

I Learned to Dream Again

BY HILDA VILLARY, MOTHER AT AGE 17

Even before becoming pregnant, my life was never easy. I grew up in a household defined by struggle.

I come from a family of six children, all raised by a single parent. It never seemed like there was enough to go around. My mom really struggled to make ends meet, and without a permanent job, it was always a challenge. She's always been a casual worker – sometimes selling chapati, a staple Kenyan flatbread, to provide for us.

For as long as I can remember, my eldest sister Sharon has battled heart disease. My mom did everything she could to cover Sharon's monthly medical care and surgery bills, leaving little support for the rest of us. Whenever my sister needed surgery, my mom would walk all over our community, searching for well-wishers who would support us and organizing harambes (community fundraisers) to raise money for her care. Even though life was hard, it felt more bearable when it was just the six of us and my mom at home. My father only made things worse. He would come home drunk, and the alcohol would transform him into a monster, lashing out violently against all of us. Whenever he was around, it always seemed like living with his shadow. He left all responsibilities for my mother to handle, and eventually she sent him away. While the physical marks left on me faded away over time, the emotional scars remained. I struggled with trauma and mental distress.

Despite all that, my mother never gave up. She worked tirelessly to ensure the six of us went to school, a miracle in itself. I completed my Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) examinations in 2020 and scored 355 marks (71% – 21% above average). My family was excited about my success.

I was overjoyed to be invited to continue my education at a county girls' school in Homabay, in western Kenya. I was a bit worried about not being able to enroll at that school because of its high fees, but my mother was determined to work harder to ensure I could attend. This felt like the greatest gift ever, which motivated and inspired me to perform well in the first term. It was just a few months into school that my sister got sick again. My mother faced a financial dilemma: either save her sick daughter's life, or support my education fees. She had to make a tough decision.

The little money we had went to my sister's medical expenses, and as a result, I had to drop out of school for the remaining two terms of my first year. It felt like my only chance had slipped away. I moved back to Kibera and joined a day school in 2022. Despite having to repeat form 1

(first year of high school), in my heart, I knew education was the key to my future. Life at home was tough, having few resources and constant worries about my sister's health, but I kept working hard and managed to complete the first three terms of school.

Early in 2023, while in form 2, I got pregnant. I was just 17 years old. I remember when I found out clearly.

My neighbor next door was cooking, and the smell made me vomit. I panicked – I knew something was definitely wrong. I anxiously took a pregnancy test in the washroom, watching the lines appear. One line. Then the second. It was positive. I broke down in tears and cried throughout the night. I felt completely unworthy of everything in the world, even sleep.

I was devastated. I had never planned for this—I was too young. I was full of shame and hate for myself.

My pregnancy deeply affected my relationships. When my mom found out, she was so disappointed. I felt like I had failed her. She insisted I get an abortion. She said that if I chose to keep the baby, I would have to leave her household. I had no choice but to leave home. At four months pregnant, I felt I couldn't terminate the pregnancy. I was scared – scared of losing the baby and scared for my own life. So, I made the difficult decision to carry the baby.

Like so much of my life, I felt lonely, with nobody to talk to.

Then, a friend introduced me to an organization nearby called Maisha, which shelters teen moms until they deliver. I knocked on their door. They opened. They welcomed me in, and I stayed there for the rest of my pregnancy.

When I left home, nobody knew where I was except for my mom. My family was disappointed and never called to check on me. I had only a few friends to begin with, and only a handful still spoke to me. I only had the girls at Maisha. There were seven of us, and they became like my sisters.



 *My symbol is an eagle because it represents strength, courage, and determination.*





We formed strong bonds of sisterhood, bonds filled with love I never thought I'd experience. We supported each other emotionally and mentally. I felt wanted and cared for. Volunteers at Maisha taught us everything about pregnancy and childcare. Being in a loving and supportive environment meant the world to me. I don't know what I would have done without them. They were my pillar of comfort and gave me hope to keep going.

Despite everything I'd faced growing up, pregnancy brought new challenges. I had morning sickness and nausea. I couldn't eat, even though I knew I needed strength. In my third trimester, I was constantly uncomfortable and couldn't sleep because of back pain.

I also struggled with depression. Sometimes, all of the pain from my life would bubble up and overwhelm me. I couldn't keep it all in. I became really depressed and thought that I couldn't go on with life. But the volunteers at Maisha always had my back. They helped me access therapy at Mental 360 in Langata - two months before and one month after giving birth. I found a lot of comfort in the sessions, and it really improved my mental health.

When it was time to give birth to my daughter, the pain was unbearable. I couldn't even walk - I had to crawl to enter the hospital. But once I held my daughter in my arms for the very first time in that hospital bed, I was transformed. I felt true joy for the first time in a long time. Labor taught me that I'm a strong woman with incredible strength. If I could survive that pain, I knew I could survive anything.

But I understood that I would eventually have to leave Maisha and reenter the world. I left Maisha in December 2023 and faced the discrimination that I had been shielded from in its safety. People in the community didn't want me near them or their children. They said I was a bad example since I was a teen mom and that I would teach other young people bad behaviors. They muttered under their breath when I passed by. Their words bruised me. Their judgment made me hate myself again. I felt my mental health slipping. But this time, I had my daughter to keep me focused.

My bond with my child is strong. I love her with all that I am. When I count my blessings, I count her twice. She is my reason to keep moving

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forward. She is my motivation, my strength, and my determination. Nothing will stop me from being the best mom to my little girl. She opened my eyes to dreaming again - and now that I have learned to dream again, I won't stop.

I dream of becoming a great chef or a journalist. I want to have my own house - and build my parents one too. And I want to be able to provide everything for my siblings. I want my daughter to study at one of the best schools and have everything she needs.

I believe, just as Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." I dream of returning to the community where I grew up and giving back, specifically, starting a charitable organization to help vulnerable kids affected by incest living in informal settlements - something I've seen hurt too many.

I want the world to know that teenage pregnancy is not the end. We deserve a chance, too. The community, and the world, should embrace us, guide us, and help us find our way.

I refuse to let the label of "teen mom" define me. Because at my core, I know that I am much more than that. I am a strong woman with big ambitions.

I will work hard and smart in school to achieve my dreams and change my family's history. I know my dreams will come true - especially now that I have a child who looks up to me.

I must make a change.

