



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

EAST • WEST
MANAGEMENT
INSTITUTE

USAID/Uganda Civil Society Strengthening Activity

It helped me to open up.

To heal.

Infectious smile, powerful ambitious voice - Gloria Mercy Laker could pass for any regular university student. But behind that innocent, delightful look resides a deep story that no young woman chasing her dreams should ever have to go through.

“I now have the courage to smile, but trust me, I could not talk about this, I would only cry and not say a single thing whenever I thought about it”

Gloria is a second-year law student at Uganda Christian University (UCU), one of hundreds of students from UCU who participated in a twitter chat organized by the USAID/Uganda Civil Society Strengthening Activity (CSSA) supported Uganda Women's Network (UWONET) to commemorate the 2021 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, in December 2021.

“I think I am one of the people who benefitted the most, after being silent for almost four years”, she says “At first, I was scared that society would rise up and stigmatize me, because that is what usually happens – but this provided a safe space, I got the strength to believe in what I am despite what happened to me”.

After finishing high school in 2018, Gloria hoped and prayed for a government scholarship since her family could not afford university tuition for the law degree dreamed of.



“And I made it (for the government scholarship). I was so happy, my entire family was – but when I went to the University to complete the process, the people in charge asked for (a bribe of) 1 million Uganda shillings, which we did not have”, she recalls, “so I started to relentlessly search for other scholarship opportunities, and that is when it all started”.

Gloria says she went around desperately applying for scholarship positions. “Various men asked me for sex in return for scholarships – most of them tried to use words to get me to give in, but some actually tried to force themselves on me”.

“The first time, this gentleman asked me to get into the car and we were driving to some office. He stopped in the middle of nowhere and started touching me, when I resisted, he left me there in the middle of the road, I had to walk back home. Then I started selling at the market to raise some money but I kept applying”.

“I was luckily shortlisted by one of the biggest organizations that gives scholarships (name withheld). A gentleman from the organization then called me and said I was shortlisted, but he needs to interview me one-on-one as per organizational policy. He came to one of the big hotels in Gulu, he interviewed me, and saw how desperate I was for the opportunity.”

“After signing the documents, he said he had forgotten the stamp in his hotel room. ‘I don’t see my stamp. Please help me go pick the key to room number two. The stamp is on the table.’”

“I didn’t suspect anything; I was so excited. I ran and picked the key. On entering the room, I could not see any stamp, and I thought maybe he put it somewhere else. Before I could turn he was in the room and he had locked the door behind him, and then he told me, ‘please relax, we need to talk about this’.

“I said OK, please open the door. We can go back out and talk.”

“He said Gloria, you are an amazing person, but nothing good comes for free”.

“When I refused, he started forcing himself on me, trying to rape me. We had to go through a big fight, I have a scar on my back. We were fighting for the key. I screamed, but unfortunately people came to see me, not to help me. My breasts were all out, my blouse was torn. I managed to open the door and I ran and reported to the police. He was arrested and tested positive for HIV. When I went to follow-up the next day, he had already been released.”

“I thought I would never be able to open up about this, and that kept eating me from the inside, until the 16 Days of Activism came about.”



“What prompted me to speak is I see a lot of beautiful young girls with great potential take these issues of sexual abuses for granted. I realized they think these things are happening out there and not within, they don’t realize they are potential victims, so I decided to speak out. If I can use my story to change even just one life, to give a reason for someone to speak out, then I will. Even when they try to stigmatize me”.

Pereth Niwahereza, a programs assistant with UWONET who was at the center of the program, says it was a unique approach to them as an organization as well. “As UWONET, we rarely use online platforms for such programs, so it was really great, and we reached more people than we had expected. We are very grateful to EWMI and USAID for the partnership – this also helps to inform our future programming”, she says.



The 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence is an annual international campaign that kicks off on 25 November, (the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women), and runs until 10 December, (Human Rights Day). It was started by activists at the inaugural Women’s Global Leadership Institute in 1991 and continues to be coordinated each year by the Center for Women’s Global Leadership. It is used as an organizing strategy by individuals and organizations around the world to call for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls.

The global theme for 2021 was “Orange the world: End violence against women now!”



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

EAST • WEST
MANAGEMENT
INSTITUTE



**USAID/Uganda Civil
Society Strengthening
Activity**