will we survive, in this poverty? We rarely afford meals on our table; we struggle to pay rent ... and now this?”

I wished I could die, because I thought of myself as a disgrace to my family. But when my mom found out I was pregnant she was very supportive. I gave birth and realized I have a life to live for: I had become a mother, and the life of my son, Ayden, is in my hands.

That’s when my friend told me of the DREAMS Initiative. I was lucky to be enrolled in a course teaching young girls about ICTs. I am passionate about creating awareness and speaking to young girls on teenage pregnancy. I believe we can prevent early pregnancy among teenage girls across Kenya, and across the whole continent of Africa. Sex is not an emergency; it can wait.

I was brought up in a very loving and supportive family, even though I lived in a place where kids have no access to education. Hence NO job and therefore NO hope for the future. I was trapped in the slums.

My parents separated when I was young, and my life quickly came tumbling down. I did not have the life skills necessary to cope with all the changes occurring right before my eyes. Our mother had to look for casual jobs to put food on the table. In addition, she also had to provide our school fees. We survived on only one meal a day, which on some occasions was unreliable.

My mother really worked hard, in a household in Parklands (an area in Nairobi). She managed to pay for my secondary fees together with my brother’s. Unfortunately, after I finished my exams in 2014, I stayed at home. My mother did not have money to send me to a college.

I decided instead to volunteer at a primary school as a teacher. I was paid peanuts, though it helped support my mother and pay my brother’s school fees. Then I discovered I was pregnant. My dream

Photo courtesy of Leah Nakami. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Never Give Up

By Nicole Atieno. Nicole is a participant in ACWICT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which empowers girls and young women in Kenya with skills and opportunities to become financially independent.



In her new work at KIWASCO, Nicole is proud of her contributions and able to take part-time work on the side. Her self-confidence has turned around.

When I was done with my high school examinations, I got a grade that I did not expect. This grade made me lose hope, since I knew it could not take me anywhere. In addition, I would not have the opportunity to pursue the course I wanted.

After the poor results, most of the time I was lonely. I did not want to spend time with my fellow friends, since they had all passed. I was mentally and emotionally tortured, but my parents were very supportive and encouraged me to be optimistic.

I had to find something to do, so I started working on a rice farm to earn a living, despite the low wages. The job was not as easy as I expected, because I started falling sick due to staying in water for long hours and being exposed to the chemicals that were being used. I got boils all over my body. My condition back at home was not any better.

My turning point in life came when I had the opportunity to join the DREAMS program. I am delighted to have come across ACWICT, because today, I realize that there is room for me to achieve what I

want to do in my future, despite the grades I got. I pursued a plumbing course which is male dominated. After the training, I found work at the Kisumu Water and Sewerage Company Limited (KIWASCO), which keeps me busy. Also I am able to work part time for their customers. The extra income helps me sustain my daily needs. This has made me proud of myself and has boosted my confidence.

Photo courtesy of Nicole Atieno. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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#MeToo

By Sophia Muchere. Sophia is a participant in ACWICT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which empowers girls and young women in Kenya with skills and opportunities to become financially independent.



Sophia showcased her ICT skills to the United States Ambassador to Kenya.

I was raised up in a polygamous family, with my mum being a second wife. Life was not easy for me and my three siblings, since we had to struggle to get the attention of our dad. Despite passing my high school exams, I could not further my studies because there was no money. Life became worse when dad died, leaving my mum as the breadwinner. I had to learn to make decisions faster; being the first born, all eyes were on me. I got a job as a house girl and earned a few coins to support my family, but I knew this was not the kind of life I wanted for myself.

Life was a total mess—being in the city with no skills to even operate a computer; can you imagine that? Poor me, right? Things got even scarier when I couldn't get even a simple job because I did not have the computer knowledge. I was devastated and felt ashamed of myself.

I felt that if I did, people would laugh at me, since someone would need to help me out. This damaged my self-esteem, and I felt like a failure. But hey, all hope was not lost for me ... a friend of mine introduced me to the DREAMS program, and I got enrolled for IT hardware and software development training, where I proudly not only passed but also got an extra opportunity to do online courses on cyber security, digital literacy, IOT, Packet Tracer and many other topics.

I am now a level one technician, and furthermore, I am capable of developing mobile applications and websites. This has greatly improved my career and even earned me a chance to attend an event organized by DREAMS, which showcased my skills to the United States Ambassador to Kenya! With the skills I have, I can now give back to society and also earn a living.

I could not go to a cyber café because I



Sophia is now a Level 1 Technician, capable of a variety of ICT skills that can enhance her career.

Photos courtesy of Sophia Muchere. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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My Future is Still Bright

By Trezar Atieno Ochieng. Trezar is a participant in ACWICT's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which empowers girls and young women in Kenya with skills and opportunities to become financially independent.



A proud Trezar accepting her DREAMS IT graduation certificate with her daughter in her arms.

I was blessed with a baby while still in secondary school ... but I had to drop out to take care of her. A year after, my dad asked me if I wished to go back to school. Since that is what my heart longed for, I accepted the chance.

I completed my secondary education successfully. After that, I went back home with hopes of having a better life, but I didn't know how this was going to be. I have very supportive parents, but I felt that all my needs would never be met, since I also have a baby to take care of.

In an attempt to make my life better, I tried to register with a Vocational Training Centre that claimed to be offering free courses, but unfortunately, I realized they were con men. I went home very disappointed. I also discussed with my dad the possibility of pursuing IT as a career, and he was very supportive. He looked into three colleges, but the fee was too high; he could not afford it. At that point I lost hope, because I didn't know how I was going to make it together with my daughter.

Fortunately, one day a lady informed my dad about the DREAMS program. I took advantage of the opportunity and applied. I returned home hopeful that I was going to be called, and it did not take long before I received a scholarship and started my IT classes.

They were amazing and fun. After the training, I was introduced to a company that trained me further and, after a rigorous interview process, offered me a job. I was very excited for the chance I got. I really thank God and the DREAMS project that today I am now able to pay my rent and my daughter's school fees, manage my basic needs, and even help my parents financially.

Rooted in these glaring needs in my community, my desire to achieve my dreams was unstoppable. I felt it was my calling to support and create opportunities for young people and advocate for the prevention of HIV. I pursued my education despite the challenges I faced, and I graduated university with a degree in biomedical sciences.

Photo courtesy of Trezar Atieno Ochieng. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Equality for All

Anonymous author. The author is a participant in ICS Africa's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which strengthens community-based organizations working in economic empowerment, HIV programs, and health system referrals in Tanzania.



She was a school girl when a man in her village raped her. She felt that she couldn't tell anyone.

I will not forget the day I was raped by a man who lives in our village. It was so painful for me. I was even thinking to commit suicide, because I felt worthless, in this world. I was afraid to tell my parents about the situation. I always was sad and alone. After some time, my aunt noticed that I was having a problem. She asked me what happened, and I explained it to her. She told my parents.

My father did not understand and started to blame me that it was my fault. But my mother was at the forefront to support me. We reported it to the village leader, expecting support from him, but we did not get it. My mother was very close to me at that time. We did a follow up to the case, but nothing was done by the court, because the perpetrator corrupted the police.

We decided to leave it to God and have me continue with my life, although it was painful for me when I

bumped into that man in the community. Through DREAMS, I am now part of a group of adolescent girls and young women in my village, who help each other and also started gardening in order to earn money to support ourselves and our families. My parents also attended skillful parenting training and practiced the skills learned. After a long period of time, my father has now started to realize that the rape was not my fault.

Many parents are not close with their girl children, which sometimes makes children fear telling their parents what is happening in their lives and even with their bodies. Good communication among parents and girl children can make us free to talk about our feelings.



She was able to disclose the rape to her aunt, who offered her the support she needed to tell her family.

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Girls Need to be Empowered

Anonymous author. The author is a participant in ICS Africa's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which strengthens community-based organizations working in economic empowerment, HIV programs, and health system referrals in Tanzania.



The author is happy that her parents are able to speak with her about menstruation and other sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) issues, now that they have attended the DREAMS ICS Africa Skillful Parenting course.

When I was a teenager, our parents did not talk to us kids about sex. My mother was sick, so our father was the one taking care of the family. When my first menstrual period came, I was afraid to tell anyone in my family. Instead, I told a friend about it, and she advised me to have a relationship with a boy, because then he would buy me sanitary pads and nice pants.

I was not aware that she meant to have a love affair. So I found a boy, and he bought me sanitary pads, and after one week, he asked me to go with him to his friend's house. When I got there, he asked me to enter his friend's room. I refused and asked him to talk while we stood outside. He got angry and asked me to bring back all the stuff he had bought for me. I apologized to him, told him that I didn't know that the pads and pants were not for free, and promised to pay him the money that he used.

The following day, I decided to wake up early in the morning and told my parents that I was going to visit a friend. Instead, I went to the neighboring house and helped the family with weeding, to get enough money to pay that boy. Afterwards, I went to the place where he used to stay during the day and said, "Here, take your money, and don't follow me again."

It was all so painful to me. When my mother realized I had already started my menstrual period, she sent me to my auntie's for a talk on how I can take care of myself during that time.

My parents have now attended skillful parenting trainings conducted in our community and have started to engage us on all issues affecting us, as children. I wish parents and caregivers could be close to their children and talk to their teenagers about sexual and reproductive health and prepare girls for their first menstrual period.



The author's family home in Tanzania.

Photos courtesy of the author. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Poverty Leads to Girls at Risk

By Lucia Richard. Lucia is a participant in ICS Africa's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which strengthens community-based organizations working in economic empowerment, HIV programs, and health system referrals in Tanzania.



Lucia tried to make the best of it in Dar es Salaam, but she was working in a bar and always avoiding lewd comments and treatment from men.

When I finished my grade seven, my parents failed to pay the fees for my secondary education. I decided to go to Dar es Salaam to find work. I met with a mother who promised to help me to find a job. The following day, she told me, "I have already found you a job, and you will be paid at the end of the month." I agreed and went to the place, but I was shocked when she told me that I had to work at her bar!

I faced a lot of challenges—drunk men were clinging to me and sometimes asking me to sit with them and drink alcohol. I could not go home, because I did not have bus fare. Even though it was hard for me, I stood up as a girl and did not agree, because I knew that taking alcohol could lead to more problems like sexually transmitted diseases and HIV.

Eventually I was able to go back home and my mother and my siblings were so happy. My mother told me, "I am glad you're back, we did agronomy training and now have sunflower seeds, and we

are expecting to harvest our sunflowers and sell them in order to get money to send you to college." I was happy that my mother is able to support our family. So I helped her harvest and store our crops.

We sold sunflowers and got enough money for me and my siblings to go to school. I succeeded in joining the nursing college for my certificate, and now I have knowledge of HIV/AIDS and use it to help my friends in our village. I advise parents even if they are less educated: do not allow your daughters to go out and work without knowing what work they are doing. And talk with your children about puberty, because this will help prevent them from early pregnancies and HIV.



Lucia is now able to provide for herself and her child on her own, and is proud of her achievements.

Photos courtesy of Lucia Richard. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Don't Give Up

By Zainabu Juma. Zainabu is a participant in ICS Africa's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which strengthens community-based organizations working in economic empowerment, HIV programs, and health system referrals in Tanzania.



Zainabu fell pregnant at an early age, and struggled to care for her child on her own.

When I finished my primary education, my mother was not able to send me to secondary school. I started a relationship with one of the boys in our village. Unfortunately, I got pregnant, and he and his family rejected me.

I went through a difficult time—my mother was the only person who supported me, and we did not have money. I thank God that I gave birth safely. I suffered a lot to take care of my child, because my mother alone could not afford everything we needed. But she helped me a lot by encouraging and sometimes supporting me to buy clothes for my child. When my child reached four months, I started to look for a job to help at least with the needs of my child and me.

Until now, my life has depended on my mother. She has now received agronomy training and skillful parenting

training through the DREAMS project. Since she started the training, things have started to change. We are working together on our farm, nearby our home, and expecting to harvest sunflower seeds and sell them, in order to get money. I am hoping this will bring enough money for me to start a small business, apart from agriculture.

My call to parents and my fellow girls is, if you are going through what I faced, don't give up. Listen to the good advice that your parents can share with you.



Zainabu's mother was able to join the DREAMS skillful parenting and agriculture trainings, which she expects will help them earn a living selling sunflower seeds.

Photos courtesy of Zainabu Juma. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Keeping Hopeful

By Annet Nayiga. Annet is a participant in World Vision's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which supports girls in Uganda to stay in school with peer-led early warning systems, stay in school committees, safety friends, and safe school contracts.



Annet is determined to finish school. As the last born child in her family, she does everything she can to reduce the financial burden on her mother.

I live with both of my parents and am the twelfth child out of twelve. Unfortunately, six have passed on, and only six of us remain.

My father is 82 and my mother 60; they are quite old now, and my siblings have not had a chance to get an education because of the challenges of polygamy. It's only me at school, and all eyes are on me, waiting to see my next steps.

Before participating in the DREAMS project, I used to live in a challenging situation. I was not sure of staying in school, due to the nature of the work my mother does to earn money to pay my schools dues.

With DREAMS, I have learned to make reusable menstrual pads. So I have not asked my mother for any money in a long time, to buy pads. I have further learned how to solve problems, how to be assertive, and how to know what I want. I am a transformed girl, and I also respect boys. Despite the challenges of school fees, I am hopeful that I will complete school and achieve my dreams.

Photo courtesy of Annet Nayiga. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Everyone Should Be Tested

Anonymous author. The author is a participant in World Vision's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which supports girls in Uganda to stay in school with peer-led early warning systems, stay in school committees, safety friends, and safe school contracts.

I go to school in Kyotera District, and I have five siblings -- four boys and one girl. My mother is a peasant farmer, and I lost my father due to HIV/AIDS.

When I was younger, my father often came home drunk and hit our mother. He was angry when she requested money to buy me and my brothers food and clothing. For the love of us children, she stayed in such a challenging relationship where there was no peace.

Our father came to know that he was HIV positive. He did not tell mother and always took the drugs while hiding. When mum learned his status, this made her suspect she was also positive. Mum got so worried and begun to fall sick. She was also put on treatment, but my father got so uncomfortable about the whole situation that he stopped taking the drugs. His situation got worse, and he passed on.

After his death, it was planned that every child in the family should be tested. I thought everybody at school knew that I must be HIV positive, due to my family situation. When I shared my challenge with one of the teachers, he encouraged me to take the test so that I could know my HIV status, and he assured me I would get the right support.

Towards the end of the term, a team of people came to our school from the DREAMS program and gave us a health talk about HIV prevention and care. Since I suspected I was HIV positive, I was counseled, and I agreed to take the test. The results came out positive, and these people still supported me on how to take my drugs. The project further gave me skills for using my hands to make reusable menstrual pads, which were a personal challenge for my mother to provide.

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The Importance of Communication

By Caroline Nakyondwa. Caroline is a participant in World Vision's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which supports girls in Uganda to stay in school with peer-led early warning systems, stay in school committees, safety friends, and safe school contracts.



Caroline and her peers at school.

I come from a family of seven, where I am the first born. My mother is a primary school teacher, and my father is a peasant farmer.

When I reached high school, I found it hard to talk about sex—especially about male and female relationships. One day, a boy came to me and asked me to become his lover. I never wanted anybody to know or see me; I just rushed away, because I feared even talking about sex. Instead, I kept quiet without addressing the problem to anyone who could give me advice on how to handle the situation.

Then I became a peer educator. I learned a number of skills during a four-day training, and I can now speak

up about sex and also hold constructive discussions with my peers. I encourage my fellow girls to stay in school, which was not the situation before. I also learned the importance of communicating issues affecting us girls to the senior woman and seeking support and guidance on how to support girls. The teachers have now changed and use positive discipline to talk to us, and the school has seen a lot of transformation.

From my experience, the peer education has made me happy to support my fellow girls to stay safe and stay in school.



Caroline and her siblings when they were younger.

Photos courtesy of Caroline Nakyondwa. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Listen to Girls' Challenges

By Mirembe Dorcus. Mirembe is a participant in World Vision's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which supports girls in Uganda to stay in school with peer-led early warning systems, stay in school committees, safety friends, and safe school contracts.



Mirembe speaks with her peers about the challenges that girls face in school, including her struggle to pay school fees on time because of delays in paying teacher salaries.

My father is a teacher, and my mother was engaged in a seasonal business. Because my father had to wait for his salary to be in a position to pay school fees for my siblings and me, I always reported to school late.

It was very difficult for him to leave me at home and go and teach other people's children. Even when at school, I lacked the basic requirements, and my friends always laughed at me because I was constantly being chased after, for the school fees.

This situation affected me so much that I was performing poorly at school. Through the DREAMS project, I have learned to be creative to solve the problems I have, and now I can freely express myself and talk to other people, and ask for help. I was supported in encouraging my parents to go and talk to our head teacher and explain why the payment of our fees is delayed. The "Stay in School" Committee listens to our challenges as girls, in school.

I encourage my fellow girls not to give up.

Photo courtesy of Mirembe Dorcus. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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Building Dreams

By Ritah Nalugewa. Ritah is a participant in World Vision's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which supports girls in Uganda to stay in school with peer-led early warning systems, stay in school committees, safety friends, and safe school contracts.

Ritah is 17 years old in S.4 at St Mary Secondary School located in Ssanje village, Kakuuto Sub-County, Kyotera District. World Vision's Early Warning Systems records show that Ritah is no longer missing school, and her grades are progressively improving.



Ritah outside her home in rural Uganda. Through many confusing times as a child, she is now more clear about what happened to her parents, and her own personal health.

I am the last born, out of three children. My grandparents have raised me after the death of my father and mother. Whenever I try to find out what caused my parents' deaths, my aunt is too harsh to explain, and I give up, because I am not finding answers.

One day, I met with the health worker who was treating my mother. She asked me whether I had ever been tested for HIV, because my parents died due to the virus. When health workers from the DREAMS program visited our school, they shared with us information about HIV prevention. I gained the courage to take an HIV test, and to my surprise, the results were negative. This gave me more determination to continue with my education, because it can help me keep free from HIV.

Before learning about menstruation, I had a challenge with pads. My aunt used to give me old rags to use. With learning how to make reusable pads in the DREAMS program, I do not have to miss school anymore. I am now continuing with my studies, worry-free and in a position to overcome so many temptations. I am now building my dream to become a doctor.



Ritah was happy to learn that she is HIV negative, since both of her parents passed away due to the disease.

Photos courtesy of Ritah Nalugewa. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative (www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks) and JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), and funded by a grant from the United States Department of State (DOS), as part of the DREAMS Innovation Challenge. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DOS or JSI.

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