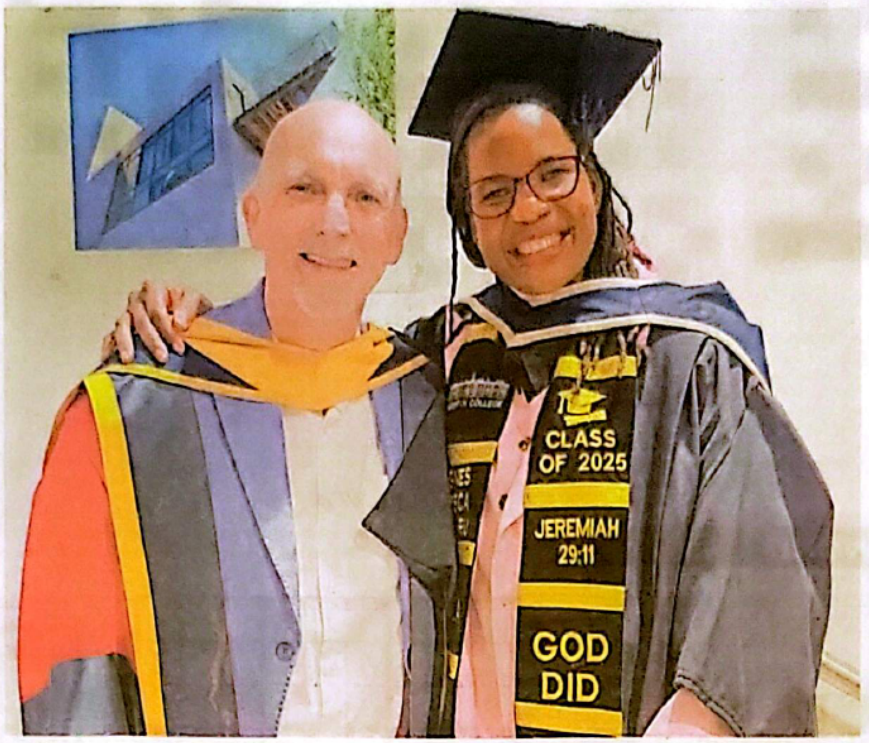
How Lokiru overcame adversity, prospered

Born in Narikapet Village, Kotido District, Karamoja region, Agnes Jesca Lokiru has scaled walls to win in the global academic arena.

BY MARKO TAIBOT



Ms Agnes Lokiru standing with one of her lecturers. COURTESY PHOTO.

Born in Karamoja, one of Uganda's most historically marginalised regions, Agnes Jesca Lokiru's rise to global academic recognition is a compelling testament to resilience, discipline, and determination.

Raised in Narikapet Village in Kotido District, she grew up in a setting often associated with poverty, insecurity, and limited access to quality education.

For many girls in Karamoja, schooling is frequently disrupted by cultural expectations, household responsibilities, and chronic underinvestment in social services.

From an early age, Ms Lokiru understood that success would demand more than intelligence; it would require endurance, sacrifice, and an unwavering belief in the promise of education.

Speaking to the *Daily Monitor* recently, Ms Lokiru said: "As a young girl, my dream was bold: I wanted to become a paediatrician. I imagined myself saving young lives in communities like mine, where health services were scarce, and child mortality is a daily reality."

Childhood ended too soon

Life, however, charted a different course. This was occasioned by the arrest and imprisonment of her father when she was barely 11 years old. That turned her into a caregiver, provider, and protector, responsible for her siblings, yet she was also a child.

"My journey was tough as my days followed a punishing routine. I rose before dawn to walk nearly two kilometres to fetch water, prepared food for my siblings, and then headed to school, often arriving as late as 11 am," Lokiru recounts.

After school, she worked in the family garden, sold vegetables at the market, cooked supper, and prepared her siblings for the next day. Her childhood was marred by immense responsibility.

"That season nearly cost me my education, but also taught me sacrifice, resilience, and zeal to for fight what I value," Lokiru narrates

Her education journey mirrored this resilience, which began at Panyangara Primary School, in Kotido District with minimal learning materials and fragile infrastructure.

She later transitioned to Maluku Secondary School in Mbale for her O-Level, giving her a major cultural and academic shift.

For the Advanced Level, she returned to Kotido Secondary School, where she excelled academically.

"Through hard work and determination, I was awarded a full government scholarship to pursue a Bachelor of Social Sciences (Honours) at Kyambogo University in Kampala. This achievement reaffirmed my belief that excellence can rise from even the most marginalised communities," she attests.

By the time Lokiru joined Senior One at age 12, her responsibilities had multiplied. She was paying school fees for her siblings while funding her own education.

"I worked tirelessly making and selling local brew (*ebutia*), farming, and selling vegetables. Education became both my escape and weapon. Today, I stand as a woman who has beaten overwhelming odds to excel," she said.

While at Kyambogo University, her entrepreneurial instincts took a structured form. She began trading in charcoal sourced from Karamoja, selling it to fellow students and wholesale dealers in Banda, a Kampala suburb.

"Between 2012 and 2015, I bought each sack of charcoal at Shs15,000 and sold it at Shs45,000, making a profit of Shs30,000 per bag. On average, I transported about 50 bags per trip, three times a month. This business was born out of the awareness that employment after campus [university] was never guaranteed. So I prepared early," she narrates.

By the time she graduated, Lokiru had saved nearly Shs50m, which later enabled her to venture into the produce trade, supplying maize and soya beans to markets in Kenya.

Even after securing formal employment, she retained her entrepreneurial pursuits though mismanagement affected the business when she travelled to Trinity College, Dublin for further studies.

Drawing from personal experience, advocacy for girls and women has become a defining feature of Lokiru's journey.

She openly speaks about equal access to education, health, and social services, using her life as living proof to persuade parents to enrol girls in school and keep them there.

To date, more than 500 girls have reportedly returned to school or remained enrolled after encountering her story and benefiting from her mentorship.

Once again, resilience proved decisive during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020) when she lost her formal job amid widespread economic disruption.

Lokiru pivoted swiftly to start an egg business with an initial capital of Shs1m.

Purchasing 100 trays at Shs9,500 per tray directly from the farm, she sold each at Shs11,000, earning a profit of about Shs1,500 per tray.

Within three months, she was supplying up to 350 trays a week to shops and business centres across Lira City. What began as a living-room operation evolved into the foundation of a large enterprise.

Advocacy

These ventures have also enabled her to support her siblings through some of Uganda's best schools, to expose them to networks and opportunities she never had, without loans. She is also paying university fees for seven people.

"This year, my third graduate will complete her studies at Makerere University, bringing the number of girls I have fully supported to bachelor's degree level to five. This achievement is priceless and reminds me that kindness and sacrifice are powerful tools for community transformation," she says.

Her support extended to her younger sister, Anastasia Natyang, during her Miss Tourism Karamoja journey, where she emerged First Runner-Up and won multiple titles, including Best Creative Attire and Miss Popularity. That backing later helped her earn the national title of Miss Rising Woman of Uganda's Tourism, an accomplishment Ms Lokiru is proud of.

"I also support girls through my sister organisation, the KaraGirl Initiative, by providing scholastic materials and sanitary products on a quarterly basis. We also teach them practical skills, such as making reusable sanitary pads using locally available materials to reduce school absenteeism and dropout," she says.

Together, they engage parents and communities to prioritise girls' education, dismantle harmful narra[illegible] and restore dignity to the girl child.

From Karamoja to Europe

Ms Lokiru's academic journey to Trinity College Dublin and Griffith College Dublin was neither accidental nor easy. It followed years of preparation, rejection, and relentless self-belief. As a woman from Karamoja, she confronted limited exposure, financial constraints, self-doubt, and persistent stereotypes.

That said, at Griffith College Dublin, she graduated with a First Class Honours MBA, topping her class and producing the best research paper titled "Exploring the Impact of USAID Funding Withdrawal on Health System Delivery in Uganda's Karamoja Region: A Pathway to Strategies for Sustainability and Resilience."

"Today, I proudly say that you do not need money to reach the world's best universities. What you need is focus, consistency, courage, and resilience, even when doubt whispers loudly," she says.

While she is not a paediatrician, Lokiru is deeply engaged in maternal and child health, sexual and reproductive health, health promotion, and health systems management across Karamoja and the Lango sub-regions.

She stands as both a global scholar and a change-maker. Her story sends a powerful message across Uganda and beyond: origin does not define destiny.



One of the charity works supported by Lokiru and her sister in Karamoja. PHOTO BY MARKO TAIBOT.

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Her excellence drew praise from the faculty. "Congratulations on your results. That is an outstanding performance, particularly in the dissertation.

"It is one of the highest I have seen for several years... a pleasure to have you as a student and I wish you the best going forward," wrote Prof Kevin O'Hara, director of Programmes at Griffith College Dublin.

Another lecturer, Prof Justin F Keogan, said: "Your curiosity, critical thinking, and determination are what truly shaped your success. You did not just meet expectations, you exceeded them through your own merit and tireless efforts."