

'My concept was rejected by the ethics committee twice'

Olivia Nakisita recounts the kind of rejection she encountered in her doctoral journey that prompted her to almost give up. Three years later, she bounced back stronger and triumphant.

BY AGNES NAMAGANDA

Olivia Nakisita graduated with a PhD at Makerere University's 76th graduation this week. To register this remarkable achievement, however, she jumped over several hurdles. She takes us through her journey to this iconic accomplishment, that she is excited about.

If you had to explain your research to a 10 year-old, what would you say to them?

Due to different reasons, people leave their countries and come to Uganda. They are called refugees. Some of these refugees are girls who get pregnant without any financial or social support. They cannot work to support themselves because they are young. A pregnant woman needs to go to hospital to get checked. This reduces chances of dying while pregnant or while giving birth. Some of these girls are not able to go to hospital during pregnancy, have no money to take care of them, and do not know the language, making communication difficult.

The good news is that most of them deliver at a health facility. The problem is that some of these health facilities do not have medicines to give to the pregnant girls and yet some of them cannot afford to buy medicines.

Why did you choose this particular research topic?

There are so many issues with adolescents. After Covid-19 lockdown, I discovered that there were high cases of teenage pregnancies in my area. These teenagers needed support because many were rejected by their parents. I run an organisation called New Life Adolescents and Young Organisation in Kiwenda in Nansana, Wakis district and we offer sexually reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to young people. My question was, if the host population with parents and structures supporting them, are getting pregnant, and are facing challenges, how about a young refugee girl who probably came in unaccompanied and probably speaking a language that is not known. I picked interest and pursued this.

What are the key takeaways from your PhD experience?

This project built my capacity in "learning how to learn". Every single step pushed me to teach myself complex topics independently. I

had to learn data analysis, and how to validate a tool to be used to collect data. A PhD means reading on your own and being guided by your supervisor. I also learnt intellectual humility: that no one knows it all. I became more resilient through failure. My concept was rejected by the ethics committee twice and I almost gave up on the PhD, but I bounced back after three years. And here I am. Additionally, my manuscripts were rejected twice from two different journals but I did not give up. Beyond writing manuscripts, I can now persuade experts by defending my ideas when they are under scrutiny. I now have professional credibility. The title "Dr" shows my competence and I am looking forward to high level research, executive roles and academic positions.

How is your research going to address specific needs in Uganda?

My research highlights how adolescent urban refugees in Kampala handle pregnancy, how they make use of antenatal and delivery care services. My research explores the intersection between policy and practice. It shows that good policies do not necessarily translate into good experiences, and good access to health services does not translate into ideal utilisation.

Globally there is increasing displacement of people due to disasters and conflict, yet, there is scanty evidence on issues like teenage pregnancies among adolescent urban refugees. This research offers evidence on critical sexual reproductive health and rights issues among refugees.

These findings will add to the existing body of knowledge on urban refugees

who are expected to be self-reliant.

How did you overcome obstacles during your PhD journey?

My PhD was self-funded. I kept hoping that I would secure funding along the way, but I was not lucky. I later received funding from the Makerere Research and Innovation Fund (RIF) which only covered two of the objectives of the study. I put my pride aside and approached family and friends for help and surprisingly, they supported me. I actually refer to my PhD as social capital. At this time, the project I was working on had ended so I had no reliable source of income. This gave me the time to push my PhD.

Along the way, I got isolated. Conversations that I previously enjoyed started boring me. Unknowingly I started advising friends instead of interacting with them. But this gave me clarity and direction without distractions.

A PhD comes with excessive chronic stress because of the constant looming deadlines. As a mother of five, family came with its own pressures. With the support of my husband, I used to go out to fun-filled places to relax my mind.

Good policies vs change

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and get ready for the next day. We would go to the gym, health clubs, bars, restaurants, horse riding, and weekends away from home, road trips and clubbing often. My husband relieved me of all housework, driving long journeys, and child care. I received maximum social support from my spouse and children.

Were there any discoveries from your research that surprised you?

The health facility deliveries of the adolescent urban refugees were very high compared to the national average. This finding needs additional inquiry so that it can be scaled up country wide. Also, we have traditional birth attendants operating within Rubaga division. The national policy is that all expectant mothers should deliver in health facilities with a skilled birth attendant. I wasn't expecting this, especially in Kampala.

What have you learnt about yourself through this PhD process?

On an individual level, my personality has changed. Whenever I found myself alone, I would go and look for people. With a PhD, I spent long amounts of time alone and I now prefer being alone, than being with people. I enjoy my own company.

What's the craziest thing you have done for your research?

I went to deep into debt. I had to finish this PhD, yet I had no income, but I was determined to finish.

What is the best advice you have received during this journey?

"This is your PhD and giving up is not an option. Get up and start writing," said Dr Bagonza Arthurs.

Post-PhD, what do you want to do that is totally unrelated to your research?

There are many young people especially boys, struggling with mental health issues in our communities and there is a lot of stigma associated with it. I want to create awareness on mental health issues among adolescent boys and how, when, and where to seek care before it is too late. I also want to start up a support group for parents dealing with mental health.

Many women stop at bachelors or at most masters degree? How can more women be motivated to pursue PhDs?

We need a systemic approach. The government should be intentional on rewarding excellence. PhD holders are capable, trusted and resilient and can therefore head government departments and ministries. Women with PhDs should be absorbed into the available public universities to avoid brain drain so that they continuously encourage girls to continue with their education.

The role models to our girls are usually those that dress well, drive good cars, living in good houses and very few of these are PhD holders. Giving visibility to such women on all platforms: print, radio, TV a wake girls who think good life is only for those who did not go far with education. On a high note, I wanted to prove that even people that obsessed with high heels and fashionable, people like a hyper life, like myself, can academically seri-

Olivia Nakisita graduated with a PhD at Makerere University.

