

From Shame to Strength

BY ASHLEY NANJALA, MOTHER AT AGE 15

My life before pregnancy was uneventful. I grew up in Mukuru kwa Njenga, on the outskirts of Nairobi, and joined Neema Donholm School, where I completed my primary school education, scoring 317 marks (63% - 13% above average) in my exams. My family was poor, so I could not attend high school alongside my peers. Without the education I longed for, I felt like my life had met a dead end. My father, deeply troubled and stressed, would leave our family for long periods at a time, leaving my mother to take care of us, mostly on her own. She used to do odd jobs like making and selling food, which wasn't really enough for all of us. Some days, we went a day or two without food. Those were really tough times.

Then, one day, our area Member of Parliament announced that they were offering scholarships to attend school, and I was lucky to be among the selected students. It felt like a second chance. I finally joined Form One (first year of high school), though my peers were already halfway through their second term. I was behind, but I was determined.

In Form Two (second year of high school), my life took another unexpected turn. I got pregnant.

While in my second year of high school, I got into a relationship with a boy who promised to meet all the needs my mother couldn't. I was young, naive, and vulnerable - and even though I wasn't ready, I gave in to his demands because I didn't know how to say no. At first, he did everything for me, including my school shopping and giving me pocket money, but in return, I was expected to satisfy his sexual advances. At that time, I didn't even know that contraceptives existed and how they could prevent pregnancy, or that it was important to prevent sexually transmitted infections, so I took no safety measures in using condoms or pills. I found out a couple of months later in school, after mid-term, that I was pregnant.

When my menses didn't come for two months, I knew something was wrong. I was really worried. Since I was in a boarding school, I waited for the holidays to go to the clinic to get tested. I remember it so clearly - I went a day after we closed school during the March holiday. The lady in the clinic was a friend of mine, and when she told me I tested positive, I took it as a joke. I didn't want to admit I was about to become a mother. But she was serious, and I had to come to terms with reality.

I didn't worry because I knew my boyfriend would take responsibility for the pregnancy. I was wrong. Instead of support, I received betrayal.

He denied the pregnancy outright and insulted me. He said I was the kind of girl who sleeps with men for money, and that I should go look for whoever the real father was, even though it was him and him alone. I was devastated. I was angry at myself, and also angry at my own mother for not being able to provide for our family by herself.

I was too afraid to tell my parents, so I considered having an abortion. In my panic, I even borrowed money from a friend to go through with it. I was told it would cost 4,000 shillings (about \$40 USD), but I only had 500 shillings (about \$5 USD). I went home silently and cried until my mother came back from work. She noticed something was wrong and asked me, but I said nothing. She assumed I was just upset about a fight with friends. The next day, she called me aside and said she knew I was pregnant. My friend who I had borrowed money from, had told her behind my back. My mother asked what I wanted for my future, and I told her I wanted to go back to school. Even though she accepted me and my situation, I knew she was disappointed with me for shattering my dreams – and hers, too.

Sometimes she would just ignore me when I tried talking to her. My dad endured my pregnancy for a few months, but then he got so stressed and upset, he left my family for good and eloped with another woman.

My pregnancy was far from easy. In the beginning, my mental state was chaotic. I suffered from intense migraines that wouldn't go away, even with painkillers. I grew twice the size of my mother, making me feel so tired. Walking even short distances was hard, so I mostly stayed at home. The lack of enough food and sanitation was the worst.

My stomach would grumble, and I knew I wasn't getting enough to eat to support my growing baby and me. I was insulted by neighbors when they saw that I was pregnant at such an early age. I felt stranded and devastated. But after receiving counseling from a therapist and seeing my mum slowly accepting the fact that I was pregnant, I began to calm down. I wasn't as stressed anymore. My mum's acceptance gave me the strength I needed.



 *My symbol is an ant because it is persistent, hardworking, and determined.*





Labor was excruciating. I was in pain for two days, but my baby wouldn't come. Eventually, the doctors told me I had to undergo a Cesarean section. The operation was successful, and my son was born healthy.

Raymond Wema is the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me. When I held him for the first time, it was the best feeling ever. I was immediately proud to be his mother, and I know that he is my responsibility in life. He's lively and playful, and when we're together, I feel joy I can't explain. Now, my relationship with my mom is better than before. She has loved and taken care of my son as if he were hers, and that means the world to me.

Going back to school was another difficult chapter. I was afraid of what people would say about me. I felt like I had let my teachers down; they had expected so much more from me. I returned to class feeling ashamed. Breast milk soaked through my uniform, and I couldn't hide it. It made me feel exposed and embarrassed. I was also sad to realize that my former classmates were now a whole year ahead of me.

My father eventually came back to us when my son was a year old. He apologized for leaving and began supporting us by helping with food, rent, and other household needs. Even so, there are still days when he doesn't earn enough, and we end up going without meals. It's hard, but we keep pushing through.

Before the team-building retreat organized by CFK Africa in Kajiado, my life felt like a mess. I was overwhelmed by loneliness and struggling to see a way forward. But during the retreat, everything began to shift. I had the chance to interact deeply with other teen moms, and for the first time in a long while, I felt seen and understood. Through shared stories and laughter, I discovered that it's okay to ask for help when you're stuck or uncertain. Most importantly, I let go of the belief that my life was a mistake. I made a promise to myself: to focus on hope, to do things that bring me joy, and to pursue my education so that I can build a life I'm proud of.

My dream for the future is to rebuild my family and heal the broken bonds between us. I am determined to study hard, excel in my exams, and pursue higher education. I have a deep passion for caregiving, especially for the elderly and vulnerable. It breaks my heart to see older people left in nursing homes by their families. I can be someone who brings them care, dignity, and comfort. Alongside caregiving, I hope to major in linguistics and become a language teacher. I believe that language connects people, and I want to use it to help others find their voice, just as I'm learning to find mine.

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