

‘Madam’ Jennifer’s Mission to Empower GIRL-H Groups in Turkana South to Tackle Malnutrition.



Amidst the dispersed canopy of thorny acacia trees in Lokapel village, Katilu Ward, Turkana South, stands a vibrant 23-year-old, Jennifer Tana, who radiates excitement and confidence as she guides a group of young women eager to refine their skills in beaded craft.

As a mentor under USAID Nawiri's Girls Improving Resilience through Livelihood and Health (GIRL-H) program, she initiates a lively discussion on enhancing the quality of their crafts and exploring new market opportunities. While passionately discussing various topics, Jennifer's mentees consistently address her as "madam" while offering their opinions and thoughts. To the girls and young women in the village, Jennifer represents more than just a teacher—she is a symbol of hope and inspiration.

Reflecting on her past, Jennifer reveals, "I was born and raised in the Lodwar area of Turkana Central. That is also where I spent my childhood and completed high school," she recounts. "But just as I was gearing up to further my education, life took an unexpected turn. I found myself pregnant and relocated to Lokapel to be with my now-husband."

"When Nawiri came to our village, looking for individuals with diverse literacy levels to join the program as mentors, I was lucky to be selected by these young women who believed in my potential. It was a moment that not only took me by surprise but opened my eyes to something profound - the purpose and value of education." Jennifer happily narrates.

Supported by a cohort of 30 young women aged between 15 and 24, she embarked on a journey towards transforming the lives of girls and young women. Her commitment drove her to participate in a mentorship program focused on honing her mentoring skills, where she acquired invaluable knowledge on mentoring and supporting young females in pivotal areas of life.

Jennifer's mentorship sessions have established a safe space at the village level, fostering collective learning and promoting the application of newly acquired skills and knowledge. Encompassing various topics such as basic education, adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH), financial literacy, such as Village and Savings Loans Association (VSLA), life skills, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), women's empowerment, health, and nutrition, as well as social accountability.



Despite facing initial resistance and skepticism from both women and their partners, Jennifer persisted. Gradually, she gained the community's trust, eventually earning a platform at community gatherings to impart the insights she gained from Nawiri training.

"The mentorship sessions only last an hour, once a week. I make it a point to go around to different homes, urging the girls and young women to come. I keep telling them, and their spouses, that even though it's a brief interaction, these sessions can really make a difference for everyone in the family."

The Nawiri GIRL-H model is designed to actively involve out-of-school adolescent girls and young women aged between 10 and 24 in Samburu and Turkana Counties. This initiative plays a crucial role in integrated strategies aimed at addressing persistent acute malnutrition (PAM). Organized into age-specific groups, participants select mentors who lead sessions tailored to enhance livelihoods and promote personal empowerment.

Under Jennifer's mentorship, bead-making skills and businesses flourished among the mentees. Rebecca Longoroi, a mother of four, shares her experience with the beadwork business that she and 15 other young women have established.

"I embarked on my beadwork journey when I was just 15 years old. Being enrolled in the program has proven beneficial for me because it's an opportunity to share ideas with other skillful women and recruit new

members to this trade. In July 2023, we participated in additional training in Lodwar and had the privilege of showcasing our artwork at the annual Tobong'u Lore' Cultural Festival," she mentions.

The group currently sustains its livelihood by selling its beadwork. Bangles are priced at Kes.500, beaded necklaces at Kes.3,000, beaded belts at Kes.2,000, and walking sticks at Kes.3,000. They generate a profit that varies between Kes.300 and Kes.500 for each item, enabling them to purchase nutritious food for themselves and their families. In addition, the group underwent training in poultry farming and allocated a portion of their earnings to acquire 18 birds for the purpose of egg production.

Ipima Regina, a 24-year-old mother of one, is also a beneficiary of Nawiri's mentorship program through Jennifer. She beams with joy as she shares the positive outcomes of her involvement.

"Thanks to these sessions, I've gained valuable knowledge and basic literacy skills. Now, I can proudly write my own name and perform basic calculations. These sessions have played a key role in transforming cultural averages. We now embrace practices like child spacing and recognize the importance of education." Mentorship affects not only individual lives but also the fabric of the community.

Jennifer reflects on the positive changes she's witnessed in her community since she began mentoring girls and young women back in 2021. She is happy to see them adopting a culture of saving and prudently managing the income they earn from their businesses, preparing for unforeseen circumstances.

Notably, she's delighted to see the newfound independence among the girls, with some establishing their own kiosks, while others pursue skills such as hairdressing amongst others.

Furthermore, she notices a significant improvement in household health. She remarks, "Children are thriving because their mothers are well-informed about nutrition, including the benefits of breastfeeding. Even husbands are embracing concepts like child spacing and family planning, contributing to overall family well-being."