TUUSEME CLUBS
{let us speak out}
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Tuseme is a Swahili expression which means ‘let us speak out.’ The Tuseme programme is an initiative of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Rwanda Chapter, supported by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). FAWE is a pan-African non-governmental organization working to empower girls and women through gender-responsive education. There are Tuseme clubs in 54 primary and secondary schools across the country. The clubs provide an opportunity for boys and girls to come together to learn, participate, develop and speak about the challenges they face. The programme supports the Ministry of Education’s work to promote and advance girls’ education in Rwanda.

The purpose of this publication is to share the experiences of the girls and boys in Tuseme clubs and provide examples of how these clubs have helped girls reach their full academic potential.
Despite recent advances in education, millions of girls are being left behind globally. The 2013 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Global Monitoring Report indicates that in 2011 there were 31 million girls out of school world-wide, of whom 55% per cent are expected never to enrol. The challenge is more pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa. The same report states that if recent trends continue, universal primary school completion in sub-Saharan Africa will only be achieved in 2069 for all the poorest boys and in 2086 for all the poorest girls. 

Globally, girls face several barriers to education, particularly at secondary school level. These barriers include hidden costs (in the form of parent-teacher association fees, uniforms and school materials), the long hours girls spend on household chores, which affects their ability to learn and perform well at school, and school environments characterized by gender bias and sexual harassment. Intimidation by male teachers or students, physical punishment, favouring boys over girls in the classroom and teasing often inhibit girls from succeeding at school.

**Why girls’ education?**

Educating girls is one of the most effective ways to advance women’s empowerment and economic development. Investing in girls reduces poverty, improves the health of women and their children and promotes healthy societies.

Education is an important tool for addressing poverty as it helps women escape from poverty through increased incomes and prevents poverty from being passed on to the next generation. Mothers who are educated are more likely to educate their children. Better educated women tend to be healthier, work and earn more, have fewer children and provide better health care and education to their children.
The Government of Rwanda has made significant progress in improving access to education by boys and girls at all levels, and promoting gender equality within the education system. Girls’ access to both primary and secondary education is among the highest in Africa. However, despite an enabling policy environment, a number of social and institutional barriers continue to prevent girls and young women from performing as well as their male peers, and from proceeding to higher education and accessing high-skill employment. In 2014, at the end of the lower secondary level exams, 90.6 per cent of boys passed their Senior 3 exams compared with 83.0 per cent of girls – a gap of 7.6 per cent. And at the upper secondary level, 92.2 per cent of boys passed their Senior 6 exams compared with 85.4 per cent of girls – also a large gap of 6.8 per cent (2015 Education Statistical Year Book, Ministry of Education).

The Girls’ Education Strategic Plan was approved in 2009 and forms the framework for interventions to increase girls’ participation in and achievement at all levels of education. National sensitization programmes have been developed to encourage parents and communities to send their girls to schools and keep them there, such as the Imbuto Foundation’s awards for the best performing girls nationally and the School Campaign, which was created to promote gender sensitivity in schools. The government has provided dedicated sanitation and hygiene facilities in all newly constructed schools and plans are in place to extend these facilities to all schools.

The Education Strategic Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2013–2018 acknowledges that while there is gender parity in access to basic education, challenges still remain with regard to girls’ performance, particularly at secondary school level, and also with regard to support for girls who wish to study science and technology (including some fields of technical and vocational training) and who want to proceed to higher education. To address these issues, the government is actively promoting targeted strategies to support girls’ education and training. These include:

• Strengthening gender-sensitive and learner-centred methodologies;
• Training of educators, trainers and education planners in gender issues;
• Regular review of the education curriculum and learning materials from a gender perspective;
• Sensitizing families and local communities to the importance of girls completing and improving achievement in formal education;
• Promoting affirmative action policies, where appropriate, to ensure equal opportunities for girls; and
• Strengthening integration of girls’ education into plans and budgets at all governmental levels.

In 2006, as part of efforts to promote safe learning, with a priority focus on girls, UNICEF initiated its Child Friendly School (CFS) Programme in the country. CFSs encourage children to succeed by providing an improved, inclusive, school environment and active and participatory teaching and learning methods. It is within these child friendly schools that the Tuseme programme was first launched.

Child friendly schools are by definition girl friendly. They encourage every girl to speak up, while also teaching boys that girls have the same rights as them, and must be treated with respect. Child friendly schools also involve the community in the management and education of their children and they have separate sanitation facilities for boys and girls (this has now become the national standard). The Tuseme programme seeks to supplement and enhance these elements of child friendly schools and to involve students, teachers and the community in discussions around challenges to girls’ education.
Tuseme is one of FAWE’s flagship programmes in the region. It was initiated at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1996 and enhanced by FAWE with gender and life skills components. The main objective is to boost the ability of girls and boys to take responsibility for making good choices, resist negative pressures and avoid risky behaviour. This model has been introduced in several countries in Africa, such as Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal and Rwanda.

In 2003 FAWE, with support from UNICEF, launched the Tuseme programme in Rwanda. The programme is implemented in primary and secondary schools through Tuseme clubs, which seek to address the structural roots of gender inequalities by understanding and engaging with norms and social rules, as well as practical issues, which impact upon girls’ attendance and performance at school. At the clubs, boys and girls are taught to make decisions, think critically and creatively, communicate, build empathy, be assertive and be self-aware.

FAWE trains girls and boys in the life skills approach. The methods used are child-centred, gender-sensitive, participatory and interactive. Through working in groups, brainstorming, role-playing, story-telling, debating and participating in discussions students learn negotiation, public speaking, decision-making and leadership skills, thus increasing their self-confidence and academic performance.

The Tuseme programme begins with the Training of Trainers workshops for two club teachers, one male and one female, students and members of the community. These workshops provide information on the background and objectives of Tuseme as well as training in Gender and Theatre for Development. Students are also trained in topics such as leadership, negotiation, assertiveness and self-control. Club members comprise interested students and teachers. During club meetings students identify the root causes and effects of poor academic performance and drop out, and possible solutions. Members create plays that explore the themes identified in their analysis and perform these to students, teachers and members of the community. The objective of these performances is to provoke the audience to think about the issues raised. After the performance club members engage school administration members, teachers, students and community members to take action to improve the social and academic environment of the school.
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The main activities of Tuseme clubs vary according to club priorities but often include the following:

- Raising awareness on the right to education, the rights of the child and training of members and other stakeholders
- Convening regular meetings
- Conducting community awareness campaigns on HIV and AIDS, and girls’ education
- Identifying students who have dropped out and encouraging them to return to school
- Supporting members who need financial assistance or school materials through income generation activities
- Participating in community development projects and activities
- Implementing small-scale agricultural activities to enhance farming skills and knowledge, and also generate income.
Although in Rwanda today over 97 per cent of girls (2015 Education Statistical Year Book) are enrolled in primary school, dropout and school completion rates, particularly at the secondary level, remain a key challenge. The Tuseme clubs support girls to speak out about the challenges they face in their schools, homes and communities. The Tuseme clubs also empower adolescent girls through increased awareness of their rights and serve as safe spaces of support. They have helped girls build their self-esteem and confidence, and have enabled boys and girls to work together to build friendships and to understand and respect one another.

Tuseme clubs empower children to be self-assured. They are encouraged to be candid about their feelings and experiences. Girls in particular are taught to stand up to pressures that might lead to disruption of or prevention from completing their schooling (e.g. pregnancy). Norah, an active member of the Tuseme club at Rwempasha School, proudly states, “When any young boy or even a man approaches me with the intention of involving me in acts that may ruin my future, I stand firm. I am now very strong and am able to challenge such people.”

Teachers have noticed the increase in confidence among girls: “Tuseme clubs empower girls to freely express themselves and talk about the problems they face without fear and hesitation,” says a teacher at Busasmana School. Community members also attest to the increased confidence: “I am happy about the way children express themselves. The girls are very confident. There is no limit to their future!” says Jean Marie Vianney Mukabaranga, a member of the community in Ngoma District.

Tuseme clubs have brought girls and boys together, and foster greater understanding and respect. Children have learned to work together in academic and non-academic activities that involve talking about gender roles. For example, boys at Ntoma School initially felt that cleaning classrooms was exclusively the work of girls. However, boys have now started participating in general cleaning, such as sweeping classrooms. The head teacher at Ntoma says, “Girls in Ntoma no longer fear boys. In class, boys and girls sit together and help each other academically.”

The clubs also promote a culture of self-reliance. Club members talk about personal hygiene, environmental conservation and small-scale agriculture. In some schools, children are taught how to create small-scale business activities. They are involved in agricultural activities such as the cultivation of vegetables and breeding rabbits. A teacher at Bicumbi School explains, “Engaging children in such activities helps them become self-reliant.” The money received from selling rabbits and vegetables is used to buy school materials for classmates in need of support.

“Before the introduction of Tuseme, girls were dropping out, not showing up at school, and displaying low levels of self-esteem. Some girls were making poor life decisions,” a teacher at Ntoma School explains. “The club has played an important role in building the self-esteem of girls. They have also acquired stronger team-building and public speaking skills through debates,” he adds.

“Through Tuseme club activities, we reflect on and talk about the challenges we face. We are able to see the connection between our past, the present and our hopes for the future. Now I feel like I have the power to challenge decisions that affect my life and education,” says a female student at Buramira Primary School.
Despite the gains in education, dropout and school completion rates remain a challenge. There are several reasons why children drop out: the inability of parents to continue to pay fees for school materials or uniforms, children staying at home to support parents, children dropping out of school to look for jobs or girls being pulled out of school to look after younger siblings. During secondary school in particular, as girls enter into puberty and reach an age some communities consider suitable for work, marriage and child-bearing, they are less likely to stay in schools.

Tuseme club members play an active role in addressing the issue of dropout in schools. Club members reach out to students who have dropped out and encourage them to return to school, and children engage parents on the importance of children’s schooling. At Buramira Primary School, club members formed teams to track dropouts and pregnant teenage girls at their school. “We came across girls who had dropped out, and others who were pregnant and had stopped going to school,” mentions Claudette, a student at the school. “We worked with parents, teachers and community members to bring back the girls. Two have returned to school despite having children of their own.”

There are many instances of children returning to school with support from Tuseme club members. One girl from Kirwa School explained that she had dropped out of school because she had gone to work as a maid. Likewise, a boy from the same school who had left to become a herdsman returned to school after being supported by his classmates. Both students are now dedicated members of the Tuseme club in the school.

Similarly, Jerome dropped out of Bicumbi School to work in town, but returned to school after his classmates talked to him. “I am very grateful to Tuseme Members. I had dropped out of school but Tuseme members counselled me, and I left what I was doing and went back to school.”
Drama is a key component of the Tuseme clubs; it is used as a tool for addressing social issues and raising awareness among school children. The Tuseme approach draws on ‘forum theatre’ as a way to raise awareness among various stakeholders. The idea behind forum theatre is to teach people how to change their world through drama and dialogue.

Forum theatre is an interactive performance, often a short skit, in which a character is grappling with a problem. At any time during the performance actors or audience members can interrupt and suggest different actions for the actors to take, in an attempt to change the outcome of what they are seeing. The objective is to merge the boundaries between audience and actors. Members of the audience participate and contribute to the dramatic action they are seeing.

The theatre performances address a number of issues that might prevent girls from completing their education: early pregnancy, low self-esteem and transactional relationships in which young girls are lured into sex by older men. Tuseme club members choose a topic to address and, with support from teachers, develop a storyline around the issue. They then identify the theatrical forms they are most familiar with, and the form they want to use to communicate their views. The artistic forms used include drama, dance, song, storytelling and poetry.

“Theatre is an important tool for addressing social issues and raising awareness among schoolchildren. It is a fun way to engage children and build confidence. Children really enjoy theatre but at the same time receive and impart important messages,” says Pacifique Jean Claude Ingabire, Programme Officer at FAWE.
The Tuseme approach has also contributed to raising the academic performance of students through boosting their confidence and motivation levels at school.

As part of the training process, FAWE trains teachers in gender-responsive, pedagogical strategies which enhance girls’ confidence and their academic performance. Through the clubs, under the guidance of trained teachers, girls are encouraged to talk about problems they are experiencing and brainstorm solutions. For example, Tuseme club members in Bihanga School identified poor attendance among girls during their menstrual cycle. The club members put together an advocacy plan, asking the schools to construct at least one separate room.

“We always talk about girls’ academic achievement but forget that achievement is influenced by social factors. Both girls and boys who have been trained in Tuseme are able to take action to stop social injustice that impedes their academic development,” adds a teacher at Gasanze School.

The head teacher of Kibara School indicated that the performance of his students, especially in drama and English, has improved. “I have seen the contribution of Tuseme clubs in my school in raising the academic performance of students. The debates and theatre have helped students improve their reasoning and speaking skills.”

The teacher in charge of Tuseme clubs at Kibara School added, “Tuseme has enabled girls to know and support each other in academics through group discussions, debates and sharing learning materials.”

As part of the national efforts to promote reading, the clubs have also introduced reading activities to improve the reading and speaking skills of students. With the support of UNICEF, FAWE Rwanda has provided schools with supplementary reading materials focusing on life skills and topics such as HIV and AIDS and hygiene promotion. FAWE Rwanda is also introducing Saturday reading events and a quarterly reading competition to further promote the reading culture among children in child friendly schools.

The clubs produce a newsletter, ‘Nabo Ni Abana’, which translates to ‘Girls are also Children’. The newsletter is a compilation of articles, plays, poems and stories written in Kinyarwanda about the experiences of club members. The newsletters are circulated in schools and also among community members with the objective of raising awareness in the community on children’s rights.
COMMUNITY OUTREACH

While Tuseme clubs operate within schools, the influence of the clubs is not just felt at the school level. Community involvement is a strong component. Members engage the community in issues related to the rights of the child, particularly the right to education, through theatre and awareness campaigns. Community members also play an important role in encouraging children who have dropped out of school to return to continue their education.

Through awareness campaigns, club members bring attention to issues such as HIV and AIDS or girls’ education. In Nyagatare District, during an awareness campaign on fighting child abuse, Tuseme club members disseminated information on child abuse and sexual harassment. Girls delivered speeches to shed light on these problems and encouraged the community to work together to stop child abuse. “In our club, we are trained to be confident and fight against the violation of our rights in the community. Through discussions with our teachers and local community leaders, we realized that there are some community members who mistreat children because they are ignorant about children’s rights. We have to sensitize such people and that is why we are going to the community to raise awareness on the rights of children,” says Uwase, an 11-year-old girl primary five student.

At another school, as part of the celebrations for International Women’s Day, Tuseme club members from Sangaza School in Ngoma District prepared a theatre performance highlighting one of the challenges girls face vis-à-vis transactional relationships with older men and how these often disrupt their education. During the second round of the performance, community members were invited to comment on the play, act out scenarios and voice their opinions on the issues presented. In one scene, where a mother exclaimed that she couldn’t continue to send her daughter to school because of the cost of the uniform, a member of the community stopped the play, offering a solution to the problem. In this way, community members are able to share their views and understand better some of the challenges faced by children.

Community members also play a role in encouraging out-of-school children to enrol in school, and those who have dropped out to return. Working with club members, district education officers and school administrators, some active members of the community visit the homes of such children, encouraging the students and parents to continue their education. In order to increase community participation and ownership, FAWE is introducing community facilitators to a select number of schools.

“Community members are important stakeholders in addressing problems that affect girls’ education. Theatre for Development is an innovative tool that can support community involvement in identifying and addressing issues of concern such as violence against children and other child rights issues,” says Pacifique Jean Claude Ingabire, Programme Officer at FAWE.
The Tuseme festival is an event bringing together Tuseme club members from different schools across the country to share experiences and learn more from one another.

The activities of the festival include theatre performances, workshops, exhibitions, discussions with role models, study tours and awards. In 2012, the three-day Tuseme festival focused on early pregnancies, prompted by the concern around the high number of pregnancies in communities. Students visited a textile factory in Kigali, met with successful career women and shared their experiences with Tuseme activities. Awards were given out in categories such as Best Academic Club, Best Performer, and Best Academic Student.

“Ever since I joined my school’s Tuseme club, I have been performing very well due to the confidence I gained from participating in club debates. I took part in the Tuseme Festival in Kigali and my parents were very supportive. I was very happy to have been part of the team that participated in the Festival. What motivated me more were the messages I got from the activities during the festival. I now feel overjoyed and confident to continue my studies!”

~Tuseme club member at Kankobwa School
Tuseme clubs have played an important role in strengthening the skills of girls and boys to overcome challenges they may face at school. Despite national and local efforts to promote girls’ education, girls continue to face challenges at home and in schools.

Teachers expressed the concern that the major challenge to girls’ education is poor attendance and performance. Girls are frequently absent as they are pulled out of school to support the family at home, and often skip school during their menstrual cycle. Although access to sanitation facilities and sanitary pads has improved in schools, girls are often uncomfortable and feel a sense of shame when requesting access to knowledge or products from their parents, teachers or headmasters. While Tuseme clubs have played a role in raising awareness about menstrual hygiene, more needs to be done in this area, especially in engaging teachers and parents.

Teachers also explained that there is a need to increase the reading levels in schools. Although the government and partners, such as FAWE, have increased access to textbooks and supplementary materials, children mainly use their notes when studying for examinations.

While there has been an increase in the involvement of parents and the community in school programmes, especially Tuseme activities, some parents still feel that implementation of school programmes is the responsibility of administrators and that their main responsibility is to provide school materials.
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**The way forward**

**From discussions with children, teachers, parents, local leaders and other stakeholders in education, several recommendations in the area of promotion of girls’ education were made.**

- **Provide training for teachers on gender sensitivity**
  
  Although progress has been made on this front, there are still teachers who perpetuate cultural beliefs about gender that negatively affect the experience of girls in the classroom. Continuing to educate teachers in this regard will help demystify the conventions of traditional education practices that have been detrimental to girls’ education.

- **Establish a comprehensive sexual and reproductive health programme in schools**
  
  Teachers and parents indicated that children have a limited knowledge of adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights. Providing all students with such information will help them take responsibility for making healthier choices, resist negative pressures and avoid risky behaviour. The new-competence based curriculum, to be implemented in 2016, places a greater emphasis on sexuality education.

- **Sensitize parents on gender equality issues in the home**
  
  Although there are many initiatives schools can take to address the challenges girls face in achieving their academic potential, many of these challenges originate in the home. Girls bear an unequal burden of household chores and responsibilities compared with boys. By engaging with parents to address issues of inequality in the home, girls will receive greater support from their families to succeed in school.

- **Promote a culture of reading**
  
  While schools have seen an increase in textbooks and supplementary materials due to the government’s learning and textbook reform programme, reading levels among children are still low. Promoting reading will not only help raise academic performance of children but also increase their creativity.
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