

# Second Chances: Community Engagement Supports School Re-entry for Child Mothers

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Forum for African Women Educationalists Uganda Chapter (FAWE Uganda)

***The story of students and mothers; Apofia Masika and Juliet Muhindo show us the role of parents and communities in ensuring that children are taught, supported, protected and sent on the right path to thrive. Community interventions and programs allow for the skillful guiding of especially young girls on the brink of adulthood.***

Apofia Masika and Juliet Muhindo are child mothers in a rural, cocoa-growing community in Bundibugyo district. “I deliberately planned to fall pregnant when I was 17 because my parents kept telling me there was no money for school fees, and that I should leave school. In anger I decided to get pregnant”, says Apofia.

Juliet, who was 15 years, explains that she was looking for friendship when she met up with a teenage boyfriend at school, fell pregnant, and left school to stay at the home of her boyfriend.

Both Apofia and Juliet’s experiences are common. They are the faces of schoolgirls in rural agricultural communities who drop out of school when impoverished parents are unable to provide for their basic needs or pay for an education and pregnancy becomes an alternative. In many cases, culturally, it is considered impractical or a waste of resources to invest in a girl’s education since the girl is often married off to another family which benefits from her. “This happens many times, especially, when the cocoa season is not good. Girls get pregnant because their parents do not have enough money to buy them what they need; the parents feel it is better to marry off the girl”, says Jamidah Kimuli, Senior Woman, and teacher, at Burambagira Senior Secondary School. “During our community sensitization meetings where we talk about preventing and responding to violence against children, Juliet’s father approached me requesting help to bring his 15year old daughter, who had just given birth, to our school.”

“My father took me to the community meeting because he was not happy that I had left school when I gave birth and he hoped that I would be able to find a school where they accepted child mothers”, says Juliet. “I felt very bad because I had disappointed my parents.”

Apofia heard about the community meeting from a friend who invited her to attend. After the meeting, Apofia contacted Jamidah, the school teacher at Burambagira Senior Secondary School about sponsorship to attend school again. “I was happy to hear about Apofia and Juliet; I immediately discussed their cases with the Head Teacher and the Parent Teachers Association representative, Sumbusa Moses, who is also a math teacher at our school”, explains Jamidah.

“We counseled both the girls and their parents. The girls apologized to their parents about their behaviour, and the caregivers agreed to provide scholastic materials for the girls, while the school sponsored their secondary education”, says Moses.

Returning to school with very young babies was not easy for Apofia and Juliet. “They had challenges; sometimes they would have to leave the class to go and breastfeed, other times the babies were sick and they missed several school days. But because the school administration and the students had been sensitized about responding to problems faced by both boys and girls, everyone was very understanding and supportive, we counseled them”, says Jamidah, who is also the Senior Woman at the school and plays a key role in counseling students.

“I joined the Child Rights Club at the school, where we did different activities like skits and debates which helped me because I learned about bad peer influence, my rights and responsibilities, how to protect myself, and I also found other child mothers so I was encouraged to be positive”, says Juliet who is now in Senior 4 at the school. “I am also able to advise other students to protect themselves, concentrate on their studies and avoid bad behavior.”

Moses notes that in spite of the maternal challenges faced by the girls, they have still managed to excel. “Apofia is always the best in mathematics in her class and among the top four performers overall.”

“I want to study hard and be a teacher to be able to buy clothes for my baby, Edma, and myself”, says Apofia, while Juliet says: “I plan to be a nurse because I can be able to treat my baby and my family when they fall sick.”

Both the teenage mothers and their babies are healthy; their focus for now is to complete secondary school successfully. To date, over 100 child mothers and victims of parental neglect have returned to school as a result of the intervention covering the three districts of the Rwenzori Sub Region including Kasese, Ntoroko and Bundibugyo.