

Man Up to Stop Violence Against Women: Uganda

“Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse and cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography.”

— Man Up Campaign

James Byarugaba



While a student at Makerere University in Kampala, James Byarugaba began to learn about gender and human rights. He discovered that “the cost of gender inequality is huge” and made a commitment to raise awareness about the value of equality.

In 2010, Byarugaba learned about the [Man Up](#) campaign, a collaboration of the Clinton Global Initiative and Vital Voices Global Partnership. At the group’s youth summit in Johannesburg that year, he met other youth who shared his commitment to equality and to ending violence against women and girls. “I realized I was not fighting alone,” says the 33-year-old, who also serves as a lecturer in project planning and management at Makerere.

Byarugaba has put his commitment to work through the nonprofit group Youth Alive Uganda. He says Youth Alive has been successful at ending violence against women in communities they work in because it:

- Incorporates gender into all its programs, which include skills development and health care.
- Started peer support groups for young people. About 100 groups with 50 members each meet with parents’ associations, teachers, religious leaders and men’s and women’s groups around the country to talk about the benefits of gender equality. “Working with community men’s groups has helped reduce sexual and physical violence against women,” Byarugaba says.
- Promotes gender equality and an end to gender-based violence to school officials. That has resulted in some schools adopting child protection policies, providing separate toilets for girls and boys, and, in some instances, changing rooms and sanitary pads for girls.
- Provides teen-oriented prenatal sessions where young mothers can share their experiences and challenges.
- Partners with local institutions and governmental bodies to mobilize logistical and financial support for gender equality efforts.

Members of the Man Up campaign in Uganda get the message out.



“My vision is one world ... where boys and girls and men and women have the same opportunities and are empowered to contribute equally in shaping the world they want,” Byarugaba says. “My vision is of a violence-free world where no human being owns the other or inflicts harm based on one’s gender.”

Learn about more ways to get involved at yali.state.gov/16days and [pledge](#) today to help end Gender-Based Violence.

[Man Up to Stop Violence Against Women: Burundi](#)

“Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. It can include physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse and cuts across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth and geography.”

— Man Up Campaign

Thierry Kajeneza grew up witnessing women and girls being raped, forced into prostitution and sent out alone to collect water and firewood and to look for food.

Thierry Kajeneza, front center, and a  colleague tell rural women in Burundi about their rights.

“I saw how women were not invited like men to speak out about their problems and about what they could contribute to the construction of Burundi” after a long civil war, Kajeneza, a 35-year-old human rights activist and YALI Network member, recalls.

That impression pushed Kajeneza and a colleague to establish [ICIRORE C’AMAHORO](#) in 2007. The Ngozi province-based group advocates for human rights, especially for women and girls. It wants to help young people avoid the mistakes of previous generations and learn to become leaders.

ICIRORE C’AMAHORO, which means “mirror of peace” in Kirundi, reaches out to young women and men to help spread its messages to the wider public. It runs youth clubs in schools throughout the country and started a youth camp. It organizes gatherings that give young men and women opportunities to talk about gender issues. And it encourages women to form support networks and learn financial skills.

The organization’s strategy includes finding opportunities in the community where husbands and wives can work together to make decisions, then discuss why each decision was made. That encourages “a safe environment for women to express themselves and allows both husbands and wives to recognize the power of working together ... in the workplace, at home and in the community,” Kajeneza says.

Kajeneza notes that Burundi’s national and local governments have “responded positively” to ICIRORE’s work. Local authorities help inspire residents to attend ICIRORE’s meetings and training

sessions. The national government gave ICIRORE the land on which it is constructing offices.

The international community also has responded. In 2010, the civil rights advocate was invited to the Man Up Young Leaders Summit in Johannesburg. A collaboration of the Clinton Global Initiative and Vital Voices Global Partnership, the [Man Up](#) campaign motivates youth to help stop violence against women and girls and advance gender equality.

Kajeneza follows the YALI Network on Facebook and says he likes “knowing other young people who are involved in many domains of leadership.” He advises members to use social media to share information about what they are doing to end violence against women.

“This issue of gender violence will be solved if we all stand together. ... The world will become a village where men and women will live in harmony,” Kajeneza says.

Take your pledge today for how you will help end violence against women and girls in your communities at yali.state.gov/4her.

Create Opportunities, Take Others Along

By Edda Zekarias, Addis Ababa

At the 24th African Union Summit in Addis Ababa in January, the AU heralded 2015 as the Year of Women’s Empowerment and Development toward Africa’s Agenda 2063.

We speak the same language

Speaking to 500 young Africans attending the inaugural summit of the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders last summer, U.S. first lady Michelle Obama passionately asked for youth’s best efforts to change the disheartening plight of many girls and women in Africa who often, and not by choice, miss out on opportunities.

More than 5,000 women participated in  Ethiopia’s 2015 Women First run to mark International Women’s Day on March 8.

“This is where Africa’s future lies — with those women-run businesses, with those girls attending university, and with leaders like you who are making their dreams possible. And the question today is how all of you and young people like you will steer Africa’s course to embrace that future,” Obama said.

Not long before that, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, chair of the African Union Commission, had a similar message. “We need much greater commitment and action to empower women and girls in

the process of eradicating hunger, poverty and promoting development. Furthermore, there is need to give special attention to increasing the participation of women in decision-making in all areas of life, as a means of improving the quality of decision-making ... including in the protection of the environment and wildlife.”

March 8, International Women’s Day, is celebrated the world over. Sadly, for many girls and women, opportunities are far from within reach. Their battles in every aspect of life — at work, school or home — are silent and painful. Imagine that every single mistake or bad thing that happens in a family becomes blame thrown at a female family member. Will younger female members of that family be treated with respect and dignity as they mature into adulthood? How will their self-esteem be high enough so they can be confident and competitive?

“At the current pace, it will take 81 years to achieve gender parity in economic participation, and some 50 years to reach parity in parliamentary representation,” [U.N. Women](#) reports.

Hope

Yet, there is hope. We have each other. We also have strong support from the men who understand us.

“A truly strong, powerful man isn’t threatened by a strong, powerful woman,” the first lady said.

In an opinion piece published on International Women’s Day, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said, “While their work may not always make the front pages, women are confronting our most pressing global issues. At great personal risk, they are fighting poverty, discrimination and violence so that their families, communities and countries can have better lives.”

“I see the power of women every day in every country that I visit,” he said.

This year, sustainable development goals (SDGs) will build upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs were about quantity. SDGs will enhance quality. [MDG3](#) set out to “promote gender equality and empower women.” [SDG5](#) will push efforts to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”

Runners reach the finish line at 
Ethiopia’s 2015 Women First run on
International Women’s Day March 8.

Including women in decision-making can double if not triple a nation’s economic and human development. This is true here in Africa.

At the International Conference on the Emergence of Africa held in Abidjan in March, UNDP chief [Helen Clark](#) proposed a way forward for Africa. “By reducing inequalities, African countries will lift human development and will harness the full potential of women and currently marginalized groups to contribute to development,” she said.

Much remains to be done. Whatever comes of these efforts, women who are able will play a key role in bringing other young girls and women along. So what will our revised route for the better be?

“If you keep positive and optimistic about what can be done, [things] do work out,” said former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

For my part I pledged on [#Africa4Her](#) to work in partnership with my alma mater, Addis Ababa University, to help young women students build confidence and set goals for while they are at school and later in the workplace. I will help them gain access to a network of pioneering professional women with whom they can talk about the challenges they face. This will help them begin to develop internship opportunities and long-term mentor relationships.

[From Factory Worker to Girls' Education Champion](#)

“Today we transform communities. Tomorrow we create the next generation of female leaders.”

— Kennedy Odede, founder of Shining Hope for Communities

Students surround Kennedy 
Odede and Jessica Posner
Odede.

With just 20 cents in savings, a soccer ball and no formal education, factory worker Kennedy Odede started the education nonprofit [Shining Hope for Communities](#) (SHOFCO) in the largest slum in Africa.

Odede, now 30, is a YALI Network member. Saying he was motivated by “the entrepreneurial spirit” of his neighbors in the Nairobi slum of Kibera, where more than 1 million people live in an area the size of New York City’s Central Park, Odede has become one of Africa’s best-known community organizers and social entrepreneurs.

SHOFCO aims to combat gender inequality and extreme poverty in urban slums by making girls’ schools catalysts of social change. “Our schools for girls serve as a long-term investment in transformative leadership. ... Tomorrow, our girls will become next-generation leaders disrupting the systems that hold poverty in place,” the organization states.

SHOFCO’s core services are tuition-free education for girls and free health care, food and psychological services for residents of Kibera and Mathare, a separate collection of slums in Nairobi. It also provides these communities with affordable clean water and modern latrines.

Odede’s group begins to support girls from before they start school to when they complete university and begin careers. He recalls one particular girl that SHOFCO’s Kibera School for Girls helped transition from adversity to success.

One Girl's Life Blooms

Pauline was 12 when she came to the school. Exposed to the traumas of civil unrest and the loss of her mother two years earlier, Pauline had underdeveloped physical and social abilities. So she was enrolled in a pre-kindergarten class. But over time, with the help of SHOFCO teachers and counselors, the young teen improved her hand-eye coordination, verbal communication and reading comprehension skills. She is now a proficient reader, a “wonderful writer” and more self-assured when she is around others, Odede says. She also excels in math, science and social studies.

“A positive environment and a quality education has contributed to a vastly growing confidence that has inspired Pauline’s dream of becoming a school manager,” he adds.

Kennedy Odede and one  of the students of the SHOFCO Kibera School for Girls.

“Education is the greatest tool for women’s empowerment. It gives girls the tools to confront the challenges of the world [and] is the greatest way to give girls confidence,” Odede says.

Odede credits his mother — “denied an education and was still just a girl when I was born” — with inspiring him to fight for gender equality through education. Often beaten by her husband, his mother “taught me how to take care of other people and to take action to bring change. ... My mother taught me to believe in the power of education,” he says.

SHOFCO involves the whole community in building new generations of empowered and healthy women, offering students’ mothers, fathers and brothers such opportunities as access to economic empowerment programs, adult literacy classes and youth sports teams. “Empowering women has always been about working from the grass roots. If you do not engage the entire community, including men, the change never lasts,” Odede says.

With more than 160 employees — from teachers, to doctors and nurses, to case workers and data collectors — “SHOFCO is a movement that transforms urban poverty to urban promise,” he says.

New Partner and New Funding

Three years after Odede started SHOFCO, Jessica Posner, an American student of African-American studies, came to work at the organization and developed a strong bond with the community. Odede says that relationship “is something to be emulated — how people from different cultures can work together to fight poverty and gender equality.”

Odede continues to operate SHOFCO and has expanded its funding base to include grants from the Newman’s Own, Ford, General Electric, Pentair and Starkey Hearing foundations, Chime for Change, the Clinton Global Initiative and Barclays Bank, as well as donations from thousands of individuals every year. The organization plans to start operating in more urban slums and serve as a model for African leaders who want to start similar ventures in their communities.

Odede believes that with education, the best way to create more women leaders is by bringing in

successful women to mentor girls.

“Today we transform communities. Tomorrow we create the next generation of female leaders,” Odede says.

[Everyone Has a Role to Play](#)

For three days, from March 24th through 26th, Alvin Allgood engaged with the YALI Network  in a #YALICHAT on the issues, obstacles that have kept women and girls from educational opportunities, and the ability to develop professionally. The Vital Voices chief operating officer brought his expansive and informed view of the issue to the YALI Network as part of the March focus on investing in women and girls. In responding to questions and comments from the YALI Network, he also discussed ideas and solutions for creating real change that will allow women and girls to “achieve their full potential.”

Read his blog on empowering women and girls [here](#).

Several questions from Network members acknowledged the entrenched prejudices and stereotypes that have prevented women and girls from playing a role in society. Questions and comments noted the resistance to educational opportunity and gender bias, particularly among men. In response to one post, Allgood stated that, “Changing culture takes time, and educating all youth is key to long term progress. It would also be useful to look at examples from other neighboring communities as learning lessons for how they have dealt with gender stereotypes.”

But many Network members admitted that men are important to changing this attitude and that it is not up to women alone. Allgood remarked that, “As a father it is my duty to ensure that my son and daughter grow up respecting all of human kind. I am happy to see the younger generations being more and more color and gender blind. Women can inspire men and they often times do. Men should not be threatened by womens rights but accepting and bold to stand alongside them.”

As one Network member put it, “It is the duty of everyone, including men in sound positions to create a platform and investment for the education and empowerment of women. We owe it our women and humanity at large.”

Creating opportunities for women entrepreneurship was another area of interest for Network members. Many identified this as critical to your community’s and country’s economic health.

Allgood agreed. “Through our work at Vital Voices, we have found that despite the proven benefits of women’s economic engagement, women business owners still face disproportionate barriers. As the future leaders of the continent, I encourage you to advocate for women’s economic empowerment in your communities. It is not only right, it is also smart economics.”

In signing off from his #YALICHAT, Allgood had praise and a further challenge for the YALI

Network.

“Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this [#YALICHAT](#). Your comments and questions have inspired me, and I hope that my responses have done the same. Collaborating and networking are critical to affecting real change. Collectively we can make a difference. We have been reminded this week that words alone are not enough and that we have to be willing to take bold steps. As you make this pledge to invest in women and girls, be sure to invite your fellow network members and think about what you can achieve together.”

[#Africa4Her: Ten Exemplary Pledges to Invest in Women and Girls](#)

This March, YALI Network members have made the commitment to invest in women and girls in Africa, not only to help achieve gender equality, but also to promote economic growth, good governance, and future innovation. Women and girls are often the foundation of a community, and it is essential that they are given the same opportunities as men for that nation to grow. More than 700 YALI Network members pledged to invest in women and girls, and many of these pledges have already been put into action. Below is just a sample of the amazing and creative pledges that were made this month.

1. Leadership development training for 25 Cameroonian women; create Young Women’s Advocacy Network:

Patience Agwenjang from Cameroon pledges to organize a six-month leadership development training course for 25 women and to create the Young Women’s Advocacy Network to support effective policy on gender issues and good governance. 

2. Mentor young female victims of human trafficking in Nigeria:

Lawrenta Igoh from Nigeria pledges to mentor girls who have been victims of human trafficking by organizing training sessions on reproductive health and life-building skills to help prepare them to adjust to society and decrease their vulnerability to being re-trafficked. 

3. Feature business women in an entrepreneurship magazine:

Mothibedi Sereme from South Africa pledges to help young women through a local entrepreneurship magazine that he publishes by featuring articles and bios on successful female entrepreneurs. He will also host a seminar on leadership and higher education for young women at which inspiring businesswomen will speak to girls about their role in the economy and the importance of education.

4. Empower young women through poetry:

Mercedes Leburu pledges to help empower other young women in South Africa to become confident and lead a liberated lifestyle through writing poetry that will boost their self-esteem.

5. Educate young girls about protected sex and how to grow produce successfully:

Noel Lutomia in Kenya pledges to help young women start small income-generating projects, such as small crop farming, that would earn them independence from men and decrease their vulnerability to sexual predators. 

6. Help girls continue their education by providing sanitary napkins:

James Obare Ondongo from Kenya pledges to help increase the chances for girls' education in two primary schools by distributing sanitary napkins so girls can attend school regularly during their monthly cycles. 

7. Organize art workshops to help women network and empower them through their own creativity:

Kunle Adewale from Nigeria pledges to invest in women by holding workshops with a focus on therapeutic art and vocational skills. The art produced at these workshops will be publicly displayed and put up for auction, with the profits going directly back to the women and girls who participate.

8. Hold a conference for young women in business to expand their horizons and share ideas:

Nathacia Oliver from South Africa pledges to initiate the first "Young Women Thrive" business conference, where young female entrepreneurs can gather to network and collaborate on new and exciting business ideas.

9. Tutor female classmates in a course:

Samuel Ndhlovu from Zambia pledges to assist two of his classmates in a course that he is doing well in by tutoring them three days a week.

10. Organize a training workshop for women in small-scale dairy production:

Khalid Ngassa from Tanzania pledges to organize and host a four-day training workshop for women who run small-scale dairy production operations as a part of the Nronga Women's Dairy Cooperative Society. He will teach them about business efficiency and how to maximize their profits using their available resources.

[White House #YALICHAT on Entrepreneurship in Africa](#)

On Monday, March 30, YALI Network members will have an exclusive opportunity to speak  with senior White House and other U.S. government officials and American entrepreneurs about entrepreneurship in Africa. The conversation will start at 13:00 UTC on Twitter and will feature the announcement of the location for the 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Summit.

Last year, during the historic U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, President Obama announced that the 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Summit will be held for the first time in sub-Saharan Africa.

Will the 2015 summit be in your country? What opportunities are available to entrepreneurs in your country? Join the chat on Twitter with [#StartTheSpark](#) to find out! Follow the conversation with [@YALINetwork](#) at 12:00 CVT / 13:00 GMT / 14:00 WAT / 15:00 CAT/SAST / 16:00 EAT / 17:00 SCT/MUT.

What is the Global Entrepreneurship Summit?

The Global Entrepreneurship Summit is an annual gathering that gives emerging entrepreneurs a unique opportunity to pitch to new investors, gain expert insights and connect with one another.

Launched by President Obama in 2009, the annual summit has grown to include high-level meetings and networking events, strategic workshops and pitch competitions. It's a chance to celebrate startups and unlock the world's economic potential.

Last year's summit was held in Morocco and this summer it will take place for the first time in sub-Saharan Africa. The summit mixes entrepreneurs, mentors, investors and policymakers. This year, YALI Network members will have a unique opportunity to participate, too.

Why does the United States care about entrepreneurship?

As Secretary Kerry said, "The United States has learned through its own experience that entrepreneurship is an essential driver of prosperity and of freedom." Entrepreneurs create opportunities for themselves and others. They unlock economic growth, create jobs and empower entire nations. Perhaps more importantly, they often find solutions to social problems.

Somewhere in the world right now, there's a startup developing a new source of clean energy, another working toward a smarter electric grid and still another devising an improved way to store all that energy. The United States wants to help them transform these ideas into successful and sustainable ventures, and thus transform the world.

What is the United States doing to support entrepreneurship abroad?

The YALI Network represents just one way the United States supports entrepreneurship abroad.

Through the president's Spark Global Entrepreneurship initiative, the U.S. government has set an ambitious goal to attract more than a billion dollars in new investments to support business and

social entrepreneurs by the end of 2017. Half will be raised for women and young entrepreneurs (those under 35). These initiatives include top programs such as the Global Entrepreneurship Summit, the President's Ambassadors for Global Entrepreneurship (PAGE), the Young African Leaders Initiative, the African Women's Entrepreneurship Program (AWEP), and the entrepreneurship work of USAID's Global Development Lab.

As we expand these efforts, the United States will continue to work with other countries, businesses and nonprofit organizations to find new ways to light the world's entrepreneurial spark.

Why is entrepreneurship important in Africa?

Entrepreneurship helps lift economies and solve problems. YALI Network members prove this every day.

In Kenya, a [YALI Network member](#) has created a shoe insert that generates and stores power. Just an 800-meter walk with the [Hatua charger](#) sole insert can fully charge a mobile phone or other small, electronic device, saving wearers the burden of unreliable or unaffordable electricity.

In Ghana, a [YALI Network member](#) is reducing waste, promoting environmental conservation and empowering women through his Trash4Books initiative. [Trash4Books Ghana](#) teaches women to make products such as woven baskets from recycled plastic, then sell them for a profit.

And in Zimbabwe, another [YALI Network member](#) has developed a mobile-phone application to help aspiring drivers pass their provisional driver's license test. Called [VIDapp](#), the application saves users the trouble of carrying books and has potential for other educational purposes.

Entrepreneurs are transforming Africa, one startup at a time.

What Role Will You Play?

By: Alvin Allgood

I am proud to have this opportunity to engage with you all and look forward to our #YALICHAT on investing in women and girls.

Alvin Allgood is the chief operating  officer of Vital Voices. He has more than 25 years of leadership and management experience.

Everyone has a role to play when it comes to investing in women and girls. I believe that your generation has already made a mark. You're known for your curiosity, creativity and refusal to

accept systems that no longer work. You see problems and you fearlessly work to create solutions. You use technology to relate in ways we couldn't have imagined even 10 years ago. You aren't bound by convention, and you're not satisfied with just accumulating wealth or power. Maybe more than any generation that's come before you, you're motivated to contribute to the larger social good — to do well while doing good.

It's this motivation that convinces the rest of us that you will improve on the world you're inheriting, and solve some of the biggest problems we face.

This month the world turns its attention to one of the greatest challenges of our time: the universal inequality that keeps women and girls from achieving their full potential. Each March on International Women's Day, global organizations, national officials and local leaders recommit to investing in solutions that work. At Vital Voices, this is what we do each and every day.

For more than 18 years, Vital Voices has been investing in women leaders who improve the world. We find women who have a vision for a better world and demonstrate leadership that unites and inspires others. Then we partner with them to help make that vision a reality.

We work with leaders in three key areas: human rights, economic opportunity, and political and public leadership. These women are in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

We make long-term investments in each leader and design programs that offer practical skills and services. We connect them with expert advisers for mentoring and collaboration, and support them in telling their stories and sharing their perspectives.

Together, these interventions increase a leader's capacity and expand her access to opportunity. They enable a leader to accelerate the impact she is having on the ground, realize her vision, and improve not just her community, but the world beyond.

As a member of the YALI Network, you're linked to more than 130,000 of your peers. You're part of a community with the potential to educate, motivate and have a lasting impact — both online and off.

I know firsthand the power of a network like yours. Throughout my career, I've seen what a determined group of leaders can achieve when they work together toward a shared goal. Before joining Vital Voices, I spent more than 20 years in the education sector innovating, improving and expanding educational services to prevent dropouts and create solutions around problems that have put our youth at risk. This was only possible through collaboration.

Through his work with Vital Voices,  Allgood is helping to create a global network of women leaders.

What we see every day at Vital Voices is that real leadership leads to collective empowerment. Every woman leader we invest in makes it her mission to reinvest in the rising generation. By sharing access, information and opportunity, the women we partner with are empowering other women and girls. It's this collaboration and cycle of impact that improves communities around the world.

When you consider making a pledge to invest in women and girls, look first to your fellow network members and think about what you can achieve together.

As you work to strengthen and expand your various entrepreneurial ventures, I urge you to leverage the networks and technology you have available to make ambitious pledges to empower the women and girls in your communities.

I look forward to reading your comments and answering any questions you have during the #YALICHAT.

Alvin Allgood is the chief operating officer of Vital Voices. He has more than 25 years of leadership and management experience, particularly in the education sector. Mr. Allgood is a veteran of the U.S. Army and has earned a bachelor's degree in advertising and public relations as well as a master's degree in organizational management.

[Mentors Help Guide Entrepreneur's Businesses](#)

Cynthia



Nigerian entrepreneur Cynthia proved that there is financial and environmental value in cassava peels.

A finalist in the 2014 Global Innovation through Science and Technology competition and a YALI Network member, Cynthia developed a way to convert cassava peels into nutritious goat feed. Farmers had perceived the peels as a useless byproduct and burned them as a cheap way of disposal. But that practice releases harmful pollutants into the atmosphere.

Nigeria is the world's largest producer of cassava, each year growing 40 metric tons and generating 12 million metric tons of peels. When burned, those peels release more than 10 million tons of toxic carbon monoxide in the air.

Cynthia's solution to the problem begins with a simple platform on which peels are dried. The dried peels are packaged and sold as a healthy goat feed. By selling both food products derived from the cassava tuber and animal feed, farmers can utilize 100 percent of their plants and boost their incomes. "This is something the community embraces with joy and excitement," Cynthia says.

In 2013, Cynthia, 24, founded the social enterprise Kadosh Production Company in Delta state to recycle cassava waste. The venture also helps small-scale farmers get credit so they can purchase drying platforms, and it links cassava growers and processors with goat-farmer customers. With an eye set on expansion to other countries, Cynthia says she hopes her business will grow to be "a

major influence in the Nigerian economy and Africa at large.”

Cynthia has a bachelor’s degree in textile science and polymer technology and a master’s in business administration from Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria. She says that since she was young, her parents have inspired her to go into business.

Further inspiration came later when Cynthia volunteered to work for a year at a woman-owned bakery “to learn how to run a business of my own.” At the bakery she learned about the challenges associated with running a business and how to handle those challenges. The experience “made me confident that I could run my own business,” she says.

Cynthia received further business advice from a U.S. mentor — a former United Parcel Service executive. Gary Mastro is one of many experienced businesspeople [MicroMentor](#) has matched with young entrepreneurs around the world. MicroMentor is an initiative of the nonprofit humanitarian group Mercy Corps based in Oregon. More than half of the entrepreneurs who request its help are from outside the United States, the group notes.

Cynthia, center, stands with some of the  entrepreneurs she has mentored and their supporters.

Cynthia’s first venture was a liquid soap company called EverGlow that makes an affordable, hygienic alternative to bar soap. “Gary is a pillar in my business and a man I respect so much,” she says.

And now Cynthia is a mentor herself. In 2013 she founded Confident Women to mentor young women and teach them about home management, family relationships and how to make liquid soap so they could start their own small-scale businesses. The businesswoman later changed the name of Confident Women to the CAMY Foundation after collaborating with a partner in Zimbabwe who wanted a similar mentoring model in her country. CAMY Foundation now has more than 450 women members in Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

Cynthia says she communicates regularly with other YALI Network members who tell her about what is happening in other countries and let her “see the great work young leaders like me are doing.”

“This encourages me a lot to keep up the work and never give up so we can have a better future.” She adds that she learns a lot from the ongoing [YALIChat](#) Twitter conversation.

Cynthia encourages other YALI Network members and potential members to “maximize the opportunities from YALI Network” and to “be a change in their society.”

Learn more about the [GIST Tech-I business pitch competition](#).

Eco-Pads Keep Girls in School

Lucy Athieno



Taking advantage of a morning break between classes in Buteba, Uganda, then-13-year-old Lucy Athieno set off to play with friends. Then she heard some boys shouting at her.

She looked down and saw a blotch of red on her otherwise clean uniform. Embarrassed, she quickly sat down. It was the only way to stop the boys from making fun of her. After all the other students had gone, she got up and went home. She did not return to school.

Many girls in low-income communities drop out of school when menstruation begins because they lack information and hygienic material to use.

Days went by before Athieno shared her experience with her late mother's friend. The woman told her to continue using rags and to throw them away after use. She said, "Nobody should see your blood. It is taboo."

A year later, Athieno was adopted by an aunt who bought Athieno her first sanitary pads. The gift of pads made the young woman realize that the "problem" of menstruation was not unique to her. The aunt also persuaded Athieno to return to school.

When she got to secondary school, Athieno — a 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow and YALI Network member — suggested to a teacher that they cut pieces of cloth and give them to other girls. She believed all girls should have the right to good health and education and not be hindered by what is a normal biological process. But the teacher considered the idea peculiar.

Convinced that her idea was realistic and desperately needed, Athieno carried it through to university. In her second year at Makerere University in 2010, she began to volunteer with a women's organization and was convinced her cause was justifiable. "Many girls were using rags or leaves or sitting in the sand during menstruation," she says.

Lucy Athieno makes reusable sanitary 

Eco-Pads to support retention of girls in school.

As part of her volunteer work, she went to Kenya where she found an organization that was distributing sanitary pads to girls. Returning to Uganda, she purchased bed sheet material and cut it into pieces and thought, "What if I inserted something between two layers of this material - something that would absorb the blood?"

She experimented with different types of cloth pads until she settled on one that was washable, comfortable and reliable. "These pads are reusable for at least one year, making them not only affordable but environmentally friendly," she says, adding that the pads help young women return to and stay in school. One year's supply of pads cost just \$3, she notes.

Now 30, Athieno has bought four sewing machines to make pads that have helped hundreds of Ugandan girls. In 2013, she founded Aluta Holdings, which holds rights for the reusable "Eco-Pads." She wants to expand access to the product to other countries.

So far, Aluta has provided pads to more than 400 girls. Meanwhile, Athieno has mentored 200 girls, encouraging them to stay in school.

"I want to impact the whole of Africa," she says.
