



Girls Improving Resilience
Through Livelihood & Health

STORIES OF CHANGE

SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS PROGRAM

JULY 2024

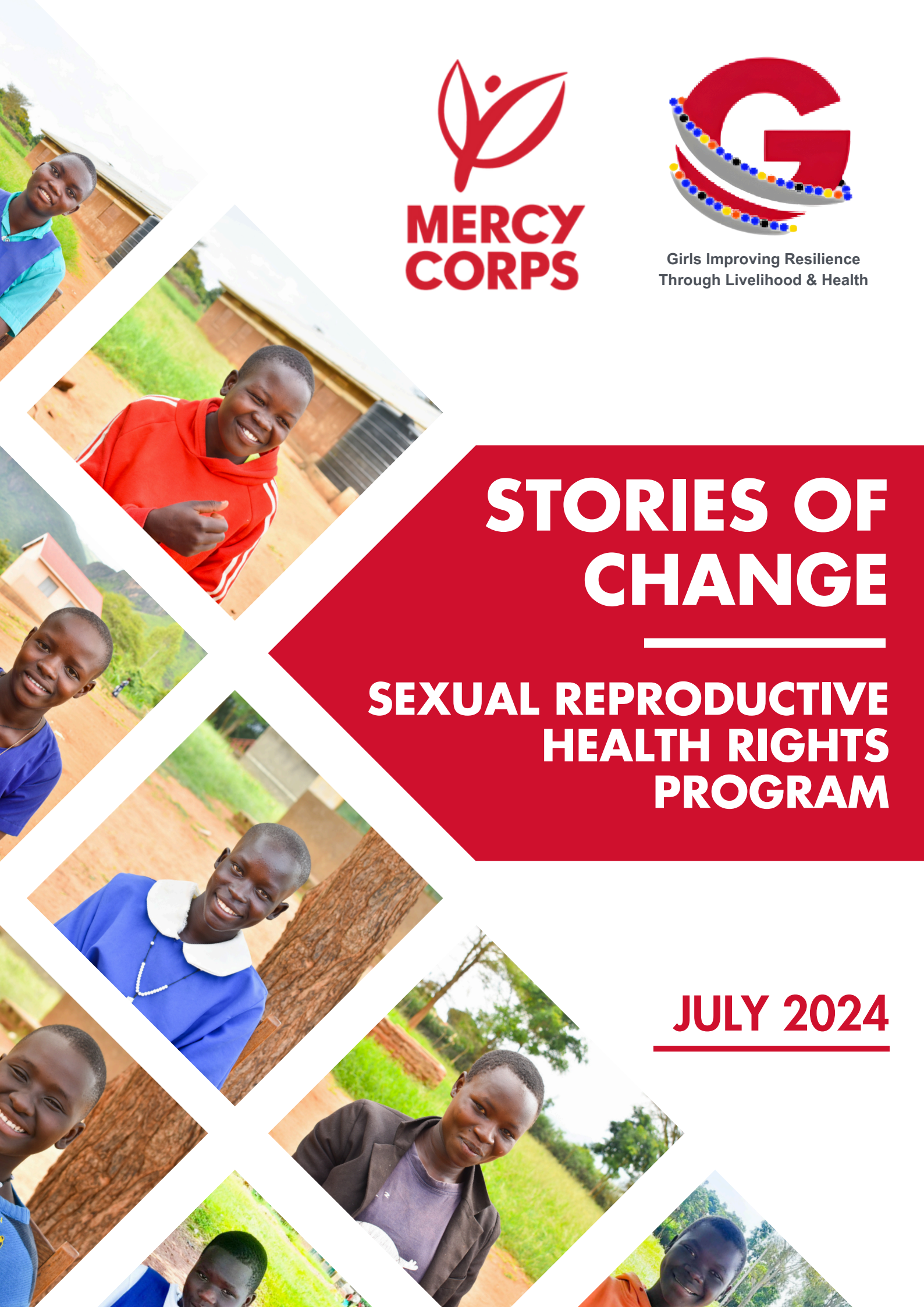


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Preface

This storybook contains ten powerful testimonies of transformation from adolescent girls and boys, as well as teachers, who have consented to tell their stories. All storytellers were participants in the GIRL-H Sexual Reproductive Health & Rights programme, delivered by Mercy Corps in the districts of Moroto, Amudat, Kaabong, Kotido and Karenga in the Karamoja region of Uganda during 2022-23.

Mercy Corps would like to express our gratitude to the participants, their families and schools for their cooperation, which was instrumental in the implementation of the program. Their support ensured improved and sustainable access to information and products on sexual reproductive health and rights for young people in the targeted districts. Mercy Corps would like to acknowledge the outstanding contributions of our participants, teachers, and implementing partners, including Wabibi Pads, Nakere Rural Women Activists (NARWOA), and Karamoja Peace and Development Agency (KAPDA), as well as the District Health Departments and Community-Based Services of Moroto, Amudat, Kaabong, Kotido and Karenga District Local Governments.

Mercy Corps also extends our appreciation to all other stakeholders who were involved in this journey from 2021 to 2023. Their active participation, valuable suggestions and support are much appreciated.

Overview

The Sexual Reproductive Health, and Rights (SRHR) component of the Girls Improving Resilience through Livelihood and Health (GIRL-H) program aims to improve girls' well-being. The program is focused on the following objectives:

- 1. Adolescents and youth in Uganda have improved awareness and sustainable access to SRH health services and products.**
- 2. Improved gender attitudes toward girls' uptake of Sexual Reproductive Health products and services.**

Using a safe space approach, the program has supported 5,179 (50% male and 50% female) adolescents and young people in the uptake of SRHR information. Since 2022, 73% of the enrolled participants have completed the SRHR curriculum, resulting in a significant enhancement of their knowledge of SRHR and improved access to SRHR services in the five districts of Moroto, Karenga, Kaabong, Kotido, and Amudat within Karamoja, Uganda. The program has also trained 500 (150 male, 350 female) parents in making bar soap and reusable sanitary pads, which has led to increased access to menstrual products for hundreds of young people in rural communities.

Objectives of the Storybook:



This storybook highlights the journey of adolescent girls and boys who participated in the GIRL-H SRHR programme from 2022-2023. It showcases the programme's successful outcomes in increasing the accessibility and availability of SRHR products and services, as well as its gradual impact on transforming social norms, attitudes, and behaviors.

The story book is targeted at a range of actors and stakeholders in the SRHR sector in Uganda and aims to provide insights and perspectives about context-appropriate SRHR practice, particularly in the Karamoja region.

The Storybook will address the following key learning questions:

- 1. What is the impact of the GIRL-H (SRH) interventions (human, social) on well-being (health and social) of adolescent girls, boys, and young people?*
- 2. What context-specific factors facilitate meaningful access to SRH products and services?*

Chapter 1: Empowerment and Confidence



This chapter highlights the importance of using a safe space approach to build knowledge, confidence and economic empowerment among young people, particularly girls, to manage their menstrual health and overall well-being.

Stories:

1. The SRHR Program has Created a Safe Space for our Pupils
2. Empowering Through Skills: Education & Entrepreneurship
3. I am certain about my confidence when my menstruation cycle starts

The SRHR Program has Created a Safe Space for our Pupils



Lucy, Senior Woman Teacher, Rengen Primary School, Kotido

"Before the implementation of the Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Program, our students lacked access to comprehensive information and resources, leading to uncertainty and confusion about their sexual and reproductive health. However, the program has created a safe and open environment, empowering students to express themselves freely and seek guidance from teachers.

Through the SRHR program, we have addressed myths and misconceptions, providing accurate and comprehensive information on sexual and reproductive

health. This has significantly reduced confusion and anxiety among students. As teachers, we have received training on creating a safe space for adolescents to ask questions and share their experiences, leading to increased openness and discussion about sexual and reproductive health.

The program has also provided us with resources on referral pathways to support students at risk of sexual abuse or harassment, particularly benefiting our female students who previously lacked support from their parents. We have sustained guidance and counseling sessions, including hands-on training in pad making and bar soap making, as well as individual and group counseling sessions.

The impact of the program has been remarkable, with over 500 pupils accessing information and services on sexual reproductive health rights. Our students have become confident and self-assured, sensitizing their peers on sexual reproductive health rights and becoming agents of social change. We advocate for similar programs to be implemented in other schools, as they have already inspired other girls in the community to attend school. Our students have testified to finding real help and support through the program."

¹ The role of a senior woman teacher and senior man teacher is to foster a positive school culture, build relationships with pupils and parents, and offer guidance on important issues like reproductive health and rights. They are role models, offering wisdom and experience to students and colleagues, helping create a supportive and inclusive environment.

Empowering Through Skills: Education & Entrepreneurship

Laura, 15 years old



"Before participating in the SRHR program, managing my menstruation was a significant challenge due to lack of access to pads, leading to difficulties in attending school and socializing. However, through the program, I acquired essential skills to manage my menstrual cycles, including making and using reusable pads, tailoring, and maintaining personal hygiene.

With my newfound skills, I started producing reusable pads during school holidays, selling them to girls and young women in the community, and earning up to 60,000 Uganda Shillings (16.15 USD) weekly. This entrepreneurial venture also allowed me to educate customers on

menstrual hygiene management and promote the use of reusable pads.

Additionally, I utilize school holidays to interact with peers, advising them on menstrual management and debunking myths, such as the fear of wearing knickers. I have taught them how to make and use reusable pads, and they now effectively manage their menstruation.

The program also empowered me with knowledge on preventing teenage pregnancy, leading me to make informed decisions about my relationships and sexual health. I have chosen to abstain from sexual activity, focusing on completing my education and pursuing my aspiration to become a nurse.

Furthermore, the program has enhanced my confidence in public speaking, enabling me to ask questions, seek information, and advocate for my needs regarding my body, relationships, and sexual health."

I am certain about my confidence when my menstruation cycle starts

Marena, 14 years



"Before attending the SRHR sessions, I experienced anxiety regarding menstruation due to a lack of guidance and cultural stigma surrounding it in my community. However, the senior woman teacher provided valuable education on menstrual hygiene management, empowering me with knowledge on proper hygiene practices, such as bathing regularly and washing reusable pads to prevent germ spread.

With this newfound understanding, I feel more prepared to manage my menstrual cycle. Notably, I was able to apply the teacher's guidance in a real-life situation when a friend

experienced a blood stain in class. Instead of reacting with embarrassment, I offered support and helped her access a reusable sanitary pad.

I now share my knowledge with peers, reassuring them that menstruation is a natural process and promoting healthy practices like using reusable pads and regular bathing. I also advise on proper pad-changing techniques during heavy flow.

I appreciate the affordability and sustainability of reusable pads, which can be used for up to two years, compared to disposable pads that can cost 3,000 shillings (0.81 USD) per month. I am grateful for the teacher's guidance and am committed to paying it forward by sharing my knowledge with others, promoting a supportive and informed community."

Chapter 2: Support and Solidarity



This theme emphasizes the value of support and solidarity among peers, particularly between boys and girls, to create a safe and encouraging environment for all

Stories:

1. Empowered to Empower Others: I Have Become a Positive Influence
2. Empathy over Mockery: I Have Become a Better Brother and Peer
3. Boys Can Make a Difference: I Support my Sisters during their Menstrual Cycle

Empowered to Empower Others: I Have Become a Positive Influence



Godfrey, 18 years old

During the SRHR sessions, our senior male teacher stressed the significance of surrounding ourselves with positive influences to safeguard our sexual reproductive health and achieve our life goals. Inspired by this message, I reflected on my own friendships and realized that some of my friends were engaging in harmful behaviors such as substance abuse, truancy, and unprotected sex.

Empowered by the knowledge gained from the sessions, I began counseling them on the risks associated with these behaviors.

I chose to maintain close relationships with those who were receptive to my advice and distanced myself from those who were not. As a prefect, I strive to lead by example, demonstrating the importance of good personal hygiene practices such as daily bathing, regular nail trimming, and shaving. Before the sessions, I had not prioritized these habits, but now I recognize their significance in maintaining overall health and preventing sexually transmitted infections.

The sessions also taught me about the importance of abstinence and the risks associated with unprotected sex. I now advise my friends to delay sexual activity until they have completed their education and encourage them to prioritize their safety and well-being. Additionally, I reassure girls that menstruation is a natural part of life, helping to dispel stigma and promote positive attitudes towards menstrual health.

Through these experiences, I have grown into a more informed, responsible, and supportive individual, dedicated to promoting healthy habits and positive relationships among my peers."

Empathy over Mockery: I Have Become a Better Brother and Peer



Emmanuel, 17 years old

"Reflecting on my past experiences, I recall a time when I would laugh at girls who had accidental menstrual stains on their clothes. However, after gaining a deeper understanding of menstrual health and hygiene, I now recognize the importance of supporting and respecting girls during their cycles.

One particular incident stands out in my mind. A classmate had unknowingly started menstruating and had a visible stain on her dress. Instead of mocking her, I discreetly informed her of the situation and offered my sweater to help her cover-

up. This small act of kindness made a significant impact on me.

Furthering my knowledge, I attended SRHR sessions where I learned about the importance of menstrual health and hygiene. I was fascinated by the girls' training on sewing reusable sanitary pads and requested to join in. This experience sparked a passion in me to create reusable pads for my younger sisters, bringing me joy and fulfillment.

Additionally, I gained valuable insights into HIV/AIDS prevention during the sessions. I learned about the importance of abstinence, regular testing, avoiding harmful substances, and seeking support from counselors. Applying this knowledge, I've made conscious choices to avoid negative influences and prioritize healthy relationships.

Through these experiences, I've grown into a more empathetic and supportive individual, dedicated to promoting positive change in my community."

Boys Can Make a Difference: I Support my Sisters during their Menstrual Cycle



Thomas, 16 years old

"During adolescence, I learned the importance of self-control and responsible behavior, particularly regarding relationships and sexuality. Through the SRHR sessions, I understood the value of abstaining from sexual activity and maintaining healthy boundaries. When I am attracted to someone, I practice self-control and keep a safe distance.

I also make conscious choices about the company I keep, avoiding influences that may lead to unhealthy decisions. If friends encourage me to engage in intimate activities, I firmly decline, reminding them that I am still young and prioritize my education and well-being.

Furthermore, I recognize the importance of supporting girls during menstruation. When my younger sister began her menstrual cycle, she was hesitant to confide in me. However, after noticing her discomfort, I encouraged her to open up and offered assistance. I purchased sanitary pads, fetched water for her bath, and provided emotional support. Seeing her confidence restored after receiving help was incredibly fulfilling.

Through these experiences, I have developed essential life skills, including self-awareness, self-control, and empathy. I am committed to maintaining healthy relationships and supporting those around me, particularly during significant life events like menstruation."

Chapter 3: Education and Awareness



This theme highlights the importance of education and awareness about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to enable young people to make informed decisions about their health and well-being.

Stories:

1. SRHR: Helping Girls Break Free from Social Pressures
2. I am now Spreading Awareness about Personal Hygiene and SRHR

SRHR: Helping Girls Break Free from Social Pressures



Teresa, Senior Woman Teacher, Musupo Primary School

"The introduction of the Sexual Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) program at our school has yielded remarkable results. Previously, managing menstrual hygiene posed significant challenges for female students, who were often reluctant to express themselves and discuss their sexual reproductive health concerns. However, we have observed a profound transformation since the program's implementation.

The girls now exhibit increased confidence and empowerment, freely articulating their needs and concerns. A notable improvement in their social dynamics has also been observed. Before the program, some girls were influenced by external peers to consider early marriage. Fortunately, this trend has ceased.

We conduct weekly counseling sessions focusing on menstrual hygiene management to further support the girls' development. Additionally, we have established an on-site tailoring facility, enabling students to learn how to create reusable pads. This initiative not only promotes good hygiene practices but also enhances their self-esteem.

The SRHR program has had a profoundly positive impact on our students, and we remain committed to sustaining and expanding these efforts to ensure their continued growth and well-being."

I am now Spreading Awareness about Personal Hygiene and SRHR



Boniface, 15 years old

"Before participating in the SRHR program, I was unaware of the significance of personal hygiene during adolescence. However, I now understand its importance due to the physical changes we experience during this stage. I have made a conscious effort to practice good personal hygiene, ensuring my hands are always clean to avoid diseases like cholera and typhoid.

When I return to my community, I feel compelled to share my knowledge with peers who may not be prioritizing personal hygiene.

During the last holiday, I took the initiative to educate a neighbor who was struggling to maintain a clean environment for her children. I guided personal hygiene practices, and I was pleased to observe a positive transformation in her home and children's cleanliness. The mother expressed gratitude for my advice.

Through this program, I have gained confidence in discussing sexual reproductive health matters openly. I have also become an advocate for supporting girls during menstruation, discouraging my friends from mocking them and instead encouraging helpful behavior. I am grateful to our teachers for imparting valuable wisdom and empowering us to become positive influencers in our communities."

Chapter 4: Personal Growth and Development



This theme emphasizes the impact of the SRHR program on personal growth and development, enabling young people to prioritize their studies, health, and well-being.

Stories:

1. Abstinence and Awareness are now my Priority
2. My Focus is on Studies, Not Relationships

Abstinence and Awareness are now my Priority



Sarah, 17 years old

"Through the SRHR program, our teacher educated us on the risks of gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV, emphasizing the importance of abstinence, avoiding unwanted physical contact, and declining gifts from strangers. Before this, I was unaware of these crucial facts, but now I'm empowered with knowledge to make informed decisions.

I've chosen to abstain from sex and report any concerns to my senior woman teacher or mother. When faced with unwanted attention from boys, I confidently assert myself, reminding them that I'm a schoolchild and won't tolerate such behavior.

I aspire to become a nurse, and I'm committed to working diligently to achieve this goal. I'm grateful for the SRHR program, which not only taught us about reproductive health but also provided practical skills like making reusable pads and soap. These skills have been invaluable, and I appreciate the program's holistic approach to empowering girls like me."

My Focus is on Studies, Not Relationships



Barnabas, 16 years old

"I understand the risks associated with early pregnancy and recognize that girls don't need to become pregnant at 18. It's beneficial for them to focus on their education and secure employment before starting a family.

When confronted with unwanted romantic advances, I take a firm stance by reporting incidents to our teacher. I also resist peer pressure from boys who encourage me to engage in relationships, prioritizing my studies instead.

My advice to peers is to delay marriage until they are older and more established. For girls, I acknowledge the threats of forced marriage and rape in our communities. To stay safe, I recommend that they always move in groups when venturing into isolated areas. By promoting responsible behavior and safety awareness, I hope to contribute to a supportive environment where young people can thrive and make informed decisions about their lives."

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ABOUT MERCY CORPS

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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