

# THE RIGHT TO DREAM

RESTORING FUTURES OF HOPE THROUGH GIRL CLUBS




Esther Awol Okot is a 34-year-old resident of Rackoko village in Katabok East parish of Morulem sub-county, Abim district. The area has a cultural and traditional value system, and many depend on the leaders in these spheres to guide community decisions. When Esther was a little girl, she witnessed a lot of violence towards women and many children were forced into marriage. Even at a young age, she could see that women were powerless, and often saw decision making being left to men. Activities such as cultivation, thatching the house, and fetching water among other things were left to women and this would leave them overworked and too tired to do anything else for themselves. Eating certain foods, such as fish and chicken, was considered a taboo for women. A woman sitting on a chair or contributing ideas in a meeting where men were in attendance was considered to be a display of indiscipline.

Esther Awol dropped out of school after completing her senior four and subsequently



AWOR ESTHER (34YRS) a farmer, married with 4 children from Katabok east village, Morulem S\_C Abim district, a community activist CIDFU project.



got married. Later, she became increasingly dissatisfied with the way things were done in her community. She realized that women who were financially incapacitated, lacking freedom and this made them more vulnerable to abuse. Esther then determined to advocate for the rights of women and girls.

She received training from the Communication for Development Foundation Uganda (CDFU) where she learned that education is vital to freedom and embarked on the path of activism for women and girls. Esther focuses on ensuring that the young girls who are in school stay in school and complete their studies while those who drop out are discouraged from rushing into marriage. She encourages the formation of social clubs based on various interests, be it sports or arts. She then urges young girls to join these community clubs which bring them together to address their challenges.

Awol has become a strong pillar in her community and strives to ensure that women and girls in her village achieve their full potential by fighting violence against them. Seeking to reduce the vulnerability of girls, Awol engages the girls in her community activities and ensures that they do not fall prey to those whose aim is to violate their rights.

“I believe that the way to address this problem is to dig up the roots,” she says. To date, Esther has managed to bring together a large group of girls. She has 42 girls who are interested in football, 34 interested in netball, and 15 who are interested in knitting. She holds weekly meetings with the girls, guiding them on how to confront the challenges that they face at home and at school, in addition to putting aside an hour daily to engage in their favorite sport or activity.

What started as a small idea is now expanding and Awol has started organizing the girls to hold friendly sporting activities with other communities. The girls have also gained the confidence to speak out and share their challenges as well as confronting violence since they now know their rights. Esther sometimes feels that she could have saved many girls forced into early marriages had she started her activism earlier. Nonetheless, it is never too late to start, and her work is progressing well.

Esther is convinced that women can do almost anything that men can do. She is proud to see instances of women taking on political positions, men escorting their wives for antenatal care, and men supporting their wives in doing household chores. This is evidence that there is a positive shift in the people's mindset. Her efforts are not in vain.