When you first engage with Mutabazi Priscilla Hajarah, you get the sense that ‘this girl really knows her stuff’ and when you discover that she is only 15 years old, you understand why Africa is considered to have the world’s largest untapped youth dividend. Africa’s young people are clear about the future they want, and the actions and leadership needed to get them there. Each day young people across the continent are taking up causes to push for greater opportunities, gender and economic equality and the right to benefit from the global commitments made on their behalf.

For many girls and young women being ostracised or publicly humiliated for something that their body does as a natural course of womanhood, is something that they often have to battle with. And in many cases due to lack of proper information and education, without fully understanding themselves what is happening to their bodies. It was a situation just like this that flamed the fire of activism for Mutabazi. She recalls how one day she had to come to the rescue of a young friend who had started menstruating at school and had unfortunately messed on her skirt. Mutabazi offered her jersey to her friend, which was then tied around her waist to cover the period stain. For Mutabazi helping her friend was easy, not so easy was battling the endemic attitudes and behaviour of boys towards girls during this time and who see ‘taking it out on them’ as a fun sport. “I was really angry and I confronted the boys and challenged them on their behaviour towards my friend. Because they were friends of mine, I was forceful in letting them know that it was not okay to try and humiliate her over something that was just part of being a girl and that she had no control over.” In 2018, Mutabazi grabbed the opportunity to join Peer to Peer Uganda’s (PEERU) school training programme as a menstrual champion.

She later enrolled for the organisation’s Youth Mentorship Programme and as they say ‘the rest is history’. “Through PERRU’s programme for adolescents and young people, I have been given the opportunity to grow personally but also to use my voice to inspire other young girls to take up issues for themselves and become more vocal in advocating for their rights and access to information and services.” Equality for boys and girls is another issue that Mutabazi is passionate about. “We are all humans and are therefore all equal and deserve to have equal rights and access to services. It’s important for me to use my advocacy platforms to ensure that girls enjoy the same privileges and benefits as boys and that their monthly menstruation period is not a cause for embarrassment or shame.” Having herself benefited from programmes that develop self-confidence, Mutabazi knows what a difference it can make. “I believe that when girls are confident in their abilities and are armed with knowledge of their rights, and supported by peer groups, they are able to stand up and say no to any injustices like child marriage and unwanted teenage pregnancies.”

Her advocacy work and passion for the rights of the girl child has not gone unnoticed. She was selected by her school administration to join the “Saving Innocence Challenge” to track down and bring back to school one of her fellow students who had been forced into child marriage by her parents in exchange for money. Coming from a very poor family and a community where child marriage is considered the most viable option for a young girl from a poor family, Mutabazi has worked hard to overcome significant obstacles and challenges to become the advocate and young leader she is today. “It’s not been easy, but I have always been a very focused and determined...
person. I am always looking at what I can learn, what I can do better to improve my results. For me I know what it is that I want to achieve and I have set a plan for what my future looks like.” When asked about her career aspirations, she is quick to say that she wants to be an engineer. “I chose this career as it is dominated by males and there are very few young women who are engineers in Uganda. I want to break the idea that only men can do certain jobs.”

Passion, underscored by a deep desire to inspire others to break barriers, push boundaries and demand equality in all aspects of life is a common thread that runs through Mutabazi’s advocacy. When asked who she has most inspired by in her life, she is reverend. “Oh my goodness, there is only one person who I hold dear, who was my mentor and friend for the longest time. Esther of course.” She is of course referring to well-known television host and Ugandan Ambassador for Women and Girls, Esther Nakajjigo. Esther sadly passed away this year but her force of nature and took her fight for to ensure a decent life for refugee women and girls across the globe. “She has always been the one to push me and to inspire me to work harder and rise above my challenges. I want to be like her and use my advocacy to inspire a whole generation of girls and young women who know their rights and have access to all the information and services they need to make informed decisions about their bodies and their futures.”

On how her approach to advocacy is unique, she thoughtfully replies, “I believe in face to face advocacy. When you have a young girl who approaches you, you are able to connect with her and build up a relationship. These girls then open up to me because they trust me. At school I am a leader thoughfully replies, “I believe in face to face advocacy. When you have a young girl who approaches you, you are able to connect with her and build up a relationship. These girls then open up to me because they trust me. At school I am a leader and I am loved by the students and that’s what makes it easier for them to approach me with their issues. You can’t get that with a social media campaign.” This is change-making from the ground up 101.

One can’t help but be uplifted and energised by the passion, fearlessness and determination that girls and young women like Mutabazi and her mentor Esther bring to communities across Africa. All we can say is, just watch this space!

Peer To Peer Uganda (PEERU) is a registered non-profit organisation that works towards social transformation and sustainable development with special emphasis placed on vulnerable and inadequately served groups of adolescents and youths (10 – 30 years) in Uganda.
If you or someone you know needs assistance or access to SRHR services or HIV screening and services, please contact Access Chapter 2 on our Facebook page @AccessChapter2. Look out for the #WeBelong campaign to be launched soon.

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With footprint in over 16 districts, PEERU has demonstrated that young people are significant actors in development and can drive positive change at grass root, national, regional and global levels.

Our integrated programming approaches are implemented in accordance with both the national and global priorities in the areas of integrated Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights, HIV and AIDS, TB and Harm reduction. Our programs as an organization are based on a holistic bottom up model, focusing on individual leadership change amongst young people as well as systematic change in policy and practice towards a more supportive environment for youth driven development. PEERU provides, equips and inspires Adolescents and youth in Uganda with high quality, high impact and gender-sensitive programming through strategic communication, issue specific advocacy, capacity building, and specialized service referral, among others.

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