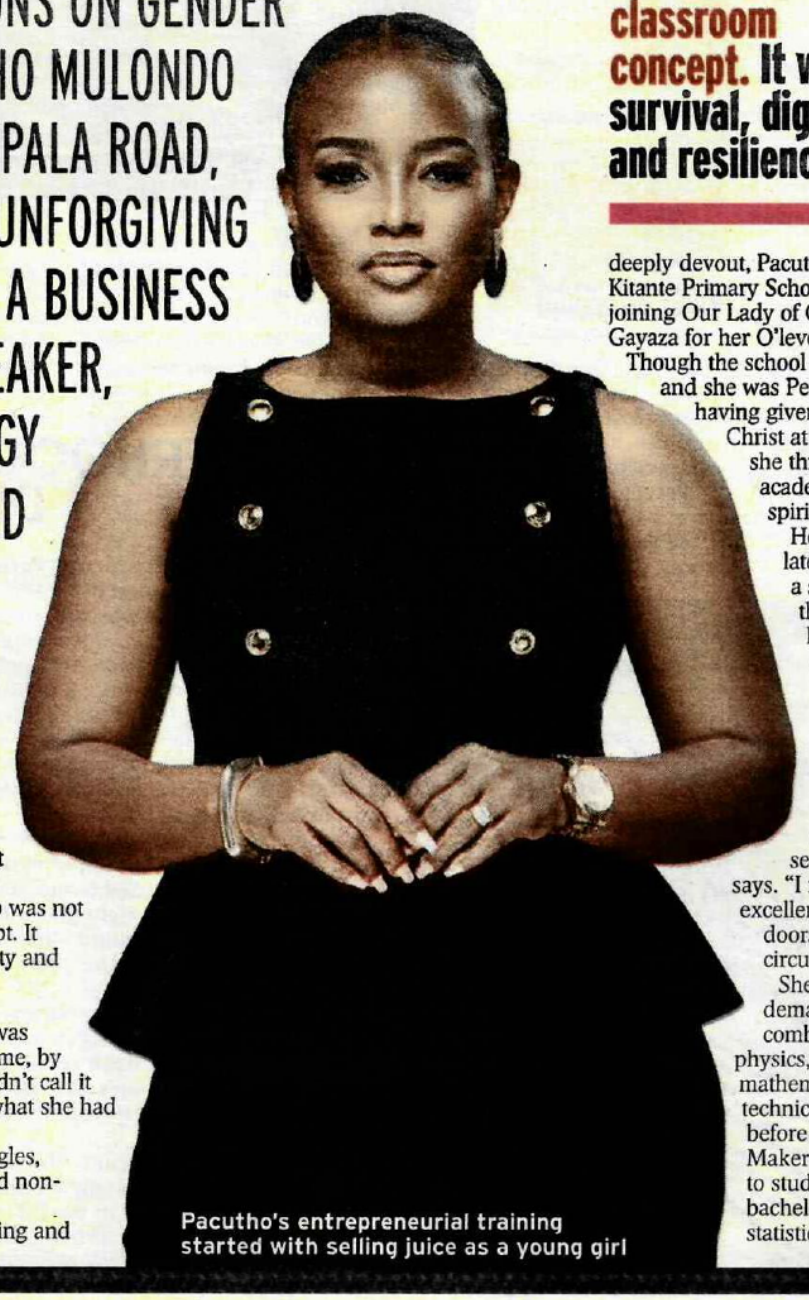
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HOW MANUELA P. MULONDO TURNED SURVIVAL INTO SYSTEMS

BEFORE BOARDROOMS, CONTENT CREATION AND NATIONAL CONVERSATIONS ON GENDER EQUALITY, MANUELA PACUTHO MULONDO WAS A WALKING ALONG KAMPALA ROAD, PEDDLING JUICE UNDER THE UNFORGIVING MIDDAY SUN. TODAY, SHE IS A BUSINESS OWNER AND CELEBRATED SPEAKER, HANDS FILLED WITH STRATEGY DOCUMENTS AND STRUCTURED CALENDARS. SHE TOLD HER STORY TO **RICHARD ATEGEKA**



Pacutho's entrepreneurial training started with selling juice as a young girl

When Manuela Pacutho Mulondo's parents separated, life shifted dramatically. Her mother left with Pacutho and two other siblings to start over without a stable income but with unshakable resolve.

"It was one of the hardest seasons of my life," she recalls. "My mother was raising us without money, without a formal job. But she never allowed us to feel defeated."

Her mother improvised ways to survive. She sold juice on the streets of Kampala and later started a small telephone booth business to support the children.

"We each had our own street," Pacutho says. "I hawked along Kampala Road while my siblings and mother covered other areas. Only later did I realise what it was teaching me."

Entrepreneurship was not a classroom concept. It was survival, dignity and resilience.

"That's where entrepreneurship was first introduced to me, by my mother. She didn't call it that. She just did what she had to do."

Despite the struggles, education remained non-negotiable.

Bright, hardworking and deeply devout, Pacutho attended Kitante Primary School before joining Our Lady of Good Counsel Gayaza for her O'level studies.

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Though the school was Catholic and she was Pentecostal, having given her life to Christ at six years old, she thrived both academically and spiritually.

Her performance later earned her a scholarship through the Forum for African Women Educationalists to attend King's College Budo for A'level.

"It was a defining season," Pacutho says. "I realised excellence could open doors beyond your circumstances."

She pursued a demanding science combination – physics, chemistry, mathematics and technical drawing – before enrolling at Makerere University to study for a bachelor's degree in statistics.

While still navigating campus life, Pacutho's entrepreneurial spark continued to grow as her sense of purpose quietly took shape.

She ran small businesses selling airtime, phone accessories and offering service-based transactions, building ventures alongside her mother's juice business. In fact, Pacutho continued vending juice until the day before she got married.

CAPITAL BEYOND CASH

A turning point came when Pacutho participated in Inspire Africa, a business reality television show that offered $25,000 in seed funding. Although she did not win, her ideas caught the attention of Ugandan entrepreneur Amos Wekesa.

"He gave me $5,000 in cash," she recalls. "He took me to the bank and handed it to me himself. He said he wanted me to remember that he personally gave me that money in case I messed it up."

Pacutho placed the money in a target savings account while waiting for clarity on how best to invest it.

"I knew it wasn't enough for what I wanted to build. So, I put it aside and told myself: 'When the time comes, I will use it.'"

That experience reshaped her understanding of business.

"Capital is more than money," she says. "There is social capital (people who connect you), intellectual capital (what you know), relational capital (those who believe in you), and then there is also physical capital. Financial capital is often the result of the others."

Pacutho's advice to young entrepreneurs reflects lived experience: start with low-risk investments, diversify where possible and grow your risk appetite gradually. Above all, treat even the smallest venture with dignity.

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