Today in our Friday Youth Activist series we meet up with 21-year old Valentine Muhindo, who is a passionate nutrition and girl empowerment activist from the coastal town of Tanga in Tanzania. Being the first advocate for nutrition featured in this series, it is important to also expand on why nutrition is such an important issue for the growing young minds and bodies across the continent. Due to a number of contributing factors, statistics indicate that almost 257 million people in Africa are experiencing hunger everyday. That’s 20% of the continent’s population. Of this over one quarter million, a staggering 237 live in sub-Saharan Africa. In a report released by the ACPF (African Child Policy Forum), it showed that almost 60 million children in Africa do not have enough food and that hunger contributes towards 45% of all childhood deaths. That is a sobering number and it places nutrition at the very center of development priorities for the continent. Good nutrition ensures adolescents and young people are able to reach their full potential and contribute towards the development of Africa.

As with most activists, Valentine Muhindo’s activism journey started with a personal experience that compelled her to find out the root cause of the near death of her cousin and her unborn baby, with Valentine deciding to take up the mantle of nutrition activist. “So, when my cousin became pregnant, she was too scared to go to the clinic to undergo her check-ups. Unfortunately this meant that she was not being given the necessary pre-natal advice and supplement support, like iron and folic acid, and this led to her being given emergency blood infusions during the birth process and it led to her baby being underweight and in need of a lot of care.” Luckily though the young boy who is five years old today is a thriving healthy young boy, but that was only because of the huge effort that the family put into his and his mother’s health after the birth. “We really came together as family to assist with the baby to ensure that he got proper nutrition and was well taken care of.” But Valentine was also battling long held beliefs that have led to malnutrition in Tanzania. “In our culture, we are told by our grandmothers and auntsies that when you are pregnant or give birth, or even when you are menstruating, that you must avoid eating certain vegetables, as they will be harmful to you and you will develop muscle cramps.” Valentine says that she always questioned this belief and after the experience with her cousin’s pregnancy she decided to take matters into her own hands and thoroughly started researching nutrition, malnutrition and it’s impacts, and most importantly how to combat the very real effects that she was seeing in her own community.

Valentine sought out key international and national organisations to help push and promote the nutrition agenda. Her roles include acting as a young leader and youth champion at the Girl Guides of Tanzania, as well as becoming one of the youngest members of the Regional Nutrition Committee. She says that her key focus is to raise awareness on the importance of nutrition and how young girls can overcome iron deficiencies, which is especially critical as they lose iron each month during their period. Valentine has also leveraged speaking platforms at national and international conferences, as well as appearing on a number of local radio and televisions shows where she helps educate the broader community and community members on good to nutrition to girls why should youth be prioritised and clear some misconceptions on foods.

Pre the Covid-19 pandemic, Valentine attend the Women Deliver conference in Canada, where she
says her eyes were opened and her own misconceptions about malnutrition only being an ‘African issue’ challenged. “I met young activists like myself from across the globe, and do you know what, malnutrition, especially for young girls, is a massive challenge across the globe. We are not unique in Tanzania or in Africa, Asian countries and European countries even are all battling with the same issues. And that means that nutrition is a universal issue that requires a global response and solution.” Valentine is hugely encouraged by some of the solutions that she saw other young women bringing to the table and she has made firm friends with other activists like herself from India and Mexico, which she says has nutrition challenges on a massive scale. “I was deeply humbled and motivated at the same time to see what solutions we could learn from each other.” She wants to see a much larger push by young people not just in her home country, but across the globe to become far more conscious about their diet and supplements like iron and folic acid. Even although she did not initially know the process of contacting and engaging with Ministers and Members of Parliament, she found out what processes needed to be followed and persevered. This led to a breakthrough when she was able to secure the participation at one of her events by the Hon. Ummy Ally Mwalimu, who was a Minister for the Environment in the Vice President’s Office at the time and who later became the Minister for the President’s Office for Regional Administration and Local Government. At the time the focus was to persuade the policymakers to make the iron and folic acid supplements free for young girls across the country. However this would prove to be a costly measure. Valentine says that she and her colleagues worked on developing a strong relationship with the Minister. “I can say that when she saw what we were doing for young girls and what we were trying to achieve, she became excited and wanted to find a way to help us.” The Minister then suggested that maybe the fortification of maize meal with iron and folic acid could be a better alternative as the cost for the free distribution of the supplements was a considerable budget. It was agreed to undertake a pilot project in Valentine’s home town of Tanga, where the Minister helped fund the purchasing of machines to add the iron and folic acid enrichment to the maize meal. “It’s working well and we are starting to see improvements with the nutrition of young girls in my area.” The Hon. Ummy Ally Mwalimu has also introduced Valentine to Hon. Jenista Muhagama, who is the Minister in the State Prime Minister’s Office and is responsible for Policy, Parliamentary Affairs, Labour Employment, Youth and Disabled and who has become a firm supporter of the work by the Girl Guides.

Seeing how being involved and engaged with the right decision-makers has spurred Valentine on to throw her hat in to the race in the 2025 Parliamentary elections as a Youth Representative. “As youth leaders we have to work in different arena to ensure that the needs of young people are not only understood, but acted upon. I’m going to continue pushing until it gets done.” She has also recently joined an organisation focused on climate change, which she says in indelibly linked to nutrition. She is currently working on putting a curriculum together for the campaign and they are currently recruiting advocacy champions who will then undergo the training. “I am very excited about this new project and know that with the right young people raising their voices and claiming their spaces in nutrition and climate change. After all it’s about global solutions for universal problems. And all it takes is one small change that leads to the next big change.
Follow Valentine on:

- Facebook: @valentine muhindo
- Instagram: @Valentine Muhindo
- Twitter: @valentinemuhin1

You can also follow the organisation she works with:

Tanzania Girl Guides Association
- Facebook: @Tanzania girl guides Association
- Twitter: @tgga_official
- Instagram: @tanzania_girl_guides

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