



RESTORING DIGNITY

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Healing beyond hospital walls: A nurse's mission to end period poverty and empower rural youth

A quiet revolution is underway in schools, community halls, and farmlands in western Kenya, guided by a nurse who chose to remain connected to her roots in Butula Sub-County, Busia County.

As a proficient registered nurse and the founder of Undugu Empowerment Programmes (UEP), Immaculate Wesonga has extended her calling beyond the hospital setting. Her work today focuses on healing the invisible wounds of poverty, stigma, and exclusion by restoring dignity, rebuilding confidence, and opening doors to education and livelihood for adolescent girls, young mothers, and rural youths.

"I know the struggles girls face," she shares. "I have witnessed wounds the eye cannot see; wounds of shame, exclusion, and hopelessness. I harness my influence, resources and skills to transform the low-income youth and promote their social justice."

Responding to a silent crisis from within

World Bank Statistics show that compared to 12 percent of boys, 40 percent of African girls aged 15-19 are either out of school, not working, or married, largely owing to period poverty, teenage pregnancy, limited education access, and youth unemployment. Rural Kenya continues to grapple with these circumstances. With the understanding that the most effective and enduring solutions come from locally tailored interventions, UEP is responding with systemic, locally developed initiatives. The approach goes beyond meeting immediate needs. It transforms the underlying structures, norms, and opportunities that shape lives.

To UEP, this involves a change in how society values, supports, and empowers adolescent girls, women, and youth in rural Kenya, through sustainable, community-led systems fostering dignity and self-reliance.

Through four interconnected projects – Sista Plus, Undugu Higher Education Fund, Hope for Teen Mothers, and Agribusiness for Self-Reliance – UEP addresses the root causes of poverty and exclusion. The vision is clear: A society where every girl, woman, and youth thrives with dignity, education, and economic empowerment. "Our mission is to expand opportunities continually, restore dignity, and foster self-reliance through transformative community initiatives," says Immaculate.

Sista Plus: Dignity through menstrual health and employment
UEP, through its flagship project, SistaPlus Menstrual Dignity Project, is directly addressing period poverty by producing reusable, eco-friendly sanitary pads at its GIRL PAD CENTRE, and offering mentorship to girls on menstrual health. The initiative ensures adolescent girls remain in school, breaking cycles of absenteeism and early marriages. "We are not just handing out pads," says Immaculate. "We are restoring dignity, confidence, and opportunity. Every girl who stays in school represents a brighter future for herself, her family and the nation."



Beneficiaries of Undugu menstrual dignity package at the organisation's Padding Centre at Sikoma, Marachi Central Ward, Busia County. Far right (in spectacles) is UEP founder Immaculate Wesonga.

"We have reached over 3,000 girls and distributed 1,200 pads since the launch of the project in February 2024. The numbers prove it: Measurable change, stronger confidence, and brighter futures for rural girls," says Maureen Elegwa, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, at UEP.

Brenda, a 16-year-old student at the local school, reflects: "Before the SistaPlus Pads Project, I used to stay home during my periods. I would cut out pieces from my clothes to use as pads... Now I feel proud when I menstruate. I feel confident. I feel like I belong to a big movement of leading girls."

Co-founder and project coordinator, Ms Irene Wesonga, says the demand for SistaPlus Pads is so high that they sometimes supplement the reusable pads with purchased disposable ones to meet the needs of every girl in the locality. "In 2023, GFA Group Germany believed in our vision and awarded us a matching grant to establish THE GIRL PAD CENTRE and advance our menstrual hygiene project," she adds. "Since then, we have improved our Centre and amplified our impact tenfold."

In this project, UEP has collaborated with a number of partners over time. They included Mexoxo and L'Oréal Fund for Women on leadership training at Cornell University, USA; Bell Consultants on grant writing and organisational capacity building; and One Million Africa Leaders Fellowship (OMLA) under Nelis Global and WYLDE International, on sustainability and social enterprise management.

Education: First line of defence against poverty

Education is the most crucial investment in human resource development, regardless of geographical location or background. Therefore, the Undugu Higher Education Fund extends empowerment by supporting rural youth with partial scholarships, mentorship and education supplies provision. UEP has made it possible for dozens of students to transition to universities and colleges, effectively enabling them girls escape early marriage.

Doris, a scholarship recipient now studying Environmental Health at Masinde Muliro University, shares: "UEP's scholarship has kept my dream alive. I want to return and assist my community with clean water and sanitation programmes now."



A beneficiary of Undugu Higher Education Fund receives her cheque from UEP co-founder and project coordinator Irene Wesonga.

The scholarship programme has so far impacted on more than 60 students in secondary schools and colleges. Applications keep coming in. By the close of September, the programme had received over 300 applications from underprivileged youths across the five operational UEP counties: Busia, Bungoma, Vihiga, Kakamega and Siaya. "Our goal is to raise Ksh2.5 million in grants to enable us to meet our applicants' educational needs beyond 2025," says the coordinator.

Supporting Teen Mothers: Closing the evidence gap

The World Bank highlights critical gaps in supporting married adolescents and young mothers. Through second-chance education and vocational training, UEP's Hope for Teen Mothers initiative closes that gap. "We support teen mothers' re-entry to the school process with counselling, mentorship, education resources and childcare while they school. Our noon schooling teen mothers learn vocational skills, ICT, agribusiness, entrepreneurship skills, childcare skills to raise their children safely, and regain confidence," says Immaculate. "They remind us that failure is never final. Resilience is the heartbeat of empowerment."

Edna, a 19-year-old mother of two, is a beneficiary. "When I got pregnant at 16 years during the Covid-19 pandemic times, I thought my life was over. I was depressed. I got married out of desperation and got pregnant again..." she narrates. "UEP sponsored my tailoring and business courses. I now make school uniforms and save money for my babies' future. I'm also a key production tailor for SistaPlus reusable pads. I produce at least 200 pads per week for the project..."

UEP has partnered with vocation-



A beneficiary harvests vegetables for sale under the Climate Smart Agriculture project.

al centres like Khasoko Polytechnic in Bungoma County, to support teen mothers. The project has reached 40 teenage mothers in one year.

Agribusiness and Self-Reliance: The rural economy reimagined

By training youth and women in climate-smart farming and entrepreneurship, UEP's Agribusiness for Self-Reliance aims to improve livelihoods.

"With tools, training, and trust, women and youth can build their own economy. The project is creating a base of rural agripreneurs who support their families and pay for education in a region with high unemployment. We believe poverty is not permanent," asserts Immaculate.

Jane, an agricultural extension officer with the project, notes: "UEP has changed how we teach. They connect classroom skills to community markets. I've seen our trainees start small greenhouses and supply vegetables to local schools. That's transformation in real time."

The project has so far reached 85 youths and women.

Aligning with Global Trends

A World Bank's framework categorises African nations into five clusters – De-layers, Educators, Generalists, Labourers, and Survivors – with girls' schooling, work, and marriage patterns being considered. Kenya, classified among the Educators, has strong education policies but faces persistent rural access gaps and inequities. By embedding itself within this framework, UEP translates national and global commitments into tangible local results. "We may not have millions," says Immaculate, "but we have belief; belief that rural youth can rise to global standards if only given the chance."

UEP's approach reveals the origin and

spread of systemic change within communities by fostering local leadership, linking grassroots action to global priorities, and sustaining results through education and enterprise. Its model not only aligns with global development goals but also redefines them in a rural Kenyan context, proving that transformational change can start small, stay local, and still speak to the world.

"My nursing journey has evolved from treating illness to transforming systems," Immaculate says: "Through Undugu Empowerment Programmes, I apply clinical discipline to heal social wounds – keeping girls in school, empowering teen mothers, and training youth in agribusiness. What began as bedside care now drives community resilience, restoring dignity and opportunity across rural Kenya, proof that healing can reach far beyond hospital walls."

The Road Ahead: Strategic vision and scaling impact (2026-2030)

UEP's next phase of growth involves a shift from small-scale community interventions to regionally recognised, sustainable empowerment systems. The strategic direction for the coming five years is clear, ambitious, and grounded in local realities.

Sista Plus (Menstrual Dignity Initiative) – Establish the Girl Pad Centre Phase II as a regional production and distribution hub for affordable hybrid reusable and disposable menstrual products, and employ over 100 youth and women.

Undugu Higher Education Fund: Increase scholarship support by 50 percent each year; support current beneficiaries annually, and create a "Give Back Pathway" for alumni to mentor new beneficiaries and reinvest skills in the community.

Hope for Teen Mothers Initiative: Reach a minimum of 400 teen mothers in Busia, Bungoma, Vihiga, Kakamega, and Siaya, and introduce advanced vocational pathways, including ICT, climate-smart agriculture, digital media, and photography. Multiply baby day care support units to reach over 500 deserving and burdened families.

Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) Programme: Enable youth and teen mothers to produce, process, and add value to indigenous vegetables, and build green entrepreneurship pipelines that link farm production to trade and income, targeting both local and international markets.

Partnership and Institutional Growth: Strengthen partnerships with foundations, county agencies, universities, women's funds, private sector partners, and diaspora networks. Secure a fiscal sponsor to strengthen global fundraising and accountability platforms.

Call to Action

UEP's scaling initiatives make it apparent that collaboration is the most effective approach. We extend an invitation to individuals, corporate partners, philanthropists, and development agencies, to sponsor a girl/youth, equip a teen mother, support our CSA projects, or offer technical expertise to bolster our community initiatives.

To engage, reach email UEP via undugu.empowerment101@gmail.com. To donate, use M-PESA PAYBILL number 247247, ACCOUNT NO 858692, and ACCOUNT NAME, Undugu Empowerment Programmes.