

International Women Day

8<sup>th</sup> MARCH

THEME:

Invest in women: Accelerate progress

Daily Monitor  
www.monitor.co.ug

Ms Marion Apio (centre) with her colleagues, Ms Suzan Mutoni (left) and Ms Susan Hilda Lokolimoe (right), after winning the Resolution Social Venture Award in 2019. COURTESY PHOTO

# 10 years of nurturing committed young people at Makerere University

**Empowerment.** The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program has birthed a community of young people vested in creating change in society.

BY JOAN SALMON  
jsalmon@ug.nationmedia.com

For the past 10 years, the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program at Makerere University has been an instrumental force in educating and empowering young people who are bringing about transformative change in their communities.

To celebrate this, we are proud to share the first-hand account of Marion Apio, co-founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of the innovative social venture Girls Alive Uganda, and an alumni of the Scholars Program.

Together with her two co-founder, she is empowering over 15,000 vulnerable girls in more than 10 schools and rural communities in Uganda through their initiative.

**Girls Alive Uganda: Empowering vulnerable girls in rural schools in Uganda**

Ms Suzan Mutoni, Ms Susan Hilda Lokolimoe, and Ms Marion Apio, alumni of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program at Makerere University, pitched their Resolution project, Girls Alive Uganda, in 2019 with a big vision to enable access to hygienic menstrual materials for vulnerable girls to live a healthy life and complete their education.

In light of International Day of the Girl Child in October, Marion Apio shares Girls Alive Uganda's experience and ongoing efforts to skill, educate, and keep girls in school.

In October 2023, Girls Alive Uganda, in collaboration with the family of Gerardo Behne, an individual who believes in the work that Girls Alive Uganda does and has a great desire to support girls to stay in school, unveiled the Keep Girls in School project.

## Keep Girls in School project

The newly launched school project focuses on providing access to basic scholastic materials and creating a brighter future for every girl child regardless of their setting or background.

This project serves as a lifeline for girls in underserved communities, ensuring that education is not a distant dream but a tangible reality. By breaking down such barriers that hinder girls' access to education, Keep Girls in School aims to bridge the gap between aspirations and achievements.

Three bright and eager pupils in pri-

mary seven at Lubugumu UMEA Primary School will be the first beneficiaries of this initiative. The three pupils are a 14-year-old P7 pupil who lost her father during the Covid-19 pandemic, a 15-year-old primary seven candidate, who is being raised by a single mother, and another 14-year-old who lost her mother when she was just two years old.

The project is being implemented by Girls Alive Uganda's committed team of volunteers including; Ms Joan Mutonyi, Ms Rose Mukabalisa, and Ms Rachael Angida who on Sept 29, 2023, were joined by Ms Christine Behne at Lubugumu UMEA Primary School in Entebbe, where they met parents, teachers, and the girls who were selected to benefit from the project.

"I believe it is these unique stories and challenges that motivate us to do what we do, we hope that these young girls can successfully and happily complete their Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) as a great next step towards the brighter future they desire," says Ms Marion Apio.

Adding, "The Keep Girls in School project, and the work that we have done in the past four years, stand as a testament to the power of collaboration, dedication, and a shared vision for change."

Girls Alive Uganda community outreaches across the country from Western Uganda in the Ibanda district, Luweero, to the East in Butaleja and Tororo, and in central slums in Kampala like Mbuya and Ggaba, are significant depictions of their dedication to community transformation.

## Testimony

When one of the young beneficiaries of the Keep Girls in School initiative was asked what the initiative meant for her, this is what she had to say:

"My academic journey has been quite a ride, filled with challenges and renewed hope, thanks to Initiatives like Girls Alive Uganda that support underprivileged children. My life took a turn when I lost my father due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but I was determined to excel academically. I received support from Girls Alive Uganda which enabled me to complete my primary education. Despite the odds, I am hopeful that I will be able to complete my education with the support of organizations like Girls Alive Uganda," narrated the 14-year-old beneficiary of the Keep Girls in School initiative.

## Donate

A sanitary towel in Uganda costs \$1, yet many vulnerable young girls in Uganda still miss three to five days of school due to their period.

"We continue to empower girls and this is proof that with unwavering commitment, lives can be transformed, and a brighter future can be realised for every girl child," Ms Apio says.

You can support Girls Alive Uganda by donating to this project. A donation of \$1 or more can help a girl access a disposable pad or any other basic necessity that she needs while at school or home.

"We show you how the funds have been spent and which girl has directly benefited from your generous support. We also engage parents, and they share how your support has restored their hope," she says.

The project received an initial start-up of \$600 from Gerardo Behne and his

## BUILDING SOCIETY

Girls Alive Uganda has built a community of over 60 volunteers, has been in over 12 schools including Nalongo Primary School in Luweero, Kisoko High School in Tororo, and has conducted over 15 community outreaches targeting parents, teachers, girls and boys, and local area leaders. The volunteers are university students or recent graduates who provide social support, motivation, career guidance, and skilling for better social and mental well-being of young women that they encounter during school and community outreaches





family and \$40 through the GoFundMe initiative.

"With the initial funding, we purchased scholastic materials, sanitary towels, and other school needs for at least three girls, and they were able to complete their primary seven examinations this year. We have a target to reach over 1,000 girls and ensure that they stay in school," Ms Apio says.

#### Community

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and local area leaders.

"Our volunteers are university students or recent graduates who provide social support, motivation, career guidance, and skilling for better social and mental well-being of young women that we encounter during our school and community outreaches," she says.

The goal of Girls Alive Uganda is to provide extensive training for girls and women in making reusable sanitary towels and support them through education and mentorship.

"We will mitigate the high rate of

12  
SCHOOLS  
IMPACTED BY  
GIRLS ALIVE  
UGANDA

menstrual-related absenteeism among vulnerable girls who have no access to necessities like sanitary towels. It is the small steps we have taken that have led us to where we are today," Ms Apio says.

Adding, "Although our initial goal was to make and distribute reusable sanitary pads, we have adopted a holistic approach encompassing education, skilling, mentorship, and outreach to reach the most vulnerable in various com-

munities in Uganda using a volunteering model."

#### Growth

Ms Apio is currently undertaking a Graduate studies degree at the University of California Berkeley, reporting local stories that are seeking meaningful change and accountability while seeking meaningful partnerships for the project. Support Girls Alive Uganda's target is to reach over 1,000 girls to ensure they stay in school by donating, becoming a volunteer, or a partner.

Visit <https://girlsaliveuganda.org/> or social media at Girls Alive Uganda and send an email to [girlsaliveprojectuganda@gmail.com](mailto:girlsaliveprojectuganda@gmail.com) for any inquiries.

#### Scholars Program

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program at Makerere University is a 10-year partnership between Mastercard Foundation and Makerere University to educate and empower 1000 Young people from across sub-Saharan Africa.

To date, the Scholars Program at Makerere University has recruited and educated 1,032 Scholars, of which 789 Scholars graduated and are in the workforce serving the community in numerous ways.

Of the 1,032 Scholars recruited for the Program, 76 percent were females, because Girl child education is at the core of the Scholars Program.



The team of volunteers for Girls Alive Uganda, during one of the community outreaches recently. PHOTO/COURTESY



Ms Marion Apio (pink top) with a team of volunteers during one of the community engagement activities held recently. PHOTO/COURTESY



Prof Justine Namaalwa Jumba, the programme coordinator of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program celebrates with some of the programme's graduates.



Girls Alive Uganda team of volunteers poses for a photo with some of the young girls supported by the Keep Girls in School initiative. PHOTO/COURTESY