

# Empowering women through Bonga

## BY VISION REPORTER

The 2016 International Women's Day anniversary emphasises gender parity or equality. In line with the theme, Stromme Foundation has over the years progressed from advocating for the education of girls to empowering women through micro-finance.

One of the innovations in that field has been the Bonga programme. *Bonga* is a Swahili term that translates to "let's talk".

When Stromme Foundation introduced Bonga in West Nile, as well as the eastern and northern regions of Uganda, many girls were dropping out of school due to poverty, long distances to the schools, insurgency, being orphaned at a young age and other cultural dynamics of the different communities.

### Bonga groups

Bonga is implemented in such a way that girls in groups of 30 come together on a daily basis to discuss issues pertaining to girls and

their community. They then come up with solutions and later, even share with their households and communities. This happens for the first six months, where they also get acquainted with life, numeracy and literacy skills by a female animator.

After the six months, the girls are introduced to vocational skills training, where they each identify a trade they would like to pursue. They receive training for three months in skills such as tailoring, baking, knitting, making handcrafts, poultry and hairdressing before an official graduation is done.

Over the past five years, we have empowered over 6,904 adolescent girls in eastern and northern Uganda. Our goal this year aims to empower at least 2,370 girls in 79 Bonga centres.

### Economic empowerment

As a development organisation, Stromme Foundation does not believe in handouts, but rather focuses on hand ups, by working alongside women or



BONGA GRADUATE KAYNET MOURINE

other community members in bringing about both individual and community development. The work

is implemented through partners who are based in the local communities.

Under economic empowerment, partners are trained in delivering the Community Managed Micro-finance (CMMF) programme. This programme involves community members organising themselves into groups of 30 to save and borrow money among themselves.

They together come up with a constitution, choose their leaders, including a treasurer and they decide how often to meet. The model is unique in a sense that it allows members to take ownership.

The CMMF programme

is introduced to all Bonga groups as early as the first three months. For some, by the time they graduate, they have already saved enough money to buy equipment to continue with whichever trade they will have acquired skills in.

Other than the adolescent girl, this community development programme emphasises that for each partner organisation, enrolment be 70% in favour of women. They focus on women because according to human development statistics, they are the most marginalised, especially in the sub-Saharan Africa.

Many women in Africa are left to cater for their families after their husbands die or abandon them. Rural women bear the biggest burden when it comes to providing basic needs for their families. Therefore, by empowering this woman to attain financial freedom, she can live a confident, secure life that enables her to look after her children. That is why Stromme Foundation targets at least 70% of women to participate in this intervention.

By the end of last year, at least 52,880 women had been reached. This year, the target is an additional 8,750 women in rural areas that are hard to reach.

### Government support

These interventions, however, are not enough. The Government needs to come up with a strong policy to protect adolescent girls. Teenage pregnancy is still a big issue. Girls below 18 years are sadly still being

## BONGA ACHIEVEMENTS

➤ 5,986 graduates have mobilised savings and started income-generating activities.

➤ 1,384 adolescents have trained in farm and non-farm based income-generating activities.

➤ 566 girls have returned to school.

➤ Graduates have been involved in campaigns on social issues, through community theatres.

➤ Participants have reported increased stability in their homes and reduced domestic violence.

➤ The plight of adolescent girls is being recognised in communities where there are interventions.

treated as clan property and offered in marriage in rural areas.

There is a great need of sensitisation if we are to see this vice adjudicated. Left unabated, this will produce a generation of illiterate young people who may never see the value of educating their own children.

It is still common to find girls dropping out of school to look after their siblings. There should be strict enforcement of education and girls should be considered to be as important as the boys.

Many girls drop out of school during puberty. It starts with missing four days of school each month, when their menstrual cycle kicks off. Without support, this causes them to lag behind in class and, eventually, they lose interest in school. To curb that, there is need for adequate places of convenience and provision of sanitary towels for the girls.

Sending girls to school by the age of six years also helps prevent them from beginning school late.

The Stromme Foundation approach to these concerns is not far from that of other international development bodies. It plans to utilise its strategic plan to work towards the UN goal of 'Planet 50-50 by 2030' and pledges to step it up for gender equality.



**Stromme Foundation**

## Stromme Foundation joins the global community to celebrate the Women.

Today, March, 8 2016, we add our voice to the many around the world to celebrate the women.

As we commemorate this day, we particularly esteem all our graduates in the Bonga - Adolescent girls empowerment program that have come a long way in recognizing the beauty, strength and potential each of them possesses.

Stromme Foundation through the Bonga program has reached out to over 6,900 adolescent girls in Uganda, most of whom had previously dropped out of school, forced into early marriages or got pregnant at such a tender age. The program has empowered them with life skills, literacy and numeracy skills as well as a vocational skill for each to enable them earn a living and reclaim their dignity.

As an organization we pledge to continue to advocate for rights of the vulnerable women including young girls and to contribute to their empowerment through our education and microfinance interventions.

We also call upon all stakeholders in the communities to take active roles in ensuring that we close the gender equality gap in order to foster development in our communities.

A hearty happy Women's Day celebrations!

For more information on our work, please visit our online pages

[www.strommeeaa.org](http://www.strommeeaa.org)

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Empowering people.

## TESTIMONY

Twenty-year-old Kaynet Mourine is a graduate of the Bonga programme from Nebbi district. "Becoming a fashion designer seemed like a dream, although I had always desired to be one. I often asked myself, where will I get money to even study? After completing Primary Seven, my family was poor and they could not afford to take me further in school. I used to be redundant at home, until Bonga came along," she says.

Bonga, Mourine says, helped create a sense of responsibility within her. "The life skills we get from our meetings helped me realise that I am important and that I have a say in whatever concerns my life. And now, my friend and I own a sewing machine. We use it to earn a living. I can meet my own basic needs and also contribute to expenditure at home. I no longer have to wait around to be told what I should do so that the men can give me upkeep. I like this feeling. I am not desperate to get married, but I want to have children some day and I will make sure they stay in school and become important people."