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## **From Ruined Hopes to Great Expectations: Strategies for Educating Vulnerable Girls in a Center of Excellence, Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

This article is based on a qualitative case study carried out in a Girls Center of Excellence in Kenya. The purpose of the research was to examine strategies used in the Center to educate and empower girls, whose backgrounds are characterized by poverty, HIV and AIDS and retrogressive cultural practices including female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriages. The article utilizes a Gender Responsive Model to examine the strategies. Data was drawn from interviews with students, teachers and administrators, document analysis as well as participant observation. Findings show that the Center employs synergistic strategies integrated in a gender responsive pedagogy, *Tuseme* (Let's Speak Out), the rescue center, and reconciliation and sensitization programs. The article concludes with recommendations for policy.

**Key Words:** *Girls Education, FAWE – Center of Excellence, Girls and Culture, Educating Girls*

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## Background

Most of us were given away for marriage. I was only 10 and that man was about 48 years old. I told my mom to tell my father that I wanted to be in school, just like those two girls I had seen in my village. I cried every day... and I prayed every day. The spirit inside me did not betray me. I was rescued and brought here when I was 12. This Center is now my home and my future. I hope they [her parents] will one day accept me. Me, I don't hate them (Faith, Focus Group interview, July 2007).

At 16, Faith<sup>3</sup> could be considered a typical high school girl. However, she is a standard 6 pupil who is considered one of top achievers in her class. She is articulate, assertive and talks passionately about the 'power of educated girls'. Her story echoes experiences of other girls, who despite challenges, are determined to get education.

Provision of universal basic education continues to gain prominence in the development agenda of many governments in developing countries. Despite this progress, a comprehensive report commissioned by UNESCO and UNICEF (2002) on the welfare of the world's children paints a grim picture of the state of girls' education in developing nations. The report reveals that two of every three children in the world who do not attend school are girls. Indeed, of the more than 130 million uneducated children between ages 6 and 11, 81 million (60 percent) are girls. Statistics of school attendance in sub-Saharan Africa are similar, with girls accounting for nearly 60 percent of the 42 million children who are not receiving formal education.

Further review of studies on girls' education in sub-Saharan Africa reveals that girls' educational access, retention, participation and performance continues to be constrained by cultural, social, economic and environmental manifestations (UNICEF, 2009; FAWE, 2000; Mlama, 2005; Kakonge, 2001; Herz & Sperling, 2004; King & Hill, 1993; Colclough, 1994 & Gachukia, 1992). Within school contexts, girls are marginalized by teachers who fail to engage them in the learning and teaching process, use cultural scripts that reinforce gender stereotypes, do not speak their language, do not believe they are capable of learning or do not have the pedagogic skills to manage classroom diversity. Any one of these obstacles can prevent girls from having a quality learning experience (FAWE, 2000; Mlama, 2005; Kakonge, 2001 & UNICEF, 2009).

This dismal picture notwithstanding, significant works, key global instruments and gender-friendly interventions continue to underscore the need for governments and local communities to work towards a common understanding of gender equality and

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equity in education (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; Millennium Development Goals, 1990; Dakar Framework, 2000; FAWE 2000). For instance, the goals set by the Dakar Framework for Action for Education for All call for the elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and the achievement of gender equality by 2015.

In the context of Kenya, organizations such as Federation of Kenya women lawyers (FIDA), African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), Global Campaign for Education (GCE), the Association of African Women Entrepreneurs (AFWE) and the Forum for African Women Educationists (FAWE) continue to advocate for women's equality and girls' education, especially in rural communities. Their efforts are focused on increasing and improving educational resources and infrastructure such as classrooms, scholarships, food, healthcare and other learning resources through training seminars and workshops (Kakonge et al., 2001; Cotton, 2000).

Our study focused on the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), whose initial mission was advocacy to put girls' education on the policy agenda of African ministries of education (MoEs) and international donors. FAWE's mission has evolved to include demonstrative interventions, program implementation and capacity building for its network of 32 national chapters in sub-Saharan Africa (Diaw, 2008). One of FAWE's significant achievements is the establishment of Centers of Excellence to serve as successful examples that utilize a holistic and integrated approach to girls' education. The Centers of Excellence model of intervention is premised on the conviction that given access to a safe and secure environment in which to study, girls' school performance can easily match that of boys (FAWE, 2002). There are two such Centers in Kenya.

We explore strategies used in one of the Centers in Kenya to educate and empower vulnerable girls. We use the term vulnerable to refer to girls who are victims of or hail from backgrounds characterized by poverty, HIV and AIDS, and retrogressive cultural practices including female genital mutilation (FGM) and childhood marriages. The research is based upon the following two questions:

1. What strategies does the Center use to support girls' education?
2. How do these strategies influence girls' personal, academic, and social lives?

### **Conceptual Framework**

In exploring these questions, we use a Gender Responsive Model (GRM), which advocates for the transformation of school institutions to be gender sensitive and able to

meet the physical, social, academic and psychological needs of both boys and girls (FAWE, 2000). This entails making “schools and school grounds physically and psychologically safe for girls, providing adequate facilities for personal hygiene, and policies to fight discrimination, harassment and abuse” (Tembon & Fort, 2008, p.44).

Given that schools embody many aspects of local communities’ way of life, Tembon and Fort further postulate that both girls and boys should be given opportunities to understand, challenge and influence forces that contribute to their marginalization, with a view to reclaiming their power to be heard as experts on their own gender and sexuality. They advocate for a rights-based approach, which considers gender equality to be a function of the “right to education” (access and participation), “rights within education” (gender-sensitive environments, processes and outcomes) and “rights through education” (the links between quality education and wider gender justice in society) (Tembon & Fort, 2008). To achieve this goal, the model espouses the integration of a holistic and participatory approach to teaching and learning in which children are active participants in observing, exploring, listening, reasoning, questioning and ‘coming to know’ (FAWE, 2006; Mlama, 2005; Tembon & Fort, 2008; UNICEF, 2009).

The curriculum in a GRM assumes a holistic pedagogical trajectory that questions and challenges underlying gender inequalities and embraces implementation of ameliorative pedagogical and curricular strategies. At the heart of a GRM are committed administrators and trained teachers who have an understanding of gender concepts and empowerment strategies. The ultimate goal of a GRM is to empower girls and boys to acquire skills to know, to be, to do and to live together (UNICEF, 2009). Empowerment in this context is defined as “the ability to make informed decisions on issues that affect one’s life in the social, cultural, economic, political and historical spheres” (FAWE, 2006, p.11). Proponents of a GRM maintain that all of these tenets, interacting in a dynamic and organic manner, constitute the ‘packaged intervention’ that can be described as a ‘gender responsive school’.

## **Methods**

Since we focused our study in one Center of Excellence, we used a qualitative case study design, which is responsive to questions of “why” and “how (Hartley, 1994; Winegardner, 1999; Merriam, 1998). The distinctive need for case studies, according to Yin (1994), “arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena, [which] allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p.13).

Data were collected within a period of two months using in-depth interviewing (Spradley, 1979), sustained observation (Barley, 1990) and document analysis (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). We supplemented the interviews with observational data for the purposes

of describing the study setting, activities, people and the meanings of what we observed from the perspective of the participants. Finally, we collected and analyzed documents related to the Center's inception, programs and activities. The documents included minutes and agendas of staff meetings, Board of Governors (BOG) and Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, the Center's policy and planning documents, workshops and seminar reports, as well as public communication documents (newsletters, brochures and informational sheets).

We utilized purposive sampling, the power and logic of which "lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 2002, p.169). Our sample was comprised of the Center's headmaster, five teachers (one male and four females) and a total of 12 girls. We interviewed the students in three focus groups, each consisting of four girls between 14 and 18 years of age who had lived at the Center for at least four years. Despite their youth, most of these girls were in standard six, were young mothers, had carried out wifely duties, and had either run away or been rescued from female genital mutilation and childhood marriages. The focus groups were structured in an environment of everyday social conversation so that the students could support and stimulate one another while articulating common perspectives and lived experiences prior to and during their stay at the Center. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Data analysis began at the first phase of data collection and continued to evolve as we gathered insight into the processes used to meet the educational, social and psychological needs of the girls. The analysis then assumed the construction of categories (Merriam, 1998) using the structure of the study's guiding questions. An iterative coding process allowed us to create matrix displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994) for each guiding question. Interviews were triangulated with observational data and the review of the Center's programs and policy documents to develop a holistic understanding of the strategies and their impact on the girls. We then compared the data to identify patterns that informed each question and the basic tenets of a Gender Responsive Model. We shared our findings with key informants in the Center and factored their insights into the final analysis (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## **Findings**

This study revealed that the Center utilizes a Gender Responsive Pedagogy, *Tuseme* (Let's Speak Out), and reconciliation programs to support and empower girls' overall cognitive, social, physical and emotional development.

### *Gender Responsive Pedagogy*

The Center's Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) is meant to enhance teachers' instructional and pedagogical practices. This strategy calls for teachers to embrace an all-encompassing gender approach to the processes of lesson planning, teaching, classroom management and performance evaluation (FAWE, 2006). Given that the Center serves students with multiple needs, the headmaster underscored the necessity for teachers to retool their pedagogical beliefs and practices, including their cultural and social sensitivity, in order to achieve gender equity and quality education. He shared that:

We emphasize inclusive learning. We have girls who are young mothers who are emotionally challenged, some with visual impairments and others who are either orphans from HIV and AIDS or other causes, and other children from broken families due to divorce or separation of parents. We have girls who are grossly abused and some who come from poverty-stricken families. It is really not easy to meet the needs of such students. And they are the majority here [Center]. So, most of our teachers are GRP-trained, some through in-service, to help and be sensitive to our girls' emotional problems (Personal interview, June 2007).

A male teacher respondent concurred with the headmaster and captured the views of his teacher colleagues, saying:

Most of the teachers are GRP-trained and even those who come here on transfers are quickly sensitized through staff meetings or teacher-led workshops so that they get to know how to deal with girls with special needs. Initially, we did not know how to handle girls having problems, like their menstrual periods – maybe they do not have sanitary pads or they are uncomfortable due to menstrual pains. Even if we understood what it was, we did not take it serious until we had to undergo a series of seminars under the GRP training (Personal interview, June 2007).

This teacher's sentiments echo research, which states that, in order to overcome gender issues in schools, teachers need to be aware of girls' needs and how to address them in their classrooms (FAWE, 2006). This is one area the Center has emphasized in teacher in-service training.

Data revealed that FAWE had carried out a review of teacher beliefs and practices in Centers of Excellence in Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda and found that a gap existed between what the Centers envisioned as gender-responsive teaching and actual teacher beliefs and practices. The gap was characterized by negative teacher attitudes, poor expectations of girls' performance, classroom dynamics, insensitive teaching and a

didactic approach to teaching mathematics and science. With the help of FAWE, teachers from these countries collaborated to develop a Gender Responsive Teaching Handbook, using their own school experiences to identify issues that needed to be addressed.

A review of the teachers' handbook revealed that in order for teachers to be effective in their pedagogical practices along a gender-responsive model, they are required to emphasize these areas: lesson planning, teaching and learning materials, language use in the classroom, classroom set up, strategies of combating sexual harassment and management of sexual maturation. One key component of GRP was Science, Math and Technology (SMT), which encouraged girls to appreciate science-related subjects by developing positive attitudes early in life (FAWE, 2003).

To ensure a gender-responsive science curriculum, FAWE made it imperative that science teachers undergo in-service training as part of their professional development. We collected data for this study during an ongoing SMT pilot program for fifth graders. One of the math teachers observed:

For a long time, girls have been thought not to do well in math. Through SMT and SMASSE (Strengthening Math and Science Education) in-service training, our efforts are changing girls' attitudes and performance in math. Last year, for example, we had 9 'As' and several 'Bs' in math as opposed to an average of 3 'As' in previous years in an average class of 30 girls. Our girls are ready to learn, and our headmaster is very supportive (Personal interview, July 2007).

With the help of FAWE and individual donors, the Center set up a science laboratory, a computer lab and science workshops to encourage students to engage in math, science and technology. All of these areas were taught by female teachers. A science teacher who had just come from the workshop, Female Education in Mathematics and Science in Africa (FEMSA), shared:

There is a strong conservative belief among parents, teachers and students that mathematics and science subjects are a male preserve. The attitude of teachers has by far the greatest impact. Many teachers, including us [women teachers], just do not believe that girls have the ability to study mathematics and science: they believe that these disciplines call for struggle and determination, and they simply do not believe that the girls are capable of coping with "difficult" subjects (Personal interview, July 2007).

While the Center had put tremendous emphasis on math and science, teachers confirmed that they seldom used the computer lab, which had 10 old computers that lacked software

updates. The headmaster said that the school did not have a technology teacher and had yet to be connected to the World Wide Web as promised by the Ministry of Education Science and Technology.

When we asked teachers to describe changes they experienced in their teaching in the context of GRP, they shared a strong view that GRP training had transformed their beliefs and helped them to “develop innovative, interesting and girl-friendly approaches” to teaching and learning. The following excerpts exemplify some of their responses:

Science teacher: Girls are smart human beings... Whether in the classroom or in the lab, mine is to help them to question, discover and learn, not about teaching them.

English teacher: I can now identify gender stereotyping in teaching and learning materials such as textbooks and visual aids. My grading is also positive.

History teacher: I lead my students to talk more about beliefs, attitudes and expectations held about boys and girls in their communities and question their inequalities.

Swahili teacher: We share personal experiences about gender throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

Math teacher: I don't have to lecture to my students. I now take a participatory approach where they are actively involved.

Special Education teacher: I lead my students to ask themselves who they are in their community and how education will change their understanding.

We also sought to understand how GRP impacted students' learning experience. We asked them to describe what they liked about their teachers. Their responses revealed that teachers were not just facilitating their learning, but empowering them to change attitudes, values and practices in which they are always victimized. The following vignettes capture their experiences:

Naomi: Before I came here, what I knew matters in my community were cows, my husband, obeying my parents and doing everything my father said. Through my teachers, I now know that education is my cows and husband.

Lydia: As a Maasai girl, I now realize that we are so oppressed. I can now tell that my father loves cows more than me. I don't have to accept the man he wants to be my husband.

Grace: Before I came here I did not know there was a stage [in life] called adolescence or menstruations, which our teachers have told us. In class we are told about the reproductive system, emotional changes that you think are abnormal, about drugs, to avoid peer pressure and others. How could I have known these things if not through my teachers?

These statements are indicative of a sense of discovery, belonging, socialization and assertiveness. They carry in them empowering aspects, which are critical for girls in navigating social and cultural environments that oppress them. Besides GRP, another instrumental strategy that the Center utilized to educate and empower the girls was *Tuseme*.

#### *Tuseme (Let's Speak Out)*

Data revealed that the Center embraced *Tuseme*, a strategy meant to train girls to express their views openly on matters that affected their personal, academic and social development, and to learn to take part in finding solutions to those problems. *Tuseme*, according to Mlama (2005), is "an empowerment process designed to enable girls to understand the gender construct of the society they live in, to identify and analyze the emergent problems and how they hinder their academic and social development, to speak out about the problems and take action to solve them" (p.2). The expression encapsulates the spirit of daringness that girls must be helped to acquire in order to liberate themselves from traditions of silence, oppression and subservience.

Within the Center, teachers used *Tuseme* to lead girls to identify, analyze, discuss and find solutions to factors that impede their education. Some of the issues they identified were manifested in school dropouts, poor academic achievement, school-girl pregnancy, sexual harassment and other gender-related problems in the community, including FGM, childhood marriages, forced participation in sexual acts and HIV/AIDS. The headmaster spoke highly of *Tuseme*, which had enabled most girls to rediscover and redefine themselves in a community in which everything, using the lion's analogy, belongs to the man. He narrated:

The Maasai community is a man's world. In this community, when food is cooked there is the man, he is served first, he eats, then the children and finally the women. Do you know that is how lions behave? The lioness will hunt, the lioness will kill and the male [lion] will feed first (Personal interview, June 2007).

When we probed the headmaster to elaborate on Tuseme, we learned that its ultimate goal is to use education as a tool to educate and empower students to fight and transform gender inequalities in school organizations and in the community. He captured the Tuseme philosophy by saying, “Tuseme is a concept we adopted from FAWE. It is an original human rights-based approach, gender responsive and inclusive... Tuseme process is persuasive and effective for social mobilization, and it offers distinct advantages in the effort to promote girls’ education.” Tuseme sessions utilize a variety of participatory and interactive techniques such as skits, debates, role playing, small group discussions and other exploratory learning techniques that are meant to equip girls with self-confidence, problem-solving, negotiation, critical thinking and other interpersonal development skills.

A female teacher respondent who hailed from the local community and who had once been rescued from FGM passionately shared her views on the impact of Tuseme on students:

The Tuseme program has helped to empower girls to say “No” and freed them from the bondage of repugnant cultural practices that hinder their education and impede their economic development. The girls no longer have to walk with their heads down or dig the ground with their toes as they talk to men. With its variety of activities, among which is theatre for development, Tuseme is an effective tool for empowering girls to “speak out” and say “no” (Personal interview, July 2007).

With a view to gaining insight on the impact of Tuseme, we asked students to describe how it had helped them. The following excerpts capture the girls’ perceptions:

Faith: I was very shy when I was brought here. I used to cry most of the time. I did not know how to speak English properly. So I spoke very little in class discussions. Since the introduction of Tuseme clubs, I am able to speak more and share ideas with others. Tuseme helps us to speak out our minds and hearts on issues that affect us. We now know our rights and we cannot keep quiet any more.

Hope: I never thought I could speak before people, especially Maasai men. Thanks to Tuseme, I want my village to realize that Maasai girls can make it in life. Some of them, when they see us wearing this green uniform, they think, these big girls need not to be in school, they need to be married. I want to shame those who believe that girls are there to be married. I want to be a doctor and work in our community to treat people who are not able to go anywhere for treatment. I will show that girls have power and can do anything.

Sarah: Through Tuseme, I now know about the dangers of circumcision. The teachers have told us and now I know I don’t have to accept it. Now,

when you step on my rights, I don't keep quiet; I speak out. And it does not matter to me the level of your status in society. I feel that I have been empowered to be a disciplined and respectable girl who respects others regardless of their status in society. My self-esteem is now high, and I have learned to accept my strengths and weaknesses.

We attributed the assertiveness and self-confidence the girls exhibited during the interview process to Tuseme activities. It was a great asset to those girls who lived in the Rescue Center.

### *Rescue Center*

Built in 2000 with support from FAWE and other donors, the Rescue Center or Emparnat *Naisula* (home for girls), is revered as a safe haven for girls rescued from FGM and arranged marriages. At the time of our data collection, the Rescue Center had a total of 85 girls, including 2 who were attending a local university. These girls' parents had refused to reconcile with them because they had disobeyed them [and their culture] by refusing to either get married or undergo FGM. A teacher, who also served as boarding master, described the Rescue Center:

Because some of the rescued girls find it difficult to go back home, FAWE put up the Rescue Center to accommodate and serve as a home for them. It has three wings; the hall, the kitchen and the sleeping wing. When we close school, the rescued girls remain there. They engage in some vocational work, they do needlework, sewing/stitching and bead work, so they don't get bored. They also prepare their own meals here. We offer remedial lessons for those who lag behind in some subjects (Personal Interview, June 2007).

We discovered that the Rescue Center was not only equipped with boarding facilities but also with a library and a theater hall. The walls inside the Rescue Center had educational posters, some of which read, "Say No to Child Labor," "Give us Education, it is our Right," and "Support Girls, They are Smarter than Cows." One poster that stood out for us was a blood-stained razor blade inscribed with the words, "WE STAND AGAINST FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION." The razor blade is the tool used to 'cut' girls during FGM initiation. Also on the wall were pictures of local chiefs meeting with girls and their signatures, denoting their commitment to support girls' education and end FGM and childhood marriages in their areas of jurisdiction.

When we asked student respondents to share with us what the Rescue Center meant to them, they described it as:

- "It is our home now."
- "It is a place where my eyes have been opened."

- “There is love here.”
- “It is our future.”

One girl in the focus group captured the experience and views of the rest by recounting her experience:

Most of us were given away for marriage. I was only 10 and that man was about 48 years old. I told my mom to tell my father that I wanted to be in school, just like those two girls I had seen in my village. I cried every day... and I prayed every day. The spirit inside me did not betray me. I was rescued and brought here when I was 12. This Center is now my home and my future. I hope they [her parents] will one day accept me. Me, I don't hate them (Personal interview, July 2007).

Another girl shared:

The rescue program is very helpful. The teachers here are so friendly. They take good care of us when we are not visited, they buy soap for us, and they give us clothes and food to cook for ourselves because we cannot go home. It provides a place for us to stay. For me it is home (Personal Interview, June 2007).

These stories depicted the Rescue Center as a solemn but loving place that carried with it the aura of a normal home, but devoid of parents, siblings, cows, dogs and chickens running around and about in the homestead. The Rescue Center symbolized both their burdens and their dreams. Their phenomenal testimonies and the aspirations evident in their individual and collective experiences were illustrative of their resilience and ability to weather conditions of adversity and disadvantage. Their common experiences helped them to recognize the importance of peer support in providing a sense of belonging, socialization, contexts for identity and learning life skills. Meanwhile, they hoped to be reconciled with their families.

### *Reconciliation and Sensitization Programs*

In order for the Center to extend its mission beyond its walls, it was imperative to sensitize the local community in the process of reconciling rescued girls with their parents. This was critical for the survival of the girls and the continuity and meaning of the Center to the local community. Affirming that he had organized several reconciliation seminars and workshops in the local community, the headmaster underscored the relevance of getting parents to support their daughters' education and to evaluate their cultural views regarding girls' intellectual abilities. Through these forums:

We have been able to change the attitudes of some people. And I have also seen a very big change in the community. Since I came here, men are seeing some of these things in a more positive manner than when a lady

was heading this Center. This made me know that Maasai men lowly regard women regardless of their position in society. If they see it is a man telling them that a girl should not be circumcised, they see there is a point. Like last December, we had a workshop and most men confessed that they have seen the reasons why girls should not be circumcised and why they should get education (Personal interview, June 2007).

While the headmaster took pride in the reconciliation programs, he revealed that most girls who had been rescued or run away still endured antagonistic relationships with their families. Some parents and 'husbands' had stormed the Center, demanding the release of their daughters and 'wives.'

We have had some hostile parents and 'husbands.' When these girls come here, there are those (parents and 'husbands') who come here with bows and arrows, saying that we want our daughters and 'wives'. But we don't release them; that one I cannot. It does not matter how they come, we cannot give them back (Personal interview, June 2007).

Although the Center was a safe haven for the girls, we inferred that its existence in the heart of a very conservative community was a sour reminder of its intrusiveness to their way of life. The Center was viewed by some as an alienating force that undermined local cultural values. A teacher shared what she saw as the views of some in the community. "Educating girls was a way of watering another man's garden. After all, any benefits of their education will go to another family," she explained. This perception, however, was changing gradually.

A review of the reconciliation and sensitization documents showed that local chiefs, who are known for their influence at the grassroots level, were the first target, since they either participated in or condoned childhood marriages and FGM in their areas of jurisdiction. A senior local chief's speech to his colleagues illustrates that sensitization workshops had started earning dividends:

We are the eyes and ears of our people. We are the link between our people in the villages and the government administration. We have a lot of power in our hands. Why then have we allowed our daughters to suffer so much injustice? Listen to their songs! They are saying that we chiefs have completely let them down. We use our positions to force them to marry us as second or third wives, or if not that, we are sitting at some high table as chief guests, eating and drinking away as we celebrate the marriage of one of them to a man old enough to be her grandfather, just because of a few cows. Maybe none of us here have done that, but have we stopped it happening elsewhere in our divisions? Fellow colleagues, this is unforgivable. Let us leave this workshop determined that not one more Maasai girl in Kajiado District shall suffer the horrors of this injustice.

The headmaster shared some positive results of the reconciliation programs. For instance, of the 49 parents who had given their girls for marriage and who had attended the reconciliation meeting in 2006, 36 had successfully accepted their daughters back into their homes and brought them back to school the next day. In the latest workshop, three of the men had asked for vacancies to bring their other daughters to school that still lived at home. This was good news to the headmaster and an encouragement to the teachers. He conveyed:

They are now trying to understand what the Center is all about. They know we are not against their culture; we tell them their culture is rich, good, but there are some things in the culture that we need to get rid of. It has not been easy, but we cannot give up (Personal interview, June 2007).

Regardless of how the girls arrived at the Center, the headmaster indicated that all of them undergo some form of guidance and counseling. This is a deliberate attempt to meet their psycho-social needs, since some of them feared to share their traumatizing experiences. The guidance and counseling unit had one trained counselor, who was a retired nurse. FAWE had also facilitated the training of some teachers in guidance and counseling. The counselor provided in-service training to teachers as well as taught students to serve as peer counselors. Guidance and counseling activities included a weekly session for all girls focusing on HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, pregnancy and girl-boy relationships. Some of these activities were conducted through debates, Tuseme, drama and film. In some cases, counseling included administering necessary medical treatment and making medical referrals for girls who suffered from HIV/AIDS or who had been rescued with severe physical and mental injuries.

Although guidance and counseling yielded some success in integrating young mothers into normal school life, the Center found that gender dynamics played a crucial role in winning the girls' trust. A teacher shared:

You know we just have to talk to them, but it takes time because they even shut off when a male teacher enters their classroom because they are scared of them. It brings back the memories, but we talk to them. All the teachers have been empowered; we were trained by FAWE on how to counsel or talk to them. We have peer counselors and we have *Girl Take Care of Girl* policy. We encourage them to talk to, accept and support one another. You see, once you come and you tell me your story and I tell you mine, you begin to realize that you are not alone or even your situation is better than mine or the other way. We don't have any teasing or ridiculing where a girl talks bad about another because of her circumstances (Personal interview, June 2007).

We discovered that the *Girl Take Care of Girl* policy was introduced as one way to encourage girls to support one another. While most girls had homogeneous background experiences that resulted in their being in the Center, they needed help to unlearn some social aspects and relearn new expectations. The policy encourages all of the girls to care about and share their resources with needy and newly arrived ones. Even with all of these strategies that we have attempted to elucidate, the Center had its share of ongoing challenges.

### *Challenges*

While the Center has made great strides in its quest to help vulnerable girls find a footing in life, our classroom observations as well as student sentiments and teacher concerns revealed that an upsurge of new students has strained the Center's physical facilities and posed health risks for the girls. The influx of students was attributed to the 2003 introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE), which presented new opportunities and challenges to schools. They face large pupil-teacher ratios, shortage of infrastructure, lack of standards of academic achievement and limited monitoring and evaluation of teaching-learning processes (Mukudi, 2004). One of the teacher respondents echoed others' concerns, saying:

The classrooms are overcrowded; they are now holding over 50 students instead of 35. The dormitories are congested too. The girls are sharing beds, which I think is not good, especially for young girls. Even the Rescue Center, which is meant to be a home to rescued girls, has now one wing open for use by all other girls. And there are consequences that come with this situation; malaria, chicken pox or any other infection, and many of them get sick or affected because of the overcrowded conditions (Personal interview, June 2007).

While student respondents confirmed these observations, they indicated that different dynamics played out along age and grade levels. For instance, girls in senior classes complained that they were not allowed to study beyond 8:45 p.m., one hour before the official "lights out" time at the Center. One girl captured the mood of the rest, saying:

Those of us who are preparing to sit for KCPE [Kenya Certificate of Primary Education] are forced to sleep early like standard one girls. I feel that we should be left to extend our studies for a short period of time. I am preparing to be the best KCPE girl in the nation. But I worry if I, and those who are older like me, will meet this huge goal if I cannot be left to extend my studies beyond 9:30 p.m. I now use my torch [flashlight] to read (Personal interview, June 2007).

With this information, we asked the headmaster to share his impressions of the student concerns. According to him, academic ability and not age determined the placement of girls once they arrive in the Center. The staff pays less attention to the dynamics that come with age differences when assigning girls to classrooms and dormitories. Without downplaying student complaints, the headmaster said that these kinds of challenges at the Center were nothing compared to the abuse and torture the girls had gone through in their homes and villages. The Center had helped them to understand the value of education. It also presented them with increased opportunities to be productive, earn better pay and participate in social, economic and political decision-making. They had gained a heightened sense of appreciation for who they had become as well as for the prospects the future held in store for them.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study examined strategies used in a Center of Excellence in Kenya to educate and empower vulnerable and marginalized girls. We found that these strategies are meant to disrupt cultural and institutional impediments to girls' educational access, participation and performance. Like many other studies focused on gender equality and girls' education (Colclough, C., et al, 2000; Kabila & Masinjila, 1997; FAWE 2000; Gordon, 1995; Herz & Sperling, 2004; Chege & Sifuna, 2006), our study underscores the importance of creating gender-responsive schools that have the capacity to enhance girls' knowledge and equip them with life skills. We argue that such skills hold the promise to empower them to understand, challenge and overcome the forces that hold them captive in contexts of vulnerability and marginalization. This is especially imperative for schools that are embedded in rural contexts, where cultural allegiance is pervasive and precedes girls' human rights, including the right to basic education of good quality.

The successful strategies and attributes of Centers of Excellence, which we view as laboratories of innovative practices, can potentially be mainstreamed into other public schools. Based on our findings, we recommend that policy makers begin this process by reviewing and revising infrastructural facilities to make them gender friendly, introducing in-service teacher programs that focus on gender-responsive pedagogies, and requiring teacher training programs to infuse best practices by developing a Gender Responsive Framework within their curriculum. While there is no guarantee that such approaches can eliminate deep-seated cultural ideologies that perpetuate gendered norms, ignoring them will only help to feed cultural scripts that reinforce myths of gender stereotypes, thereby limiting girls' access to and experiences of empowering interventions.

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