

My Deafness is No Barrier!

By Helen Kukundakwe

In 2004 I joined the Uganda National Association of the Deaf (UNAD) **Silent Theatre Drama** group and shortly afterwards travelled to Sweden for one month's training course in deaf theatre. On return to Uganda, although I became actively involved in drama, I had a great desire to get a job. I was concerned because my education was not very good – I'd only completed basic primary education. Nevertheless, I decided to apply for a job with UNAD. Fortunately in 2005 I applied and got a job as office assistant which also included preparing and serving tea and snacks to UNAD personnel and visitors. I was extremely hardworking and determined to do a good job. Sometimes there were so many people at UNAD, deaf and hard of hearing members who came to attend meetings, seminars or workshops; times such as these were extremely busy. I was frequently sent to buy food items and drinks – I had to be fast and would run at breakneck speed to buy food orders, which was terribly exhausting!

Then I got a great idea.... I realised that there was an opportunity to start a catering business! This idea was the turning point in my life! I'd done a lot of running to and from shops: it was dangerous constantly crossing horrendously busy roads with never-ending, disorganised traffic and reckless motorists. I envisioned a plan which I proposed to my bosses, explaining that it was cost effective, less risky (for me) and practical if I offered catering services at the premises, instead of UNAD spending lots of money on outside catering. I'd take daily breakfast and lunch orders from each staff member; and if informed in advance, I'd also provide in-house catering for meetings and other events. I requested for an opportunity to try - my proposal was accepted! This is how I started my business. I continued working as an office assistant.

In 2010 I set up **H.K. General Enterprises** (using my initials). In addition to providing catering services, I started selling different kinds of soft drinks and snacks. I learnt about people's eating habits and gained enormous experience – there was potential for growth.

I'd never been self-employed before but was naturally gifted at conducting business and knew how to maintain good business etiquette: providing services on time, being friendly to customers, etc. Everyone complimented my work and commented on my efficiency; my self-confidence got boosted! I was delighted and invigorated to expand my business as my clientele grew! Using profits made in food sales, I invested in a variety of stock, buying snacks, drinks, yoghurts, and cooking a variety of dishes that my customers liked – I ensured that I never run out of anything.

In early 2010, I learnt about Deaf Link Uganda's TDDP micro-credit loan project through a friend who encouraged me to apply. Immediately I jumped for the opportunity because I'd always wanted to expand but had no where to take a loan. The loan process was highly

competitive as there were several, equally competent self-employed deaf women with small businesses like mine. We were all nervous because we knew that only four deaf women would be selected to be recipients of the loan. Each one of us did our best to impress the TDDP Committee – who had already done background checks on us, visiting our business to obtain detailed information and recommendations. Because I had a good business record, I was confident.

I was *over-the-moon* to learn that I'd been selected for the loan: I received UGX 250,000 (equivalent to US\$100) – AMAZING!! Immediately I purchase a cooking stove, utensils and “airtime” (credit bought on plastic strips which users install on mobile phones) – this was a great boost and investment for my business as my income increased significantly – I accomplished a lot through determination and hard work, not depending on anyone! I added to my variety breakfast, *katogo* (a favourite traditional breakfast meal of plantain mixed with beef stew or offal) and boiled eggs. Each day I wake up at 5am to prepare and begin cooking before my customers arrive. By 7am I'm ready and open for business.

The DLU-TDDP loan is a great opportunity for the deaf, most especially self-employed deaf women. I have benefitted tremendously from the project which is opening up new business ventures for me. Being among the first beneficiaries is a great honour. I was keen on maintaining a good loan record; therefore I repaid my loan in full within two months! In addition, I continue to gain skills through the DLU Business Skills Training programme, learning to maintain good records of purchase, sales and profits. I buy retail items from wholesalers as it's cheaper; and have learnt to bargain and maneuver through busy Kampala markets. Despite working in an economically aggressive environment where discrimination against the deaf is rife, I don't allow negative experiences to discourage me. I'm tougher and alert; being female, it's important to be aggressive to avoid being exploited.

I now own two businesses, and recently opened a retail shop. Because of my good record, I have been selected again to enter **Round Two** of TDDP, and received another loan. I'm very proud of the opportunities TDDP has given me and as a role model; I willingly share my experiences with other deaf women. I encourage all disabled people never to **GIVE UP!**

Helen is 24years old. She became profoundly deaf during childhood, as a result of an illness. Deaf women entrepreneurs like Helen are phenomenon indeed! Although in the minority, they have proved that they can achieve economic empowerment- against all odds in a harsh economic environment where disabled people are discriminated against in the workforce. TDDP supports the economic endeavours of each loan beneficiary. As exemplary role models, deaf and hard of hearing female entrepreneurs are essential in the fight against economic dependency, unemployment, exploitation and poverty. Although in its early stages, TDDP has proven successful and we aim to ensure that it reaches many prospective Ugandan Deaf Entrepreneurs.