

WHO WOULD HAVE IMAGINED a project between Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, and Egerton University in Egerton, Kenya, to teach Kenyan university students about HIV/AIDS would ultimately transform a rural community and bring a private secondary school to girls desperately in need of a chance to succeed.

In January, the boarding school is set to open its doors to 30 girls in the remote fishing community of Muhuru Bay, providing them with scholarships, dormitory housing, and an atmosphere free from the physical abuses of male teachers and the sexual harassment and abuse of male classmates.

A lack of opportunities for women and girls, coupled with concerns over safety and security, is a problem that plagues much of Africa. This is an acute problem in more remote regions where educational opportunities for girls are limited, literacy rates are low, and they are often judged by society to have much less value than their male counterparts.

“The boy child is actually the privileged child. Girls feel like they don’t belong to the community,” because little is invested in them, says Rose Odhiambo, one of the driving forces behind the Women’s Institute for Secondary Education and Research (WISER), the

transforming project that has grown out of the partnership between Duke and Egerton universities.

In sub-Saharan Africa, only 5 percent of students—male and female—are enrolled in tertiary education, according to the World Bank. It’s the lowest percentage for any region of the world. Of those select few students in tertiary education, just 40 percent are women.

Simply making it that far is a major challenge. Of the 30 countries with the lowest adult literacy rates in the world, all but one—Afghanistan—is located in Africa, figures from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) show. Niger ranks dead last, with an adult literacy rate of 42.9 percent for males and only 15.1 percent for females.

While Kenya fares better than many of its peers, with a male literacy rate of 77.7 percent and a female rate of 70.2, it still ranks only 147th out of 182 nations studied by the UNDP.

Disparities are much greater in rural areas, where girls often quit school to care for their families, get married, or have children.

“The moment you get a husband you drop out,” says Kakenya Ntaiya, who managed to stand up to the traditions of her home village of Enoosaen, Kenya, come to the United States to attend university, and is now building a school back home to give young girls the opportunities she had to fight to attain.



Form 3 students (16 or 17 years old) studying after dinner in an old auditorium, Providence Girls' Secondary School.



Education for girls and women is not always a priority in many parts of Africa. But students and faculty, with the support of their universities and a number of nongovernmental organizations, are striving to help the continent and improve equity of opportunity.

By Susan Ladika

The Unprivileged CHILD

Overcoming Local Mindsets to Provide Opportunity

Zertihun Tefera, executive director of the Siiqqee Women's Development Association (SWDA) in Ethiopia, which works to assist girls in continuing their education, underscores the reality on the ground. In rural areas in particular, the common attitude is "What is the use of sending girls to school? They will get married. They will leave the family. People think it's a waste of money."

But organizations like SWDA and WISER have a different perspective. "If you educate a girl, you educate a community," says Odhiambo, who is herself a personification of that belief. Now head of the Institute of Women, Gender, and Development Studies at Egerton University, she grew up in a polygamist family in Muhuru Bay, one of more than 50 children.

Yet, she was the lucky one. Her intellectual talent was recognized early on, and she went away to private secondary school. From there she went on to university, ultimately earning a Ph.D. in immunology. She's the only girl from Muhuru Bay to have that distinction.

A Kenyan girl learning a new skill through a Women's Institute for Secondary Education & Research (WISER) program.



While a number of boys went away and succeeded in their careers, none have returned to help their village. But Odhiambo, who learned "sometimes it's difficult to run away from yourself, your roots," has returned.

For the girls of Muhuru Bay, she serves as a role model—someone who made it out of the community and succeeded. "It motivates them to know there is a possibility to grow up in that environment and make it through education," Odhiambo says.

But she's by no means alone in opening up the world of possibilities to the girls of Muhuru Bay. In

2002 Odhiambo met Sherryl Broverman, associate professor in the Biology Department at Duke University, during a conference to help science educators embed social justice issues into science courses.

The two hit it off, and worked together to develop and win a National Science Foundation grant to teach a course on HIV/AIDS that is now required by the Kenyan government for students to graduate from university.

Broverman traveled to Kenya the following year, and in 2004 went with Odhiambo to Muhuru Bay. It was the day the local secondary school was handing out prizes, and Odhiambo was the honored guest, Broverman recalls. The girls were thrilled to have such a rock star in their midst.

From that first visit, the seeds were sown to do more for the girls and Muhuru Bay, a community of about 30,000 on the shores of Lake Victoria. The province where Muhuru Bay is located has the highest HIV infection rates in the country, and many girls become ill from having unprotected sex with the fishermen who visit the community. Through the encounters, the girls gain money for clothes and hygiene products.

The group consulted with the community's chiefs, and in 2006, Duke started doing research about the existing secondary school, and even held a research seminar to determine the most effective strategy to help the girls succeed, drawing up business plans that looked at topics like stakeholders, funding, and operating costs, Broverman recalls.

The school "is embedded in a wider suite of projects that look at community development," says Broverman.

Those range from constructing more latrines, which cuts down the risk of typhoid fever; developing a water system with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) that provides clean drinking water for 5,000 people; and the school construction itself, which provides jobs for 300 as the older women make the bricks and the men install them.

Broverman takes Duke undergraduates with her on each of her Kenya visits, and they then serve as teaching assistants when they return to North Carolina.

One of those who accompanied her was Andy Cunningham, who graduated from Duke in May 2008 with a double major in international comparative studies and Chinese.

One evening Cunningham received a note from one of the girls in Muhuru Bay, who said the male teachers caned her for no reason, and the boys sexually abused her. "Please get me out of this hell," the note ended.

That galvanized Cunningham to become more involved with the community, and is now co-founder



In connection with Duke University, Women's Institute for Secondary Education & Research (WISER), is building a boarding school for girls in Muhuru Bay, a remote community in Kenya set to open in January 2010.

A Kenyan man helps build the school, left.



and executive director of WISER, living in Muhuru Bay, and overseeing construction of the boarding school, which is scheduled to open its doors to the first 30 girls on January 2010.

"Boys are at the higher end of the seesaw. Girls are at the bottom. We want to even it out," Cunningham says.

Eventually the school will house 120 girls, with 30 in each secondary school class. They'll receive full scholarships that cover education, housing, books, and even clothing and hygiene products—"things that keep girls out of school," Broverman says.

The seven-acre campus will also include a computer tech center, gathering hall, and area for solar technology studies.

The students are being selected based on a mix of grades, interviews, and essays. Broverman says a girl who cares for eight younger siblings may not have the best of grades, but they can still be admitted to the school "if we see a spark of potential. We want to make sure we don't miss those girls."

Students Step Up

Tapping into girls' and women's potential is a motivating factor for students, universities, and non-governmental organizations operating across Africa.

Julie Walz, a senior at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., was so touched by what she saw during an internship with Think Impact, a nonprofit that brings young people on board to help fight poverty in developing countries.

Walz spent the summer after her sophomore year in the rural Manyeleti region of South Africa. She and fellow Georgetown student David Lamb were so moved by what they saw, they launched a program to aid high school girls in the community.

"The girls have an infinite amount of potential," Walz says, but they have no idea how to apply to a university, seek out financial aid, or address any of the other issues that are commonplace for U.S. high school students today.

So she and Lamb, who graduated from Georgetown in 2009, developed a resource booklet to help students navigate the ropes for college admission. They hope to break the cycle of poverty in the region, where unemployment tops 70 percent and the graduates "hang around the community with nothing to do," Walz says.

They also created the Mundzuku Scholarship Fund, which provides funding for higher education for the region's young people. They've paired with a South African NGO to help administer the project, and a group of the community's women are to select the winner, based on grades, essays, and interviews with teachers.

All of the top five candidates are girls, Walz says. "Girls are consistently highest within their class at all grade levels."

Xanthe Ackerman, a Ph.D. student in international relations at the Fletcher School at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, also felt drawn to help girls after serving on an internship with CARE in Malawi.

Ackerman had a friend who was interning at the *Christian Science Monitor*, so to coincide with the G8 Summit in 2005, Ackerman was commissioned by the

newspaper to write an article on what it's like to live on \$1 a day in the village of Bowa, Malawi, featuring the life of a local woman who had started her own small business. In the article, the woman mentioned that her son was going to school, but she didn't have the funds to continue her daughter's education after eighth grade.

Readers, affected by her plight, spontaneously donated money to send the girl to school. Ultimately, Ackerman established a nongovernmental organization called AGE Africa, which set up a community-managed scholarship fund overseen by local women, which helps girls from the village continue their education.

It's a poor place, where most families survive from subsistence agriculture. These girls have succeeded by doing well on their school exams. "They need sup-

A lack of opportunities for women and girls, coupled with concerns over safety and security, is a problem that plagues much of Africa. This is an acute problem in more remote regions where educational opportunities for girls are limited, literacy rates are low, and they are often judged by society to have much less value than their male counterparts.

Richland Student Faith Smith (second from left) with Ameth Fall Girls High School Penpals





"The prefects are dead! Long live the prefects!" Form 3 students, soon to be sworn in as prefects, taunt Form 4 prefects who are resigning. This scene takes place at AGE Africa's partner school—Providence Girls Secondary School (an all girls' boarding school in the Mulanje District of southern Malawi).



"Public Displays of Affection" This photo shows students waiting outside the school's administration office to hear news about a classmate that is sick. This is at AGE Africa's partner school, Providence.

port, and the public school system, we feel, is not going to be enough to get them over the hurdles they face," Ackerman says.

Now AGE Africa supports 17 girls from Malawi, who are in the eighth grade or higher. They attend all-girls' boarding schools and the

scholarships cover tuition, transportation, uniforms, and pocket money—roughly \$700 a year.

With a good education, the girls have a better chance to be successful in the labor market, and will be more able to care for their own children, Ackerman says. AGE Africa also hopes to develop a career counseling program for the girls. "We want to give them enough so they can navigate their lives the way they want to."

Although few girls have been able to continue their educations, it's not because of a lack of parental support. Malawi "is a country where people believe in the power of education." So if an organization has the funds to help cover girls' school costs, "that's great, they love their daughters," Ackerman says.

Starting a Girls School Back Home

In other places, it can be more of a struggle. Just ask women like Ntaiya, who now is working on her Ph.D. in social and comparative analysis in education at the University of Pittsburgh.

She was engaged to be married at age 5; she attended the village primary school and a Catholic boarding school for secondary school. Then she was able to persuade the village elders that if they would support her in her bid to go to college, she would come back and help the village.

As a young girl helping to care for her seven siblings, living in a hut with no electricity and lacking books, she saw her female teachers, who were neatly dressed and wore shoes, "as my role models."

Her goal was to emulate them and attend a teachers' college. Then a man from her village, who attended the University of Oregon, came home for a visit, and the dream of attending university in the United States was born.

With his coaching, she was able to land a scholarship to Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, where she received her bachelor's degree, and now is working on her Ph.D. at the University of Pittsburgh.

At the same time, she's living her new dream, raising funds to develop the Kakenya Center for Excellence, a school for girls in her home village. The first phase started in May, when 32 fourth-grade girls were admitted to the school. A second wave will enter in January—the traditional start of the school year.

Ntaiya decided she would rather start educating the girls as soon as possible, rather than waiting until the whole center is complete. A board in Kenya selects the girls, and each takes an entrance exam to gauge where they stand academically. While exams count, so does the girl's personal history.

Ntaiya wants to be sure to include orphans and those from one-parent homes in a country where HIV/AIDS is rampant. They also look at whether a girl's other female family members have had a chance at an education. If not, she says, "we have to intervene."

The board also makes sure to select girls from various parts of the sprawling village, where some children walk two hours to get



Students are exuberant after receiving their uniforms at the Kakeyna Center for Excellence.

to school. “We want to touch families from different parts of the village, and also touch lives of those girls who never would have a chance to be in this position,” she says.

Ntaiya is driven by “the desire to give girls what I didn’t have.” It’s a society where girls are “looked at as second-class people. When it comes to opportunities, they’re always given to boys. I feel like we have to catch up.”

So far she has brought in about \$100,000 for her project, and ultimately wants to raise \$1 million, which would fund a dormitory, library, and cultural center. She would like to have a clinic where women and girls can be tested for HIV/AIDS, and opportunities where girls can learn Kenyan traditions like bead work and storytelling.

“We want to create girls who are leaders,” Ntaiya says. And eventually she’d like to pull boys into the mix. “You can’t change the community by changing one gender.”

Others are working to assist girls of university age in Kenya. In 2002 the Zawadi Africa Educational Fund was launched, patterned after successful airlifts in the 1960s put in place by President John F. Kennedy and a former prominent Kenyan politician, Tom Mboya.

Under the program, more than 1,000 East Africans—including President Barack Obama’s father—came to the United States to gain a university education.

Mboya’s daughter, Susan, revived the idea, and began bringing young women to the United States for their education. Mboya says she was inspired to do so because many of those who benefited in the 1960s went on to become Kenya’s leaders. Now most are aging, and “if we wanted to grow more high-quality leaders in Africa, we would need to refresh the base.”

While the vast majority of the participants are from Kenya, a handful come from places like Uganda and Rwanda. The young women are chosen based on academic and leadership skills, as well as financial need.

So far more than 80 promising young women have taken part in the program, going to such schools as Harvard and Yale universities and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

They also head to smaller, liberal arts schools with a religious inclination. “These schools work well for our students who come from rural areas, and for whom the adjustment may otherwise be too difficult,” Mboya says.

The Zawadi project also makes sure the girls have strong support from college and university faculty members, as well as international student offices, to help the young women in their transition, Mboya says.

One school that has recently become involved with the program is Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina. Daniel Green, associate vice president for enrollment, says the college sought to work with a country with which it already had a

relationship, and one Meredith professor had done AIDS research in Kenya.

As a result, Meredith teamed up with Zawadi Africa, bringing two young Kenyan women starting with the 2008–2009 academic year, and another one joining them for the start of the 2009–2010 school year. The school is providing full scholarships, and plans to bring in one new student each year. “It makes great sense for us to give back globally,” Green says.

Zawadi Africa provided Meredith with a list of potential applicants, and school officials made the final selection. “It was really difficult to make a decision. Of course you want to take everyone,” Green says.

The first year they settled on two engineering majors, Ida Githu and Kagure Wamunyu, who are in the United States for a five-year program.

Wamunyu says when she finishes her degree, she hopes to go on to graduate school and study civil engineering, and then return to Kenya and help develop the country’s transportation system.

“I feel I should help,” Wamunyu says. She also wants to tap into her leadership potential while in the United States, where she is exposed to very diverse ways of thinking. “You learn to see things from a different angle. That’s especially important for a leader.”

Githu also hopes to go to graduate school for medical research, focusing on AIDS. For her, coming to the United States was an opportunity to be “exposed to so much more. You get to see a world view.”

One of her goals is to help develop her own leadership qualities. “We need movers and we need people who are actually doing things.”

U.S. colleges and universities also are working to get their students exposed to new ways of thought, and new experiences helping those abroad.

Sherry Dean, executive dean of humanities at Richland College, part of the Dallas County Community College District in Texas, taught in Senegal nearly two decades ago, and after she returned to the United States she started working for the community college district, teaching French language, and cultural and intercultural communication. She began taking students and faculty with her to Senegal periodically, and has continued to do so ever since.

Since 1996 Dean and her students and colleagues have worked with Ameth Fall Girls High School, in Saint-Louis, Senegal, including raising scholarship money to help keep the girls in secondary school. The money comes from simple things like bake sales, car washes, and donations.

It’s a country where the female literacy rate is only 33 percent, and if something happens in a family, the girls are often pulled from school, says Dean, adding, “One thousand dollars can keep a girl in school with room and board for a year.”



Students greet Kakenya Ntaiya, founder of Kakeyna Center for Excellence, when she first arrives at the school in summer 2009.

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Women in Rwanda participate in a University of Michigan program as part of the Goldman Sachs' 10,000 Women project, to provide business and management education.



Signs were posted in the school coffee shops for a \$2 "African Outreach Latte." The money students would normally use for a cup of coffee to keep themselves perked up between classes was instead channeled to the Catholic University of Sudan.

"Students loved it" says Woods, who now is with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Two students who were involved with the program are looking to revive it again this winter semester.

The pilot program raised about \$1,000 to purchase books and other educational materials, says Father Michael Schultheis, vice chancellor of the Catholic University of the Sudan.

The first campus, in Juba, with a focus on economics and business administration, opened in 2008. In 2009 a campus for agricultural and environmental sciences opened in Wau. About one-quarter of the students are women, and Schultheis says, "We encourage women and give special attention in acceptance and academic work. Some are very good. Others need encouragement to participate in class discussions."

Schultheis, who has worked in a number of African nations, including Uganda, Mozambique, and Ghana, says educating Africa's women is crucial. "Women basically form the family and educate the children if literate. They can encourage their children to get an education. Today in Africa, without education, young people are more or less limited to bearing children, herding cattle, cultivating fields, or sitting around the towns looking for work that generally isn't there."

Concerns such as those have prompted the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) to partner with a number of African organizations, including the Siqqee Women's Development Association (SWDA) in their efforts to help encourage girls to remain in school.

"We really believe gender equality is a critical component of social and economic development," says Sarah

Most recently, six students from Richland Collegiate High School, which is a charter high school on the campus of Richland College where high school juniors and seniors earn both their high school diploma and an associate's degree, headed to Senegal in December 2008.

There the four girls and two boys met students at the Ameth Fall School and took part in a seminar on youth and women's issues in Senegal.

Dean has found that often when students go abroad, they come back and reconfigure their career plans so they can work in a nongovernmental organization aiding others. "When you go to a locale, you need to give back to the community," she says. This is about building global sustainability."

Others have stuck closer to home and worked to aid African educational efforts. Last year, Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, launched a "Donate a Latte" program, offering students the option of donating money from their meal plan funds to support newly formed Catholic universities in Sudan.

Andrea Woods, who served as student body president before graduating in May 2009, said a backer of the Sudanese schools suggested the project to her, and she jumped at the idea. "I wanted student government focus to be less about self-promotion and more about service and intentionality."

Gunther, the AJWS East Africa program officer, based in New York. "If they can't participate actively, community development doesn't occur."

AJWS provides grants to assist community-based groups, such as SWDA, with their efforts. Tefera, the executive director of SWDA, which was formed in 1997, says the organization does everything from helping to build latrines to renovating libraries to supplying scholarships to promising female students.

While the Ethiopian government's policy calls for equal rights in education, that isn't necessarily the case in traditional societies, she says, where the girls often attend primary school, and then are forced to marry.

And something as simple as a latrine also can impact a girl's school attendance, Tefera says. If a school has no latrine, a girl may not attend, so SWDA tries to develop separate ones for boys and girls. In other cases, the organization provides economic support so a girl can purchase uniforms and textbooks, sets up girls clubs, and offers tutoring classes and counseling services.

"We try to assist them to stay in school and get better results. We want them to continue their educations at higher levels and encourage them to be leaders.

Beyond Education

For some organizations and universities, assistance doesn't end when girls complete secondary school, or even university. The William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan is part of Goldman Sachs' 10,000 Women project, to provide business and management education to women in various less-developed nations.

One project the university is involved with entails helping Rwandan women hone their business acumen. The program began in 2008 and is now training its third group of women, says Sharolyn Arnett, program manager for executive education at the university.

Experts from the School of Finance and Banking in Kigali, along with University of Michigan faculty with previous experience or ties to the country, teach courses on topics such as business rules and regulations and tax laws.

Because so many men were killed in Rwanda's bloody war in the 1990s, the government encourages women-owned businesses, Arnett says. When the training program was first announced on the radio, there were 600 applicants for only 60 slots. For the most recent course, more than 900 women applied.

The businesses have run the spectrum from a grocery store owner to a dairy farmer, and a trash collector to a wedding cake designer. Despite their differences, "it feels like a sisterhood among themselves," Arnett says.

The experience has also encouraged some to consider expanding beyond Rwanda's borders. "It's pretty exciting to see how much they grow in confidence," Arnett says. "It helps them to go beyond what they see around them."

IE

SUSAN LADIKA is a freelance writer based in Tampa, Florida. Her last article for *IE* was "Women's Work," which focused on improving education for girls and women in the Middle East in the September/October 2009 issue.

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