

## **Abitimo is a beacon of hope for education in Gulu**

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Every year, in commemoration of International Women's Day, *The New Vision* seeks to recognise women, who have made a positive impact on their communities and their efforts often go unnoticed. Starting Tuesday, February 17 we have been publishing stories about this year's nominees for The Women Achiever's Award 2009.

**By Frederick Womakuyu**

REBECCA Abitimo, 75, has endured pain and challenges; her father marrying her off young, years of struggle in exile, detention of her husband without trial, suffering a bout of TB and a bitter and harsh life of an IDP when war struck northern Uganda.

However, through all these struggles, she didn't give up. Instead, she now holds a Master's degree in Special Education and is proprietor of the first private primary school in Gulu, northern Uganda. The school has educated orphans and turned them into lawyers, doctors and many other professionals.



Born in Ngariam Village, Katakwi district to a father who served as a colonial administrator, but quit into private business, she enrolled at Gulu Girls School, mainly to learn Acholi, which she could not speak since her father, though a native of Gulu, would be transferred from place to place.

"I was very bright at school and during the sixth year, I and another girl were selected to sit for General Certificate of Primary Education examinations at Madhvani Primary School. I passed well and was given a scholarship to study Junior Secondary Certificate for three years," Abitimo recalls.

But when Abitimo went to her father, excited about the award, he recoiled. "His intention was for me to learn Acholi and later stay home. When I was called upon to go back to school, he objected," Abitimo explains.

Her love of education and desire to achieve her dream of getting a degree, inspired her to work out a plan to go back to school.

"I had left my personal belongings at school and so I requested my father to allow me pick them. He agreed, oblivious of what was on my mind," she adds. "After I went back to school, I never returned home."

This of course did not please her father who demanded to know why his daughter was misbehaving. However, Abitimo was lucky that her brother, who was working in Gulu as a medical officer then, defended and supported her through school. She completed her Junior Certificate in 1951 but was diagnosed with TB, and had to be admitted at Mulago Hospital, a serious setback to her career. Unfortunately, when Abitimo left hospital in 1954, her father didn't allow her to go back to school. "Some Indians had secured a scholarship for me to join high school, but my father rejected it and forced me into marriage. I accepted on condition that I marry a man of my choice, which I did," she adds.

Rebecca soon discovered that her husband was not keen on making the marriage work. He was an alcoholic and abusive. After failing to complete his studies in London, the couple returned to Uganda and parted ways.

She took a course in Home Science and also met her second husband, Odongkara who had been interested in her earlier but she had turned him down when he asked for her hand in marriage.

She accepted Odongkara's second proposal and they got married. Having had children from their previous marriages did not deter the determined couple from living a happy life until turmoil hit Uganda in 1971.

Odongkara served as a police officer under the Obote I and Amin regimes but later fled to exile in Tanzania because of the insecurity in the country at the time.

Having left his wife behind, Odongkara was imprisoned for political reasons.

It took a personal written note from exiled President Milton Obote and seeking audience with President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania to secure her husband released.

Fearing repercussion from the Amin regime, the Odongkaras decided to take refuge in the USA where life was not easy.

"My husband took a job as a security guard, while I got one at a baby care's home." She later decided to go back to school and completed her degree in Community Development, proceeding to acquire a Master's in Special Education.

In 1983, Abitimo came back to Uganda and stayed in Mbale, eastern Uganda where her husband worked as a police officer.

Having kept a low profile from active politics, she thought it more inspiring to start a school in her hometown.

"I went to Gulu and surveyed the place to see where I could construct a private school. I wanted to show people that anybody can do something," she said. After securing 200 acres of land in Amuru district, she started construction work by making her own bricks. Since there was not enough money, she paid her workers in kind, giving them food, sugar and salt.

When the NRA took power in 1986 and insecurity was high in the villages in northern Uganda, she deserted the sight and joined her husband who had been appointed district commissioner of Gulu.

The LRA conflict in northern Uganda devastated livelihood and children dropped out school, making her do something about it. "I took care of about seven children and gradually introduced learning by teaching a class under a tree. Other parents got interested and brought their children to "the school". The number soon grew to about 30," she adds. That became Abitimo's dream of establishing a nursery, primary and secondary school.

In 1990, the security in northern Uganda improved and Government urged the people to leave IDP camps and go back to their villages. This was a challenge for Abitimo and her school, which she did not want to abandon. "I looked around for space to relocate and finally got it. I hired some built structures from Uganda Railways to use for the new class. We also constructed grass-thatched huts to supplement on the limited infrastructure we had. We

named the school UNIFAT Primary School, literally standing for "Upper Nile Institute for Appropriate Technology."

The numbers kept growing and the school graduated from nursery level to primary seven. The school's first candidates sat their PLE in 1993 and out of 42 pupils, 20 passed in first grade and 22 in second division and none failed. In the subsequent years, the school excelled in the region.

UNIFAT ranked top among schools in Gulu and enrollment shoot up to about 800 pupils, which posed a challenge for space.

She acquired more land and gradually started constructing classrooms. The number of the pupils swelled to 1,500 and the space was growing small each day.

UNIFAT received help from friends and well-wishers and expanded the school. For instance Bank of Uganda gave the school flashing toilets worth sh2m and later the Government also gave them iron sheets.

The school currently boasts of a total number of about 1,300 pupils and 45 teachers. Abitimo appeals to President Museveni and other Ugandans to join her fundraising drive to raise money and start a secondary school, thus bringing about development.

"We need more funds to expand the school, meet increasing demand for education and continue to support over 200 orphaned pupils whom we sponsor," she said