

# Giving hope for refugees in Uganda

"I am depressed, worried, angry, confused and I need to get married to a man even if I have just turned 13 years old or I kill myself. I lost both my parents and now I'm staying with my uncle whose wife is not treating me as a human being." These are the words used by 13-year-old South Sudanese Joan who is living in the Palorinya refugee settlement in Northern Uganda.

The 13-year-old girl became the housemaid of her uncle's family, but she was not treated well. Whenever Joan receives any kind of goods from charitable organisations, her uncle and his wife rush to immediately take it away from her. Joan started collecting and illegally selling empty plastic bottles to fuel dealers to cover for food shortages. To end her misery, she hoped to get married to start building a more stable life for herself and her future husband.

Life was never easy for Joan. When she was younger, she had an unstable living environment, being shuttled back and forth between family members and eventually encountering some bad experiences.

Joan's life was completely out of order when she first stepped into the children council formation in November 2020. She needed support to understand that her life is valuable. During the children's parliament organized by JOFA Joan said: "I have not only lost my education but also my self-value." The children's council/ dialogue helped her to get a different perspective. "I am realizing now that I was making unwise decisions and going down the wrong path to get married or kill myself."

Caseworkers and Child protection committees immediately started tackling Joan's problems and linked her to child friendly spaces (CFS). She has already benefited from peer-to-peer counselling and community-based guidance. Caseworkers started counselling through the CFS's Empowering Rights of Victims program to help her cope with past traumatic experiences she suffered when she was younger. She enrolled in the child drama club to deal with her trauma and to create a strategy of socialising with fellow children.

"The JOFA Program has changed my social spirit and I have now learned that amidst problems, I can still grow and be a responsible citizen. My spirit has changed. When a Case Worker first came to me for the children group formation, I was depressed and did not care about myself. Now, I am a new person and regained trust into my life." said Joan.

For her the JOFA project is a steppingstone to increase her self-esteem and confidence. Through peer teenage groups, others help her working through the trauma and violence she suffered in her family. In December 2020, caseworkers observed that Joan no longer shows signs of depression and has become a girl with a new positive attitude and improved self-esteem.



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This project is co-funded by  
the European Union