



## DREAMS Innovation Challenge *Silence Speaks – Grantee Stories*



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# Funds Manager for DREAMS Innovation Challenge

## *Silence Speaks – Grantee Stories*

Cooperative Agreement No. S-LMAQM-16-CA-1103

**Submitted to:**

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**Prepared by:**


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


**Cover photo:**

Photo courtesy of Redempta Mwende. Redempta works with the African Centre for Women and Information and Communication Technology's DREAMS-IC project.

**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. All participants received follow-up technical assistance to conduct community-based storytelling and photography projects with young people.

This compilation includes personal stories from the 19 grantee staff members who gave consent to publish their stories after the webinar series. It also includes transcriptions of the 12 digital stories that were created during the workshop in Kenya. A playlist of the digital stories may be viewed on YouTube at <http://bit.ly/DREAMSstorytelling>.

Please note that the stories elicited from the youth Story Circles are being edited and will be submitted separately.






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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Women Should Not Have to Suffer in Silence



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSAngeline>

By Angeline Masinde. Angeline works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee BHESP, 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.

I was brought up in an era when girls were only supposed to listen, not talk. I am also the first born, so my mother expected me to take care of my seven siblings. If any of them made a mistake -- I was punished on their behalf.

We all went to primary school in the Nairobi Eastlands. I walked to and from school every day, with my girlfriends. Men often harassed us on the way. One day, during a music lesson, our teacher told the class to go look for bamboo sticks to make kayambas (a musical instrument). I went in a group of four girls. We asked some men on the street where we could get the sticks. They said, "Follow us, we can show you where to find bamboo."

Our little minds didn't see any danger ahead, as they took us to a deserted place where no one could see us. Then, two more men joined them, and together they attacked and raped us. We were just 12 years. The pain just ate me inside. Rape was very common in our area... no one got punished, and only girls were blamed for it. The four of us never talked about it to any one, not even amongst ourselves.

So many years have passed now, but still, every time I hear someone has been raped, I feel that pain again... And I always use my experience to advise young girls who are giving up in life, like some of the girls I work with. We offer them HIV prevention education and PrEP, but for the ones who face violence at the hands of their partners, there may be fear to use the pills that keep the virus from being transmitted.

Thankfully, today girls do not have to suffer in silence. Working together, we can empower them and protect their rights.

This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### Access



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSBeauty>

By Beauty Waekha. Beauty works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee VillageReach, which provides adolescent girls and young women in Malawi with direct access to health workers via a healthcare service hotline, SMS reminders, youth-friendly health services, and access to reproductive health commodities.

My body and feelings told me I had to do something. But how and where? Why am I having these feelings when I am with my boyfriend? I told myself I am a strong lady and shouldn't have a sexual relationship before marriage. Let alone my parents' reaction, there would be my church's reaction just knowing I was having sex or, worse, if I happened to be pregnant.

Contrary to my belief, I was caught in a situation with my boyfriend...just the two of us, in his room. Oh my...it's morning. Already? I slept there. And we had sex. No protection. Will I be pregnant? Have I contracted HIV? Never! I trust my boyfriend.

I was happy as never before when I saw blood coming down the following month. I had my monthly period. Sigh of relief. I went for HIV testing and learned I am negative. I also learned more about HIV and contraception. Though I have a nursing and public health background, nature doesn't respect that. Safe sex is for everyone.

Best of all, I found work helping other girls and young women in my area learn how to prevent HIV transmission and access and use birth control. Your decisions about when to get pregnant are made by you, and not left up to chance.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### When Silence Is Not Golden



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSChishimba>

By Chishimba Kasanga. Chishimba works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee Lubuto Library Partners in Zambia. Lubuto Library Partners uses public libraries in Zambia as a gateway for scholarships, referrals, mentorship, reproductive health programming, and community engagement. She is also an official DREAMS Ambassador for adolescent girls and young women in Zambia.

I was 11 years, too young to know much about sex but old enough to have breasts. I was at home with my baby sister and my 23-year-old cousin. My parents were at work.

I was alone in my room when my cousin walked in and started fondling my breasts. I was terrified! There he was, someone I trusted and looked up to, shamelessly enjoying himself. He said, “Do not tell anyone.”

When my parents came home that evening, I was afraid of causing conflict. How could I tell them he had touched me in ways I hated? I had no witness except a 3-year-old who could barely construct sentences. So I kept quiet.

It happened again the next day, this time lasting longer than before. Still, I remained silent, fearing the consequences of speaking out. I wondered, “Will anyone believe me? What if he comes back again? When will this end?”

Even though I wanted to just forget about it, I couldn’t bear the thought that my cousin might do the same thing to my sister. I finally found the courage to tell my parents the truth. Much to my relief, they believed me.

When confronted, my cousin denied everything, saying, “Why would I touch her? I am old enough to have any lady I want, so why would I waste my time with a child?” But a year later, he finally admitted it.

Today, I am committed to helping fellow survivors and bringing public attention to the realities of sexual abuse. I’m now mentoring adolescent girls and young women, helping them find inner strength to challenge and overcome abuse and discrimination. It is so important for them to feel safe speaking out, so justice can be served.

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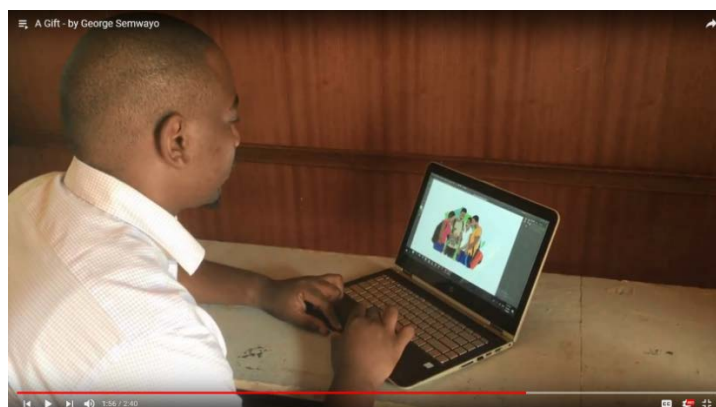
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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### A Gift



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSGeorge>

By George Semwayo. George uses his artistic skills to create sexual and reproductive health and rights graphics and messages for young people as part of 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 seven, my parents got separated, and I went to stay with my grandparents. This brought loneliness at first, and then I began to enjoy spending time alone. My grandparents were around, but I hardly felt their presence.

I developed a passion for art. I traced pictures of cars from magazines and newspapers using a clear plastic bag, and then reproduced the images on different paper. Every time I completed a drawing, I was inspired to do more. Self-motivation became my strength. But my father was against the idea. He said, "You are wasting your time, you should be reading your school books." When he visited, I quickly hid all my drawings. I felt tense when he was there; my space was being invaded.

One cloudy afternoon as I was sketching outside on a small wooden stool beneath an avocado tree, my father showed up unexpectedly. Right away, he began to criticize me. But then my aunt came forward and said, "Don't discourage him – if it's a gift, let him pursue it." I couldn't believe it.

She encouraged me and took me for lessons at a local art gallery. I knew that I just had to believe in myself, because I had no other vision of what I could be. After taking art in primary school and high school, I found out about different careers I could do, with art. I spent many nights drawing, to create an impressive portfolio for my college application. I was accepted and completed a four-year program in 2015. My father was so proud.

Some of the young girls I work with today tell me about the pain they feel when their parents discourage them from staying in school. I always think about those kind words of my auntie, and then I talk with them and encourage them to hold on to their dreams, no matter what.

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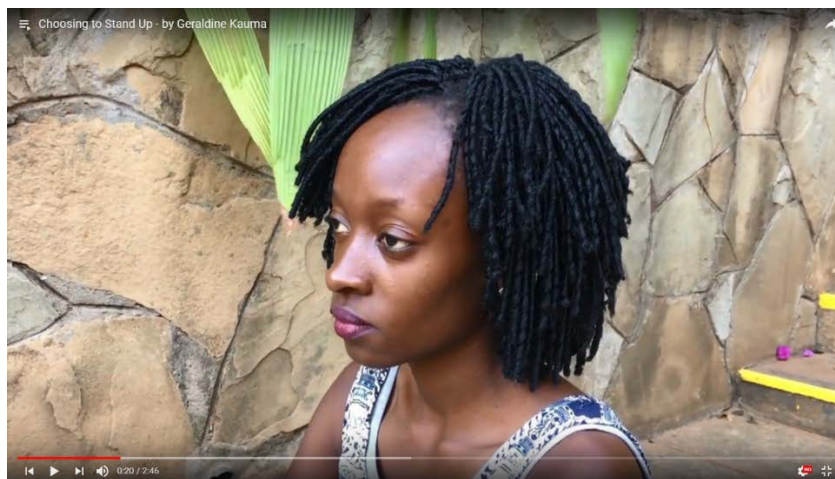






## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Choosing to Stand Up



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSGeraldine>

By Geraldine Kauma. Geraldine works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee Brick by Brick in Uganda, which teaches girls to construct reusable menstrual pads for personal use and income generation, and enables in-school reproductive health education.

She and I were such close friends, ever since we joined the school. Every day after classes, we stayed behind and chatted a little about how the day had gone. She even introduced me to her boyfriend and told me stories about how nice he was, and how intelligent. After a while, I noticed she wasn't as bubbly as always. She was avoiding people and staying in her room to sleep, whenever she had free time. Exams were fast approaching, and I decided to go and ask what was bothering her. After I prodded her, she broke down and told me her boyfriend had assaulted her repeatedly. She had been too afraid to say anything because he threatened her life.

When he found out that I knew, he also began threatening me. He said, "You and your friend and all the girls in your class are sluts... if you don't keep quiet, I will tell everyone how damaged you are, and no one will want you." He said, "I have pictures to share that will destroy you." He thought we would cower, but I chose to inform the authorities, and he was put in jail. Her family supported her in handling the ordeal.

After that, I knew I would stand up whenever I can- as a female who has been privileged with education and an opportunity to speak out. After university, I started working with youth on HIV prevention. I get to talk with adolescent boys and girls, about the importance of health education and equal opportunity. They share many stories. One young girl talked about being overlooked because she is female; her uncle did not want to pay her school fees. I talked to the counselors, who had a session with him. He then began to support her.

Every day, I strive to inspire young girls in Uganda to achieve their dreams, because I, too, was once a young girl.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Making Decisions



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSMazvinyanya>

By Mazvinyanya Madzivaide. Mazvinyanya works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee Culture Fund of Zimbabwe Trust, which is producing and deploying a creative knowledge toolkit addressing 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.

I was born in a rural district in Zimbabwe. As a ritual, I travel there during the public holidays, to visit my parents and take a break from the city's fast life.

When I went last April, I learned that one of my nieces, who had recently finished 11th grade, had eloped. Apparently she had decided to escape poverty by becoming a second wife to a 41-year-old man from a better off family.

I was heartbroken that my 17-year-old niece had taken that route, even though her family was struggling financially. I thought, "How can it be that in my job, I'm always talking to girls about empowerment, and yet my own niece does not know there are better choices for her?" I went to see her parents and told them, "It is not right for a girl to get married this early. I grew up here, and I have been able to make a good life for myself – she can too, if you take her back home."

I then visited my niece at her new home. We talked for a long time, and I convinced her that she does have options besides being married. She said, "I'm afraid I'm pregnant... I don't want to become a single parent." Together, we walked to the local clinic, and she got a pregnancy test.

Thank goodness it was negative, and the HIV test which the clinic staff advised her to take was also negative. She was thrilled and ready to start over. I said, 'Even though people think it's a taboo for young girls like you to talk about sex and sexual health, let's talk about it, it's really ok,' and I encouraged her to avoid having sex again until she is more mature.

Now, she is back at her parents' home and looking for a job. And me? I became even more passionate about supporting young women in making decisions that feel right for them.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Independence



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSMillicent>

By Millicent Okello. Millicent works with the Catholic Medical Mission Board's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which aims to keep girls in school by making school environments in Kenya more girl-friendly. This is done by addressing gender-based violence, improving sanitation, mentoring students, providing sanitary towels, training teachers on gender pedagogy, and enabling scholarships and fee-waiver opportunities.

For me, growing up meant constant struggle. We were seven children, and my father was a casual laborer, my mother a house wife with no education or income. She was powerless to make any major decisions, for our family.

By the time I was 12, things were so difficult that I had to find a way to earn money. You see, we were living in a rural area at that time. There was a lady who went from house to house plaiting women's hair. I followed her and watched for hours. Then I practiced on the grass near the river, as I waited for my turn to fetch water. This lady encouraged me to learn keenly.

It was not easy, as I had to juggle between doing hair and school. Luckily, my father was interested in education and pushed me and my siblings to work hard. He said, "There is no other option, for a better future. Out of the seven, I am the only one who managed to join the university.

Today, I help women and girls realize their full potential. I speak to them about their value and worth and encourage them to demand equal rights and opportunities with the boys. I also educate schools and the community about how to support girls' education. We must condemn gender-based violence, improve sanitation, and increase scholarships and fee waivers – so female students don't have to work long hours like I did, just to stay in school.

I want to see more girls from the informal settlements transitioning from primary to secondary school and then going on to college – with the support of their male counterparts. I want to see more women becoming economically independent and playing equal roles, in their families.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### For a Healthier Life



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSNathan>

By Nathan Binomugisha. Nathan works as a partner with Aidsfonds, whose DREAMS Innovation Challenge grant provides young women with tools and training to become small business owners in Uganda.

I grew up with my father in a family of three brothers and one sister. We lived in Panda Pier, by the lake. There wasn't much to do, so we spent hours playing street games. My father always said, "You make your own destiny. It is a matter of you deciding when to start."

So I started by working as a barber to get money for university. Cutting hair shaped how I relate with people from all walks of life. In talking with them, I saw how our stories can be a bridge of inspiration for others.

Now I document young entrepreneurs who have a passion to share their knowledge. It's a new way to reduce unemployment and reduce the spread of HIV in young women and men.

I recently filmed a young woman whose stepmother tried to force her to get married when she was only 13. Instead, she ran away from home and ended up co-habiting with another man. She had her first child at the age of 15. Now, she has gained employment skills and is more informed about HIV.

I also work with young female vloggers, who share stories about the challenges youth face with HIV and unemployment. Our talks about possible solutions have been a defining moment for me as a filmmaker.

When we learn from each other and share our stories, we are striving for the greater good of everyone.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### How Girls Can Claim Their Power



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSNonhlonipho>

By Nonhlonipho Bhengu. Nonhlonipho works with the University of the Witwatersrand's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project in South Africa, which educates and provides girls with menstrual cups to remove barriers to full school participation, including lack of access to feminine hygiene products, bathroom privacy concerns, and inadequate sanitary systems in schools.

It was one of those days I will never forget. It was supposed to be one of the happiest days of my life, as I was to receive an award for being the sport girl of the year.

We were sitting in the school hall, when I felt something liquid running down my legs. I did not understand what was going on. My name was called out to go up on the stage. Instead of being afraid that I might hold my certificate upside down out of excitement, I was thinking there might be a big red stain on my powder blue uniform. Slowly, forgetting to smile, I went and took my award.

After I sat down, I asked myself if I had seen anything frightening lately. Every time she got a period, my older cousin said things like, "I saw an accident on the freeway, and two people were lying there dead. I think that is why I am bleeding." I felt confused and ashamed.

How can it be that girls are embarrassed about something so natural? Even though I cannot change that day of my own life, I can certainly change the lives of others.

In my work, we educate young women about puberty and menstruation and provide them with menstrual cups. This helps them continue their education without interruption, which means they are less at risk of early pregnancy and HIV.

Menstruation is a natural phenomenon. No one should be frightened of talking about it, especially due to lack of knowledge and resources for protection. If you're a sport girl like me, you can use the menstrual cup while playing any kind of sport. We have the power to end the shame.

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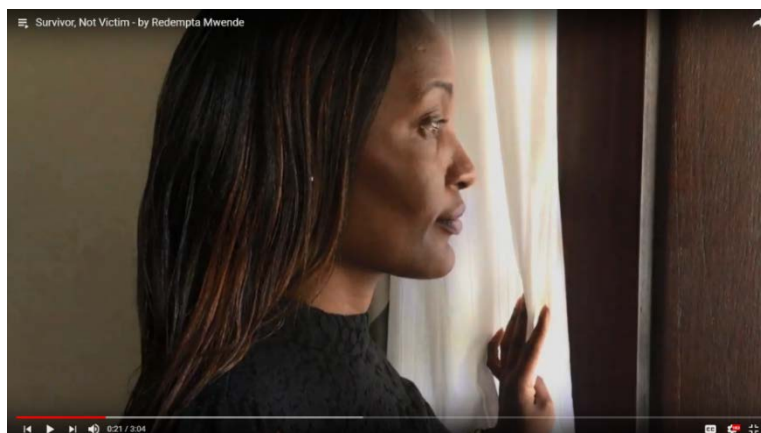






## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Survivor, Not Victim



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSRedempta>

By Redempta Mwende. Redempta works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee African Centre for Women and Information and Communication Technology, which empowers girls and young women in Kenya with skills and opportunities to become financially independent.

While I was drawing the curtains at the office, ready to call it a day, I heard a knock at the door and saw a young girl I knew, peeking in. She was usually so full of life, but on this occasion, as she entered, the tears began flowing. I handed her some tissues. Then she told me her story.

She had gone out to a nightclub with friends to celebrate turning eighteen. When she felt tipsy, she wanted to leave, but her friends wanted to stay. They suggested she catch a lift with an older man they knew. She told me, “I took the risk, and it turned out to be the biggest mistake of my life.”

He invited her to spend the night at his place. Initially she hesitated, but because her parents were very strict, she was afraid to go home drunk. So she accepted. He insisted she should sleep in the bedroom, he on the couch in the other room. In the middle of the night, suddenly he was next to her, undressing her. She said, “I asked him to stop, but he did not listen. I tried to fight him, but he was too strong. I tried to scream, but he punched me in the stomach.” He tied her hands to the headboard with his belt and then raped her.

When she finished speaking, I hugged her, and we both wept together. I was the first person she told; she worried that people would not believe her, would blame her for what happened. I was happy to support her healing – it completely changed my attitude towards sexual violence. Today in my work, we talk to women not only about HIV prevention and STI treatment, but also about rape. These are **all** health issues.

Three months later, this young woman came to me and told me she had tested negative for HIV. She was lucky. She said, “I will not let one event in my life define my future. I am not a victim; I am a survivor.”

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Equal Rights for All



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSSabrina>

By Sabrina Majikata. Sabrina works with ICS Africa's DREAMS Innovation Challenge Project, which strengthens community-based organizations working in economic empowerment, HIV programs, and health system referrals in Kenya and Tanzania.

One morning when I was going to work, I heard my neighbor shouting at her daughter, who is just 13. She said, "You are not going to school! We do not have money to waste for your school fees, there is only enough for your brother to study. You must stay at home and help with chores so that when he comes home, the food will be ready."

Even though I was running late, I decided to go to that house, and I asked the mother what was happening. She told me, "My daughter wants to go to school, just like her brother. She does not understand her brother is the man and so needs to study, and that woman are responsible for the household."

When I was a child, my parents always insisted on the importance of education. So I thought every family knew the value of school for all children. After I graduated and started to work, I realized it is not true. People still marry their daughters off at early ages, in order to get wealth, and so most women in rural areas are not educated, past grade school.

That day, I asked my neighbor to let me explain what I thought could help the family. I gave her examples of women who are recognized by the world as leaders and urged her to let her daughter study and reach for her dreams. I told her, "Everyone in the world needs access to resources and opportunities, whether they are male or female. Even your daughter needs this. Education is the right of every child, and when she educated, she will help your family and whole community, and she will have a better future."

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### The Right Support



Watch the video here: <http://bit.ly/DREAMSSarah>

By Sarah Magoba. Sarah works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee World Vision, 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 work in Uganda, in a very remote and hard to reach rural area. In my job, I meet with small groups of girls to listen to their challenges and encourage them to stay in school. Some of them want to drop out because they do not feel safe as young women; others face pressure to help out at home, instead of studying.

Sometimes our conversations remind me of my own experience...

When I was 15, my emotions were up and down, and I was not doing so well in my studies. One afternoon, my school organized a career guidance session and brought in three men and one woman to talk to us. Right away I had questions. I wondered, how did she make it to the university? Did she face challenges because she is female?

The three gentlemen spoke for what seemed like hours. I just wanted to hear from the lady. When she finally spoke, she had a great voice, and her humor put a smile on my face. She asked, "Who among you would like to complete university, like me?"

I was not sure whether to put my hand up, but I did. She shared her challenge with mathematics -- she told us that when she was in school, she joined a group of girls who met every evening to discuss their personal problems and the difficulties they were facing with various subjects.

This opened my eyes--I walked out of that room a very different person. The next day, I woke up at 5:30 am, bathed, and went to school early to study. Three other girls were in the classroom, reading. This gave me confidence, and I suggested, "Why don't we form a discussion group?" Soon after, I made the best score, on our mock exams in history.

When girls work together, and when they get the right support and have a place where they are really listened to, there is nothing they cannot achieve.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### A Walk into a Hopeful Life

By Akuzike Zingani Ghambi. Akuzike works with Save the Children's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project in Malawi, which provides a bridge to employment to young women so that they do not resort to transactional sex, staying in risky relationships, and adopting other economic coping strategies that expose them to HIV.

**Note:** the name of the young boy described in this story has been changed, to protect his privacy.

Returning from school one day, I saw a young boy trip and fall ahead of me. I had noticed from a distance how he was dragging himself through the scorching sun. He could barely manage to carry a small sack on his shoulder. I ran to him stretching out my hand to reach out.



Akuzike walking Andrew home from school.

"Thank you," he said, helping himself up with my support. I watched him compose himself. He asked, dusting off his sun burned outfit, "What is your name?" I smiled and answered, "Akuzike... and you?" He responded, "Andrew."

He looked tired, and I could hardly guess his age. When I asked, he said, "about 12." We started walking again, and we talked while we covered a distance towards his home. I carried his sack on my shoulder. After a little while, he asked with a puzzled look, "Wait! Why are you talking to me?" I didn't know how to respond to this. A moment of awkward silence passed, and he asked again, this time with some agitation, "Tell me why are you interested to talk to me?"



Establishing youth groups is one way to enhance connection and love.

I realized another delay would make things worse, so without proper thought, I quickly pulled out an answer that changed the course of our walk. "I was walking behind you, and I felt like the sun was too much to walk alone, so I figured I would join the fellow ahead: you."

He responded with a glowing face and a blushing smile. And then he opened up, telling me his life story. He was an orphan, born to a mother who had been HIV

positive. With a stammering voice, he shared how life had been hard for him, facing stigma all round. He said this had led to him drop out of school and live an isolated life, with no hope. I then asked Andrew, "How would you want your life to be like?" He responded, "I want to loved and accepted."

Since that day, I committed to be part of Andrew's life, to support and help him live again. Due to our chats over the past 10 years, he went back to school and joined his district youth group, whose members are living positively.

Photos courtesy of Akuzike Zingani Ghambi. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### Passion Ignited

*By Banele Mandaza. Banele works with World Education Bantwana Initiative's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project in Zimbabwe, which provides preventative and responsive interventions to school drop-out due to pregnancy for adolescent girls and young women in Swaziland, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.*

I grew up as a daddy's girl. Being the youngest in a family of five and the second girl gave me a privileged position. I was the first among my siblings to sit and pass my secondary school exams in one sitting (at a private school no less), and the first to make it to university. I wouldn't say I was spoiled, but that sense of safety and being valued by my parents and family meant that I always had access to what was required for a healthy and safe upbringing. That was my normal.

In 2016, while working with the DREAMS program, I was introduced to a radically different "normal" for girls who were otherwise just like me – we were all girls. They were not daddy's favorite; in some cases, they had lost their fathers or other family members to HIV and AIDS. Because of this, they found themselves out of school. Although they were, like me, loaded with dreams and aspirations for their future, they were just the opposite of my normal.

They flocked to community campaigns designed for adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 24 years, for health services: an HIV test, family planning guidance, a peer counselor who "got them," or just for the sole reason that they were a girl. Their fascination with these campaigns went beyond experiencing something new happening in the community; it was also because access to these much-needed services was free. Again, something that I had always been able to access with little challenge.

Face to face with the extent of the gulf between these girls and young women and the memories of who I had been at that same age, my 'normal' suddenly seemed like opulent privilege.

And so a passion was ignited inside me, to create change for adolescent girls and young women in Bulawayo. I am not a stranger to this city – I was born here, went to school here, matured here, and now live with my husband and children here. Surely, "normal" should be generalized across time and space...

It should be normal to live free from violence, to have access to and take up health services. It should be normal to attend and complete school, to pursue and live out your DREAMS!

*This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### The Value of Change

By Barrack Ondieki Bosire. Barrack works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team (AMURT) in Kenya, which empowers girls and young women from Nairobi's urban settlements with professional housekeeping skills, reproductive health knowledge, and financial literacy.

I grew up in two Kenyan worlds. As a young boy, the better part of my life was spent in Langata and Kahawa. In fact, my dad tells me I am named "Barrack" because I was born in a military barracks. He was a soldier, which means my siblings and I were expected to follow instructions. I never dared question what my father said. I learned to take care of myself from a very early age, alone. By the age of 12, I knew how to cook, wash my own clothes, iron them, clean the house and dishes, and keep my room neat.

One evening, it all changed. We had to move out. I remember helping to load the last household item that would fit into the military truck before jumping in at the back to commence a journey to an unknown destination. I felt excitement mixed with fear as the truck snaked through the evening traffic jam. Finally, we arrived at the site where the second part of my life began: Huruma.



The neighborhood where Barrack grew up lacked basic amenities.



resulted in Barrack's commitment to work with children and youth.

It was a stark contrast with what I was used to. We landed in a single room hardly 50 by 50 feet. There were no basic amenities. I shared that room with all my siblings and our dad— I don't ask how it was possible. Not only did we all sleep in that room, it was also the living room and the kitchen. We shared a single public toilet outside with more than 50 families. We were only entitled to 60 liters of waters in a day.

I felt that life was very unfair. I had to make new friends and adjust to the harsh conditions of living in the neighborhood. I got a chance to interact with boys my age who were into crime— youth smoking cigarettes and even weed. It had never, ever crossed my mind that I could do these things. I thank my dad for being strict and instilling fear that stopped me right in my tracks when I even considered doing what my age mates were doing.

Photos courtesy of Barrack Ondieki Bosire. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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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In my interaction with my friends, I kept asking myself questions: why were they doing all these bad things, and yet they had parents? Was it that their parents were different from mine? Will I ever get out of this place and enjoy the life I had before?

Somehow, these questions led me into wanting to assist my age mates, though I didn't know how. When I got involved in an adolescent HIV and AIDS awareness project for church youth in 1997, I knew this was the way. I was trained, and the curriculum, which had a component of substance abuse prevention in it, helped me talk to my age mates, as a peer educator.

And so my life changed for the third time: for 21 years now, I've been holding discussions with youth on how to reduce their risk of HIV.



Barrack leads a discussion with young men, about how to prevent HIV.





## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### A Hard Worker Reaps the Harvest

*By Boniface Onyango. Boniface works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee ACWICT, which empowers girls and young women in Kenya with skills and opportunities to become financially independent.*

My journey in life has not been a smooth ride. As the saying goes in my village, 'Jakinda ema keyo' (only a hard worker reaps the harvest), I have lived to be a shining hope to many young people there. I grew up with four other cousins, under the care of my maternal grandmother. She was a strict disciplinarian who made every effort to see that we went to school and completed our primary education.

Back in the mid-90's, this was almost unheard of, for the girls in our home village. A majority of them dropped out of school when they became pregnant or were married off. It was so painful to see my own cousin leave school to marry her childhood sweetheart. Girls at that time lacked role models and champions to mentor them. Even when they did get a primary education, most of them lacked relevant skills to earn a decent income. I witnessed too many young girls and boys die of HIV and AIDS.



Boniface speaks to program stakeholders.



A group of DREAMS girls graduate from the ACWICT DREAMS program.

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.

While I was pursuing my degree, I spared time to do community voluntary work by visiting the vulnerable and offering what help I could to those

who were in need. This inspired me to continue to pursue my calling by empowering young people to be HIV free and economically independent. Today, beyond my normal workload, I visit my rural school, to offer life

skills training and health education. This has meant that my community has seen more girls and boys going to university, just like I did.

Photos courtesy of Boniface Onyango. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### Making a Contribution through Advocacy

By Dorothy Nassolo. Dorothy works with the National Forum of People Living with HIV and AIDS in Uganda, a partner of the AidsFonds DREAMS project, which provides young women with tools and training to become small business owners in Uganda.

In Uganda, adolescents and young people aged 10-24 make up a third of the population, and about 127,000 of them are living with HIV. I lead community dialogues to raise awareness that people with the virus can have productive and healthy lives.

During one of these sessions in Lira District, a parent to an HIV positive adolescent girl noted that her child was ill and getting worse each day, despite religiously taking her HIV treatment. Afterwards, I asked to visit the child. On reaching their home, the bed-ridden daughter faintly said to me, "I am dying." She was very pale and thin, with sores all over her body. I comforted her and encouraged her to take her medication as recommended by the doctor, but she refused, saying that she preferred death to a life full of suffering. When I said, "Tell me why you feel this way," she shared her story.



Dorothy with a group of young women, after an educational session on HIV prevention.



Dorothy's organization uses radio as a way to reach Ugandan youth.

As I listened to her, I realized that her biggest problem was not the virus, but inadequate information, denial, and discrimination. At school, she was continuously made to feel "less than." At home, she faced a nightmare of insults from her father and siblings. She felt her only alternative was to seek refuge at the hospital where she gets medication, but even there, she was never given the attention and care she longed for. Health workers she approached for counseling always said they were busy, and she couldn't talk openly when other clients were around.

This young woman also told me that it was a problem when she and other

youth had to get their medications on the same day as adults. This made it harder for them to express their views to health workers. And in some cases, they avoided picking up their medications, due to a fear of being judged and talked about in the community. I took the time to follow up on this issue – I advocated until the young people were allocated a separate day for getting treatment, as well as a youth corner with designated friendly health workers and peers, at the local clinic. These things supported the recovery of this young woman. It gives me great joy knowing that as I do my advocacy work, I am contributing towards improved access and utilization of health services among young people.

Photos courtesy of Dorothy Nassolo. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### Things Will Never Be the Same Again

By Dunia Chiwala. Dunia works with FHI360's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project in Malawi, which provides scholarships to increase secondary school participation in Malawi and fosters community-led efforts to ensure that education, health, and economic drivers are simultaneously addressed.

**Note:** the name of the young woman discussed in this story has been changed, to protect her privacy.

That morning, when Yankho came to me and said, "I just wanted to let you know that I am going for an HIV test again today," I found it strange. She didn't sound like her usual self...I was working at an all-female teacher training college, facilitating behavior change sessions with pre-service primary school teachers as a way of reducing their risk of HIV.



A community comes together to talk about HIV risk reduction strategies.

I was relieved when, two hours later that day, Yankho came over to my place. I wanted to understand why

she had made it a point to let me know she was getting tested for a second time. She sat down on my couch, tears in her eyes, and said, "Dunia I am HIV positive." I said, "Thank you for being open with me, but why are you so sad, what is the problem? Why was it so important for you to tell me that you are going for another test?"

Like many of my students, Yankho had not checked her HIV status before she came to the college. She had said, "I am happily married." However, she told me that through our behavior change sessions, she had come to realize the

importance of knowing her status – for herself, her husband and children. She had previously tested negative, but that day, she had suspected the outcome would be different.

Yankho also told me things were no longer the same at home. Her husband had recently begun drinking heavily and was resentful towards her pursuing her teaching certificate. So that morning I encouraged her to call her husband and ask that they both get tested. His response was, "Yes, we should get tested together, but before we do that please can you come home, I have something to tell you." I could see she was upset, but when she left, I could also see the courage in Yankho's eyes.

Yankho was courageous enough to realize that things may never be the same, but more than ever, she was well equipped to transform her life for the better.



Dunia's students explore what it means to be a role model.



Yankho was distraught when she tested positive for HIV.

Photos courtesy of Dunia Chiwala. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

# Breaking the Silence Around Violence in the Community

*By Esther Muhia. Esther works with the 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.*

I grew up in a village where the rights of girls were violated and they had no access to justice. After finishing my primary schooling when I was 14 years old, I celebrated with all the other students, but two of my classmates were gang raped by the village boys. During that week, the village women gossiped about it, but nobody took the girls to the hospital. Though the girls used to perform well, they could not continue their education, because they became pregnant. One died while giving birth; the other became a teenage mother. And yet the perpetrators continued to walk freely. I knew even then I had to do something to change this.

Three years later, when I was in high school, a child rights organization came to our class to teach us about rights and how to prevent violence. During the individual clinics, I shared the stories of my two friends. The counselor talked with me and shared her contacts. In 2003, I reached out to her organization, and they trained me as a peer educator.

Immediately, I started working as a volunteer, training students on children's rights. We sensitize people during community dialogues, religious platforms, and market place impromptu talks. We also write songs and poems in mother tongues, to emphasize the importance of prevention and reporting.

My dream has been to see a community free of violence, one where girls understand their rights and are the drivers of their destiny, and where men are held accountable for their criminal actions. A highlight has been seeing the changes in a girl who I helped in 2008, when she was raped on her way to fetch water from the river. I took her to the hospital and for counseling. Eight years later, in 2016, she graduated as a lawyer and now enables other women to access justice. Empowering women and girls remains my commitment, in life.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Working with Love

By Forbes Msiska. Forbes works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee Badilika Foundation in Malawi, which provides scholarships to adolescent girls from low-income families and equips their families with income-generating strategies.

My father died when I was ten years old. My young brother and I grew up in a very poor family, with our mother. Life was very tough. My brother and I were very close and depended upon each other. As we grew older, my brother looked bigger and stronger; this confused many people, who thought that he was older than me. But in 2004, I noticed a decline in his health. He frequently complained of sickness and gradually started losing weight. My brother was very secretive about his status— I only found out that he was HIV positive two months before his death, in 2005. By then, it was too late. He left behind his wife and their six children. I felt angry with AIDS for taking my only brother. I needed to do something.

I could see that sex workers in our country were especially at risk.

Despite the high prevalence of HIV among them, the moral stigma attached to the trade has tended to hinder attempts to protect their rights. Our society's indifference to the trials and tribulations of commercial sex workers persists. There is a need to find ways to improve their living conditions and promote their health.



The loss of his brother to HIV inspired Forbes to found the Badilika Foundation.

transmission of HIV and was tested for the virus. When she learned she is positive, she was prescribed antiretrovirals. Happily, her daughter was born HIV-free, and remains so to this day.



Sex workers attending an HIV prevention workshop.

Our aims are twofold: to focus on healthcare that's conscious of HIV and its impact, and to empower sex workers economically and provide avenues to alternative, sustainable means of employment. My entry point is always love. I go into nightclubs and distribute condoms or invite girls to meet me at the office. People often ask me if I'm encouraging sex work. The reality is that it will continue, so we need to focus on the practical need to impart HIV prevention knowledge.

One young orphan we worked with got into sex work by the age of 16, after she fled from an abusive uncle. When I first approached her, she was pregnant. Through our work, she learned about mother-to-child

Photos courtesy of Forbes Msiska. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### Living Better Lives

*By Francis Emol. Francis is part of the team that coordinates Mercy Corps' DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which combines vocational or microfranchise training with stipends and vouchers to enable private sector business experience for young women in Uganda.*

I work in the northern part of Uganda, in Gulu District -- a region that has experienced a decade of civil war. Many lives were lost, and we are still in a recovery period. And there is HIV. In our area, the virus is not well understood. Many people live in fear of caring for the sick, leaving patients without social support even from loved ones. HIV is especially affecting young people, who lack information about how to live positively.

I provide counseling for people affected by HIV and AIDS. One who stands out is a young boy who lives with his grandmother because his parents died of AIDS. This boy has been marginalized and not allowed to play with other kids, because people do not understand how the virus is transmitted. Since he is young, no one bothered to explain to him what was going on -- he only learned from rumors that he is living with HIV. This child of 14 years was left broken and withdrawn, with no one to talk to.

My work offered me the opportunity to get close to the boy -- I was able to provide him with a listening ear. He shared his fears about life based on how he is being treated, and how this is shaping his character and socialization. He was no longer interested in school, for fear of being side lined. I told him, "You can always come to me, if you need comfort or support."

I was also prompted to talk to his grandmother and let her know his feelings. She said, "I will do my best to support him in any way." This experience has given me a passion for working with young people, who often lack the chance to open up. I want to build their skills and confidence to stand up and speak out for themselves, when they face challenges.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Fulfillment

By Fredrick Maweu. Fredrick works with Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project in Kenya, which empowers girls and young women from Nairobi's urban settlements with professional housekeeping skills, reproductive health knowledge, and financial literacy.

I work in the informal settlements in Nairobi, where the burden of HIV is highest, and where adolescent girls and young women are most affected. To reduce their vulnerability to infection, I train them on professional housekeeping and help them secure jobs as home managers or housekeepers. This tremendously reduces the chances that they will trade risky sexual encounters for money. I also teach them about sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention.

One day after a training session, a young woman requested to meet with me privately. She said, "Teacher, I have lived with some uncertainty about my HIV status." I encouraged the girl to open up. She told me, "I have previously engaged in risky sex in order to earn a living.



Fredrick educates young women about sexual health and HIV.



Understanding how to correctly use a condom is key to preventing HIV.

One of my peers died of AIDS-related illnesses. This scared me a lot, because sometimes we shared sexual partners without using any form of protection against HIV. It was our means of survival."

I thanked her for sharing her story and advised her to get tested and learn her HIV status. I said, "With this knowledge, you will be able to plan for your life better. I assure you that you are in safe hands." The girl agreed to take a test.

Later that day, she found me in the clinic. She said, "Teacher, today has marked a turning point in my life. I am HIV negative. I feel renewed to live a better life free from HIV and the suspicion that I may be positive. Carefulness and HIV prevention will mark my new lifestyle." New energy and optimism was evident all over her. It was a moment of joy and great fulfillment of my service to humanity.

Photos courtesy of Fredrick Maweu. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### My First Encounter with Girls

*By Gasper Mpehongwa. Gasper works with World Education's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which helps girls and young women in Swaziland, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe remain in school, prevent unplanned pregnancies, and pursue alternative flexible secondary education for young mothers.*

I was born and raised in a village near Mount Kilimanjaro, in northern Tanzania. We were a family of six boys, and my parents kept cattle, goats, and sheep. It was customary in those days for us to live a bit outside of the main village, to avoid problems when animals strayed away. So, our house was about five kilometers from the main village.

Although the isolation did save us from constant problems with farmers, it was challenging for us to interact with the rest of the villagers. This also had implications for our early education: our parents delayed registering each of us until the age of 10, when we could

manage the ten-kilometers daily walking commute to and from the school.

In primary school, I started to interact and play with girls on a daily basis. I was so excited by their physical appearance, how they laughed, and even how they cried. I spent a lot of time teasing them, just to see their reactions. In the class, I also noted that girls were fewer in number than us boys. And when I went to my friends' homes, I saw that their sisters did all the cooking, fetched the water, and were not allowed to join the boys in football matches.



Gaspar's village in Northern Tanzania.



Gaspar started school at age ten, when he could manage the 10 kilometer walk.

When I asked friends or teachers why girls seemed to work more than us boys, they just told me, "Girls will become women; they must prepare to take the role of their mothers, which is to cook, wash dishes, fetch water, and stay at home." I wasn't sure about this statement. Silently, I wondered why, if it was a girl's duty to wash dishes and fetch water, were me and my brothers doing these things at our home? Was there something wrong with our family?

When I went to secondary school, I learned that although there are biological differences between men and women, there is nothing about this that pre-determines particular roles of girls and boys. I realized that differences in roles were actually a creation of society, and that how these roles are viewed differs from one community to another. Most importantly, I learned these roles can be changed. I wondered, "How can we end gender bias in my village, to free the girls from so much work at home?" I decided to study rural development, and I have dedicated my energies to answering this question.

Photos courtesy of Gasper Mpehongwa. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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.





## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### A Story of Endurance

*By Happiness Gacheri. Happiness works with Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project in Kenya, which empowers girls and young women from Nairobi's urban settlements with professional housekeeping skills, reproductive health knowledge, and financial literacy.*

Growing up in a village in Meru, Kenya was not easy, considering that we were a family of roughly 17 people sharing a small homestead. All of us—my cousins, aunties, uncles—had a nice time each evening around a fireplace, as our grandparents told us stories.

My mother had finished teacher training college but was not working yet. My father was still at the university, and we rarely saw him other than two or three times a year during semester breaks.

When he finished his law degree and was given a first posting in the city of Machakos, my brothers and I were so happy to leave the village and go to an urban setting. We were enrolled in a school there, and our mother started working as a teacher. There was so much love in our family that I never noticed when things started changing.

Then, my father started coming home drunk, and at this point, he started abusing my mother. I was young, but old enough to hear her crying every night, pleading with my father to stop beating her up. It became a routine, and my brother and I did not sleep. We cried each evening when we heard our mother wailing in pain. We were helpless.

As we grew older, we learned to stand up for our mother... but this earned us a thorough beating. Later, we were sent to a boarding school away from all the abuse at home. We were safe, but it killed us every day to think about what our mother was going through. She visited us and encouraged us to study hard.

Seeing all the violence at home helped me make up my mind to pursue a career that would help me advocate for women's rights. Now, I'm a social worker, and I assist girls and young women facing violence in their relationships. For a while, I was so afraid of marriage, but I found a very good man who loves and respects me, and I have been blessed with two beautiful children, who I talk to about love and respect, even in their young age, to help them grow into responsible adults.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Making Services Accessible

By Jenny Gakii Miriti. Jenny works with Ananda Marga Universal Relief Team's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project in Kenya, which empowers girls and young women from Nairobi's urban settlements with professional housekeeping skills, reproductive health knowledge, and financial literacy.

I used to work in a sex workers program. We focused on HIV and STI prevention, but I always felt I needed to intervene before the girls engaged in sex work. Now that opportunity has come up for me. In December 2016, I started providing health education and job skills training to adolescent girls and young women in Nairobi's urban settlements.



Jenny teaches staff how to provide adolescent-friendly health services.



Jenny hopes one day to open a drop-in center specifically for adolescents.

I recently asked the girls where they access sexual and reproductive health services when they need

them. They told me, "We visit the sex workers' clinic. We know that for us to open a file there, we must be sex workers. So, when we go, we lie to them and say that we are sex workers. We answer all the questions they ask us, and then they open a file for us so that we can access free and non-discriminatory services." Other girls participating in my sessions confirmed this is the case.

It broke my heart. In my mind, I thought that since an "adolescent package of care" was rolled out in Kenya three years ago, youth friendly services were available in all the government facilities. But apparently not.

I felt challenged by the fact that even though I can offer friendly services to girls and young women, I have limited or no control over what other health facilities does. When an opportunity arose to train our clinic staff on HIV, I engaged the team, and I asked them to integrate the training with the mandated adolescent package of care. This helped enlighten staff on how to provide adolescent-friendly health services. For me, this is just the beginning of ensuring that such services are available. I plan in the future to open a drop-in center specifically for adolescents, to give them a true sense of belonging and care.

Photos courtesy of Jenny Gakii Miriti. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### No One Should Die Due to Lack of Information

By Meridah Mwanja. Meridah works with the DREAMS Innovation Challenge project of the University of Washington, which increases access to PrEP for adolescent girls and young women through public sector clinics in Kenya and aims to promote voluntary HIV testing among their partners.

It was mid-year 2011, a Sunday afternoon. My son Muma whispered, “Mama, you have a visitor.” He shook me cautiously since he knew I would be furious with him for interrupting my nap. (God knows naps are precious for working mums.) “What?” I barked. He told me that my neighbor was calling on me and ran off before I could ask which one. Outside our home, I found ‘Mama Twili’ waiting. “Come in,” I said. “No, thank you. But if you could just spare a few minutes, I would like your professional opinion on something. Kind of like a private consult if you are willing,” she quipped. “Sure, I’ll be right out,” I said.



Meridah and her colleagues work to promote voluntary HIV testing and increase access to PrEP for adolescent girls and young women.

Mama Twili wanted to know what could be done about the yellowing of her skin. I examined her and suspected that she had clinical jaundice – her eyes and tongue were discolored. I advised her to see her physician. Two weeks later, I found Mama Twili seated on her front pouch. She had lost a lot of weight, and her stomach was distended. She greeted me with a weak smile, informing me that indeed she had liver and renal failure and was undergoing dialysis twice a week. She was optimistic that she would recover. I made a mental note that I would check up on her as often as I could. I felt good because I had been of assistance.

But unfortunately, we can’t always be of assistance. Some months later, I was just getting home from night duty when another neighbor, Milka, met me at the door. “Mama Muma, we need you,” she said, pushing me into my house. I sat down, bewildered. Hanna, my other neighbor, joined us. “We have Kyende at my house,” Milka blurted out. “Her mother is dead, we think, but we need you to confirm.” She reached out and held my hand, since I was in shock. “When? How? Why?” was all I could say? Apparently Kyende’s mother had been HIV positive for a while, but had stopped taking her medications. Then she stopped eating. She lost hope, gave up.

After all was said and done, I told myself, “Meridah, no one should die due to lack of information about HIV and AIDS.”

Photos courtesy of Meridah Mwanja. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

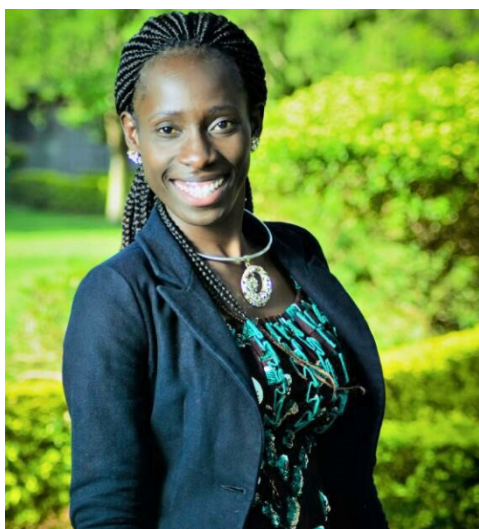
### Encouragement

By Moureen Ochieng. Moureen works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee ICS Africa, which strengthens community-based organizations working in economic empowerment, HIV programs, and health system referrals in Kenya and Tanzania.

When I was six years old, my dad lost his job. My siblings and I moved with our mom to a rural area, and he moved to another town. That was the last time we saw him, throughout our childhood. We stayed in our grandmother's house, and later, when our mum left, our grandmother moved us into a small hut. Our 14-year-old sister, who had dropped out of school in grade eight, became our only parent.



Moureen and her siblings grew up with their grandmother, in a rural area.



When she was a girl, Moureen was asked to trade sex for money to pay her school fees.

At grade eight, my menses started. I was scared I would soil my dress in school; I thought boys would laugh at me. Because I was now almost grown, relatives in the city wanted me for a house girl. Men followed me around, asking for marriage, and others wanted me to visit them at night. They said they would give me money to pay my school fee, if I agreed to be "their friend." Fortunately, a community worker explained what they were up to and helped me to continue my schooling.

In high school, I studied hard. I identified with students from poor families, and we encouraged one another. Most girls started confiding in me about

issues of rape, sex in exchange for shopping, and domestic violence. I was nominated to be the guidance and counseling chairlady. I studied social work at university. Now, I passionately work with adolescents and families, because I want to help them begin a new life, like I did. I encourage adolescents in positive behavior and attitudes. I have rescued girls, reintegrating some back with their families and some back to school. As girls and women, we face so many challenges, but with the right support, we can find our way.

Photos courtesy of Moureen Ochieng. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### Everything Has Its Own Time

By Precious Phiri. Precious works with Hope worldwide Zambia's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which hosts after-school clubs to inspire and support girls and young women in Zambia who have left school or are at risk of dropping out to attain secondary school education.

My father died a long time ago, when I was a little girl. My mum and the rest of us kids started living with our grandma, who was very old and had difficulties walking. Life became so challenging – I had difficulty adapting to a new environment that I was not used to. We survived by the small business mum was doing, selling second-hand clothes and shoes in town. This was tough because of the competition, but by the grace of God she managed our school fees and nutrition.

It used to break my heart looking at how she suffered, but I couldn't do anything, because I was young and still in school. I had faith that one day it would be well with our family, again. Every time I saw her complaining, tears rolled down my face. She would look at me and say, "My dear girl,



Precious' mother supported the family by selling second-hand clothes.



Today, Precious helps run after-school clubs for girls in Zambia who are at risk for dropping out.

God is with us, and I tell you not to worry anymore."

A few years later, I was registered with an organization that works with underprivileged communities to improve their quality of life, through economic empowerment and education. I became a leader in their youth club, where I offered HIV prevention lessons and motivational talks to enable young people to contribute positively to society, and to challenge their beliefs about what they can achieve and the impact they can make.

This organization sponsored my secondary education and completion of a certificate program in Information Communication and Technology (ICT). To this day, I encourage youth to be determined and attentive. In my lessons, I always say, "Never lose hope, no matter how tough the situation is." When they tell me how hard things are for them, I think about my own experience and share the words my mum always used to tell me, "Everything has its own time."

Photos courtesy of Precious Phiri. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### Inspiring Girls to Complete Their Education

By Sharon Clark. Sharon works with HOPE worldwide Zambia's DREAMS Innovation Challenge project, which hosts after-school clubs to inspire and support girls and young women in Zambia who have left school or are at risk of dropping out to attain secondary school education.

I was born in Zimbabwe and spent most of my early childhood there. Our family moved to South Africa when I was a teenager, and I later completed a master's degree in chemistry. I worked in the environmental chemistry industry in South Africa for a few years before moving to the UK in 2003. When I arrived in the UK, I was struck by the different approaches to education between the UK and many African countries. Most children from poorer households in the UK receive free primary and secondary education, funded by the government. By contrast, children from poorer households in many African countries face tremendous challenges in trying to complete their education.

In 2015, my husband and I, along with our children, moved to Zambia to work for HOPE worldwide Zambia, which implements programs for orphans and vulnerable children who have been affected by HIV. I was shocked to learn that only 41% of girls in Zambia enroll in secondary school.

Primary education is free, but secondary education is not. Many families are very poor and cannot afford to pay school fees. If money is available, it is usually used towards a boy's education rather than a girl's. Schooling is seen as more important for boys, while girls are often expected to help in the home or get married. Too many girls and young women have babies when they are quite young, and they stay at home to look after the children. This traps them in a life of poverty, with little hope of finding meaningful work.



Using new tools and technologies to engage girls and young women in HIV risk reduction.

business skills training, and other topics. Adult role models offer motivational talks, and we provide school bursaries for some of the girls. I am excited to see so many Zambian girls engaged and taking part in the activities. My dream is for them to finish their schooling, rather than staying trapped in a life of poverty.



Self-defense training is a key aspect of empowering girls.

In my work, I speak to girls in poor communities, many of whom have dreams of completing their education and becoming teachers, nurses, journalists, and lawyers. Our clubs are for girls who have either left school or are at risk of leaving. 1,200 girls aged 10 to 24 are enrolled in the program. They receive informal sessions on HIV prevention, sexual and reproductive health, child rights, self-defense, the production of re-useable sanitary pads, business skills training, and other topics. Adult role models offer motivational talks, and we provide school bursaries for some of the girls. I am excited to see so many Zambian girls engaged and taking part in the activities. My dream is for them to finish their schooling, rather than staying trapped in a life of poverty.

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## DREAMS Innovation Challenge Silence Speaks

### Breaking Patterns

By Stella Ojuok. Stella works with the DREAMS Innovation Challenge project of the University of Washington, which increases access to PrEP for adolescent girls and young women through public sector clinics in Kenya and aims to promote voluntary HIV testing among their partners.

Growing up, I never questioned a woman's worth in a relationship. I was surrounded by very strong women who seemed to me just as empowered as men, my mum being one of them. I went through school not feeling much of a difference between boys and girls.

Then I landed my current job. One of my duties is to capture the experiences of health workers who provide PrEP services (the pill you take before having sex, to prevent HIV transmission). At first, I reported many success stories, and then I started noticing a disturbing pattern. Quite a number of women who were started on PrEP due to their feeling at risk from their husbands' lifestyles were later opting out because of the same men. It seemed they were doing so at the request of their husbands. Some had even been forced

to stop, after being verbally threatened or even physically assaulted.

How could it be that women would not dare to protect themselves against HIV infection, out of fear of their spouses? "Is this what marriage is like?" I asked myself as I documented incident after incident. "Does getting married mean putting ourselves second? Risking it all to 'make it work'? Is marriage worth such a price?" These questions popped into my mind as I tried to understand this scary trend.

I am a product of a very successful marriage. I believe in marriage as much as I do gender equity. I also believe that women have the right to be safe from intimidation or violence at the hands of their intimate partners. Surely it should not be women's responsibility to make relationships work, especially when doing so might cost them their lives.

Because we were able to highlight this worrying trend, women in the program who experience intimate partner violence are now referred to services offering prevention and appropriate responses. I also started an active campaign for young women, on self-worth in relationships. My first stop was "Sauti Skika" (amplify voices), and yes, it was a success!

But this is only the first step: we must also work with men to revise their views of masculinity and mobilize them to stop trying to control women but instead treat them as equals.



Stella started an active campaign for young women, on self-worth in



Stella believes men must revise their views of masculinity and treat women as equals.

Photos courtesy of Stella Ojuok. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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

### Unleashing Every Potential

By Steve Mpita. Steve works with DREAMS Innovation Challenge grantee Camfed Malawi, which is working to improve educational attainment among adolescent girls in Malawi and ease the challenges associated with transitioning to adulthood by providing financial, psychosocial, educational, and mentorship support.

I grew up believing all was well for everybody, until one Thursday in November 1990. I was in school in Malawi, when the teacher stepped out for a moment, one of my classmates shouted, “Bloodsuckers!” without knowing why, I joined everybody in fleeing. In no time, the whole campus was emptied of learners. The school day had prematurely ended.

The following day, we and our teacher came to class as usual. I was the class monitor, so he came straight to me, pointed a cane into my face, and asked,

“Where are the bloodsuckers?”

Of course there were no “bloodsuckers” – the cry had been in response to



Steve works to make sure girls in Malawi can remain in school.



must support efforts to champion girl's education.

the arrival of a group of government officials, visiting our school by car. In those days, cars were a rare sight in rural areas, and it was not uncommon for children to associate them with danger.

I stammered in search of an explanation. But he would not accept any excuses; instead, he decided that his cane should speak for him. He caned me and the rest of the class, except one girl. She had a physical disability and so came to school every day on the back of her mother. Our teacher's actions became clear to me: we had left her all alone the previous day, when we had fled the classroom.

A few days later, this girl dropped out of school: she had felt unprotected. I have not heard of her since, but the incident has always haunted me. I have often wondered, “What has she become, without education?”

What happened that day is the basis for the human services work I do now. I facilitate the protection of underprivileged children, especially girls, so they can remain in school and reduce their risk for HIV.

Back in my childhood, I joined everybody in running away, while one girl remained helpless. If I had helped her, perhaps she would have completed school, as I did. Instead, the potential inside her which education might have unleashed was stifled. I still regret what happened, and I will not let it happen again. The power of the disadvantaged, if nurtured, can surely change the world for everyone's betterment. I want to be a part of that change.

Photos courtesy of Steve Mpita. This story was produced in collaboration with StoryCenter's Silence Speaks initiative ([www.storycenter.org/silence-speaks](http://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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