

The **POWER** of **Young Women**

20 POWERFUL STORIES FROM
YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS



AWARENESS | AGENCY | ADVOCACY | ACCOUNTABILITY

***YW4A Young Women's Voices: 20 Powerful Stories
from Young Women Leaders*** © December 2025

This booklet was developed as part of the Young Women for Awareness, Agency, Advocacy and Accountability (YW4A) programme, funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Power of Women Policy Framework. YW4A is implemented by a consortium of eight partners, led by the World Young Women's Christian Association (World YWCA).

The accounts shared in this booklet are drawn from the experiences of young women who have participated in the programme across Africa and the Middle East and North Africa region.

Photographs included in this publication were taken during YW4A activities and are shared courtesy of the YW4A partners and the young women featured.



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This collection brings together accounts from young women who walked their leadership journey with the Young Women for Awareness, Agency, Advocacy, and Accountability (YW4A) initiative.

Across Egypt, Kenya, Palestine, and South Sudan, the young women featured here speak about harm and resistance, leadership learned under pressure, and the decision to act even when silence felt safer. Their voices are grounded in everyday life and informed by work on gender justice, faith-based dialogue, and human rights, yet remain unmistakably their own.

The visual language of this booklet draws on traditional fabrics and textile patterns from each country. Cloth carries memory, labour, care, and inheritance. It is worn, handled, repaired, and passed on. Like fabric, these accounts are shaped by place and history. Each stands on its own, yet gains strength when woven alongside others.

YW4A created space for those voices to be sharpened, connected, and sustained. What follows are accounts of young women who learned to name injustice, claim their rights, protect their boundaries, and act in ways that shifted their own lives and those of others around them.

This booklet is offered as a record of that work, and as an invitation to listen closely. Change, as these accounts show, is made deliberately and collectively, thread by thread.

Glossary of terms

Advocacy: Action taken by individuals or groups to influence laws, policies, practices, or social norms. In YW4A, advocacy is led by young women and grounded in lived experience.

FEMspace (Feminist Empowerment Movement Space): A structured safe space created under YW4A where young women and gender-diverse people meet to learn, reflect, build skills, and organise collective action. FEMspaces are facilitated by trained leaders and prioritise safety, trust, and shared leadership.

Feminist Consultation Methodology (FCM): A World YWCA approach used in YW4A that centres lived experience, power analysis, and collective reflection. It supports advocacy shaped by those most affected, rather than imposed from the outside.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV): Violence directed at a person because of their gender, including physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, or economic harm. Preventing and responding to GBV is a core focus of YW4A.

Noon for Change: Local name for YW4A in Palestine that focuses on leadership development, awareness, and social change among young women.

Positive Masculinities: YW4A work that engages men and boys to challenge harmful gender norms and support equality, without reinforcing dominance or control.

Psychosocial First Aid (PFA): Basic emotional and practical support offered to people experiencing distress, especially survivors of violence. In YW4A, PFA helps participants feel supported and regain a sense of stability.

RiseUp! Leadership Training: A World YWCA leadership training programme that was core to the YW4A initiative. The training focuses on self-awareness, power, rights, communication, and collective action. Many participants identify it as a turning point in their leadership journey.

Safe Space: An environment that is intentionally created and facilitated so participants can speak openly without fear of judgment, harm, or retaliation. In YW4A, safe spaces are actively protected, not assumed.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR): The right to make informed decisions about one's body, health, and reproduction. YW4A addresses SRHR through education, advocacy, and challenging harmful norms.

Training of Trainers (ToT): An approach used in YW4A to equip participants with the skills to train, mentor, and support others, helping leadership and knowledge spread within communities.

Young Women for Awareness, Agency, Advocacy, and Accountability (YW4A): A World YWCA-led initiative working in Egypt, Kenya, Palestine, and South Sudan to support young women to understand their rights, build leadership, and influence decisions that affect their lives.

Young Women Reference Group (YWRG): A group of young women within YW4A who provide leadership, guidance, and accountability to programme implementation and advocacy priorities.

Contents



Egypt

- **Basmala:** Defiance Led to a Different Future 7
- **Hagar:** Carving Space for Women's Participation 9
- **Madonna:** Supporting Girls Facing Violence 10
- **Marina:** Ending the Violence at Home 13
- **Toka:** Trusted with Leadership 15



Kenya

- **Andyson:** Still Here, Still Queer 17
- **Beatrice:** Income Stability Through Umoja 19
- **Emily:** Leading beyond cultural limits 21
- **Lizaflorina:** Agency Past Inherited Silence 23
- **Melody:** Where Skill Became Security 26



Palestine

- **Athar:** Learning Why Voice Matters 29
- **Hala:** Speaking Out Became Normal 30
- **Haneen:** A Voice Put to Use 32
- **Sajeda:** Using Words With Purpose 33
- **Yassmeen:** Making Accountability Possible Under Occupation 34



South Sudan

- **Agnes:** Choosing School Over Early Marriage 38
- **Hipaingba:** Holding Leaders Accountable for Girls' Rights 41
- **Keji:** Holding Community in Displacement 43
- **Pamela:** Opening Safe Spaces in Juba 45
- **Roselyn:** Holding the Line for Girls in Crisis 47



Egypt

The patterns that accompany this section draw on Egyptian textile traditions that are bold, layered, and precise. From appliqué work to embroidery, these fabrics reflect endurance and reinvention. They speak to histories carried forward, reshaped by each generation.

The first-person accounts from Egypt reflect young women navigating social expectations, silence, and resistance. They speak about learning to name harm, defend boundaries, and confidently step into public life.

Defiance Led to a Different Future

My story began in 2023, right after I finished high school. Like anyone with big dreams, I placed all my hope in my exam results. When they were not enough to get me into the college I wanted, I felt crushed. I tried to move on and enrolled elsewhere, telling myself I would find my way. But something felt missing. I could not explain it. I just knew I was not where I was meant to be.

Around that time, a classmate told me about training sessions run by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. I joined, hoping to feel more grounded. Instead, I started hearing things like, “You are smart, but your place is in a man’s home,” and “Save your intelligence for your household.” I often stayed quiet, but inside I knew those words were wrong.

One day, I saw a post about a programme called YW4A. I was afraid to go. I did not know how to tell my family that I wanted to talk about issues like female genital mutilation, child marriage, and violence against women. These are still considered shameful topics for girls to speak about. But I went anyway. From the first day, I understood something clearly. Staying silent would not protect me. I had to speak up for myself.

Through YW4A, I learned how to say no to what I did not believe in. I learned that expressing my opinion freely is not a privilege, it is a right.

I also learned how to stand firm in an environment full of discouragement. People kept asking, “What is the point of this work?” “Why are you wasting your time?” “You are throwing your life away.” I did not see it that way. I was building my future.

As my network grew, I became more aware of how often women’s boundaries are tested. Some people tried to get close to me for their own interests. Others did not respect my personal space. When I refused inappropriate jokes or kept my distance, I was labelled cold or uptight. But I was not being difficult. I was protecting myself. That kind of verbal and emotional pressure is a form of violence, and I did not deserve it.

Basmala

**KERDASA,
GIZA GOVERNORATE**



without apology. The training opened doors I never imagined. I took part in sessions with organisations like Equality Now and GIZ. I began raising awareness among other young women.

My first session at university was attended by fifty girls. I launched my own advocacy initiatives to help girls speak up without fear.

One of my proudest moments was co-founding an initiative to raise awareness about the dangers of child marriage. I helped create a small educational booklet on the harms of marrying minors, which we distributed in the Kerdasa area. I also became a certified awareness trainer, delivering sessions on early marriage and domestic violence to women of different ages.

I was once the girl they told to save her cleverness for her home. Today, my family looks at me with pride. I am a trainer, a youth union coordinator, a vice-chair of a public relations committee, and a young woman who speaks openly for girls' rights.

I have learned that change does not stop with you. When you find your voice, you make space for others to find theirs too. And for me, it all started with the RiseUp! training.

From the bottom of my heart, I wish every girl could experience something like YW4A. It is not just a training. It is the beginning of a new life.

Basmala

“

They told me to save my cleverness for my home. Instead, I used it to build a life I am proud of.

-Basmala.



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Carving Space for Women's Participation

My name is Hagar Adel. I am 23 years old, from Alexandria. I am sharing this account in the hope that it reaches someone looking for change or the courage to take a first step.

My journey began in 2021, when I was 19. I started volunteering with the Ministry of Youth and Sports. I enjoyed being involved and wanted to make a difference, but I often felt unprepared. I did not always have the information or confidence to speak clearly with people, or to stand in front of a group of girls and guide them. I looked around and felt that everyone else knew more than I did. That feeling made me hesitate. I held back my opinions, even when I had something to say.

In 2023, a friend nominated me to attend the Inhadi (RiseUp! Leadership) training hosted by Sabaya El-Kheir Association. That experience changed how I saw myself. It shifted the way I thought and helped me understand issues I had never fully grasped before. Most importantly, it gave me confidence. I began to feel steady in my voice.

When the training ended, I made a decision. I joined Sabaya El-Kheir as a volunteer because I believed in their work and wanted to be part of something that had changed me so deeply. I wanted to support other girls in the same way I had been supported. Through this path, I became involved in the YW4A programme.

I attended the training, took part in specialised programmes such as 50/50, and continued learning. When a facilitator role opened up, I applied. I was accepted.

Becoming a facilitator changed how I showed up in the world. I grew into someone who could speak, organise, and take part in social and political spaces with confidence. I contributed to an electoral awareness campaign and began working more directly on civic engagement.

Today, I am a facilitator for political participation. I also launched an initiative called *Your Voice, Your Choice*, which raises awareness among young women about the importance of civic engagement and participation in public life.

Hagar

ALEXANDRIA





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Through the YW4A programme, I was nominated to represent Egypt at the 2023 Interreligious Convention, co-hosted by the Faith to Action Network, World YWCA, Act Alliance, ACT Church of Sweden, ACT Ubumbano, Mensen met een missie, Muhammadiyah and Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, held in Johannesburg, South Africa

I also organised a conference for lawyers and media professionals to promote the Unified Law to Combat Violence Against Women, and led a religious conference that explored how Islam honours women and why advocating for women's rights matters.

Another initiative I created, You Deserve to Know, raises awareness among girls and women about the human papillomavirus (HPV). It grew from a simple belief that access to information can change lives.

This journey has taught me that change does not come from waiting to feel ready. It starts from within, with the decision to believe in yourself and take responsibility for your voice. That belief has shaped the person I am becoming, and the work I continue to do.

Hagar

“

I decided to join Sabaya El-Kheir as a volunteer after the RiseUp! Leadership training. I had fallen in love with their mission and wanted to be part of the YW4A initiative that had changed me. I wanted to support and uplift other girls, just as I had been supported...

... Today, I'm also a facilitator for political participation. I launched an initiative called "Your Voice, Your Choice" to raise awareness among young women about the importance of civic engagement.

-Hagar.

Supporting Girls Facing Violence

Everything began when I was sixteen.

I attended a girls' conference organised by the church. I thought it would be just another ordinary gathering. Instead, what I heard there unsettled me in a way I was not prepared for. Girls spoke about being violated, not only outside their homes, but inside them. They spoke about harassment, rape, emotional and physical violence, and about the silence that followed them into their daily lives. A silence that filled their houses and shaped their futures.

At the time, I was a girl raised in a protected environment, in a family that gave me safety. I had never imagined that this level of pain existed so close to me. Listening to those accounts, I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt and responsibility, even though I knew I was not the cause. I carried that weight quietly. For a month, I sank into depression. I told no one. I only wanted to forget what I had heard. But in that darkness, a thought kept returning.

If listening caused me this much pain, what about the girls who were living it? That question stayed with me. It was the first time I felt a quiet calling inside myself. I did not yet know what my role would be, but I sensed that it would come.

Three years later, when I was nineteen, I was introduced to Al-Farah Foundation for Development.

I was nominated to become a facilitator in the YW4A programme. I was terrified. I was a young woman from Beni Suef, travelling alone to Alexandria, stepping into a role I had no experience in, expected to lead and support other girls. Still, I told myself what I always do in moments of fear: try. Maybe this is your path.

And it was.

The initiative changed how I see myself. I discovered that I could lead, speak with confidence, organise events, and manage a media team. I learned that everything I had once been told I could not do was possible. More than that, I learned that leadership begins with believing in yourself.

Through the initiative, I learned about my rights as a girl and the tools needed to create change.

Madonna

**BENI SUEF
(UPPER EGYPT)**





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I supported girls facing difficult circumstances and became a voice they could turn to, a safe space when they needed one.



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I represented Egypt at the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67) conference at the United Nations in New York as part of the World YWCA delegation. I became the leader of my organisation's social media team and a member of the programme's Young Women Reference Group.

Today, when I look back at the girl I was at sixteen, crying quietly after that first conference, carrying the pain of others in silence, I see how far I have come. I see the Madonna who now stands with other girls and says, clearly and without hesitation: You are not alone.



FILM NEGATIVE

I am not just a girl from a distant governorate. I am a leader. A voice for girls who were never given the space to speak. This project did not simply change me. It awakened me.

I am deeply grateful to Al-Farah Foundation for the trust they placed in me and for seeing potential in me that I could not yet see. Thank you to Eng. Nasreen and Eng. Michael for their support, and to my family, who stood by me every step of the way.



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I am where I am today because of that belief, and because I chose to answer the call when it finally arrived.

Madonna

“

Since attending the CSW convening, I have started to share my experiences with my colleagues at the university and follow peer-to-peer education with the other young women in my organisation. To foster knowledge growth, spread awareness, and strengthen us when we work together, this idea was strongly emphasised at the convening. We are planning on reaching out rural areas and vulnerable women in society to raise their awareness.

-Madonna.

Ending the Violence at Home

My name is Marina. I was in fourth grade, living in my extended family's home. My parents come from a strict Upper Egyptian (Sa'idi) background. One day, my grandmother handed me a knife and said, "Take this upstairs to your room. We're going to slaughter a chicken." As a child, I was excited, imagining we would have chicken for dinner. I had no idea they meant me instead of the bird.

Upstairs, my grandmother, my uncle's wife, and a traditional birth attendant held me down. I was terrified. I tried to run, but they caught me and performed female genital cutting on me while I was fully conscious, without any anaesthesia.

Afterwards, they carried me to my mother. I could not stand or move from the pain. Even now, when I hear about female genital mutilation or try to speak about what happened to me, I remember everything. As a child, I used to ask, "What happened to the piece you removed from me? Where did you take it?" They laughed and turned it into a joke. I grew up without answers.

Years later, I joined the YW4A training. That was when I finally understood what had happened to me, and why.

When someone suggested that I should have my own daughter cut, I refused. In front of my husband and others, I said,

"I will never let this happen to her. It breaks my heart seeing her cry even when she takes an injection. Do you really want me to watch her endure the pain I endured?"

Later, a close relative asked me to accompany her to have her daughter cut. I stopped her. I told her clearly,

"Do not do this. If you go through with it, I will report both you and the doctor."

I explained the harm caused by female genital mutilation. In the end, she did not go through with it.

In that moment, I knew something had changed. I had made a decision, spoken clearly, and acted. What was done to me without my consent would not be repeated through me.

That is where my power is.

Marina

SA'IDI (UPPER EGYPT)

Trusted With Leadership

About a year and a half ago, Toka was living in near-total isolation. From morning to night, she stayed on her phone, using it as a barrier between herself and the world. She was struggling with recurring episodes of depression, and fear shaped her daily life. She feared people, their looks, their reactions. Even speaking felt overwhelming. She found it difficult to ask for the simplest things, even from her own family.

In the middle of this isolation, there was one steady presence: her mother. She supported Toka quietly, without pressure, offering care and patience. Her mother believed in her long before Toka believed in herself. As a trainer with CARE, she became the first bridge to something beyond isolation.

At one point, the weight of being alone became unbearable. Toka tried to distract herself by enrolling in a hairdressing course. But when the time came to attend, she withdrew. Her fear of people and judgment was still stronger than her desire to change. Then her mother told her about a training connected to the YW4A initiative and encouraged her to attend. Toka hesitated, but agreed, reassured that her mother would support her step by step.

The first day of the training was terrifying. Each time someone looked at her or asked a question, her heart raced. Speaking felt heavy and exhausting. During one session, however, the trainer

said something simple that stayed with her: that people are the leaders of their own lives, and that their actions can create impact. Those words marked a turning point.

After the session, Toka approached the trainer and asked if she could volunteer. It may have seemed like a small step, but significant for her. It was the first time she reached out to the world instead of retreating from it.

From there, her growth was gradual but steady. She moved from being a volunteer to becoming a facilitator in the project. Each step brought new challenges: speaking in front of groups, managing activities and taking responsibility. She was still living with the effects of past bullying, particularly related to her voice, but she continued.

Toka

ALEXANDRIA



Toka

With training, consistent support, and encouragement from people who recognised her potential,

Toka began to change. Day by day, she grew stronger. She learned, practised, and took on leadership roles. She became a team leader, then a project coordinator, and later the head of the volunteer unit.

All of this happened while she was still just 21.

What stood out was not only the scale of the change, but how quickly and deeply it took root. Toka became almost financially independent, began realising small dreams she had once set aside, and learned to face challenges not without fear, but with the courage to move through it.

One moment stayed with her. Her mother once said that she still could not believe how much Toka had changed in such a short time. It was more than a compliment. It was a reflection of a journey shaped by healing, growth, and new beginnings.

Today, Toka is no longer defined by isolation. She continues to learn and grow, supported by those who believed in her along the way: CARE, the YW4A initiative, Al-Farah Foundation, trainer Nesreen, Mr. Michael, and above all, her mother, who saw the person Toka could become before Toka could see it herself.

“

My mother once told me she could not believe how much I had changed. She believed in me first, and so did CARE, the YW4A project, Al-Farah Foundation, trainer Nesreen, and Mr. Michael.

-Toka.



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Kenya

Kenyan textiles are marked by colour, repetition, and movement. Worn in daily life and public gatherings, they signal identity, belonging, and strength. Their patterns are meant to be seen.

These accounts from Kenya reflect leadership grounded in community. They speak to economic survival, collective organising, disability justice, and queer visibility. These accounts show how change takes shape when women lead openly, even in spaces that resist them.

Still Here, Still Queer

Andyson Grey Gathauri is a trans man currently pursuing a Diploma in General Agriculture at The Meru National Polytechnic. As a member of the queer community, Andyson navigates daily life in an environment that is often hostile to gender-diverse people. While living and studying in Meru, they have faced discrimination from fellow students and members of the surrounding community, experiences that have affected their sense of safety, mental well-being, and confidence as a leader.

From a young age, Andyson showed a strong interest in leadership and politics. In high school, they believed firmly in non-discrimination and inclusive leadership, values that led to their election as school president. They carried this commitment into higher education and decided to run for the position of Deputy President (Academic) at The Meru National Polytechnic.

Andyson's candidacy drew intense backlash. Their appearance and gender identity became targets of hostility. Campaign posters were vandalised, and discriminatory messages circulated through WhatsApp groups and direct messages. Andyson was labelled "masculine," accused of threatening heterosexual relationships, and openly attacked for supporting the queer community. As the threats escalated, they were forced to stay indoors for their own safety in the days leading up to the election. In the end, the discrimination cost them the

position.

At a time when their confidence was deeply shaken, Andyson was introduced to the YW4A programme through Liza Kibaara, the lead Trainer of Trainers of the Power FEMspace. Joining the FEMspace marked a turning point. In this safe and affirming environment, Andyson learned more about their rights, connected with other queer individuals, and found reassurance through shared experiences. For the first time since the election period, they felt seen, accepted, and supported.

Before joining YW4A, Andyson struggled with self-doubt and emotional distress following the public backlash and loss of the election.



Andyson
MERU COUNTY



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Through regular participation in FEMspace sessions and RiseUp! Leadership trainings, they began to rebuild their confidence and reconnect with their sense of purpose.

Andyson's growth was evident when FEMspace members elected them as Secretary, a clear sign of the trust and confidence they had built. They remain deeply committed to leadership and social justice. They are hopeful and determined, and believe strongly in the importance of inclusive spaces. Andyson understands the mental and physical health challenges that come with belonging to a minority group and sees FEMspaces as essential places for learning, healing, and working through shared challenges together.

Facilitators say Andyson's experience mirrors the everyday realities faced by many queer young people. They see FEMspaces as essential spaces where young people can learn, find support, and feel safe, and they remain committed to supporting Andyson as they continue to grow into leadership roles.

Through YW4A, Andyson participated in FEMspace sessions, RiseUp! Transformative Leadership training sessions, and legal and media advocacy activities. Along the way, they gained a deeper understanding of their rights and grew in confidence as leaders. Their journey shows how much inclusive spaces matter, especially for young people from marginalised communities.

Andyson



I had lost hope in politics after the criticism and threats increased, and I lost the seat. But when I joined the YW4A Power FEMspace, I was welcomed warmly and introduced to other trans people. I realised I was not alone. My confidence started growing back. Today, I have regained my confidence and learned how to handle many situations. Next year, I hope to vie again for school leadership and later even national politics.

-Andyson.

Income Stability Through Umoja

Beatrice Nyabwonda Kerubo is a YW4A Lead Trainer of Trainers at the Centre for Community Mobilisation and Empowerment (CECOME) and the founder of Umoja FEMspace Group. She lives in Eramba Village, Marani Ward, in Kitutu Chache North Sub-county, Kisii County. She is a wife, a mother, an entrepreneur, and a community organiser. Through her leadership, she supports a FEMspace of twenty young women, many of whom have experienced or continue to face gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, and limited access to basic services such as menstrual hygiene products and reproductive health information.

Beatrice's work grew from what she was seeing around her every day. Women in her community were staying in abusive relationships because they depended financially on their partners. Girls were missing school regularly because they did not have sanitary towels or access to clear, reliable information about sexual and reproductive health. These challenges were common, persistent, and often treated as normal.

Rather than look away, Beatrice brought young women together in Eramba Village to talk openly about their experiences, learn about their rights, and support one another. What began as a shared space for conversation and mutual support became more organised over time. The group registered as Umoja FEMspace Group, giving their work a formal structure and legal recognition.

Through her involvement in the YW4A programme, Beatrice and her team received training on safe spaces, the RiseUp! Model, leadership, human rights, and economic empowerment. With this foundation, the group began looking for practical ways to address the link between economic insecurity and violence against women. They were clear that without income and shared resources, change would not last.

With support from a friend, Beatrice and her team developed a proposal to WIDU Africa, a programme that supports community-led enterprises through matched grants and business coaching. Their proposal set out a clear, community-driven plan for income generation. It was successful, and Umoja FEMspace Group received a grant of KES 250,000. That funding marked a turning point. The group established a greenhouse, creating jobs and generating income from the sale of farm produce.

Beatrice

ERAMBA VILLAGE,
KISII COUNTY





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Beatrice

The money earned was reinvested into the community, including direct support to women who had experienced violence and the provision of sanitary towels and reproductive health education for school-going girls.

The group later expanded into beekeeping, adding another source of income while supporting environmental conservation and biodiversity. Together, greenhouse farming and beekeeping formed a sustainable approach that strengthened livelihoods while caring for the environment.

In October 2024, Beatrice participated in the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) Forum in South Africa through YW4A, one of the world's leading conferences focused on violence against women and children. Her participation recognised the work she had been doing to link economic independence with efforts to address gender-based violence and harmful practices such as female genital mutilation. The forum also gave her the opportunity to share Umoja FEMspace's experience, learn from other grassroots leaders, and return home with ideas to strengthen her work.

Through steady organising, collaboration, and support from YW4A, Beatrice and her team have built something tangible in Eramba Village. Women and girls now have a place to meet, earn, learn, and support one another.

What started as a response to everyday hardship has become a structure that offers real options where few existed before.

“By empowering women economically, we have reduced cases of gender-based violence in our village. Women who were once dependent and trapped in abusive relationships now have a source of income and dignity. The greenhouse has become a symbol of hope and resilience for our community.

- Beatrice.

Leading beyond cultural limits

Emily Okuta comes from the Nubian community, a minority group in Kenya and within Kisii County.

She is a married mother and an entrepreneur. Like many girls in her community, Emily was married off at a young age, at just 17, due to deeply rooted cultural norms that prioritise marriage over education and personal development for girls. As a result, she had little opportunity to understand herself or nurture her ambitions before taking on the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood.

Initially hopeful, Emily soon found herself in a marriage marked by emotional abuse and control. Her dreams of education, independence, and personal growth gradually faded as she struggled to cope with daily emotional distress. In a community where girls are often viewed as secondary to men and economic hardship is widespread, Emily felt confined by both cultural expectations and limited access to basic resources.

Emily's turning point came through her involvement in the YW4A programme, specifically the FEMSpace sessions, which offered her a safe and supportive environment. Within these spaces, she found solidarity, understanding, and the freedom to speak openly about her experiences. Through dialogue, shared learning, and empowerment, Emily began to rediscover her sense of self. She gained confidence, recognised her worth, and understood the importance of feeling alive and fulfilled

each day.

With renewed determination, Emily took decisive steps to change her life. She began a small-scale business making samosas, which later grew into a beauty shop and salon. These ventures not only provided her with a steady income but also restored her sense of agency and independence. Through resilience and hard work, Emily transformed from a survivor of early marriage and emotional violence into a respected entrepreneur and a source of inspiration within her Nubian community.

Today, Emily is an active and dedicated member of Nubia FEMSpace, where she volunteers to support and encourage

Emily

**NUBIAN COMMUNITY,
KISII COUNTY**





FILM NEGATIVE



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other young women to become the best versions of themselves. The YW4A intervention became a light in a moment of darkness, offering her hope and the tools to act on it. There is a visible spark in her eyes as she speaks about her journey and her excitement for the future.

Emily's growth has not gone unnoticed. Keziah Ibongia, Lead trainer of trainers (ToT) at Nubia FEMspace, observes:

“Emily is the hardest-working person I know. She wasn't like this when we first met. Through FEMspace, she didn't just listen, she acted. She changed her situation on her own terms and now earns an income through diverse businesses. I truly believe there is no business she cannot do.”

Emily has participated in monthly FEMspace sessions, RiseUp! Leadership training, safe space model training, and legal and media advocacy training. These experiences have shaped her into a confident, economically empowered woman who has chosen growth over struggle, prioritising her mental wellbeing, financial independence, and the empowerment of other women in her community.

Emily



It took me a while to get to where I am, but better late than never. I have learnt to understand myself, my strengths and capabilities, and I want to use them to become the best version of myself. I want to take action against injustices facing women in my community. Most of all, I want all my children to go to school and complete it without cultural norms limiting their dreams.

- Emily.

Agency Past Inherited Silence

My journey with the YW4A Initiative began in September 2022 at the Inua Mama Mjane offices, where I met Cynthia Kananu for the first time.

Although I had already served in various leadership roles and supported several women's rights groups in their human rights advocacy, it was through the YW4A initiative that I began to understand my life's purpose and leadership journey more deeply. The mentorship, learning spaces, and tools we received, especially the RiseUp! manual, strengthened my facilitation skills and expanded my understanding of myself, my rights, and the challenges my community faces. Through transformative leadership lessons, I learned that the relationship a leader has with themselves shapes how they relate to others and even influences the policies and systems they advocate for. I came to better understand human rights, the instruments that protect them, and the collective responsibility we all share in ensuring that every person can live in dignity.

Before joining the YW4A, I was shy to call myself a feminist. Feminism had been distorted into a battle of the sexes, and although I knew that wasn't true, I lacked the language to express what I believed. Listening to women of all ages speak honestly about their realities, violence, power imbalances, lost opportunities, and immense resilience made me understand more deeply why women and children are often regarded a

vulnerable in society. These conversations also helped me unlearn the shame I carried from being exposed to domestic violence from a young age and from growing up in a culture that demanded silence around pain and trauma.

I realised that many people avoid teaching factual information, either because they do not know it or because the topics are considered taboo. Instead of offering comprehensive knowledge, communities often promote purity culture, leaving adolescents and later adults without the information they need to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health. This lack of evidence-based education ripples into every aspect of life: limiting access to employment, harming mental health, reinforcing cycles of poverty, and weakening our ability to support one another through conflict, pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum challenges, grief, illness, and healthy coping.

Lizaflorina
MERU COUNTY



**My
Voice
Matters**



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Growing up, I witnessed domestic violence far too young. I remember my father arriving home drunk, arguments escalating, and my mother reaching a point of desperation where she handed him the knife she had been using to peel potatoes, asking him to end her life. Another memory from Class 8 is of passing my parents' bedroom window and seeing my father pinning my mother to the wall, beating her again. These were only fragments of the chaos that lived in our home. Later, in my all-girls secondary school, I realised that many other homes looked like mine, or worse. Girls shared stories of domestic violence, defilement, assault, peer pressure, and self-harm, yet despite countless motivational speakers, no one addressed the real issues shaping our grades, identities, and futures.

Awareness, for me, became the exposure and education that helped me understand myself and life better. I realised that mental health, civic awareness, sexual and reproductive health rights, and feminism must intersect if people's quality of life is to truly improve. That realisation led me to find my agency, expressed through creating Power FEMSpace, a safe space where women and young people could learn about their rights, share their experiences, and feel empowered to speak against discrimination and injustice. Advocacy taught me that everyone's story matters and that personal experience often fuels one's direction on the journey toward justice.

Through YW4A, I met powerful young advocates from Kenya, Egypt, Palestine, and South Sudan, with different lives and

Lizaflorina

“

So many of us come from generations of violence where trauma, silence, and harmful norms are passed down, trapping families and societies in cycles of poverty and instability. These personal and collective experiences (of young women) helped me understand the urgency of transformative, intersectional advocacy...

Cynthia's own story inspired her to create safe spaces for widows, young women, and queer people to exist freely and heal, and in turn her leadership inspired many of us, including me, to speak bravely and use our lived experiences to push for systemic change.

- Lizaflorina.



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backgrounds brought together by a shared pursuit of dignity, freedom, and peace. Each person offered insights that others could transform into strategy, growth, and action. Being part of the YW4A movement helped me understand how harmful it is when institutions try to separate issues that are deeply interconnected. Human rights, SRHR, mental health, governance, and social norms cannot be addressed in isolation. Understanding these intersections allowed me to contribute meaningfully to the collective effort toward healing, justice, and sustainable change, reclaiming my power and telling my story from a place of healing rather than shame.

Since then, I have stepped into public spaces, speaking on panels and using my voice and lived experience to show how civil society, religious leaders, and governments can work together around evidence and accountability. Recognising the influence of faith leaders, I focus on strengthening their understanding of gender justice, trauma, SRHR, civic rights, and public budgeting, so that advocacy for water, healthcare, and education is seen as part of their responsibility. Churches reach people weekly in ways few institutions can. Our communities may be poor, but our voices are not powerless.

YW4A did not give me a new purpose; it illuminated the purpose that had always been within me and provided the tools, language, and community to bring it fully to life!

Lizaflorina



A core part of my sustainability plan is digital storytelling, using real stories and lived experiences to advocate for justice. Stories soften hearts, shift beliefs, and turn statistics into people.

My own story gave me courage, and now I want storytelling to give communities that same power. My journey of change is one of healing, awareness, agency, and voice, a journey from silence and trauma to leadership rooted in justice and dignity.

- Lizaflorina.

Where Skill Became Security

Melody was married at the age of 20, shortly after completing high school. With no formal skills or employment at the time, she entered marriage financially dependent on her husband, who held two university degrees and a stable job. He became the family's sole provider, a role that left Melody vulnerable. Her husband controlled all financial resources for both Melody and their child, at times deliberately withholding support. This financial control gradually escalated into emotional abuse and, at its peak, direct threats to her life.

Fearing for her safety, Melody made the difficult decision to leave the marriage and return to her parents' home. Determined to rebuild her life and provide for her child, she found support in her parents, who recognised her resolve and enrolled her in a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institution to study welding.

Entering a male-dominated field was daunting, but it marked the beginning of Melody's journey toward independence.

While studying, Melody took on casual jobs to meet daily needs, including cleaning a church. It was here that she learned about the Young Women for Awareness (YW4A) initiative through the church pastor. She joined the programme as part of Cohort 2 and began attending FEMspace sessions, safe, supportive spaces where young women could learn, heal, and grow together.

Through FEMspace and the Rise Up programme, Melody gained a deeper understanding of her rights. For the first time, she was able to identify and name the violence she had experienced in her marriage. Participating in storytelling sessions enabled her to reflect on her journey, while Psychosocial First Aid (PFA) training supported her healing process and helped her rebuild her sense of self-worth and emotional strength.

As Melody continued to engage with YW4A, her confidence grew significantly. She began taking on visible leadership roles, regularly serving as the master of ceremonies during YW4A reflection meetings and confidently leading prayers at her church.

Beyond physical spaces, Melody found her voice online, using social media platforms such as TikTok to

Melody

MERU COUNTY





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document her welding work and share her personal journey. By doing so, she challenges gender stereotypes in a traditionally male-dominated profession and inspires other young women to pursue non-traditional career paths.



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Today, Melody faces her male colleagues with confidence and pride, no longer defined by fear or dependence.

Melody's journey is one of resilience, courage, and growth. From a place of fear and dependency, she has emerged as an empowered young woman, a skilled welder, and an advocate for women's rights. Through YW4A, she has reclaimed her voice and also chosen to use it to uplift others in her community.



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Melody



Through YW4A, I learned about my rights and understood the violence I had endured. I now participate in discussions on amending the Sexual Offences Act and have gained advocacy skills. Storytelling has given me the power to share my story and inspire others.

-Melody.



Palestine

Palestinian embroidery is a language of its own. Each pattern holds memory, place, and history. Tatreez is record-keeping, resistance, and continuity stitched by hand.

The accounts from Palestine speak to living and organising under constraint. They reflect young women who claim space, confront violence, and insist on dignity despite structural barriers. These accounts show how voice is sustained when freedom is restricted, and why collective memory matters.

Learning Why Voice Matters

A year ago, Athar was a shy girl, always sitting quietly in her corner, feeling as if life were racing ahead while she stood still.

Then she got a message from Sajeda: *“Come join us in the Noon for Change (RiseUp! Leadership training) programme.”*

Her heart skipped a beat. Speak in front of people? Impossible! But her curiosity got the better of her, and she thought, Why not give it a try?

When she first walked in, her hands were trembling and her voice barely audible. But when she took a deep breath and spoke about her fear, everyone clapped and encouraged her. For the first time, she felt like her voice mattered. Then the workshops began. She learned to lead rather than follow. She realised how important it was to protect herself and to speak up about difficult topics like domestic violence and harassment. She understood the meaning of inclusion when she saw girls with disabilities getting a fair chance to run for elections.

Once, she was asked to facilitate a Zoom session. Her heart dropped to her knees, but she turned on her camera and said, *“This is a safe space, girls. Speak freely.”* The session ended successfully, and in that moment, she knew that fear was behind her.

She returned to her neighbourhood full of energy. She led

awareness sessions on domestic violence, spoke at her university about harassment, and encouraged many girls to raise their voices. Today, Athar walks with her head held high and tells those who hesitate: *“Change starts with a small step... don't let fear block your sunshine.”* She, who once stayed silent, has become a leader spreading hope wherever she goes.

Since then, Athar hasn't stopped at the program's end. Every time a new opportunity comes her way, she leaps at it without hesitation. She's been volunteering in other workshops, teaching children communication skills and visiting families in need, offering kind words and accurate information. Whenever she sees a shy girl, she sits beside her and says,

“I was just like you but one step changed my whole life.”

Athar
SALFEET



Speaking Out Became Normal

My journey with the YW4A programme began after one of the trainers encouraged me to join the Transformative Leadership training. At the time, I did not fully understand why I had been chosen. What I knew was that I needed space away from the constant tension and arguments at home. The training included an overnight stay, which gave me a rare break from that environment.

For those few days, I felt safe. There was no shouting, no conflict. I could speak during discussions and know that I would be heard. That feeling stayed with me. During the sessions, we discussed ideas that are often mentioned but rarely explained in ways that relate to real life. One of those was feminism. For the first time, it was not abstract. It was about my body, choices, safety, and my right to speak.

After the training, I began facilitating sessions with other young women. I worked in different centres and later supported the formation of a young women's support group in Anata refugee camp. Many of the girls I worked with were dealing with harassment, pressure, and electronic blackmail. Some were afraid to speak because they feared being blamed or punished. Using what I had learned through YW4A, I helped create spaces where they could talk openly, understand their rights, and support one another.

Facilitating these sessions changed how I saw myself.

I became more confident speaking in front of groups and leading discussions. That confidence also affected my life at home. Growing up, I often felt that my father favoured my younger brother. I dealt with that by staying quiet and keeping my feelings to myself. Through the programme, I learned that silence was not helping me. I learned to express my needs clearly, using words instead of withdrawing.

A major turning point came when I stood up for myself during an incident of harassment. It was frightening, but I did not freeze. I acted. I used my voice and shouted so others would hear. I even threw my water bottle at him as he tried to run away.

Hala
JERUSALEM



Hala

That moment made everything real. The concepts we discussed in training were no longer just words. They were something I could use to protect myself.

Before this, my father insisted that my younger brother, who is seven years younger than me, walk me home from the bus stop for protection. After that incident, I refused. I told my family clearly that I could protect myself. For the first time, I truly believed it.

Through YW4A, I also participated in legal and media advocacy training, including exposure visits outside Palestine, such as to Turkey. These experiences helped me understand how laws, media, and public narratives affect women's lives, and how young women can engage with these systems rather than feel excluded from them.

I later joined the Young Women's Reference Group, where I learned how to manage responsibilities, stay committed, and work with others to plan and follow through on actions. I also continued raising awareness among other young women, especially around harassment, blackmail, and safety.

At home and in my community, the change became visible. I was no longer quiet or withdrawn. I became someone who spoke, who supported others, and who was listened to. YW4A did not change who I am. It gave me the tools to trust myself and to use my voice when it matters.

“Through the training, I gained the tools and skills necessary to confront the challenges I face, which greatly boosted my self-confidence.

- Hala.



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A Voice Put to Use

Haneen was married at a young age and suddenly found herself carrying responsibilities she had not expected. While other girls her age were preparing for their high school exams, she was doing the same while pregnant.

The psychological pressure was heavy, and her mental state was fragile. Still, she made a clear decision not to stop. She sat for her high school exams while becoming a mother for the first time, trying to understand who she was and where she was going, all at once.

Despite the challenges, Haneen stayed on course. She continued her education while giving birth and raising a child, proving to herself that she could move forward, even under pressure.

A real turning point came when she joined the Noon for Change (RiseUp! Leadership) programme through her sister, who was already volunteering with the project. That experience opened a new door. She began to understand her right to education more deeply and to recognise the importance of awareness, commitment, and ambition.

Haneen did not keep this growth to herself. She started speaking with young girls about the dangers of child marriage, using her own experience to show the emotional and social consequences many girls face.

Through her actions, she showed that change is possible.

She went on to complete her university degree and later earned a master's degree, showing that determination can overcome even the most difficult circumstances. Alongside her studies, she volunteered with several organisations, giving her time and energy to her community. In time, this work led to a job she had worked hard for and truly deserved.

Today, Haneen lives with the results of choosing to keep going. She is a mother, a graduate, and an active member of her community, determining her future herself.

Haneen
SALFEET



Using Words With Purpose

I was always looking for change, but not the kind that happens slowly on its own. I wanted something deeper, something that shifts how you see yourself. When I joined Noon for Change (YW4A), I did not expect it to affect me the way it did. I did not know I was about to understand myself more clearly.

In our first session, we sat in a circle. Everyone carried something with them: a story, a fear, or a doubt about whether their voice mattered. When the facilitator asked, "How do you see yourself?", I could not answer right away. Instead, I asked myself a different question, "How do I want to see myself?"

I have always worked with words. As a journalist and media professional, I believe in speaking. But the programme helped me realise that speaking is not enough. What matters is believing that your words deserve space and that what you say can reach people and stay with them.

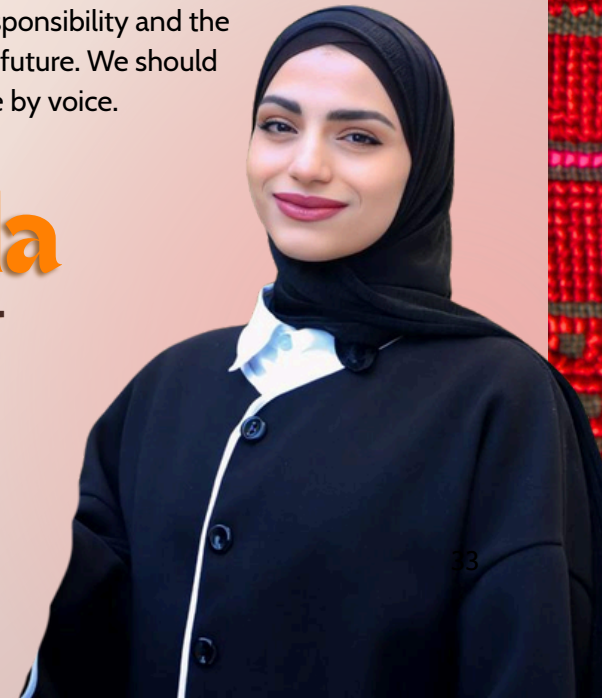
During one exercise, we were asked to write a letter to ourselves five years into the future. I stopped and asked myself honestly what I wanted. I saw myself speaking about women's issues without hesitation. I saw myself standing firmly in my work, talking about subjects people prefer to avoid. I saw my words reaching someone younger and helping her believe in herself. That was when I realised that Noon for Change was showing me what was already there inside me, unapologetically.

Did I change? Yes, I did. But not by becoming someone else. I learned that real change is about returning to yourself with more confidence and clarity. Today, I speak more freely. I face things that used to scare me. I trust my voice, and I use it.

My name is Sajeda Abu Aseeda. I am a journalist, media professional, and social activist advocating for women's rights. I believe that change starts from within, through a brave word, a fearless decision, and a deep belief that each of us has a role to play.

Noon for Change did not end for me. It began inside me, and it continues. I know now that I am not alone. Our voices, mine and those of other women who share this vision, are the beginning of the transformation we are working towards. I believe that change is a responsibility and the we should not wait for the future. We should build it, step by step, voice by voice.

Sajeda
SALFEET



Making Accountability Possible Under Occupation

My name is Yassmeen, and I am from Jerusalem, Palestine.

I was born into a family that my parents describe as divided into two generations: before Oslo and after the Oslo Accords. I belong to the post-Oslo generation. My parents hoped to raise their children in a life shaped by justice, equality, opportunity, and dignity. Under Israeli occupation, that hope remained out of reach.

My earliest awareness of life came in 2000, during the Second Intifada. I was five years old when tear gas was fired into my school bus at a newly established checkpoint between my home and my school. Soon after, I was moved to a public school in Jerusalem, where my mother had to buy me a wooden desk so I could continue my education.

As the Apartheid Separation Wall was built, my school changed. Teachers began disappearing, forced to leave due to increasingly restrictive policies. By the time I graduated from high school, I had never had a mathematics teacher or an English teacher. That was when I made my first independent decision: my university education. I had always wanted to study international law, but my parents did not support that choice. Pharmaceutical sciences was the only option they were willing to accept. As for justice, they believed life itself would teach me

what the law meant.

During my master's degree in Public Health Administration, I spent long hours collecting questionnaires and analysing data. Yet despite all the research, I felt disconnected. Something was missing. That feeling became clear during a visit to a primary healthcare clinic. Nearly one hundred women, many of them young and seemingly healthy, were sitting together in a crowded room. As I listened, I realised their conversations were about social realities as fixed and unchangeable. Violence, discrimination and exclusion were discussed as facts of life.

In that moment, I understood that social injustice was affecting these women far more deeply than physical illness. This was not only a health issue. It was a crisis of dignity, fairness, and basic human rights.

Yassmeen
JERUSALEM





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I knew I needed tools, structure, and a movement that worked for women's rights. I needed to be part of something that could turn awareness into action.

One night at 11:30 pm, I saw a Facebook post from the YWCA of Palestine announcing the opening of applications for the YW4A Initiative. I opened it immediately. The focus on young women's leadership, knowledge-sharing, and engagement at local and international levels spoke directly to what I had been searching for. I applied that same night.

After the RiseUp! Leadership training, I completed a Training of Trainers course and began sharing this knowledge with young women in Jerusalem. We created safe spaces where women could speak, be heard, and support one another. I then took training on social behaviour and the use of social norms, which became especially important as attacks in Palestine intensified. It helped ensure our work remained inclusive and effective without alienating people.

Through media and legal advocacy training with international facilitators, we developed tools to push for change. My group focused on early marriage, producing a short video to raise awareness and support advocacy efforts.

In 2024, I participated in the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) forum in South Africa, where I shared the feminist consultation methodology we had been using in Palestine, grounded in women's lived realities.

Yassmeen

“As my role grew, I began supporting and guiding groups of young women. Together, we started developing initiatives to be implemented in the near future. I also hosted a global webinar for International Youth Day, bringing together young people from around the world to exchange ideas and experiences.

I was also appointed as the representative for the young women's reference group in Jerusalem. In this role, I helped lead accountability dialogues with the Ministers of Labour, Justice, and Women's Affairs.

- Yassmeen.



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The focus of the methodology presentation was on sexual violence and other forms of violence against women and girls.



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We addressed barriers facing young women and pushed for legal protections, including the urgent need for a Family Protection Law against violence. These meetings were about making young women's voices heard at the highest levels and working towards concrete change.

My participation in international spaces, including CSW69, reflects what is possible. Many of my colleagues were unable to join due to permit and visa restrictions imposed by the occupation. Even so, their absence did not weaken our work. Their strength continues to shape it.



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We keep going, knowing that what we are building now will matter for those who come after us.



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Yassmeen

“ Standing there (at CSW69), telling my story, I wasn't just speaking for myself, I was carrying the voices of every young woman in my community who has been silenced or pushed aside. CSW gave me the stage, but my community gave me the strength.

- Yassmeen.



South Sudan

In South Sudan, meaning is often carried through texture rather than print: beadwork, woven fibres, and hand-crafted forms shaped through care and necessity. These materials speak to resilience built under pressure.

These accounts from young women in South Sudan reflect leadership forged in displacement, economic uncertainty, and social rebuilding. They speak to advocacy that happens close to home and accountability that begins in community. These accounts show how agency is exercised even when systems are fragile.

Choosing School Over Early Marriage

Agnes Night Wani was born in 1994 in the Lokoya community of Eastern Equatoria, South Sudan.

She grew up in a context where girls' education was not prioritised and where decisions about girls' lives were made without their consent. As a young girl, she was denied schooling and forced into early marriage. She chose to leave that situation and return to school, determined to complete her education despite the risks and uncertainty.

In early 2021, Agnes joined the first cohort of the YW4A programme in South Sudan. She was among the earliest participants in the RiseUp! Transformative Leadership training and quickly distinguished herself through her discipline and commitment. The training strengthened her understanding of women's human rights instruments, advocacy strategies, referral pathways for survivors of violence, and community mobilisation approaches.

She went on to become one of the programme's strongest Trainers of Trainers. She facilitated RiseUp! sessions, supported new cohorts, and mentored young women who were hesitant to speak in public. She helped establish and strengthen safe spaces where young women could discuss early marriage, sexual and gender-based violence, school dropouts, and exclusion from decision-making spaces.

Agnes played an active role in applying the World YWCA Feminist Consultation Methodology in her community. She participated in consultations that gathered young women's priorities and translated them into structured advocacy messages. She supported key informant interviews with community leaders, local authorities, and stakeholders to address harmful practices and barriers affecting girls' education and safety. In Terekeka County, she facilitated re-engagement meetings with Cohort 3 participants, supporting them to refine advocacy plans and sustain safe space activities.

Agnes

**LOKOYA COMMUNITY,
EASTERN EQUATORIA**



Agnes

Her advocacy extended to media engagement. Although initially nervous, she began participating in radio talk shows addressing early marriage, girls' education, and gender-based violence. Over time, she became confident handling live questions and articulating clear demands. She contributed to advocacy messages supporting the Western Equatoria Girl Child Education Bill and engaged officials from the Ministries of Gender and Education regarding progress on girls' protection and education.

Agnes also represented young women from South Sudan in broader platforms. She participated in joint convenings on Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR), Gender Justice, and Power of Women lesson-sharing spaces. She contributed to International Youth Day engagements under YW4A and was featured in related global communications. She took part in the International Day of the Girl global webinar on navigating online spaces safely, speaking about digital risks facing young women in South Sudan. She also participated in Geneva Peace Week discussions on women, peace, and security, where she shared perspectives from grassroots young women leaders.

In 2023, she enrolled in a degree programme in Gender Studies at East African University in Juba. Her academic training strengthened her analysis of gender inequality and reinforced her practical advocacy experience.

Throughout this period, Agnes carried financial responsibility as the breadwinner in her family. During the pause in YW4A funding between January and October 2024, she faced

“
They decided my future for me when I was still a girl. Going back to school was the first decision I made for myself.
- Agnes.



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Agnes

increased economic pressure but continued mentoring young women and supporting safe space activities.

Her commitment led to her recruitment by the Christian Agency for Peace and Development (CAPaD) as a Gender Officer under YW4A Pathway 3. In this role, she supported community dialogues, programme coordination, and stakeholder engagement. When CAPaD became the YW4A country lead in October 2024, she assumed stronger coordination and mentorship responsibilities, contributing to planning processes and ensuring young women's priorities were reflected in implementation.

Agnes also used her own personal resources to write and record an original song about women rising and being heard. The song has been performed at YW4A activities and is widely known among young women, partners, stakeholders, and supporters in South Sudan. It has become part of how participants express collective strength during programme gatherings.

As the economic crisis continued, Agnes sought further professional stability. She now works with Oxfam as a Roving Education Officer, focusing on education access while continuing her advocacy against early marriage and supporting young women's leadership in her community. She has also been recruited as a Programme Manager with Lift Organisation South Sudan, a youth-led organisation advocating for the rights of women and girls in Yambio. She has become a leader others rely on.

“The YW4A programme has totally changed my mindset from being a weak and fearful woman to a strong one. I can now stand up boldly and fight for my rights and the rights of other women in my country. I have gained confidence in participating in political leadership opportunities, and I now want to be a member of parliament someday.

- Agnes.



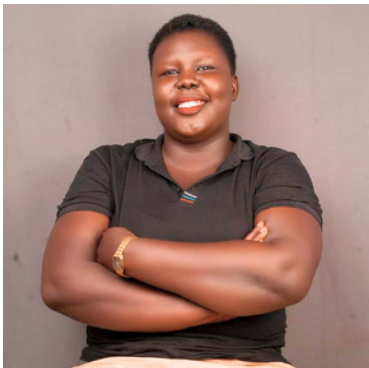
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Holdings Leaders Accountable for Girls' Rights

I come from a community in South Sudan where girls are not given the freedom to speak up or make decisions about their own lives. I know this from personal experience. In my family, I was not allowed to disagree with decisions made for me. I was expected to accept them quietly. Girls' education was not valued, and at a young age I was forced into marriage with an older man. I felt powerless, trapped in a life I had not chosen.

Around me, I saw the same patterns. Girls forced into early marriages. Girls dropping out of school. Cases of rape handled through harmful traditional practices, where the survivor was forced to marry the perpetrator to avoid shame. Many girls my age never had the chance to complete school simply because they were girls. Seeing this made me realise that things had to change.

When the YW4A project was launched in Yambio by SHWDO, I attended the introductory workshop. I was immediately interested in the goals of the project and the focus on young women. When they announced they were recruiting for the first cohort, I signed up without hesitation. That decision marked the beginning of my leadership journey. Through YW4A, I attended the orientation, advocacy sessions, and the RiseUp! Transformative Leadership training.

I also took part in sustainability sessions and other capacity-building activities. These experiences gave me practical leadership skills. I learned how to mobilise my community, how to engage leaders, and how to speak confidently about harmful practices such as child marriage and gender-based violence.

At first, I was afraid to speak in public. I remember being invited to my first radio talk show in 2022. I was nervous, and the questions felt difficult. But with continued mentorship and training, I gained confidence. I learned about women's rights instruments, referral pathways, and how to respond to tough questions with facts and clarity. Over time, I became comfortable speaking on radio programmes and participating in state-level advocacy activities organised by YW4A and SHWDO.



Hipaingba

YAMBIO, WESTERN EQUATORIA



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Hipaingba

I helped develop advocacy messages calling for the approval of the Western Equatoria Girl Child Education Bill. I took part in consultations with stakeholders, where we discussed the challenges young women face and what actions were needed to address gender-based violence. Today, I can confidently ask officials from the Ministry of Gender and the Ministry of Education about progress on the Girl Child Bill.

I now lead a safe space where I train other young women to speak up and know their rights. I support them in participating in community meetings and in challenging harmful traditions. I have also begun planning small business initiatives, including a local chocolate and coffee project, to strengthen economic opportunities in my community.

My parents have seen the growth in me. Today, when I tell them I need to travel to attend a workshop in Nairobi, they support me because they see the impact of this work.

Currently, I serve as a Programme Manager for Lift Organisation South Sudan, a youth-led organisation advocating for the rights of women and girls in Yambio. This role reflects the trust my community now places in me.

YW4A did not just give me training. It gave me the knowledge, confidence, and space to act. I no longer remain silent when I see injustice. I speak, I organise, and I hold leaders accountable. My life began in a space where I was not allowed to decide for myself. Today, I help other girls to find their own voices

“ I was once told to accept decisions made for me. Now I sit in consultations and ask leaders what they are doing to protect girls.

- Hipaingba.

Holding Community in Displacement

At just 22 years old, Keji Viola Bosco was selected by her community to lead an internally displaced persons (IDP) site hosting returnees and displaced families.

With limited prior experience, she stepped into a demanding role that required daily engagement with community concerns, many of which directly affected women and girls. She worked with NGOs and government partners to ensure access to services, particularly for survivors of violence and those facing exclusion from support systems.

In 2021, Keji joined the YW4A programme. Through the Rise Up! and feminist community mobilisation trainings, she strengthened her understanding of women's rights, advocacy, and community leadership. The training marked a shift in how she approached leadership, moving from responding to immediate needs to organising collective action and supporting women's participation in decision-making spaces.

Since joining YW4A in 2021, Keji has consistently participated in national and regional learning spaces that have strengthened her leadership practice. She participated in a joint convening on lesson-sharing for the Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR), Gender Justice, and Power of Women initiatives, where she engaged with feminist movements across Africa. She also received training in the World YWCA Feminist Consultation Methodology and completed the RiseUp!

Transformative Leadership training. As part of the 16 Days of Activism in Juba, she took part in a Networking, Partnership, and Coalition Building workshop, further strengthening her ability to work across organisations and movements.

As her confidence and skills grew, Keji began representing young women's voices in local dialogues and public forums. She played an active role in recruiting new YW4A cohorts in Juba, encouraging other young women to step into leadership and advocacy roles. Through YW4A, she also participated in regional advocacy spaces, including the Women Deliver Conference in Rwanda in 2023 and the PALU Conference in Addis Ababa in 2024.

These experiences enabled her to engage with policymakers and women's rights advocates across the region and apply those lessons within her own community.

Keji

JUBA (IDP AND RETURNEE COMMUNITIES)





FILM NEGATIVE



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Keji

Today, Keji serves as a Gender and Monitoring and Evaluation Officer. In this role, she mentors young women, supports peace dialogues, and works to ensure women and girls are actively involved in shaping decisions that affect their lives. Her leadership is rooted in consistency, accountability, and a commitment to making participation meaningful rather than tokenistic.

Her growth has not gone unnoticed by those closest to her.

Her father, George Kwaje Agrey, reflects,
"I've seen her grow into a confident leader who gives wise advice and uplifts her siblings."

Her husband, Bosco Felix Alfred, adds,
"She's hardworking, dedicated, and a true partner in both family and community life."

Keji's journey shows how young women, when trusted with responsibility and equipped with the right tools, can lead effectively even in the most complex and fragile contexts. Her work continues to shape safer spaces for women and girls in South Sudan.

Women and young women who formally participated in the 2015 peace negotiations in South Sudan were only 15%. However, this increased to 33% in 2018. Civil society organisations' advocacy paid off, and more women could present the voices of conflict-affected persons regarding issues of governance, security, economic recovery, and social cohesion. Hence the importance of including young women to shape the conversation during the peace process.

- Keji.

Opening Safe Spaces in Juba

Pamela Dawa is 28 years old and lives in Juba, South Sudan. She joined the YW4A programme in 2022 after being introduced and mentored by Keji Viola, a member of the first cohort.

Before joining the programme, Pamela describes herself as a quiet person who rarely spoke during workshops or public discussions. Her first orientation session and the RiseUp! Leadership training changed that. Through the training, she began to participate more actively and gained confidence in speaking with others. Over time, she started volunteering regularly and attending more workshops and meetings. This helped her strengthen her communication skills and better understand the challenges young women face in everyday spaces such as homes, public transport, churches, and markets.

As her confidence grew, Pamela asked to support the programme in a more formal role. She was later recommended to serve as a Young Women Reference Focal Person with the Christian Agency for Peace and Development (CAPaD). In this position, she coordinated activities, mentored younger participants, and supported programme implementation.

One of her contributions was helping recruit and train Cohort 4 participants using the RiseUp! leadership training model. She also helped operationalise several safe spaces for young women in Juba, including at Elite High School, the Presbyterian

Church community, and the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Gudele. These safe spaces provided environments where young women could discuss their experiences, learn about their rights, and build leadership and mentorship skills.

At Elite High School, Pamela helped facilitate a mentorship session attended by 36 girls aged 15 to 30. The session focused on helping young women identify their strengths, support one another, and discuss issues affecting them in their communities. The RiseUp! leadership model and the Feminist Consultation Methodology were used to guide discussions on the challenges young women face and how they can organise themselves to address them.

Pamela supported mentoring sessions for 30 young women in the Presbyterian safe space in Hai Referendum.

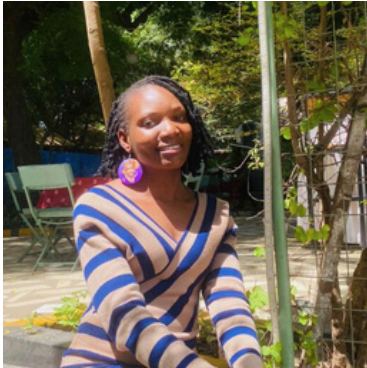
Pamela
JUBA





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Discussions focused on leadership, public speaking, and understanding rights, while participants reflected on the barriers that limit young women's participation and explored ways to challenge harmful social norms.



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She also facilitated discussions in the Seventh Day Adventist safe space in Gudele on early and forced marriage, early and unintended pregnancy, and cyberbullying. In one session, a participant shared her personal story for the first time, saying the safe space gave her the courage to speak openly.



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Pamela organised community dialogues on gender equality, human rights, and social justice. In Jebel Timan, a discussion on parental care and child safety prompted several mothers to begin bringing their babies to the market rather than leaving them alone at home. In the Gurei area, she convened small-group discussions on neighbourhood safety, during which women raised concerns about night attacks and the lack of response from local authorities.



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Beyond programme activities, Pamela also used the knowledge gained through YW4A in her own family. She helped her aunt reclaim family land taken by a land grabber by guiding her through the legal process and identifying the relevant authorities. Her aunt eventually secured legal ownership of the land.

Today, she continues supporting young women through safe spaces, community dialogues, and training sessions.

Pamela

“Before joining the programme, I was quiet and rarely spoke in workshops. Through RiseUp! training and mentoring, I realised that as a young woman I also have the power to influence others and inspire change.”

- Pamela.

Holding the Line for Girls in Crisis

I started my work in community development while studying nursing and volunteering with SHWDO in Yambio. When I joined the YW4A initiative, I was still learning how to respond to the challenges young women and girls face. The training and mentorship I received helped me build the skills I needed to support them more effectively.

During my hospital attachment, I saw many young girls coming in to give birth at a very early age. Some were dealing with complications, and many were clearly traumatised. These experiences stayed with me. I realised that beyond medical care, these girls needed protection, follow-up, and someone to stand with them after they left the hospital.

Through YW4A and my work with SHWDO, I gained practical skills in case management, referral pathways, and supporting survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. I learned how to assess cases, connect survivors with services, follow up with families, and work with community leaders to prevent further harm.

One case that affected me deeply involved a 17-year-old girl who had survived abuse and was rejected by her family. I followed up with her case and continued engaging her father, explaining the impact of abandoning his daughter and the importance of supporting her recovery. After several discussions, he agreed to take her back home.

That decision changed her situation. She later rejoined the YW4A programme and is now rebuilding her life with support and stability.

Through this work, I have earned trust within SHWDO and among other civil society actors in Yambio. I regularly support young women, handle sensitive cases, and ensure survivors are referred and followed up properly. I also participate in community awareness activities to help people understand violence, early pregnancy, and the responsibilities families have toward girls.

For me, leadership means being reliable, following cases through, and making sure young women are not left alone once they ask for help. YW4A strengthened my ability to do this work, and make a difference in the lives of the girls who are now safer and supported.

Roselyn

YAMBIO, WESTERN
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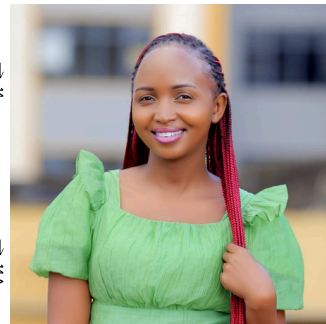
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To the young women whose stories form the fabric of this booklet, thank you. Each story is a thread, and together they form a shared story shaped by your passion to change the world.



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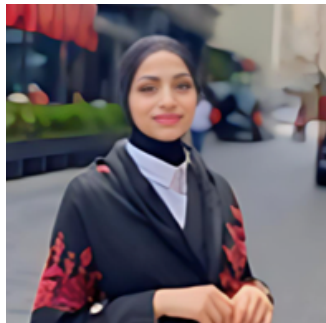
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