

phenomenal

By Gillian Nantume

A passion for women's health

DEVOTED: With her background in health service, Irene Ndagire is committed to finding solutions to women's health problems and changing attitudes along the way.

When Irene Ndagire says she feels like she has used up all her savings to fund her passion for providing health information to women - and she is optimistic about the future - you can only admire her zeal. Four years ago, she quit her job as a physiotherapist and cardiac therapist at International Hospital Kampala (IHK) and set up Women's Health Foundation (WHF).

"WHF supports women who are going through different medical conditions, mostly free of charge. At the moment, there are four projects under WHF. We have a Health Mama Project for elderly women where we teach them about menopause challenges and how to overcome them," says the 2016 Mandela Washington Fellow, trained in civic leadership at Rutgers University in New Jersey, US.

The Health Mama Project is the flagship project of WHF. However, the founda-

tion also has a Smart Young People Project which deals with reproductive health, teenage pregnancy, career guidance and behavioural change, as well as a postpartum project that teaches mothers which exercises to perform after childbirth in case they have urinary problems or weak pelvic floor or muscles and gives them information about postpartum depression.

"Most women, after giving birth, become obese so we also give them advice about postnatal nutrition. We approach churches, mosques and local council chairpersons and discuss with the leaders what we have to offer women in their congregations."

To reach more women, the foundation visits Health Centre III's on immunisation days and with the midwives' permission, talk to the mothers.

Helping women overcome backaches

During pregnancy, many women experience backaches because of the weight the foetus puts on their spinal cord. However, for many, this pain continues years after they have given birth.

"In the course of our talks, we have discovered that many women suffer from nerve pains, backaches, and partial paralysis after giving birth. Women who continue to suffer backache after giving birth are in trouble if they ignore that pain. One thing I know about backache is that it becomes worse with time, and it damages the nerves that connect to the legs. You may end up in a wheelchair or on crutches, or you may not be able to control your urine."

According to Ndagire, the only remedy for backache is to have five or six physiotherapy sessions and learn how to manage the condition. WHF offers free physiotherapy sessions. However, if the condition is too far gone, the affected women are referred to a physiotherapy clinic.

Teaching boys how to respect females

There is a wise saying that when a sapling is bent during its growth, it turns out to be a bent tree. The same is true of human beings. "If



QUICK FACTS ABOUT NDAGIRE

Ndagire attended Buloba High School and Buddo Senior Secondary School. She acquired a diploma in physiotherapy from Mulago Paramedical School, a diploma in cardiac rehabilitation from Malabar Institute of Medical Sciences, India; a bachelor's degree in physiotherapy from Ernest Cook Ultrasound Research and Education Institute, Mengo Hospital, a certificate in women's health from Women's Institute of Robert Wood Johnson Hospital, New Jersey USA, and a certificate in leadership at Rutgers University.

She has nine years' experience in physiotherapy and six years as a cardiac therapist.

Her favourite quote is: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go as a group."

On juggling work and life, Ndagire says, "I have learnt to collaborate with different people in my line of work, which makes work easier. As a wife and mother with young children, my husband has supported me in every way, including financially. We even take time to pray together as a couple."

a boy is taught early to respect women, the cases of domestic violence in all its forms - sexual, emotional, physical, mental, and financial - can be minimised in the future," says Ndagire.

"Our Male Involvement in Women's Maternal Health Project is on two levels. First, we approach primary and secondary schools and talk to young boys about how they should treat the women in their lives. Personally, I believe in reaching the younger

generation. It involves such simple things as telling them to help carry a girl's bag if she is sick and not laughing at a girl when her uniform is stained with blood. So far, we have talked to more than 300 school boys."

On another level, WHF also talks to groups of men about how to treat their wives respectfully and with compassion. Of course, there will always be challenges when talking to men about how to be compassionate to their wives, especially in our male-dominance culture.

"Men do not want to learn and they always resist in the beginning. But, I use hypothetical scenarios to reach them. I always ask them what they would do if their mother or sister were infected with HIV/Aids by some man. Always, their answer is that they would kill the man. That is where our discussion begins because I tell them they could be that man whom their wives' brothers want to kill because of the things he does to their sister."

Inspiration for starting WHF

Initially, when Ndagire began the Foundation, she worked with her mother, Milly Nakakande Kawooya, who was helping with the paperwork.

Currently, WHF has five board members and has helped more than 5,000 women in four years. "As a physiotherapist at IHK, 90 per cent of my patients were women. What surprised me was that many were showing signs of early menopause - as early as 30 years. If a woman is having problems with her bones and is showing signs of early menopause, it is a serious problem. That was my inspiration to start WHF."

Ndagire is currently undertaking a study with Global Health and has discovered, in the course of her research that the main cause of early menopause is infertility, wrong contraception choices, and poor management of HIV/Aids. "About 9 per cent of the population of women is experiencing early menopause," she says.

Besides having a passion for women's issues, Ndagire is a director in Vent Med Care, a company that facilitates medical travel for patients seeking treatment options in India.

She is also the brains behind the first Uganda Women's Summit to be held on October 11, 2017 at Silver Springs Hotel. WHF has organised a summit under the theme: Understanding women's health across their lifespan, which will tackle sexual gender-based violence, women's reproductive health, human rights, and the role of development partners in implementing Strategic Development Goal Four and Five.

The Summit will be opened by Her Royal Highness Nnabagereka Sylvia Nagginda.

